

The Dilemma Facing Ex-Muslims in Trump's America

How to challenge Islam while defending its adherents



A Muslim faithful reads the Quran inside a makeshift mosque.

Yorgos Karahalios / Reuters

SIMON COTTEE

MAR 6, 2017 | GLOBAL

“Challenging Islam as a doctrine,” Ali Rizvi told me, “is very different from demonizing Muslim people.” Rizvi, a self-identified ex-Muslim, is the author of a new book titled *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey from Religion to Reason*. One of the book’s stated aims is to uphold this elementary distinction: “Human beings have rights and are entitled to respect. Ideas, books, and beliefs don’t, and aren’t.”

The problem for Rizvi is that the grain of Western political culture is currently against him. Those in the secular West live in an age when ideas are commonly regarded as “deeds” with the potential to wound. So, on the left, self-critique of Islam is often castigated as critique of Muslims. Meanwhile, the newly elected president of the United States and his inner circle have a tendency to [conflate](#) the

ideas of radical Islam with the beliefs of the entire Muslim population. So, on the right, the very same self-critique of Islam is used to attack Muslims and legitimize [draconian policies](#) against them.

One possible response to this problem is to back down and stay silent. *The Atheist Muslim* is a sustained argument for why silence is not an option. I met up with Rizvi in his hometown of Toronto recently to discuss his reasoning.

Rizvi told me he wrote his book to give other ex-Muslims and wavering Muslims a reference point. He particularly had in mind those atheists, agnostics, and humanists who live in Muslim-majority countries where the act of renouncing one's faith is punishable by death. Rizvi, who was born in 1975 in Pakistan, where blasphemy carries a [potential death sentence](#), and who lived for more than a decade in Saudi Arabia prior to becoming a permanent resident in Canada in 1999, knows all too well how dangerous public declarations of disbelief can be.

In contrast to other prominent ex-Muslim activists, like the Somali-born [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#), there is no [atrocitiy](#), trauma, or turbulence in Rizvi's narrative. He grew up in a loving and supportive family. His parents are Shia Muslims, but they are "secular and relatively liberal" professors, he said. It wasn't until his late teens that he began to seriously question his faith. According to Rizvi, when he told his parents about his atheism, "they were fine with it. We had arguments, but I wasn't going to get disowned." On the day *The Atheist Muslim* came out, his mother told him, "Your book will do well, *inshallah*" ("God willing"). To me, he joked, "If she'd told me that before, I would have put it as a blurb on the cover!"

In *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, the sociologist Phil Zuckerman makes a distinction between "transformative apostasy" and "mild apostasy." The former refers to "individuals who were deeply, strongly religious who then went on to reject their religion," whereas the latter refers to those "who rejected religion but weren't all that religious in the first place." Rizvi belongs to the latter category. "I was a nominal believer," he told me.

One criticism that has been leveled at ex-Muslims is that they are prone to fundamentalism, trading one form of zealotry for another. In *Murder in*

Amsterdam, for example, the Dutch writer and academic Ian Buruma **controversially ascribed** to Hirsi Ali “hints of zealousness, echoes perhaps of her earlier enthusiasm for the Muslim Brotherhood, before she was converted to the ideals of the European Enlightenment.” This type of psychological observation seems way off in the case of Rizvi, who has a successful career outside of his public role as a former Muslim: He is a medical communications professional and a gifted musician who plays and sings in a rock band. For Rizvi, Islam was never an all-defining identity, and neither is his current ex-Muslim status.

“You can’t sanitize scripture. Fundamentalists have a more honest approach—they’re more consistent.”

In his book, Rizvi describes himself as an “agnostic atheist,” someone who doesn’t believe in God, but who is open to the possibility that he or she may be wrong. He also admits that when he fully abandoned his faith he was initially reluctant to embrace the “atheist” label. “The stereotype of atheists was of strident, aggressive, arrogant know-it-alls. ... This is not how I wanted to identify. I was humbled by everything I did not know, and everything I *could* not know,” he writes. “It was later that I realized atheism *is* a position of humility, in contrast to theism, which claims to know the truth, and moreover, deems it divine and absolute.”

In *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, the anti-theist Christopher Hitchens confided that he found “something suspect even in the humblest believer” on account of their “arrogant” assumption that they are “an object of real interest to a Supreme Being” and their claim “to have at least an inkling of what that Supreme Being desires.” Rizvi, who counts “the Hitch” as an intellectual hero, is clearly opposed to this line of critique. He writes about Muslims with great humanity and feeling. He also remains culturally wedded to Islam, celebrating Eid and enjoying the feasts of Ramadan.

Yet he is trenchantly critical of canonical religious texts. “Most Muslims are moderate, but whoever wrote the Quran, that’s not a moderate person,” he said. Rizvi devotes an entire chapter of his book to exposing what he sees as the

flagrantly illiberal elements in Quranic scripture. Referring to the chapter on women, *Surah An-Nisa*, he writes: “It establishes a hierarchy of authority, where men are deemed to be ‘in charge’ of women. It also asks wives to be obedient to their husbands, and allows their husbands—in the most controversial part of the verse—to beat them if they fear disobedience.”

Rizvi condemns this, but he reserves an almost equal contempt for reformist Muslims who, as he sees it, try to rationalize away such verses. He puts the scholar of religion Reza Aslan in this category, taking him to task for [his suggestion](#) that interpretations of scripture have “nothing to do with the text... and everything to do with the cultural, nationalistic, ethnic, political prejudices and preconceived notions that the individual brings to the text.” Rizvi is incredulous at the categorical “nothing” in this claim, and echoes the Islamic studies scholar Michael Cook’s [observation](#) that religious texts provide “modern adherents with a set of options that do not determine their choices but do constrain them.” He is skeptical, too, of [reformist efforts](#) to reinterpret scripture so as to bring Islam into line with liberal values. “You can’t sanitize scripture,” he insisted. “I think fundamentalists have a more honest approach. ... They’re more consistent.”

The left’s suggestion that criticism of Islam equals criticism of Muslims is a form of blackmail.

Rizvi is also opposed to any efforts to sanitize Islam as “a religion of peace.” He is particularly critical of any attempt to separate jihadist violence from Islamic scripture, which he believes is one of its main drivers, though not the only driver. This puts him at odds not only with Donald Trump’s currently [embattled](#) deputy assistant [Sebastian Gorka](#), who identifies the “martial” passages in Islamic scripture as the [overriding cause](#) of jihadist violence, but also with Gorka’s liberal critics who [deny](#) or [minimize](#) any such causal link.

The main *bête noire* of *The Atheist Muslim* is not the Islamic fundamentalists who would like to see Rizvi’s head on a spike, but the “regressive left,” who, in Rizvi’s view, are the former’s preeminent apologists, and who seek to silence voices like

his own. For Rizvi, their suggestion that criticism of Islam equals criticism of Muslims is a form of blackmail, disseminated to shut down any forthright critical engagement with the religion.

Unfortunately, the distinction between ideas and people isn't so clear-cut, especially in the context of high-commitment faiths, where beliefs are not just abstract conceptual entities but core aspects of personal identity. At various points in his book, Rizvi explicitly recognizes this. "In much of the Muslim world where I grew up," he writes, "religion is more than just a belief system. It is inextricably embedded in every aspect of people's lives." But for the most part he glosses over this in order to advance his argument that critiquing ideas is not the same as attacking the people who hold them. It would be more convincing to argue, as Stefan Collini does in his book *That's Offensive!*, that people do take ideas personally, but should be mature enough to withstand criticism of their cherished beliefs, responding with counterarguments instead of violence.

Rizvi also pushes back against the argument that ex-Muslim testimony serves to "give ammunition" to anti-Muslim sentiments on the right. This, he argues, is to give his testimony a power it doesn't have. "The reason that anti-Muslim bigotry exists is not because people like me are talking about what we're talking about," he said. "It's because there are millions of people watching their TV screens and they're seeing a guy drive a truck into a crowd in Nice, screaming 'Allahu Akbar,' or they see the Taliban go into a school in Peshawar and kill 132 kids, screaming 'Allahu Akbar' and quoting from the Quran, and they look at this and they just put the dots together."

Furthermore, Rizvi points out that even if ex-Muslim testimony is appropriated by demagogues on the right, the dangers of self-censorship are far graver. Recalling Osama bin Laden's [admiration](#) for Noam Chomsky's writings, he said, "Bin Laden was a huge fan of Chomsky, had his books, and quoted him in a few of his speeches. So should Chomsky stop speaking truthfully about the problems of U.S. foreign policy because Americans may get attacked around the world? Well, of course not. If something is true and needs to be said, it needs to be said."

In fact, he argues, it is the failure of mainstream democratic politicians to openly and honestly discuss Islam and its relationship to jihadist terrorism that has helped create an intellectual vacuum and usher in Trump and the alt-right, who were only too willing to address it, but in a xenophobic register.

“It is more important now than ever,” Rizvi writes, “to challenge and criticize the doctrine of Islam. And it is more important now than ever to protect and defend the rights of Muslims.”

Rizvi wrote these words before Trump came to power accompanied by a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment. The second point—that it is crucial to defend the rights of Muslims—could not be more relevant in America and Europe. But the first doesn't feel so urgent, given how embattled Muslims currently are.

Rizvi acknowledges that Trump and the rise of the far right have made his job harder, because of the proliferation of anti-Muslim intolerance and the vast energy resources it takes to constantly oppose this. Yet he remains committed to the argument advanced in his book: Both the critique of Islam and the defense of the rights of Muslims “must go together.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SIMON COTTEE is a contributing writer for *The Atlantic* and a visiting senior fellow with the Freedom Project at Wellesley College. He is the author of [The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam](#).
