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author, the end of faith

by robert s. boynton

What are the most profound changes we will face in the next twenty years?

We're going to be increasingly confronted by the problems of religion, the most acute being the collision between Islam and the West. Islam is a religion that takes the sting out of death. In personal terms, that may be consoling, but in geopolitical terms, we want death to have a sting. We don't want societies full of martyrs, armed with twenty-first-century destructive technology, who grow dewy-eyed with the thought of paradise. The next twenty years will reveal whether Islam is compatible with modernity. If it's not, global warming will be the least of our problems.

You've received a furious response to your views as America's most outspoken atheist. Is atheism, like gay rights, going to become accepted as more atheists "come out of the closet"?

Sure, that is taking place to some extent. But the more appropriate model is the way our attitudes toward racism changed. It's shocking when you think of how recently churchgoing white Americans were lynching African-Americans. We've all seen pictures of entire families, in their Sunday best, looking at a lacerated corpse hanging above them. So how did our country get from there to here? In the future, when a complete victory is eventually won over racism, it's not going to be a world in which the majority of the people maintain that they're nonracists. It's going to be a world in which the very concept of separate races no longer makes any sense. If atheists ever win the argument, it's going to be in a world in which the concept of atheism is no longer needed.

Is the current debate moving us in that direction?

The debate over atheism, about the conflict between faith and reason, has actually had an unfortunate side effect. The critics of atheism have characterized it as merely one of many competing “worldviews” which can be attacked like any other. I argue that the burden should be on religious people to argue for the truth of their claims. Atheism is no more a “worldview” than believing in witchcraft is.

You’ve talked about the possibility of a religious war. Where is the first shot likely to be fired?

I’m not sure, but I’m worried about the level of radicalism among Muslims living in the West. This is especially a problem in Europe. You look at recent polls of young British Muslims: A third of them say they want to live under Sharia law and believe that anyone who renounces the faith should be put to death. Sixty-eight percent believe that those who insult Islam should be arrested and prosecuted. The levels of medieval thinking among Western-born Muslims is shocking. I don’t know what Europeans should do about it, but I’m pretty sure that what they’re currently doing – ignoring it and hoping it will go away – is the wrong strategy.

What’s at stake in the current moment?

We’re at a moment in history in which things can go in either of two ways. We might create a global civil society whose goal is to maximize happiness, compassion and scientific understanding. Or we may go the way of places like Sudan, Congo and Iraq, which represent competing visions of hell on Earth.

It’s possible people will come to their senses and realize that organizing humanity around competing religious certainties – beliefs about which books were dictated by the creator of the universe or what name God wants to be called – is suicidal. And Islam may undergo the same transformations that we in the Christian West have. After all, we were burning heretics for five centuries, so there have been changes made in our religiosity.

So which way will things go?

I don't see anybody making reasonable and civilized noises loudly enough that it could make a difference. So I can't say that I'm an optimist. I don't feel despairing of our circumstance. But if you ask me to name actual causes for hope, I'd come up short.

Do you see a key figure in the time ahead of us?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Muslim and former member of the Dutch parliament, is very important. She's very forthcoming about how ignorant she was as a devout Muslim, and how that ignorance led her to support things like the fatwas against Salman Rushdie. She believed he should be killed for blaspheming Islam. Now she's the one receiving death threats. She single-handedly exemplifies a tradition of moral criticism that has been slow to emerge in the Muslim world. She is a harbinger of things to come, if Europe ever gets serious about this problem.

Why does religion remain so persistent, even though we are living in a time of profound technological change?

We are witnessing a perverse situation in which cutting edge technology coexists and interacts with medieval fanaticism. The perfect example of this is the way the Internet has enabled the global jihad movement, which would have been unthinkable in a less technologically developed world. If you believe that technology will develop at an even greater rate in the future, which I do, and that religious fanaticism will persist, which it surely will, you will see we are in a lot of trouble. There is no possible future in which aspiring martyrs will make good neighbors for us.

You've been doing research in neuroscience. What has it taught you about religious belief?

Neuroscience, particularly neuroimaging, is changing our view of ourselves. It is now clear that if you want to understand humans in the twenty-first century, you have to understand the science of the brain. From the preliminary work we've done, it seems that religious belief is not distinct from other kinds of belief. Your brain doesn't care whether the content of a proposition is about the life of Jesus or a mathematical equation. The circuits look the same when you believe they are either true or false.

But it's quite possible for a person to be absolutely wrong and yet be convinced that he's absolutely correct, whether about mathematics or the nature of God. The fact is that one's level of conviction or certainty isn't the final arbiter of whether or not something is true. The truth of a statement isn't something you feel in your brain, it's something out in the world, which you test with science and reason.

You are critical of religion, yet you remain open to mysticism and spirituality.

I part company with many atheists in that I've always been interested in, and respectful of, spiritual and mystical experience. People have been having profoundly transformative experiences under the banner of mysticism for thousands of years. I just don't think you have to believe any religious bullshit in order to have those experiences. You don't have to believe that any book was dictated by the creator of the universe. All you have to believe is that the contents of your own mind are worth looking into by some means of introspection.

The problem is that most of the testimony on this subject comes from religious traditions and is therefore riddled with rather baroque superstition. There is absolutely nothing that you can experience while in meditation, no matter how blissful, that confirms Jesus' virgin birth, or any other religious doctrine.

Growing up, how did you imagine the future? Does the world today look different than you expected?

I've always lived on the razor's edge between optimism and pessimism. I'm incredibly grateful to live in the West and have all of the opportunities I've had. September 11th

made me cognizant of how precarious these circumstances are, and how potent the strains of unreason are, even in our own privileged context. That wasn't something I grew up feeling. Before September 11th, I didn't realize how quickly and dramatically things could go awry.

Is there any one thing you've learned about religion that will help us overcome the threat of fundamentalism?

The most shocking thing I've learned is how the criticisms I made of religious moderates in *The End of Faith* has been born out. Religious moderates shelter religious extremists with their demands that faith itself be placed beyond criticism. They keep us hostage to traditions where books like the Bible and the Quran are treated like magic books, immune from criticism in ways that ordinary books like *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* aren't. By endorsing this Balkanization of the world into separate religious camps, they make it difficult to acknowledge how much evil is being done in the name of religion.

I receive the most astonishing mail from atheist scientists who claim not to believe in anything themselves, but who are outraged that I dare to criticize other people's religious faith. They go to the mat in defense of people's religious superstitions and their right to believe them. What they're saying is, "I don't need our religious psychosis, but all these poor stupid people do." It's a condescending, politically correct form of elitism.

How do you think this time will be remembered forty years from now?

With any luck, we'll be embarrassed by the state of our discourse in the same way we're embarrassed by the way our ancestors treated race during the first part of the twentieth century. We'll be astonished by the smugness and certitude with which people not only held their religious convictions, but imposed them on others through public policy and the law. We'll look back in wonder that the Vatican was preaching against the use of condoms in the developing world, and that the United States impeded stem-cell research because some imagined that microscopic cells had

human souls. Forty years from now, we'll realize that taking religion seriously was like taking astrology seriously.