The God Debate

A response to the Newsweek lead article on atheism and faith

The first item in this booklet relates to the lead issue covered in Newsweek magazine of April 9th, 2007 which deals with atheism and faith. It contains a good discussion, at the popular level, by the editor Jon Meacham. It involved a discussion between Pastor Rick Warren of California's Saddleback church and Sam Harris speaking for the atheists. However, there was the common deficiency that the Islamic or Qur'anic viewpoint was not represented. This prompted me to write a letter to the editor of Newsweek, which should set the stage for the material to follow.

The Editors

Newsweek

Dear Sirs,

My heartiest compliments to your editor Jon Meacham for doing such a wonderful job in covering "The God Debate" in your issue of April 9th, 2007. I am in the process of writing a book on the same subject and have been studying the relevant literature for some time. Both sides of this topical issue were covered very well by Meacham, with sensitivity and understanding. The amiability of the discourse is another most welcome factor which today's world badly needs if our fragile civilization is to continue and develop.

The God Debate is a crucial one for all of humankind and it must be resolved by the pen and not the sword. Newsweek has performed a yeoman service by setting the right tone for this discourse and deserves to be complimented. Apart from maintaining civilized courtesies, all concerned must agree that for the modern audience the yardstick of such a debate today can only be based on reason and

evidence. Nothing less will do.

However, a basic flaw was evident both in the summation by the worthy editor as well as the discussion amongst the two participants, Rick Warren and Sam Harris, which I would like to bring out in order to focus the debate better.

An important hurdle in a meaningful discourse on reason and revelation arises out of the lack of relatively precise definitions of the terms involved. The meaning of reason is fairly well understood, but when we talk of revelation just what do we have in mind? Different people have widely varying understanding of revelation. Authentic revelation, originating from the Creator (and that alone should qualify as revelation) must be distinguished and set apart in this discussion from literature which, however well-meaning, is erroneously passed off as revelation. This would then rule out materials which over time have undergone translations or reconstructions (because translation simply cannot take the place of the original), and whose historical roots and continuity are quite doubtful, to say the least.

Editor Meacham, while doing an excellent job of presenting both sides fairly and constructively, takes for granted that "Scriptures are the products of human hands and hearts and have been translated and copied for generations upon generations; scholarship clearly shows that the texts present historical and literary problems that would seem to rule out the possibility that they are perfect books". It has to be admitted that few scholars of the subject would take issue with the above statement.

But therein lies the problem which needs to be addressed if we are to make any real progress with this debate. These comments of your editor are indeed applicable to the scripture of the Jewish and the Christian Bible and that only goes to make the objections of atheists not just plausible but rather convincing. Indeed, how can a translation or a commentary double up for a text whose original is no longer available for reference, let alone claim divine writ for such a document? Honestly, it is not surprising at all, that atheists have had a field day

with the Old and the New Testaments. Anything claiming its origin from the Almighty Hyper-intelligence simply has to be something unique and inimitable not only in literary style but its content too must be unique, be based on reason, and be amenable to falsification testing, amongst others. In other words, it must meet the critical standards of modern science and scholarship.

Believers cannot build their case on faith alone in today's world dominated by rationalism and expect to be taken seriously. They must be prepared to submit their case to the yardstick of reason. In chapter 3, I have proposed strict but objective and hopefully impartial criteria for consideration of all interested parties, whether believers of all hues or atheists and agnostics, to chew and agree upon, which can then be used to judge the veracity and validity of any claimed divine scripture. Once such a criterion is agreed upon then all claimants of divine revelation can submit their case for independent but objective examination. This would allow us to sift the authentic from the corrupted revelation and put this matter in its correct perspective. That revelation could then be put to test as to whether it is or can be the product of even the best endowed human hands and minds. This exercise can be done on the pattern of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence by NASA in their SETI experiment.

It is my contention, supported hopefully and convincingly, by a lot of evidence marshaled from various fields, i.e., the universe around us, the history of people of old, and finally human psychology that Al Qur'an, which claims that it is the final testament of which the Creator Himself declares to be the Guardian, is by far the only scripture existing today, which by a wide margin, meets such objective and rational evaluative criteria and claims to contain evidence which can even convince the reasonable skeptic.

> *In time, we shall make them fully understand Our messages (through what they perceive) in the utmost horizons (of the universe) and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this (revelation) is indeed the truth.*

Qur'an 41:53

It was this teaching of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad which launched these primitive Arab Bedouins over the next five centuries or so to create a glorious enterprise, spread from China in the East to Morocco and Spain in the West, overcoming simultaneously the two superpowers of the day, Persia and Byzantium. Far more important, they embarked on an intellectual adventure which still surprises and amazes keen observers.

The Arabs collected knowledge from the four corners of the globe, i.e., Greece, Rome, Egypt, Byzantium, Persia, India and China. Not only did they translate these works into the Arabic language, but made significant additions to this storehouse of knowledge through discovering new fields of studies like algebra, trigonometry, optics, and major additions to astronomy, medicine, surgery and navigation, etc. Their unique contribution however was in developing the experimental method which laid the foundation afterwards, through European hands, of modern science.

What launched the primitive Bedouins on this intellectual adventure? What triggered this search for knowledge from wherever they could find it? What impelled the Abbasid Caliph Mamoun to pay Hunain-ibn-Ishaq, a Christian translator, the weight of a manuscript in gold for translating the same from Greek? What else but the admonitions of the Qur'an to think, to ponder and to deliberate over the universe, and the Prophet Muhammad's urgings that a Muslim should go even to China to acquire knowledge.

That is how Qur'an ushered in the age of reason and knowledge which spread to Europe through the dominions of the Arabs in Spain and Sicily and ultimately blossomed into the age of enlightenment and finally the modern scientific miracle through the astounding and admirable efforts of the Europeans. Qur'an still has the same message for anyone willing to listen, which latter day Muslims forgot and sadly are paying the price for. Qur'an, of course, has much more to offer. Apart from emphasis on reason, it takes humans to areas beyond the ken of

reason, but only after demonstrating through evidence that it is a book, nay an instruction manual, direct from the Almighty Creator to teach humankind what they know not and cannot know except through top down guidance from the Creator of the Universes, if there are multiple ones.

It is a pity that believers only weaken their case when they keep giving divine status to books which they know are products of fellow humans, even if they be inspired. Let it be stated clearly that the revelations originally given to Moses, David, or Jesus, as stated in the Qur'an, were without the shadow of a doubt genuine and authentic, but equally it must be admitted that today no trace of them is unfortunately available to us. The Old Testament, the Psalms, and the New Testament, as we know them today, may indeed carry the kernels of the originals, but there is no evidence to show which part of them can claim to be authentic revelation, i.e., the true word of the Creator.

A uniqueness of the Qur'an lies in the fact that it is the dividing line between the age of magic and miracles and the age of reason. Almost a thousand years before the European Enlightenment, Qur'an had already ushered in the age of reason by insisting upon the need for rational reflection rather than blind faith. Instead of appealing to the emotions through supernatural actions, Qur'an calls its addressees to use their reason, to ponder, to think, to reflect, to use all one's faculties to weigh the evidence before accepting the same.

> *And do not follow (blindly) any information of which you have no (direct) knowledge. You will be held accountable for your hearing, sight, and the faculty of reasoning.*

Qur'an 17:36

Keeping the current state of tense relations between the West and Islam in view, one can anticipate the likely reaction. What are you saying? If today's Muslims are any example of this revelation, i.e., the Qur'an, then our response is thanks, but no thanks. We just are not interested! My answer to that may surprise you, but I fully agree with that sentiment. I contend that sadly, it must be accepted that Muslims

of today collectively do not represent either the principles of the Qur'an or the practices of the Prophet Muhammad. They have turned their backs on the Qur'an. In fact it would not be wrong to say that they have abandoned the Qur'an all but in name which states categorically that those who follow the principles laid down in the Qur'an will naturally become ascendant in this world.

> *God has promised those of you who have attained to faith and do righteous deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth.*

Qur'an 24:55

Explaining this verse, the eminent translator of the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad says, "this Qur'anic reference to God's promise contains an oblique allusion to the God-willed natural law which invariably makes the rise and fall of nations dependent upon their moral qualities". Thus, the fault clearly lies with the Muslims and not the Qur'an. It would not be wise to throw away the baby with the bathwater.

In fact, the dismal condition of today's Muslims in the world comity is one eloquent proof of the veracity of the Qur'an. Qur'an should not be considered a monopoly of the Muslims; rather, it is a book of guidance for all mankind to be studied and examined afresh and objectively to benefit from, and to tell man what he knows not. Indeed, Qur'an was sent down to tell man what he can never know by depending on his intellect alone or by using the powerful yet limited capabilities of the brilliant scientific methodology. It is only top-down guidance from the Almighty, the Hyper-intelligent Creator, which is capable of defining what is the place of humans in this universe and what we are doing here.

In short, humans, according to the Qur'an, have been given pride of place and a position of honor in this universe. We are, according to science, quite literally and not just poetically, children of the exceptional few stars which experienced supernovae convulsions, as evidenced by the presence, albeit in traces, of the elements heavier than iron in our bodies. Being a pleasurable by-product of the

reproductive cycle, our valuation in economic terms, on the basis of supply and demand may turn out to be quite low, but when valued in engineering terms, i.e., adding the cost of materials, energy, and labor involved, the value of each one of us is simply incalculable. This will perhaps explain the Qur'anic statement:

> *whoever kills a human being other than for manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he has killed all mankind, and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he has saved the life of all mankind.*

Qur'an 5:32

Only when each of us learns to recognize the honor given to us by the Creator by declaring us as His "vicegerents on earth" shall we be able to honor our fellow humans and be better able to end the constant strife and bickering based on race, nationality, creed, or material ownership. That is what Qur'an teaches us, and will be its crucial contribution in guiding modern day humans to meet the challenges of today and keep us from tearing each other apart. Genuine revelation fully respects the need for evidence, as so rightly emphasized by Sam Harris towards the end of the debate. Revelation has absolutely no quarrel with that requirement. In fact it demands and repeatedly urges the need for reason and reflection.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the atheists' attempt to ridicule 'revelation' by targeting the Old and New Testaments, is like Martians arriving on earth and attacking the cosmological views of the Ptolemaic system, representing them as views of modern science and cosmology instead of the current Copernican and Einsteinian versions. That would not only be a pointless exercise but a travesty of truth and reality. Yet, this is what Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and associates are doing.

If atheists really want to discuss and debate the existence of God or the veracity of revelation and its relevance to the modern world, they have to look to the Qur'an which is the only genuine version of revelation available today. Their study, attention, critique, and comments are welcome so long as they are based on objective considerations and not on knee jerk prejudices based on the European past and reinforced by

the unfortunate conduct of many Muslims of today who have turned their backs on Qur'anic teachings and are an affront to its sublime message of peace and reason. Let it be remembered that Qur'an is not a monopoly of the Muslims; rather it is meant as a blessing and guidance for all of humanity. I trust this will help in clearing the picture somewhat.

Yours Truly,

Tariq Mustafa

Retired Federal Secretary to the Government of Pakistan,

President National Paralympics Committee of Pakistan.

Vice President Asian Paralympics Committee.

Email: mustafatariq@hotmail.com

Tel. +92-300-8559622