

Rejecting Islam and Detesting Islamophobia

Three Extracts from *The Young Atheists' Handbook*
by Alom Shaha

1

Stories, myths, and legends are a vital part of human culture. The evidence is that we have a deep psychological need for them; they help us to make sense of the world. They are powerful instruments for communicating our deepest beliefs about the way we believe the world is and the way we think it should be.

So I like to think that I understand why holy books are important: they contain the stories that define the religions to which they belong. They are so powerful *because* they are stories, not just the instruction manuals or reference books that they are often thought to be.

I'm not suggesting that holy books are bereft of enlightenment or just plain common sense, either. I think it is important to appreciate that, regardless of what I think of such texts, the majority of the world's population regard some holy book or other as containing fundamental truths about the way the world is and how we should live in it.

However, these books can cause trouble when the boundaries between myths and reality become blurred, and when people start to take them literally. That's when people use the myths they hold dear to justify their actions in the real world, including oppressing, or even killing, those who do not share the same beliefs.

Millions of Christians believe that the Bible is the literal word of God. They believe it all, from the story that God made the world in six days to the one about Noah building a boat that carried two of every animal on the planet. Aside from the fact that common sense and science exclude the possibility of either of these things, there is an overwhelming weight of evidence that the Bible was put together over a long period of time by many authors. It was translated from original



texts in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and subject to much input and interpretation from human sources. The Old and New Testaments are sacred because they represent a kind of agreed consensus about what God is and what He wants of us.

Ironically, and contrary to what many Christians believe, the literal truth of the Bible is not even a central tenet of Christianity. According to author Stephen Tomkins:

Part of the problem is historical. The deification of the Bible is a result of the Protestant reformation. Before then, the final authority, the ultimate arbiter and source of information in religious matters was the church, with its ancient traditions and living experts. When Luther and friends opposed the teaching of the Catholic hierarchy, they needed a superior authority to appeal to, which was provided by the Bible.

Fortunately, many Christians seem happy to accept that the Bible is not the literal word of God. This allows them plenty of room to discuss the meaning of their holy texts and to treat the stories in these books as metaphors or allegories. It permits, even encourages, their religion to reform and evolve along with the rest of society. Instead of being some inerrant document of 'the truth', holy books, according to some Christians (and Jews, for that matter), are simply tools for arriving at the truth for themselves.

Yet, unlike Christian and Jewish doctrines, Islam demands unambiguously that Muslims accept the Qur'an as the word of God. One is not

a true Muslim unless he or she accepts the words in the Qur'an are of divine origin, revealed to Muhammed through the angel Gabriel. This puts the Qur'an into an entirely different league as a sacred text. Many Muslims also maintain that the only way to truly engage with the Qur'an is to read it in Arabic: one has not read the Qur'an if he or she has only read a translation.

The belief that the Qur'an is an eternal, immutable text endows it with a unique level of authority when compared to any other work of literature – if I can even be allowed to call it that. There has been no Reformation in Islam, and it doesn't look like there's going to be one any time soon. There will always be strong resistance to any attempt at a Reformation because Islam is inflexible in its claim that the Qur'an is of divine origin. And in this sense, Islamic fundamentalism seems almost understandable, for how can you not be a fundamentalist if you have the word of God at your disposal? If you believe the Qur'an to be the word of God, it would be irrational not to follow its every instruction – and reason and science must, by definition, concede authority to it.

I'm certainly not qualified to provide a detailed critique of either the Bible or the Qur'an. But I have at least made the effort to read them. I find it astonishing and depressing that many people who lead their lives according to the ideas and rules laid down in these books have not read them. I once asked a young Muslim how she knew that the Qur'an was true. She replied that the writing in the Qur'an was so beautiful that it could not possibly have been written by a human.

stories with power to resonate deeply but no need to believe that they have a divine origin

I was flabbergasted by this argument, and could not come up with a suitable response. I felt that it would be rude to contradict her by pointing out that I knew that her knowledge of literature was limited to a handful of books, so it was unlikely she was qualified to accurately judge the beauty

that mortals were capable of producing in a work of literature. She had certainly never read the works of Oscar Wilde, Primo Levi, or Jhumpa Lahiri, for example, who have all produced beautiful literature.

To add a further dimension of oddness to her belief about the Qur'an, the girl had not read the Qur'an in any proper sense of the verb 'to read'. She had been brought up, like many Muslims around the world, to 'read' Arabic, in the sense of being able to recognise the sounds to which the symbols corresponded and to be able to pronounce the words they formed when combined, but she was not taught what those Arabic words meant. I know this because I was taught to do the same. It is a common practice in non-Arabic-speaking communities and one that, even as a child, I found baffling.

The English translation of the Qur'an is written in verse, but it is far from poetic, and I have found it rather difficult to read. There are poems written by humans – Louise Glück, Pablo Neruda and Wendy Cope, to name just a few – that have moved me far more deeply. Perhaps I might find the Qur'an a more satisfying read if I were capable of reading and comprehending it in Arabic. But I suspect that even if I could understand the words, I would not be convinced that it was so beautiful that it must have been of divine origin.

There is no doubt that the Bible, the Qur'an, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Bhagavad Gita, and other religious books hold profound meaning for billions of people. There is no doubt that their stories have the power to resonate deeply. But in my mind there is also no doubt that they are ultimately books written *by* humans *for* humans. There is no need to believe that they have a divine origin – books, and the ideas they carry, are powerful enough without imbuing them with divine authority. Once we do that, we are in danger of losing the most important thing that books can do for us: make us think. Humans have always struggled with, and will continue to struggle with, questions about how we should live our lives, who we are, where we come from. To simply accept that these answers have been written down in books that are hundreds or thousands of years old is to stifle human creativity and to ignore our capacity to think for ourselves, to change and evolve.

Prejudice has not gone away, but it does shift focus. Today, while non-whites may not be subjected to quite the same levels of abuse and discrimination that I was as a child, Muslims around the world are victims of increasing levels of Islamophobia, a form of prejudice based on religion rather than skin colour. In western countries such as Australia, the United States, and Britain, Islamophobes are easy to find: from Kye Keating, a young Australian man who organised a 'Ban the Burqa Day' through Facebook, to the members of the Tea Party in the United States, who openly describe Islam as a 'dark and dangerous and devious religion' with a 'culture that keeps hundreds of millions of people right on the edge of murder and mayhem 24 hours a day', to organisations such as the English Defence League (EDL) who invite you, on their Facebook page, to join them if you 'are fed up and sick to the back teeth of Islamic Extremism'. Supporters of the EDL have been involved in violent attacks on Muslims, and yet, with what can only be deliberate perversity, the EDL describes itself as a 'human rights organisation'.

Islamophobia is by no means a post-9/11 phenomenon. In 1997, the Runnymede Trust issued a report on Islamophobia, describing it as 'an ugly word for an ugly reality'. The report went on to summarise the closed views of Islam held by Islamophobes, including the idea of the religion as 'violent, aggressive, threatening, supportive of terrorism, engaged in a clash of civilisations'. However, it is clear that since 9/11 the western media have conspired to create a view of Muslims that is overwhelmingly negative. As Christopher Allen writes in the report *Islamophobia in the Media since September 11th*:

What they have wholeheartedly reinforced is what I would suggest is the most dangerous aspect of Islamophobia; that Islam is entirely uni-dimensional and monolithic without any internal differentiation or opinion. Through indiscriminately saddling stories about Muslims in Afghanistan and Palestine with similar stories of Muslims in Britain, both the press and the wider media have deliberately overlooked the diversity that exists in both the British and global Islamic community. As such, it attributes to all Muslims the entire spectrum of negative characteristics that are fundamental to Islamophobia.

Just as the racists I grew up with saw all brown people as being the same – that is, inferior – Islamophobes today see all Muslims as the same, and completely fail to acknowledge the diversity and differences in values that are held by the millions of Muslims in the world.

be clear that our criticisms of Islam are not founded on EDL's racist assumptions

You may wonder why, if I no longer identify as Muslim, I care so deeply about this. I could argue that I find racism in any form objectionable, and that Islamophobia concerns me because it is often, as in the case of the EDL, a thinly disguised excuse for giving vent to dangerously racist views. However, there's more to it: I think that it is important for people like me, who are critical of some aspects of Islam, to be clear that our criticisms are not founded on the same racist assumptions, or motivated by the same kind of thinking. We can be critical of the ideology behind Islam, as well as the way in which it is sometimes practised, without being critical of those who believe in Allah or attend a mosque. People often unfairly conflate the two and, as a believer in human rights and justice, I find this abhorrent.

3

For many Muslims living in the west, the events of 9/11 and the resulting Islamophobia have, understandably, forced them to identify more strongly as Muslims. For me, one of the saddest outcomes of this atrocity is that the actions of a tiny, tiny minority of Islamists have forced a wedge between Muslims and the rest of the world, a wedge that they did not ask for, creating a barrier that only compassion and empathy will break down.

While I empathise with many Muslims and understand why they might choose to assert this aspect of their identity, it is one that I have explicitly rejected. Not just because I don't believe in Allah, but also because I feel that it is my duty

to assert my own identity as an atheist. I feel that it is important for people like me to be 'out' because there are not enough such people from a Muslim background who are willing to be open and honest about their lack of belief in God, and this makes it difficult for young people from these communities to be who they want to be. The sad truth is that I am a rare breed – a public 'ex-Muslim' – and one of the reasons I have written this book is to let countless others who keep their lack of faith a secret know that they are not alone. This may sound overdramatic or self-aggrandising but, on the other hand, at least I don't believe I'm one of a special people 'chosen' by God. My delusions are of my own making.

While I will continue to ponder my beliefs, I suspect that I will never go back to Islam, never

again call myself a Muslim. I don't doubt that there are still some out there who would call me a 'coconut' because of this. But if what that means is that I have freely made my own choices about who I want to be and how I want to live, then I am proud of the label.

These extracts from *The Young Atheists' Handbook* by Alom Shaha (extract 1: pages 73-78; extract 2: pages 88-90; extract 3: pages 110-111) are reprinted by kind permission of the publishers: Biteback Publishing Ltd, Westminster Tower, 3 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7SP. The book is reviewed on page 21.

Alom Shaha teaches physics in Camden School for Girls.

Dispersed

For Alice Southworth

She is dispersed: the Oxfam shop will have its due
And scarves and books pass into strangers' hands;
The chairs find homes in unfamiliar corners;
Her daughter wears the narrow wedding band.

Life flowed away from her quite gently,
The breath and the coherence slowly ceased;
And yet her presence still surprises,
The vividness diminished not the least.

Her memories become the stuff of stories
And new family and friends ask, 'Is it true?'
Fresh links and continuities astound them:
Amid the fragments she is shaped anew.

The world is always dying and renewing:
Let go to make new patterns and new forms.
Life moves on, with its never ending growing
But quieter, thinner, further all the time.

The universe will continue to expand;
There are more stars already than the grains of sand.

Kathryn Southworth

Kathryn Southworth is the former Vice-Principal of Newman University College, Birmingham. Now retired, she lives in Camden Town, London.

