

Atheists on Islam: How the Atheist Community at UIUC Perceives Islam and Relates to the Campus Muslim Community

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Abstract

The Illini Secular Student Alliance (ISSA) is a registered student organization for the nonreligious student community at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). In 2010, they promoted an event called "Draw Muhammad on the Quad," where students drew stick figures labeled 'Muhammad' around the UIUC campus. This was inspired by a larger, national event called "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day." The event caused ISSA to be labeled by some members of the campus community as Islamophobic. This paper will explore how current and former ISSA members view Islam and the Muslim community at UIUC. Do they view Islam as more dangerous or 'radical' than other faiths? Do they have a cogent understanding of the basic tenets of Islam? Additionally, this paper will research whether they feel that events such as "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" serve merely as expressions of free speech or are meant to ostracize and criticize members of the Muslim community. What effects, if any, do ISSA members feel that this type of event has on the Muslim community at UIUC? This research was conducted by interviewing current and former ISSA members. Information was also obtained using articles written by ISSA officers on their official website. The interviewees themselves viewed Islam as no more dangerous than other religions, but they expressed mixed opinions on whether or not the campus community and larger atheist community were Islamophobic. The interviewees expressed little support for hosting another controversial event such as "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" and stressed ISSA's participation in interfaith events.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation: New Atheism and Islam

A 2006 study led by Dr. Penny Edgell at the University of Minnesota asked participants to select a group that did "not at all agree with [their] vision of American society" and a group that they would disapprove of their children marrying into (Edgell, et al. 2006). The groups that participants could choose from included recent immigrants, conservative Christians, homosexuals, and African Americans, among others. For both questions, the most common response was 'atheists' followed by 'Muslims.'

In addition, a 2012 Gallup poll found that Americans were least likely to vote for an atheist (43% would not vote for) or Muslim (40% would not vote for), compared to other minority groups (Jeffrey 2012).

Both groups represent a small minority of the United States population and both appear to face high levels of prejudice and intolerance. While this shared experience could foster solidarity between atheists and Muslims, several prominent members of the 'New Atheist' community have expressed opinions that have led the movement as a whole to be labeled Islamophobic. While 'New Atheism' is a rather poorly-defined (and sometimes pejorative) term,

I use it here only to refer to the present day popular atheist movement, as characterized by the writings of Christopher Hitchens, Dr. Richard Dawkins, Dr. Sam Harris, and Dr. Daniel Dennett.

Christopher Hitchens was vocally pro-“War on Terror” and in 2002 even lauded the ability of cluster bombs to “go straight through somebody and out the other side and through somebody else. So they [terrorists] won't be able to say, ‘Ah, I was bearing a Koran over my heart and guess what, the missile stopped halfway through. No way, ‘cause it'll go straight through that as well. They'll be dead, in other words” (Greenwald 2011). More recently, Sam Harris was on Bill Maher's HBO news show Real Time (Maher 2015) (both men are prominent atheists) and was making the argument that accusing someone of Islamophobia is simply a way to dismiss and shut down legitimate criticism of Islam. They both argued that labeling someone as Islamophobic is an ad hominem attack not on par with someone being labeled racist or homophobic. In the same interview, Harris called Islam “the mother lode of bad ideas”. Sam Harris has also claimed that Islam is more dangerous than the other Abrahamic faiths, writing that “despite all the obvious barbarism in the Old Testament, and the dangerous eschatology of the New, it is relatively easy for Jews and Christians to divorce religion from politics and secular ethics... Transforming Islam into a truly benign faith will require a miracle of re-interpretation” (Harris 2014). This sentiment was echoed by Richard Dawkins who said that Islam is “the greatest force for evil today” (Dawkins 2013).

While these men have made controversial comments about Christianity and other religions, the comments referenced above (and many not mentioned here) point to a general sense that Islam is a uniquely dangerous religion. Does the atheist population as a whole hold this belief? Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett are wealthy, White men. Their perspective cannot be extended to the entire atheist community. Due to the lack of a unifying doctrine, any two members of the atheist

community could be polar opposites, with only their lack of a belief in common. Still, there are general trends within the larger community (atheists tend to be liberal and favor same-sex marriage, for example)(Pew Research Center 2015). Is Islamophobia one of these trends?

A 2011 Pew Survey found the “religiously unaffiliated” less likely than Protestants or Catholics to believe that Islam encourages violence more than other faiths (Pew Research Center 2011a). Only 30% of the unaffiliated agreed with the statement. However, the category “religiously unaffiliated” does not include only atheists or agnostics, but also people with some religious faith who don't identify with any one organized religion. But, perhaps this figure does point to atheists being more tolerant (relative to several other faiths) of Islam.

As described, the relationship between atheists and Islam is complex and varied. What can be learned by focusing on a small subset of the larger atheist community? One such subset is composed of the members of a UIUC nonreligious student organization called the Illini Secular Student Alliance (ISSA). In this paper, I have chosen to explore the attitudes of four members of this student organization.

1.2. Atheism at the University of Illinois: The Illini Secular Student Alliance

ISSA was founded in 2007 as a registered student organization (RSO) at UIUC. According to their website,

“Our mission is to organize, unite, and serve students who promote the ideals of scientific rationality, secularism, and humanistic ethics. Through ongoing activism, we aim to educate the general public (our local community in particular) about the values of reason, science, critical thinking, skepticism, and openness to new ideas. Finally, we seek to improve our community and the world as a whole through service work – an area which is traditionally dominated by religious organizations.”

ISSA has won numerous national awards, including recognition for their service work and diversity initiatives. They organized the first “Light the Night” walk in Champaign, IL to raise money for the Leukemia Lymphoma Society. Also, they actively take part in interfaith activities with other RSOs.

In the spring of 2010, ISSA hosted an event called “Draw Muhammad on the Quad,” which was inspired by a worldwide event known as “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.” These events initially began as a response to the censorship of an episode of the television show South Park. The episode depicted the Prophet Muhammad as a cartoon, which is considered *haram* (forbidden) by many Muslims. The scriptural basis for this is found in the hadith, specifically Sahih al-Bukhari 3:42 (Pew Research Center 2011b), which reads, “Whoever makes a picture will be punished by Allah till he puts life in it, and he will never be able to put life in it.” In response to the depiction of Muhammad in the South Park episode, a member of the group Revolution Muslim posted a death threat against the shows creators online.

In response to the censorship of the episode and the death threats against the shows creators, a movement was organized to publicly create depictions of Muhammad on a day that came to be known as “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.” ISSA, then called Atheists, Agnostics, and Freethinkers of the University of Illinois (AAF), hosted an event called “Draw Muhammad on the Quad” which was inspired by the “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” movement. The main focus of this event was the chalking of several stick figures labeled Muhammad across the UIUC campus. ISSA posted on their blog that they drew “over 150” of the stick figures “across two quads” (Clint 2010). Some of the drawings ended up being altered (such as one that had a red ‘x’ drawn through the word ‘Muhammad’ with the word ‘stop!’ drawn in above) or removed.

This complex history between ISSA and Islam makes its members an even more interesting subset of the atheist community to examine. In this paper, I first explore how

familiar my interviewees are with Islam. What general knowledge do they have? How informed do they think that they are? Next, I discuss their thoughts on the campus climate towards Islam. In the following section, I explore their thoughts on New Atheism and the larger atheist community. Do they think that prominent atheists like Dawkins and Harris are Islamophobic? Do they think that atheists in general have stronger feelings about Islam than other faiths? Next, I report their general thoughts on the “Draw Muhammad on the Quad” event. I then explore whether or not they feel that a similar event could (or should) be held again. Finally, I report my interviewees’ thoughts on interfaith activities.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

I interviewed a total of three current members of ISSA. They have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. Sarah, Aaron, and Nora are all active members of ISSA and undergraduates at UIUC. I interviewed each of them in-person at a public place on or near campus. I asked them questions intended to determine their perception and knowledge of Islam, their feelings about Everybody Draw Muhammad Day, and their perception and knowledge of Muslims on campus. I also interviewed Katherine, an alumnus of the University and former member of ISSA. Due to her relocation since graduation, this interview was conducted via e-mail. I knew Katherine prior to conducting this research, but (as I am not a member of the organization) I was not very familiar with her participation in ISSA. I asked her fewer questions than the other interviewees, instead focusing primarily on her knowledge of the “Draw Muhammad on the Quad” event.

III. RESULTS

3.1. *Familiarity with Islam*

When I asked Sarah, Aaron, and Nora what they know about Islam, their answers were similar.

Sarah said she has a “general knowledge of Islam” and that she took a class on the Koran. I got the sense that she felt informed, but she was hesitant to say that she knew more than the average person. Aaron said that he felt more knowledgeable than the average person, but that he still knew “not so much.” He also mentioned that he knows some people from the Muslims Student Association (MSA). Nora gave the most detailed explanation of her knowledge of Islam. She said that she knows a decent amount about the faith, and explained the relationship between Islam and Christianity (i.e. Jesus being considered a prophet within Islam, not the son of God). As an example of a modern, practical issue related to Islam, she brought up Female Genital Mutilation. She explained the different types of genital mutilation, the reasons behind the practice and that, while the genital mutilation is associated with Islam, it is highly cultural.

3.2. The Muslim Community and the Campus Community

Opinions were divided on whether or not the UIUC campus is a safe space for Muslim students. When I asked this question to Nora, she audibly gasped and began shaking her head. She very emphatically said that “every minority group struggles, especially if they have to interact with the privileged groups” on campus. Katherine said that while Champaign-Urbana is a reasonably progressive area, she doesn’t think that the campus is as progressive. She had heard stories about the discrimination being faced by members of the MSA when ISSA was interacting with that organization. Aaron, on the other hand, told me that he felt that the university did a good job “promoting diversity” on campus.

3.3. “All religions are fair game to bash”

When I asked my interviewees how the larger atheist community feels about Islam, the answers were mixed. Sarah seemed unsure, but said that there does seem to be a sense that the community “dislikes Islam more than

Christianity” and based this off of comments she had seen online. However, she felt that this applied more to mainstream atheist speakers. Nora agreed with the latter statement, pointing out that the opinions of White, male, privileged people like Dawkins and Hitchens cannot necessarily be used as representative of the entire community of nonbelievers. She also said that she thinks that Mormonism gets more ridicule and criticism than Islam. Katherine said that opinions are, “...split down the middle. There are certainly plenty of atheists (i.e. Sam Harris) who are uniquely focused on Islam because of extremist acts like suicide bombings, as well as Islam’s treatment of women. But I feel like just as many people would put Islam on par with Christianity. I personally tend toward the latter, but I think the former is motivated by fear and I’ll admit that hearing about acts of Islamic extremism in the news occasionally makes me feel as if it is different. But that’s not rational. Christianity has at least as many violent crimes woven into its history.”

Aaron disagreed with Katherine’s assessment of Sam Harris. I mentioned Harris’s comments on Real Time as an example of the sort of hostility towards Islam that I suspected existed. Aaron disagreed and felt that Sam Harris was critical of Islam without being anti-Islam.

Not a single one of my interviewees expressed agreement with Dawkins’s claim that Islam is “the greatest force for evil today.” Aaron claimed that Islam is only uniquely dangerous in the sense that many predominantly Muslim countries are economically disadvantaged and involved in war. It is these difficult conditions that create terrorism, not Islam. He also said that he personally felt that if the Middle East were predominantly Christian, we would be talking about Christian terrorism.

Nora expressed a similar sentiment. She brought up work by Dr. Marlene Winell on Religious Trauma Syndrome, which (according to Dr. Winell’s website) “is the condition experienced by people who are struggling with leaving an authoritarian, dogmatic religion and

coping with the damage of indoctrination... Like PTSD, the impact of RTS is long-lasting, with intrusive thoughts, negative emotional states, impaired social functioning, and other problems." Nora believes that Dr. Winell's work shows that fundamentalism and dogmatism is dangerous, no matter what form (Islamic, Christian, or other) it takes. She said that, to atheists, "all religions are fair game to bash." She also pointed out that atheism (lack of a belief in a god) is separate from *anti-theism* (the active dislike of religion).

3.4. Everybody Draw Muhammad Day: "It's forever the history now"

Sarah and Nora were not ISSA members in the spring of 2010. Aaron was a member, but he wasn't particularly involved. According to Sarah, around the time that "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" took place, ISSA "had a leader who was more concerned about bashing religion". This is similar to how Katherine, who joined ISSA after the event, felt. She said:

"I think I would have supported the event at the time, but I couldn't do so today, knowing what I do now. We thought our members were mature enough to participate in this event in a light-hearted manner. Done properly, Draw Muhammad Day would have been generally flippant to Islam, but not specifically and pointedly disrespectful to the campus Muslim population. Instead, one of our members ... got carried away and drew Muhammad on the steps of a mosque on campus. No one else in the group would have condoned such a thing. In the wake of Draw Muhammad, we spoke to the MSA and learned how personally hurtful the event was to them. We realized that we hadn't so much playfully defended free speech worldwide as we had upset and alienated a minority student group."

3.5. Other Ways to be Blasphemous

Not a single member of ISSA who was interviewed for this paper said that they would

push for the "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" event to be held again. Sarah was very clear, saying, "I don't know of anyone on our board of directors who would advocate for that." Katherine said that, while she personally found the event to be thoughtless and inappropriate, opinions after the event were split on repeating it. She further said that "perhaps drawing Muhammad once near the Union and staying with that drawing and explaining our actions to passerby [*sic*] would have been a more effective way to accomplish what that event was intended to without appearing to target other students. I think I would still support something like that, as long as it was conducted tactfully."

Aaron came the closest to supporting the event, saying that if anyone "wants to draw a stick figure on the quad and label it Muhammad, that's their right." However, he also said that he thought that it was "not a very well thought out event" and that ISSA hosts other events that more effectively promote free speech. Every interviewee mentioned one particular event- "Blasphemy Day." Blasphemy Day is an event hosted by ISSA where they allow students to write comments on a large board on the quad. This event is meant to raise awareness of blasphemy laws and promote free speech and open criticism of religion. Sarah believed that Blasphemy Day was more effective than "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day" because focusing on one group draws attention away from what they aim to do- promote free speech. She said, "when we do big events we make sure it's not offensive."

3.6. Interfaith Activities

In an open letter on May 10, 2010 addressing the "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" event, the UIUC RSO Interfaith in Action wrote that "these recent chalkings are incompatible with our vision for a pluralistic campus, primarily through the ways in which they show disrespect for the Muslim community." Dr. Eboo Patel, a member of the President's Faith Advisory Council, wrote several op-eds condemning the

event. Over a year later, a blog entry was posted to the official ISSA website, entitled “Dear Interfaith, it’s over.” in which these criticisms were cited (ISSA 2011) as reasons for disengaging from the interfaith movement.

At some point, though, the relationship between ISSA and the interfaith community on campus was rekindled. Most of my interviewees stressed the interfaith activities that ISSA is involved in. While Sarah thought that ISSA interacts more with Christian RSOs, Aaron said that he thought that ISSA actually interacts more with Muslim RSOs.

One event that they were participating in the week of my interviews was Interfaith in Action’s Food For Thought Potluck. Two interviewees joked around that they were supposed to bring food that represented their religious group– a difficult task for a group of atheists. Aaron felt that participation in interfaith events is important for exposing ISSA members to other religions. He also mentioned that “all are welcome” at ISSA meetings.

IV. DISCUSSION

Understanding my choice of interviewees is important for interpreting my results. I could have interviewed anyone on campus who identified as an atheist, but I chose to focus on active members of ISSA. I did this for three reasons: 1) I wanted my interviewees to be well versed in atheist issues, 2) ISSA has a history with the campus Muslim community through the “Draw Muhammad on the Quad” event and 3) active ISSA members are the face of the campus atheist community to outsiders. But, before trying to generalize these results, it is important to note that the majority of atheists do not join organizations like ISSA. It is a relatively small organization compared to the number of atheists that are statistically likely to be attending UIUC. These atheists would not have had many of the experiences common to my interviewees (including both debates between atheists on religion/social issues and participation in interfaith activities).

Given that I was asking my interviewees

personal and potentially controversial questions, how much weight can be given to their answers? I find it likely that many, if not most, people would hesitate to reveal racist or xenophobic or Islamophobic feelings to an interviewer who is essentially a stranger. Also, while my interviewees were not officially speaking on behalf of ISSA, it is possible that they didn’t want to project a negative image of the group. However, I felt that my interviewees were being reasonably candid. They typically gave full, detailed answers and would argue for or expand upon their opinions when I would challenge them.

Certain patterns emerged during the interviews. My interviewees brought up terrorism at least three times. Nora pointed out that Muslim terrorists get more focus than ‘domestic terrorists’. Aaron believed that Muslim terrorists are motivated by their circumstances, and that Islam can be used as a justification for violence, but Christianity can as well. Katherine mentioned that it’s easy to start to equate Islam with terrorism when watching the news, but that such a reaction is motivated by fear. She also pointed out that Christianity, too, has a history of violence. It doesn’t surprise me that the topic was common. For many people, Islam seems to have become wrapped up in ideas about violence and radicalism. However, the comments of my interviewees on terrorism show that they didn’t think that Islam was uniquely dangerous or violent.

Do they believe that the larger atheist community finds Islam to be uniquely dangerous? Katherine, Sarah, and Nora all said that prominent atheist figures tended to have very negative opinions about Islam. Aaron disagreed, pointing out that Dawkins tends to write a lot about Christianity in his books. I found his statement that Sam Harris isn’t ‘anti-Islam’ rather strange, given that Sam Harris himself has said that Islam is “the mother lode of bad ideas”. I think this points to a problem of terms, though. What does anti-Islam mean? If being anti-Islam means that you think that people would be better off without the faith, I think this would apply to a great deal of atheists

(as many tend to think of religion itself as being dangerous or, at the very least, a waste of time). If it means that you find the tenets of the faith particularly dangerous and worth fighting against, then this has to apply to Harris. Still, I think that many atheists would draw a distinction between being anti-Islam and anti-Muslims-as-people. To Muslims who believe that their faith is an intrinsic part of who they are, this 'love the sinner, hate the sin' attitude may seem impossible. To the many atheists who view criticism of religion as being rational and impersonal, however, this distinction makes sense.

Nora said that she didn't think that the opinions of a privileged group of White males (Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, Dennett, etc.) could be generalized to the larger community. I would point out, however, that a huge portion of the atheist community is socioeconomically privileged, White, and male. According to a 2012 Pew report, people who identify as atheist or agnostic are more likely than average to be college educated and have a high income. While men make up 48% of the population, 64% of people who identify as atheist or agnostic are male. An overwhelming majority (82%) are White. This lack of diversity certainly has an impact on the community.

As ISSA exists now, the prospect of another event such as "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" occurring is remote. While Nora and Katherine believed that it was important to avoid making the campus an unsafe space for Muslim students, this idea wasn't clearly expressed by Aaron or Sarah, so I hesitate to call that particular sentiment universal. Instead of a desire to be sensitive to religion, the two major reasons for the event not recurring were more pragmatic. First, the event gave the organization a negative reputation around campus. I definitely got a sense of "are we ever going to live this down?" from my interviewees. Sarah, for example, felt that they were still trying to make up for the event four years later. Likewise, Nora felt that some people would always associate ISSA with the event. A second reason that the event is unlikely to be repeated is that

the interviewees expressed that there are more effective ways to criticize religion and promote free speech. Every interviewee brought up events such as Blasphemy Day. While Nora did feel that this event could also be problematic, she still felt that it was more effective.

That being said, I do think that my interviewees are critical of Islam. This is reflected in Katherine's feelings that the idea behind the "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" event was valuable, despite her questioning its execution. This critical attitude is also evident in Aaron's defense of Sam Harris's critique of Islam. My interviewees, however, did not seem to limit this criticism to Islam. Instead, they expressed ideas such as Nora's that "all religions are fair game to bash". This is reflected in the fact that "Draw Muhammad on the Quad" wasn't their only controversial event that targeted one particular faith. They held a De-Baptising Day, where people could reverse their baptisms by being 'dried off' with a hair dryer. Every interviewee strongly emphasized the importance of promoting free speech and the ability to be critical of religion. One particular statement from Nora was that "in every group people should be critical and open". I believe that it's easy to let personal prejudices (including Islamophobia) creep into what could be rational discussions about the failings of religion. To avoid this, ISSA has taken steps to choose events that criticize religion without singling out any one faith and also to promote interfaith understanding. While they are highly critical of Islam, they don't reflect the Islamophobic views of many members of the New Atheist movement.

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