

Bill Maher's Muddled Attacks on Islam

As an edgy comedian, Bill Maher prides himself on his “politically incorrect” religion-bashing, but his excessive attacks on Islam more aptly reflect a “politically correct” bigotry, as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Bill Maher thinks he knows exactly why they hate us. In the world according to Bill, all those agitated Muslims on the receiving end of multiple interventions, numerous “double-tap” drone strikes, countless tons of falling bombs, the systematic imprisonment of “rendered” individuals and the widespread use of lawless torture are, simply put, the outgrowth of a backwards belief system. And those beliefs also inspire a type of religious violence that’s become a destructive force unparalleled in today’s world.

The “today” part is important to Maher because he doesn’t like the “false equivalence” of historical context. Instead, he’s decidedly on the side of “that was then, this is now.” So, forget Christian Crusaders, Spanish Inquisitors, Philistine-purging Israelites or, one would assume, any of human history’s numerous examples of holy war-making.

Also not equivalent are recent mass murders of Sikhs in Wisconsin and of Muslims in Quebec. And don’t bother bringing up the growing list of identity-based violence against Muslims or, perhaps most tellingly, of mistaken identity-based violence against those who are ignorantly thought to be Muslims, but aren’t.

Somehow, America’s long, demonstrable history of putting ethnic cleanliness next to its own obsessive Godliness doesn’t quite cut it either, burning crosses and Native American genocide notwithstanding. No, history doesn’t reverberate in the Islamophobic echo chamber ... unless, of course, we’re talking about the “warlike” history of long-since faded Islamic empires. Then all’s fair in this one-sided front on the anti-religious war being waged by the so-called “New Atheists.”

The New Atheism

Maher and his confrontational cohorts – like famed geneticist Richard Dawkins and anti-Muslim gadfly Sam Harris – have targeted Islam as something far more pernicious than just another fantasy-based religion with the usual roster of fundamentalists, self-appointed prophets and violent opportunists.

For them, Islam is *sui generis*. Islam is, according to their unique atheist orthodoxy, both violent and repressive in ways that make it wholly unique. Islam is not just an intellectual error, but a dangerous cultural cancer.

Essentially, these New Atheists have simplified a question almost as old as the “War on Terror” it so inadequately tries to explain. For them, the answer is clear. They hate us because Islam is the enemy of the “liberal” values and, by extension, of the entire civilized world.

Perhaps that’s why Maher doesn’t think jihadi terrorist groups or random incidents of jihadi-inspired violence are better explained as the irrational acts of individual insanity or as the predictable blowback from 75 years of American meddling the Middle East. That is, of course, if you consider “meddling” an adequate description of America’s history of profitable relationships with brutal dictators.

Maher’s “they-hate-our-liberal values” explanation is certainly an inadequate characterization of 25 years of continuous bombing in the region ... and of CENTCOM’s random application of kinetic force in numerous Muslim countries over the same period. “Meddling” also falls short of describing the multi-year drone war on “suspected militants” and, all-too-often, on innocent civilians.

On the other hand, “meddling with benefits” might best describe the post-colonial period in a poorly-partitioned region where receding Western powers exploited the maps they’d drawn to great effect. The divided nations they created were fairly easy for corporate neo-colonialists to conquer or control – whether they sought oil, or sold weapons to those who had the oil, but needed protection ... sometimes from their “own people.” And then there’s Uncle Sam’s meddling (a.k.a. complicity) in the never-ending displacement of the Palestinian people.

But those niggling details tend to cloud the clear-as-day view of Islam that Maher shares with those who see it as an enemy of civilization. That’s certainly the view of die-hard evangelicals like Franklin Graham, of defense industry shills at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, and of the assorted denizens of the increasingly profitable Islamophobia industry.

In effect, Maher and the New Atheists have joined a legion of doomsayers led by the indefatigable Pamela Geller, the paranoia-stricken Frank Gaffney, Steve Bannon’s profit-seeking Breitbart and Trump’s momentary National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael Flynn.

Packaged for Liberals

To be fair, Maher doesn’t employ the same type of paranoid histrionics that both buoys and enriches those right-wing poseurs and the other troubling Islamophobes who’ve found a home in Trump’s White House. Rather, Maher makes a “liberal” argument about the need to stand up for “progressive” values like equality for

women, free speech and freedom of religious conscience. He rightly points to countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan as places where a basic level of human rights is not available to women, to religious minorities, to homosexuals or to anyone not willing to conform to fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Ironically, and perhaps not coincidentally, some of the places where progressive values are least likely to be embraced are the same countries America has mostly closely supported – Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also not coincidentally, the places where America has exerted the most influence are also the places that produce many of the violent individuals and groups through which Maher judges the planet's Muslims.

Unsurprisingly, Maher and the New Atheists are loathe to concede the notable shades of gray around the Islamic world – from the women serving in parliament and working as professionals in Iran to the quite different Muslim experiences found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Balkans. Nor do they mention the fact that Muslim-majority nations have had more women reach the top political spot (eleven) than the United States (zero). It doesn't quite fit into their zero-sum game.

Punchy Lines

Still, if Maher was making the point that the United States is too often a handmaiden to ... or crass beneficiary of ... repression in regimes that hold some economic and/or strategic value to the defense industry and/or the oil industry, he'd likely garner support from many of the progressives he often scolds. But he doesn't.

Instead he and his fellow finger-pointers rail against the Quran as the "motherlode of bad ideas." Maher says Islam is "the only religion that acts like the Mafia" and even assured Muslim-American Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, that the Quran is "a hate-filled holy book."

Maher's presentation is a "schlock and awe" shtick that burnishes his credentials as a self-appointed bullshit detector. It preserves his long-standing brand as an anti-PC crusader and, like so many great comedians before him, as someone willing to "go there" even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Perhaps that's why Maher's accused his fellow liberals of giving Islam a "free pass" when it comes to their "repressive" culture. And why he's reprimanded anyone who disagrees with his assertion that Islam is both a particularly violent and a peculiarly "backward" religion that is totally incompatible with the modern world (whatever that is).

He's made a point of criticizing the "cultural relativism" that compares

Islamic-based violence with violence linked to other religions – particularly violence linked to Christianity. As Maher infamously told Charlie Rose back in 2014, to “claim that this religion is like other religions is just naive and plain wrong.”

This politically incorrect posture has made fans of die-hard Christian commentators. But this is also where his punchy argument – and his disdain for context – betrays him. Why? Because it fails to account for the cruel crimes against humanity currently being driven by hard-line, radical Buddhists in Myanmar. Yes, it’s true ... Buddhists have fomented a widespread program of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority which is, oddly enough, a Muslim minority.

Hindus Too?

Maher’s posture ignores the rise of Hindu extremism in India, where the problem of religious violence and persecution is growing under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Vice reported that religious minorities in India “averaged one attack per day” in 2015. Muslims in particular have experienced an increase of random violence since Modi came to power. And last year, attacks on the Christian minority grew three-fold with a church “burnt down or a cleric beaten on average 10 times a week,” according to a report by Open Doors UK & Ireland.

It is also true that the radical settler movement in Israel has its own hyper-fundamentalists who believe divine right has given them carte blanche to purge the Holy Land of both Muslims and Christians. In 2016, radicalized settlers produced “an average of 2 incidents of settler violence per week,” according to a United Nations report. Yes, we know about Hamas’ radical Islamic violence.

But human rights organization B’Tselem is monitoring the persistent problem of Jewish violence because there is such a thing as “radical Judaism.” And Israel’s “Ultra-Orthodox” fundamentalists have a familiar, anti-liberal problem with women worshipping next to men, riding the bus with men and with a belief in the “unclean” nature of the feminine.

Let’s be honest ... it’s a fundamentalist tendency shared among the three Abrahamic cousins. Even now America’s Vice President Mike Pence believes married men shouldn’t risk cavorting with other women, may believe it’s possible to “pray the Gay away,” absolutely believes gay marriage is tantamount to “societal collapse” and is the standard bearer for a well-established Evangelical political movement that “inspired” violence against abortion providers. And, as noted earlier, there are those troubling, religiously-inspired burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan.

Do these religiously-sourced incidents, some of which are part of long, identifiable patterns, mean that the religions themselves are inherently pernicious? Is it possible that Maher, like the politically correct liberals he scorns, is handing out free passes to these non-Muslim religions? Or is it that religions are – like most belief or political systems – potentially useful tools to those seeking righteous justification or an organizing rationale for their rage and anger?

As a guest on Maher's HBO show recently said regarding the "lone wolf" attack outside the Houses of Parliament in London, "it has nothing to do with Islam the same way Timothy McVeigh had nothing to do with Roman Catholicism."

But Maher wasn't having it. And when he was then presented with the fact that Irish Catholic separatists engaged in a deadly campaign of bombings and terrorism against those they perceived as their Protestant oppressors, again Maher bristled. He said that was "the past" (like the Inquisition, the Crusades and, apparently, those uniquely American burning crosses).

And he punctuated his point by dropping this headline-grabbing punch-line: "Every time some bomb goes off, before it goes off, somebody yells 'Allahu Akbar!' I never hear anybody go 'Merry Christmas! This one's for the flying nun!'"

It got a nice chuckle from the crowd. But history usually gets the last laugh.

History Matters

First of all, not only did the IRA and IRA "elements" repeatedly attack Christmas shoppers in London in the week before the holiday, but one such attack outside Harrod's on Dec. 17, 1983, killed five shoppers and wounded 91 others. That bombing led to annual fears of a "Christmas Bombing" campaign all the way into the 1990s.

No, the proudly Catholic authors of that attack did not say "Merry Christmas," but their intention was clear. The bombings were not *in spite of* the most important religious holiday for Christians, but *because of* the added impact that holiday had in creating a feeling of terror among the intended target. The timing of the bombing was itself a terrifying message.

Secondly and, perhaps more pertinently, the United States used the Christmas holiday as a backdrop for one of the most brutal bombing campaigns of the post-World War II era. Officially it was called "Linebacker II," but ever since it began on Dec. 18, 1972, the round-the-clock bombardment of Hanoi, Haiphong and the surrounding environs has been known as the "Christmas Bombing." It was ordered by President Nixon as a punitive measure meant to terrorize the

Vietnamese people and, therefore, designed to apply pressure on the Communist government to (ironically) sign a peace agreement in Paris.

Although there was a pause on Christmas Day, this momentary “gift” was cold comfort to the 1,600 people who died in that campaign. Hanoi was laid waste as America’s fleet B-52s flew a total of 741 sorties and “dropped at least 20,000 tonnes” of bombs, according to a 40th anniversary report on the bombing by the BBC. Another report put the total at 40,000 tons. A Vietnamese source says the total – and the lingering toll on the Vietnamese people – was much higher still.

LobeLog’s David Bacon wrote a retrospective look at the psychological impact of the B-52 as an instrument of *de facto* terrorism. He dug up a newspaper report on a delegation visiting in the wake of the Christmas Bombing. It was led by Nuremburg jurist Telford Taylor. It also included Joan Baez and Yale University Divinity School Associate Dean Michael Allen, who said, “The most horrible scene that I’ve ever seen in my life was when we visited the residential area of Khan Thieu, and as far as I could see, everything was destroyed.”

Like the IRA, Nixon didn’t shout “Merry Christmas” when he delivered his explosive message. Then again, he didn’t really have to. As noted journalist and columnist Anthony Lewis wrote in the New York Times, “To send B-52s against populous areas such as Haiphong or Hanoi could have only one purpose: terror.” And Lewis wasn’t alone in his assessment that Nixon’s purpose was, in fact, terrorism.

Newspapers around the United States and the world condemned the bombing and the word “terror” was used by The Washington Post (“Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace,” Dec. 28), the New York Times (“Terror From the Skies,” Dec. 26), Joseph Kraft (“senseless terror”) and Dan Rather (“large scale terror bombing”). The Christmas bombing message was clear to all.

God-Fearing ‘Freedom’

But that simple symmetry is not the end of the story. That’s because the underlying propaganda of that the war – like all of America’s Cold War interventions, proxy battles and ad hoc bombings – was something Americans have (perhaps unsurprisingly, perhaps conveniently) forgotten. The plain fact is that Vietnam and the entire post-World War II period was sold as a struggle against “Godless Communism.” That may sound like a quirky anachronism today, but rest assured that the “Godlessness” of Commies, Pinkos and interloping Socialists was not only a core foundation of Cold War propaganda, but it also fed the monster of paranoia that helped create McCarthyism.

Indeed, at the same time Sen. Joe McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, was railing against

Commies in 1954, Congress was moving to add “One Nation Under God” to the pledge of allegiance. As the New York Times recalled in a 2002 article on a challenge to the constitutionality of that addition:

“The change was made to draw attention to the difference between the system of government in this country and ‘godless Communism.’ ... Introducing his resolution in the Senate, Senator Homer Ferguson, Republican of Michigan, declared, ‘I believe this modification of the pledge is important because it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely belief in God.’ No one in the Senate or the House spoke in opposition.”

In fact, the vocal merger of American Christianity with Cold War anti-Communism has been cited as a spur for the 16 percent rise in church membership between 1940 and 1970. In a 2003 review of a well-received book of the topic, Dr. Merrilyn Thomas of University College London noted that it should be “self-evident” that “religion played a significant role in the Cold War ... given the powerful influence of Christianity on the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain.”

It may not be “self-evident” now because it is simply taken for granted. We’ve inherited that era’s holy warriorism and pushed it deep into our collective subconsciously through our gaping memory hole. It’s a subtext that came to the fore when the 9/11 “changed everything.” But, then again ... it really changed nothing.

Lessons Unlearned

Perhaps the saddest fact to emerge from the bloodiest episode in America’s war on Godless Communism is that Ho Chi Minh didn’t really have to be America’s enemy. He actually thought America – with its own revolutionary past – might be an ally in his drive to liberate Vietnam from French colonial rule. It made sense since he’d worked with the OSS to battle the Japanese in World War II. But that nascent alliance became impossible as an almost religious form of zealous anti-Communism consumed Truman’s presidency, the foreign policy establishment and, by the mid-1950s, most of America’s institutions.

Instead of seeing Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist first and a Communist second, America policymakers missed an important fact. His main goal was to liberate his nation from foreign occupation. But the foreign policy establishment viewed Vietnam and the entire world through a Manichean lens. It was the Free World versus Communism. It was good versus evil. It was a civilizational battle between the God-fearing and the God-less. And this simplistic template made it impossible to see that Communism was often as much a means to an end as it was

an end unto itself.

That's one lesson Cornell University professor and historian Frederik Logevall took from writing his 2012 book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*.

As Logevall said in an interview referenced by the New York Times, Ho "saw communism as the best path of development for his country, but it was always *his country*." And it was the liberation of "*his country*" that mattered most. Even the New York Times noted in its Sept. 4, 1969 obituary that Ho was a "remarkable" statesman who "pursued his goal of Vietnamese independence" by successfully "blending Communism with nationalism."

And that's the unlearned lesson of the entire Cold War period. Wherever we look back and see Communist, Socialist and other radicalized insurgencies, we usually see a larger historical process of decolonization. The years after World War II are filled with examples of former colonies fighting against the re-imposition of empire after the end of World War II. Or we see the revolt of newly-liberated peoples against the post-colonial proxies, kleptocrats and petty dictatorships that essentially stood between the people and their right of true self-determination and/or economic power.

To be sure, there were also many instances of dyed-in-the-wool Reds who were true believers. Places like Cuba, China and the Soviet Union were secure enough on their own to turn inward and, ironically, transform the communist project into a statist-style religion with personality cults that smack of religion. We see it now today in North Korea. But it is undeniable that Communism was also an effective organizing and recruitment tool that gave adherents a strong sense of group cohesion and ideological discipline that made them both effective fighters and committed believers.

Moreover, Communism was itself often criticized as a pseudo-religious paradigm that crystallized the terms of the fight into divided the world into the oppressors and the oppressed (a.k.a. infidels and believers). This mirrored the way America divided the world into the God-loving free world and the "Evil" empire of Godless Communism. In many ways, Communism became the logical "belief system" for those organizing resistance to the real or perceived American imperialism of the post-war period. It's almost an irrefutable matter of political physics that the forceful imposition of the American Century would elicit an equal and opposite reaction. These reactions are as predictable as gravity.

Belief System Breakdown

Sadly, the coming of the War on Terror revealed exactly how little America learned from the bloodletting of Vietnam. Osama bin Laden began his Holy War as a project to eject “infidels” from Saudi Arabia – the holiest of Islam’s lands and his home nation. The infidels were American troops and they were there because they were “meddling” in Iraq – a place where America’s one-time client had become its foe. But America’s oil-thirsty neo-colonial protection racket put it right in the crosshairs of bin Laden and many others who resented America’s presence. Ironically, that resentment had its roots in yet another resistance movement – the CIA-generated plot to expel another set of invaders from a Muslim land.

That’s right ... like Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong and countless other ideological leaders of the Twentieth Century ... the CIA realized the power of a coherent belief system to create exactly the type group cohesion and hard-won discipline necessary to fight an asymmetrical war against a superior invader. That’s what Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism offered the adherents who flocked to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the CIA took note of the power of Shiite fundamentalism to organize resistance when their hand-picked, highly-Westernized leader in Iran was quickly toppled by a religious coup that was as much an anti-colonial fight as it was anything else. It’s a lesson as Russia learned in neighboring Afghanistan when they were ejected by comparatively lightly-armed foe reinforced by their hardcore beliefs.

It’s strangely fitting that the Muslim faith of the Mujahedeen helped to bring down the “Evil Empire” of Godless Communism. Unfortunately, their American benefactors filled that vacuum with their own ambitions for a unipolar world and, in the process, left Afghanistan with little more than rubble to show for their help.

With America now unopposed on the world stage, it began a renewed era of “meddling” around the Muslim world that led to the arrival troops in Saudi Arabia (1990), the basing of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain (1995), the establishment of Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti (2002) and a vast array of smaller deployments around the globe. This compounded the damage from U.S. indifference to Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and from a decade of sanctions and bombing in Iraq that reportedly led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children.

Albright’s Endorsement

Whether that story is a fact or a myth, all that really matters is that the story was widely known. In 1996, it was bitterly reinforced by then-U.S.

Ambassador to the U.N. Madeleine Albright when she infamously told Lesley Stahl of *60 Minutes* that the Iraq's sanction-related deaths were "worth it."

Why? Because America's former client – Saddam Hussein – needed to be punished. This is the same Saddam Hussein the United States armed in the 1980s to fight Iran. That's the same Iran the United States was simultaneously – and quite illegally – arming to fight Saddam. And this, like so many other details, may be inexorably stuffed somewhere in America's bottomless memory hole.

But, like a long litany of interventions, drone-delivered executions and troubling crimes committed since 9/11 (yes, torture and extralegal imprisonment are crimes), it's a fact widely known around the Muslim world. Don't doubt for a minute that Gitmo, Abu Ghraib and the ever-present menace of hovering drones are foremost in the hearts and minds of many Muslims.

Given that fact, it is any real surprise that the Muslim world sees the United States and its allies as enemies? Is it really because – as the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes believe (note that is, in fact, a belief) – the Muslim faith is uniquely ill-equipped to be part of their "civilized" world? Or is it that Islam is just the latest example of an ideology or religion being used to organize, to inspire and to marshal angry, displaced and/or aspirational human beings in a fight against a superior foe?

If history is our guide, radical jihadism looks like an opportune way to organize resistance to what many Muslims see as an American Century of violent "meddling" and political imposition through brutal proxies and neo-colonial adventurism. It is blowback. The New Atheists – and befuddled Americans – should look no further than the most recent slaughters of civilians in Yemen and Mosul for the replenishment of the already manifold reasons why they hate us.

And as for the often-cited the rejection of Western "liberal" values? Like the rejection of "decadent Capitalism" by fundamentalist Communism during the Cold War, it makes sense that Islamic fundamentalism would target anything that smacks of the Western world. And like other ideologies of resistance and revolution, it directs people's anger toward the accouterments and symbols of the dominant power in their lives – whether directly imposed or imposed through proxies.

If that's what radical Muslim jihadism is ... then it is infinitely more comprehensible than Bill Maher, the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes are willing to accept or admit. Maybe Islam isn't a puzzling cancer that has to be excised. Maybe jihadism is a means, not an end. And maybe the brutal insanity of the Islamic State is more an echo of the excesses of the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Robespierre's Reign of Terror than it is a

logical conclusion of the Islamic faith. And maybe ... just maybe ... the radicalism around Muslim world can be seen in a larger context of history. That means acknowledging the extent to which America and its repressive proxies have set the terms of the debate around the Muslim world for the better part of a century.

Ultimately, it's most important to recognize that Maher is, at best, misguided when he says there aren't "Christian terrorist armies like ISIS." As far as many Muslims on the receiving end of officially-sanctioned violence from the U.S. military, that's probably a distinction without much of a difference. And if there's any doubt about America's own lingering fundamentalism, take note that few things would be more futile today than trying to get Congress to scrub that Cold War-era religious test from the Pledge of Allegiance.

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