

Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue

by Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz

Reviewed by Patrick Keeney

Even after the jihadi murders in Paris and San Bernadino, the clerisy which dominates the media and governments of the West refuse to acknowledge the truth of Pascal's observation. Instead, they stubbornly cling to the conventional pieties: all religions are innately peaceful, including Islam; religious beliefs, by definition, promote only benevolent and charitable behaviours; Western values are universally held and aspired to by all peoples; the chaos in the Islamic world is the child of Western intervention; Muslim youth in the West are radicalized by virtue of their being victims of economic and social exclusion; and so on.

Such platitudes insulate us from the reality that much of the Islamic world openly rejects Western ideals. Core Western values such as personal autonomy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, scientific rationality, gender equality, creedal forbearance, the right to apostasy, and the separation of Church and state, are forthrightly renounced by significant numbers of Muslims. Additionally, a general decline and atrophy of the religious intellect

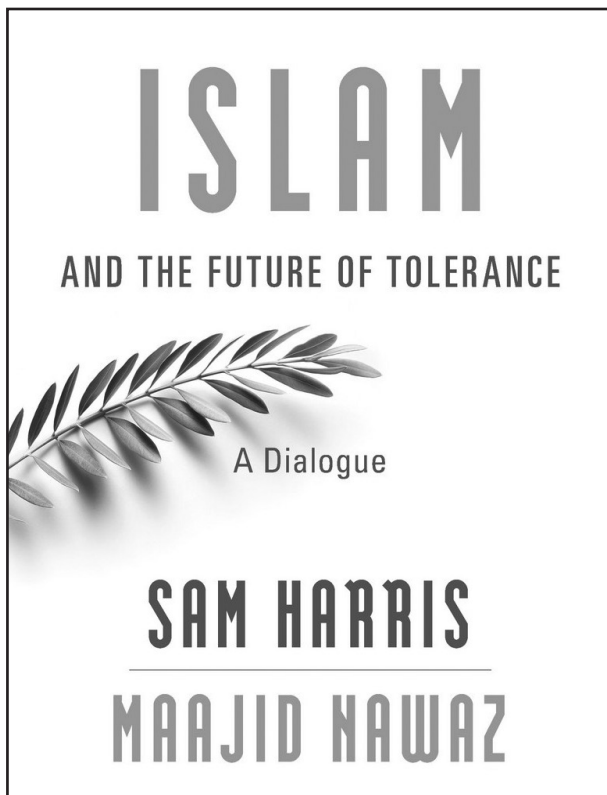
and imagination in the secular democracies has made it difficult for the liberal West to challenge an aggressively militant strain of Islam. Our media and political elites trade on simple-minded equivalencies; all religious beliefs are equally true or equally false; all religions promote behaviours which are equally benevolent or malevolent; and all religions grow from myths equally irrational.

Hence when our politicians attempt to account for jihadi atrocities, they are forced to outlandish and fatuous conclusions, such as, *pace* President Obama, that the violence perpetrated by ISIS does not stem from religion, but results from a "group of thugs with good social media."

Such *bien-pensant* apologists are prominent throughout the chattering classes of the West. And, as Sam Harris points out in *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, "their influence is as intellectually embarrassing as it is morally problematic." The book's central premise is that defeating radical Islam requires a forthright appraisal of the religious foundation of Islamist violence and a blunt examination of Islam's foundational texts.

"Men never
do evil so
completely
and cheerfully
as when they
do it from
religious
conviction."

Blaise Pascal



ISLAM AND THE FUTURE OF TOLERANCE:

A DIALOGUE

Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz

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Sam Harris first rose to prominence with his book, *The End of Faith* and so became counted among the so-called “new atheists.” His views concerning Islam continue to earn him opprobrium from Islamic apologists, along with the predictable charge of “Islamophobe.”

Maajid Nawaz is a UK-born Muslim. He is the co-founder and chair of Quilliam, a London-based think tank focusing on religious freedom, extremism, and citizenship. He is a former member of the radical Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahir, an association which led to his arrest in Egypt in 2001, where he remained imprisoned until 2006. During his imprisonment, he underwent a conversion to a human-rights perspective which led him to renounce Islamism and call for a “secular Islam.”

While there are differences between the two men, they agree upon the major points: the evils of Islamism, the blindness and obtuseness of the West in attempting to understand and counter Islamism, and most crucially, the urgent necessity of reforming Radical Islam.

Among the barriers to a productive discussion of a reformed Islam is finding the appropriate terminology in which to distinguish among Islam, religious extremism, and jihadism. Nawaz argues that “Islam is just a religion. Islamism is the ideology that seeks to impose

any version of Islam on society. Islamism is therefore theocratic extremism. Jihadism is the use of force to spread Islamism. Jihadist terrorism is the use of force that targets civilians to spread Islamism.”

Employing this template provides a helpful lens into the debate, one which allows us to see that the rise of both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are manifestations of a far deeper and systemic malaise. Talk of “defeating” al-Qaeda or the Islamic State on the field of battle is to mistakenly assume that the fight is against one or another “extremist” group. However, as Nawaz points out, the problem was never “al-Qaeda-inspired extremism, because extremism itself inspired al-Qaeda, and then inspired the Islamic State. It is this extremism that must be named – as Islamism – and opposed.”

Both men are contemptuous of the fatuous moral posturing that too frequently characterizes the “Islam” debate in the West. In their view, too much commentary glosses over a very disturbing truth: namely, that many of the moral failings of Islamism – the subjugation of women, the persecution of homosexuals, the death penalty for apostasy, the criminalization of blasphemy, the stoning of adulterers, the beheading of enemies, and so forth – are practices which find their justification in religious scripture. Harris and Nawaz frankly acknowledge that the actions perpetrated in the name of radical Islam, however savage and barbaric, are nevertheless based on interpretations of Islam’s foundational texts, the Koran and the hadith (the collections of the reports claiming to quote what the

prophet Muhammed said verbatim on any matter). Ultimately, jihadi violence is justified by scripture. As Nawaz points out, “Merely calling it “extremism” is too relative and vague, and sidesteps the responsibility to counter its scriptural justification” (121).

The question of reform then becomes the urgent question of finding ways of interpreting these texts which would preclude violence, and ultimately bring about Nawaz’s desideratum: a secular, tolerant and democratic Islam, one which values human rights, positive law, scientific rationality and the equality of the sexes. In short, what is most needed is a reformed Islam, one which denounces jihadi violence and embraces modern values.

The way forward then is crucially about finding new ways of interpreting Islam’s central texts, a task which Quilliam sees as foundational to its mission. And there is some reason for hope. As Nawaz points out, historically Islamic scholars have taken various approaches to scriptural interpretation, such that on any given subject there are multiple interpretations, “which demonstrates there’s no *correct* one. If we can understand that, then we arrive at a respect for difference, which leads to tolerance and then pluralism, which in turn leads to democracy, secularism, and human rights” (105).

The need for a reformed exegetical tradition in Islam is imperative, and any person of good will can only wish the best for this project. Yet does such a reformation necessarily lead to a rights-based, democratic, modern society? After all, even if we allow for a multiplicity of legitimate textual interpretations, that very toleration would still allow for fundamentalist, literalist readings. Moreover, as Harris argues, “scripture, read in anything but the most acrobatic, reformist way, seems to be on the side of the barbarians” (114).

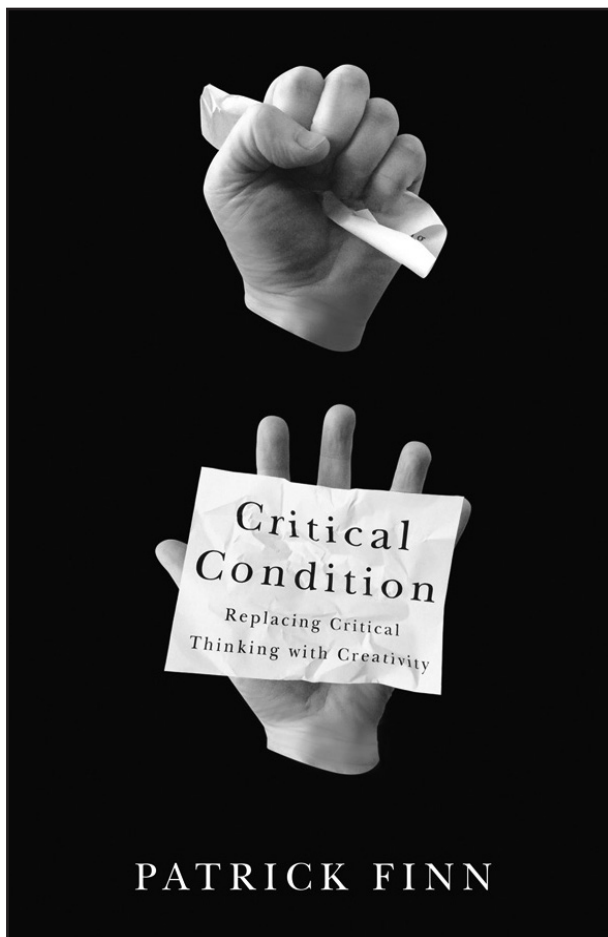
Both Harris and Nawaz accuse liberalism of having betrayed the cause of a reformed Islam. As Nawaz writes, “A great liberal betrayal is afoot.” Liberal intellectuals, who by all rights should be siding with attempts to reform Islam, are instead busy shouting “bigot” and “Islamophobe” at liberal Muslims such

as Nawaz, or indeed at anyone else who dares criticize Islam. In a marvelously telling phrase, Nawaz labels such people the “regressive left” for their tendency to side with every regressive reactionary in the name of “cultural authenticity.” (As an aside, it is distressing that the West is now compelled to re-fight various battles in the war of ideas which were once believed to have been won. Voltaire famously declared “*écrasez l’infame*,” where the “infamous” thing which he would crush was the Catholic Church. Of course, what Voltaire was ultimately arguing against was the power of any and all authoritarian religious institutions, and the whole system of ecclesiastical power and superstitious belief on which they rested. What, pray tell, would he have to say about the current crop of liberals, and their pussy-footing around radical Islam? Why have liberals betrayed their legacy?)

The West is involved in a war of ideas, not with Islam, but with Islamism, a medieval, millenarian religion inimical to the values of the secular West. Yet our multicultural biases, combined with the stifling political correctness of the “regressive left,” result in numerous delusions which have effectively paralyzed the conversation that we so desperately need to have.

Harris and Nawaz provide a much-needed corrective to a half-century or more of wishful thinking about the religious roots of Islamic violence. Neither man shirks from stating painful truths. Nevertheless, the interlocutors manage to steer a middle course between the rhetorical bombast of the political right and the moral posturing of the left. They provide the reader with an excellent primer concerning one of the great challenges of our age. But perhaps just as importantly, this little book serves as a model of how civilized debate can and should proceed, even when discussing a topic so fraught as Islam, Islamism and the rise of jihadi violence. •

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***CRITICAL CONDITION:
REPLACING CRITICAL THINKING
WITH CREATIVITY***

Patrick Finn

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reader expects to get a credible point out of the loose associations, superficial sketches, (what you hope is) hyperbole, and inapt definitions. Really, there is so much wrong in this book that it is nearly impossible to review. Fortunately, Jodie Matthews, over on the *LSE Review of Books* site¹, already raises several issues with *Critical Condition*, so at least I am relieved of that burden. Here, I will examine only three points.

First, what does Finn mean by “critical thinking” and how does that relate to the academic subject? Behind this label, Finn is most directly concerned with violent language. However, language Finn finds violent includes terms such as “interrogation” and “investigation,” and he doesn’t even mean, e.g., police interrogation – he is talking about standard academic fare, the interrogation and investigation of texts (31). “Judgement” too is violent, it seems (xii), and in fact, he seems to be saying that the simple act of criticizing someone is to do violence to them. Not even “constructive criticism” escapes culpability in violence (34).

To support this, Finn suggests, initially as an apparently innocent question (xii), that if many people think of critical thinking as a negative thing, we should ask if there is not some truth in this. It later becomes apparent that Finn actually takes this as sufficient to show that critical thinking is negativity (30-31). But why not accept that this is a misapprehension, since as Finn notes, the authors of most critical thinking texts stipulate that by “critical thinking” they actually mean “careful reasoning”? Finn claims

***Reviewed by
George Williamson***

Patrick Finn’s *Critical Condition: Replacing Critical Thinking with Creativity* proposes that the critical thinking that runs academia and much of the rest of the world ought to be replaced with what he terms “open-source, creative, contributory, loving communication”. Finn regards critical thinking as purely negative, capable of inspiring only attack and verbal violence. If we expect university graduates to be capable of contributing something to society, he claims, we should be teaching them creativity.

I fully expected to be annoyed – I teach philosophy and have taught critical thinking – I had not considered the possibility of finding it virtually unreadable. Not that the book is poorly written, inarticulate or illiterate. No, one can easily let the words flow past one’s eyes without much trouble, drifting along through the rhetorical turns. The problem arises the moment the

the constant need to correct misapprehensions is itself evidence for his claim. He suggests that in “use-based language” (30), maybe that meaning has ceded its place to “negativity.”

What Finn intends by “use-based language” is not clear, but to my knowledge, the issue of usage in language designates not a *kind* of language *per se*, but rather the fact that a given word’s meaning in common use may diverge from its dictionary definition and may drift historically. Presumably, Finn has this in mind, but usage also refers to the fact that understanding the intended meaning of a word, when there is more than one meaning, requires understanding its *context* of use. Not every connotation of a word is invoked each time it is used, and understanding the context allows one to decide what meaning is intended. In critical thinking texts, denying the connotation of negativity is simply a way of specifying context. So, contra Finn, there are two *co-existing* meanings of the term “critical” in common use to mean “negative” and in academic contexts to mean “reasoning carefully.”

Take a careful look back at the last paragraph: *that* is critical thinking (plus a tiny bit of knowledge about language use) in the sense of careful reasoning. This is not self-congratulation. Indeed, the point is so trite as to be only worth mentioning because it addresses a mistake central to Finn’s claims. But this may not faze Finn in the least. Recall his assimilation of violence to anything involved in thinking critically: judging, interrogating, debating. The above does all or most of these. Is this the violence Finn claims is being taught at university and needs to be junked?

Finn’s claims about university teaching appear to be empirical, since there should be ex-

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periences that could confirm them. Finn imagines a university that as a whole teaches verbal combat: the classrooms should look like martial arts sparring sessions. But I have never seen any such thing in over 20 years of teaching, and really, the exact opposite is true. Generally, civility reigns. To be sure, academics have gotten into notorious scraps, some becoming quite heated, but no one instructs students in nastiness, and both classroom and faculty discussions are mostly polite and sober. Would this experience not refute Finn’s claims? Finn sees exactly the same thing on campus as any other professor, but unfortunately takes it to be a form of

violence. In truth (and this is my second point), no experience can confirm or disconfirm Finn’s claims, as all he does is *redefine* the ordinary conduct of the university as *violence*. Unless you buy into this, his claims evaporate.

Not to say the university system is above criticism or that there are no problems with what is taught and how it is taught. I feel compelled to point out for comparison, however, the on-going corporatization of the university, the chronic de-funding by governments of all parties and stripes, which may well be a prelude to privatization, covert or otherwise. By contrast, this problem does not depend merely on how you take it, even if it admits of different perspectives.

Third and finally, are critical thinking and creativity actually opposed anyway? By “creativity” Finn means “the creation of something *new* that has *value*” (xiii, italics original). As defined, it is immediately apparent that creativity cannot do without some critical thought. What counts as “new”? Can it be merely new-to-you, or must it be world-historically new? To be new, must something contain nothing previously ex-

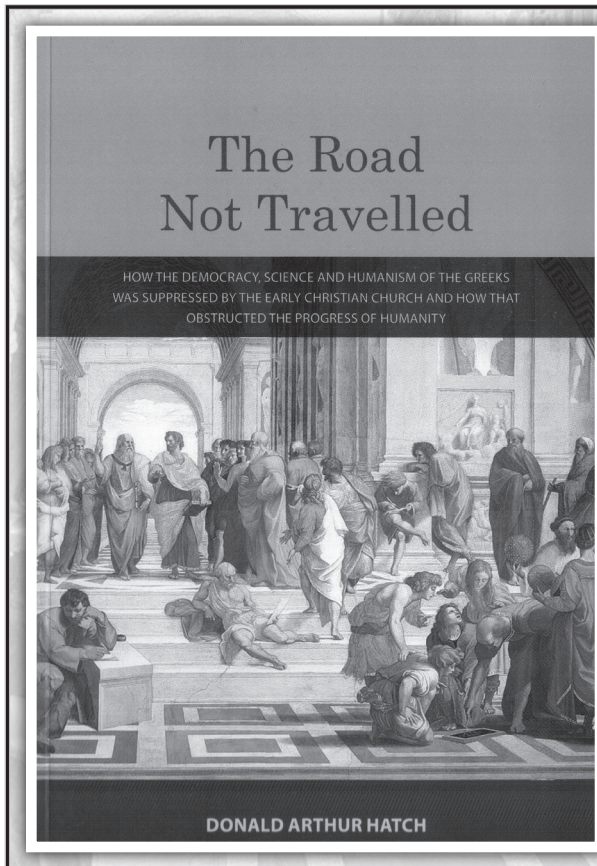
tant, or is a novel arrangement of old stuff sufficient? Regarding “value,” must creativity have value in itself, or can it have value for some further purpose? Does it matter for whom or for what it is valuable? Sorting out these concerns, even if you think them cheap shots at Finn’s definition, will require some carefully reasoned distinctions. And in fact, good reasoning inevitably must be both critical and creative, since even criticizing a text or an argument requires more than the rote application of intellectual tools. In thinking through an argument, one often must come to a new realization simply to achieve understanding. But now, what do *I* mean by “creativity”? I am pointing out that creativity is involved in problem solving, so far as solutions can range from applying a tried-and-true method to coming up with a genuinely fresh approach. But obviously, problem solving requires critical thought as well. The two are not opposed, but interdependent. If Finn had his way, he would eliminate from university in-

struction training that actually enables and facilitates creativity.

Early in the book, Finn describes what he is doing as a “thought experiment” (a term of art from philosophy), and there is a fair amount of what I think of as “begging off.” Authors write these things as warding gestures, to deflect in advance criticism they don’t wish to deal with. Finn clearly would prefer to start a conversation about the transformative power of creativity, and likely regards critical responses as unwelcome and unhelpful. But in starting from rudimentarily mistaken assumptions, as I hope to have shown, this conversation had nowhere else to go. •

References

1. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/01/10/book-review-critical-condition-replacing-critical-thinking-with-creativity-by-patrick-finn/>



Donald Hatch has packed each page with knowledge and with thoughtful comments about our past and about the emergence of a hopeful future as we proceed from the path of religious superstition and supernaturalism into a more enlightened time.

– *Goldwin Emerson, Ph.D.*

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