

## Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue

By Harris and Maajid Nawaz

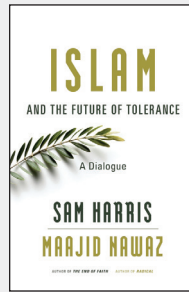
USA: Harvard University Press, 2015, 138 pages, \$17.95, ISBN: 9780674088702.

Reviewed by Nagothu Naresh Kumar

AN AVOWED ATHEIST, Sam Harris, and Nawaz Maajid, former extremist, and founder of the organization Quilliam come together to take stock of Islam and a range of ancillary issues in *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. The book is comprised of exchanges about Islamism, Muslim tribalism, interpretive latitude in the case of scriptures, and the need for secularism in the Muslim world.

Punctuated by candidness, civility, and enthusiasm to engage with a worldview other than one's own, these exchanges are sharp and cut through much of the ideological and conceptual clutter, leaving no room for obfuscation. The book is also marked, surprisingly, by agreement from both the interlocutors on a range of issues. Harris is adept at steering the discussion and raising thorny questions, while Maajid adds intellectual depth to the opinions he brings to the table. The dialogue incorporates the wider Muslim world and presents a semblance of accommodating a range of worldviews; it is remarkably suffused with an evangelistic desire to forge societies that are Western in model and tenor.

Keeping in mind the intricacies and complexity of the issues and actors involved, semantic and conceptual distinctions are furnished initially by Maajid. Distinguishing



between Islamists and Jihadists, he states: “When I say “Islamism,” I mean the desire to impose any given interpretation of Islam on society. When I say “jihadism,” I mean the use of force to spread Islamism” (p. 18).

With these definitions in place, Maajid sets the tone of the book regarding Islamists – a tone that forms the sinew of the book with Harris in affirmation. In refusing to single out any particular political actor within the larger rubric of Islamism, Maajid repeatedly accuses Islamists as desirous of imposing a particular brand of Islam on the society. This anathema for Islamists of all hues is evident throughout the discussion.

While berating the Islamists for their contradictory approach to Western modernity wherein, on one hand they adapt to it by taking recourse to the ballot box while simultaneously railing against it, Maajid does not bring attention to the fact that the worldview, which he seeks to promote through his organization characterized by secularism in its Western model of separation between religion and state, is also a product of Western modernity (p. 23). Moreover, he argues that the path to democracy and human rights is available only through the Western model of secularism disallowing for any variance or context-based approach to the multihued nature of secularism denoting a diligent sub-

scription to a singular model for all societies irrespective of their histories.

Maajid also notes that any society voting for Islamists is symptomatic of an 'identity crisis' and shows its inability to come to terms with 'the forces of globalization' (pp. 23, 36). The assumption here seems to be that globalization ought to lead to a uniform politico-social landscape across the world, wherein religion must be confined to the private sphere. This view not only gives short shrift to contextually attuned modernities and the many forms religion takes under globalization but peddles the even more erroneous notion that a dominant religiosity playing a significant role does not exist in the West. More importantly, it seems to connote that any attempt to choose a political dispensation that accords religion a place at the table of decision-making is uncharacteristic of the current era. For a dialogue that seeks to put a premium on value pluralism, these subtle assumptions aimed at uniformity seem to be strangely out of place.

In equating any Islamist attempt at gaining power through the ballot box as the imposition of a particular brand of Islam, Maajid steers clear of making any distinction between the separation of Islam and state on one hand, and religious and state authority on the other. The former is deemed to be against the spirit of Islam by thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, whom Maajid draws upon, but the latter, as an elastic form of governance, allows for non-discrimination and equal rights for all. Thus, it is viable to adopt Islam as a state religion while treating all citizens equally without prejudice, persecution or discrimination, as is best evidenced in the Tunisian constitution of 2014 which the discussion skips.

Harris has sharp criticism in store for the brigade of Western apologists, which refuses

to acknowledge the role religion, especially Islam, plays in conflict. For all the nefarious ways in which religion has been implicated in the conflicts in Western history, leading to the famed wall of separation between religion and the state, there is a pernicious reluctance among many in the West to acknowledge its role elsewhere in the world. For Maajid, an even more exasperating and enervating role is played by 'fellow travelers' evident in 'regressive leftists' who, in their need for 'cultural authenticity,' seek and parse out conservative Muslim voices as 'true' representatives of Islam, thereby working to the detriment of liberal and other disempowered groups within Islam (p. 49). Over the course of the book, Maajid is also hard hitting when he takes the grievance narratives to task for peddling and sustaining a victimhood mentality that feeds on a history of colonialism and imperialism (p. 58).

Both Harris and Maajid agree that the issue of Muslim tribalism is problematic in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wherein the 'Muslim world' breaks into an outrage whenever Sunni Muslims are victims, but does not express similar outrage when the perpetrators are fellow Muslims; the authors and attribute this double standard to 'religiously mandated solidarity with other Muslims' (p. 114). While this diagnosis is not off the mark, the conflation of solidarity with tribalism is acutely contingent on the nation-state as the default mode of political association in spite of it being a recent phenomenon. The above diagnosis gives short shrift to the contemporary resonance of the historical memory of the Pan-Islamic movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which were quite instrumental in mounting opposition to imperial overtures, wherein transnational solidarities proved to be quite crucial in establishing networks and a cosmopolitan ecumene.

In response to a question posed by Harris on how the issue of Muslim tribalism could be addressed in addition to de-stigmatizing secularism in the Muslim world, Maajid proposes a reappraisal of the concept of *umma*, giving it a humanistic twist so as to include all of the humanity (p. 116). As for revamping the credentials of and disseminating secularism (in its Western model) in a Muslim world which has been tainted by secularism's association with secular dictators, both the interlocutors affirm that the panacea lies in promoting the value of pluralism. Pluralism here is coupled with the western model of secularism, insinuating that it cannot sustain itself in the absence of such a model. There is no mention or discussion of contextually attuned secularisms that could sustain and promote the value of pluralism, a blind spot

which is disappointing to note in a book that otherwise offers sharp insights.

The book's strength lies in its dissection of the red herrings that inundate discussions on Islam and its contemporary cultural variations with precision and candor. Seeking to provide a corrective to the yarn of 'politically correct' narratives and falling short of 150 pages, this slim volume, packed with ideas, trains its guns on multiple issues ranging from the benefits of scriptural dexterity to the need for transcending victimhood narratives, while advocating the value of pluralism, and seeking to fuel a grassroots campaign for all of the above. This book is recommended reading for all those who wish to gain a more nuanced understanding of Islam and its myriad manifestations across the Muslim world.

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## Development in an Era of Neoliberal Globalization

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*Edited by Henry Veltmeyer*

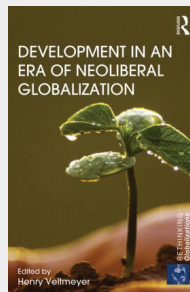
London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014, xiv+181 pages, \$145.83, ISBN: 9780415830935.

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*Reviewed by Gökhan Umut*

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THE CAPITALIST development process has been criticized by many scholars due to its questionable effects on countries. After the privileging of neoliberal principles in western national economies from the 1970s onward, discussions on the legitimacy of capitalism have increasingly continued. Undoubtedly, neoliberal policies have been questioned intensively in developing countries as well. The World Bank's confession that there is no empirical support for the effectiveness of neoliberal policies on developing nations could explain why policymakers in develop-



ing countries are unsure about the integration of their countries to the extreme liberalization of the economy.

*Development in an Era of Neoliberal Globalization*, a collection of articles and presented papers to pay tribute to Surendra Patel's substantial scholarship in development economics, is a significant contribution to the field. Many pro-globalization books tend to analyze the economic and social problems which are prevalent in today's world within the frame of neoliberal assumptions. Accord-