

And so too may the institutionalized piety of even modern science precipitate revolt—because, for better or for worse, revolt invigorates.

If all this sounds like so much fuzzy, sociological impressionism, well, maybe it is. But might there not also be, lurking amidst the fuzz, just a grain of (not strictly scientific) truth as well, about a peculiar American-exceptionalist gestalt? “The heart has its reasons,” claimed Pascal, “of which reason knows nothing.” And perhaps those myste-

rious reasons, as discharged through American (irrational) contrarianism, portend not simply recidivistic cultural decay but (and without gilding them with any facile romantic or Nietzschean virtue) some as yet unrecognized (and even) *evolutionary* function.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said of the perpetual fluidity of human consciousness that every thought was a “prison” and that a heartfelt, open-ended guess was somehow more gratifying than a logically constraining fact.

Anyway, that’s the music *he* stepped to a century and a half ago, and so still do a lot of Americans today. **FI**

Steven Doloff is professor of humanities and media studies at the Pratt Institute. His writings on culture and education have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and FREE INQUIRY.

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## Global Humanism

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### The Virus of Faith Avijit Roy

Religion, a medieval form of unreason, when combined with modern weaponry becomes a real threat to our freedoms.

—Salman Rushdie

**O**n January 7, 2015, the world witnessed a tragic atrocity committed by soldiers of the so-called religion of peace when two masked Islamists armed with assault rifles entered the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* (a French satirical weekly newspaper) and killed twelve people, including two police officers, three cartoonists, and seven journalists. The gunmen were heard shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“God is great” in Arabic) and “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad.” A mere three weeks before, on December 16, 2014, nine gunmen affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban conducted a terrorist attack in Peshawar, Pakistan. They entered a school, opened fire, and killed 145 people, 132 of whom were schoolchildren.

To me, such religious extremism is like a highly contagious virus. My own

recent experiences in this regard verify the horrific reality that such religious extremism is a “virus of faith.”

It all started with a book. A national book fair (popularly known as the Ekushey Book Fair) is held every February in Bangladesh. Newly published books are displayed in more than five hundred stalls. Literally thousands of people come to the fair every day and enjoy buying new books. Publishers start preparing for this event quite early as they try to get their books ready for the frenzy of the fair. One of my recent publishers, Jagriti Prakashani, timed the publication of my book *Biswasher Virus* (Bengali for *The Virus of Faith*) to coincide with the book fair of 2014.

As soon as the book was released, it rose to the top of the fair’s best-seller list. At the same time, it hit the cranial nerve of Islamic fundamentalists. The death threats started flowing to my e-mail inbox on a regular basis. I suddenly found myself a target of militant Islamists and terrorists. A well-known

extremist by the name of Farabi Shafiur Rahman openly issued death threats to me through his numerous Facebook statuses. In one widely circulated status, Rahman wrote, “Avijit Roy lives in America and so, it is not possible to kill him right now. But he will be murdered when he comes back.”

Let’s put Rahman aside for a moment

**“ . . . Religious extremism is like a highly contagious virus.”**

as I provide readers with a bit of background about the book. I knew there was a growing demand for *Biswasher Virus* long before it appeared in the market. It started when I wrote a few blogs on this particular topic on MuktoMona (a website of freethinkers of mainly Bengali descent). Due to faith-based politics, a lot had happened in

Bangladesh in the year before, some of which I attempted to cover in my writings. When several bloggers were put behind bars for being openly atheist, I published articles including one in FREE INQUIRY ("Freethought Under Attack in Bangladesh," October/November 2013). I also covered other incidents surrounding the Shahbag Movement, such as an incident in which atheist bloggers including Ahmed Rajib Haider and Asif Mohiuddin were brutally attacked by fundamentalists. Mohiuddin was seriously wounded but luckily survived a murder attempt in Dhaka on January 14, 2014; on the other hand, Haider was found hacked to death there a month later. I found a commonality in these writings: the virus of faith was the weapon that made these atrocities possible.

Another interesting case concerns

***"I suddenly found myself a target of militant Islamists and terrorists."***

Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis, a Bengali student who came to the United States on a student visa in order to wage Islamic *jihad*. Nafis was arrested in 2012 by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation in a sting operation after attempting to set off a fake car bomb outside the Federal Reserve building in Manhattan. He was eventually sentenced to thirty years in prison after pleading guilty to terrorism. In my book, I tried to analyze how an afterlife-obsessed, terrorist brain such as Nafis's could put our civilization in immense danger. Nafis's deep faith in a holy text and his belief in afterlife rewards led to pursue his *jihadi* mission against the "infidels"; this can easily be compared to the action of a virus.

Faith-based terrorisms are nothing but viruses—if allowed to spread, they will wreak havoc on society in epidemic

proportions. On September 11, 2001, Americans experienced a horrific atrocity in their own land that killed almost three thousand people and caused at least \$10 billion in property and infrastructure damage. It was, of course, the virus of religion that had persuaded Mohamed Atta and eighteen others that perpetrating this bloodbath was not just a moral act but also a sacred duty. In the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, the Kouachi brothers killed twelve people and injured several others in the name of Allah and their prophet.

The cases of the Kouachi brothers, Nafis, and Atta are not isolated manifestations of the religion virus. Rev. Michael Bray, the American minister who was convicted of a series of abortion clinic attacks in the eighties, used biblical verses to defend his acts of terrorism. In 1992, Hindu fanatics destroyed Babri Masjid, one of the largest and oldest mosques in Uttar Pradesh of India, based on a religious myth called "Ram Janmabhoomi." The incident ignited riots in India and neighboring countries. As I am writing this article, ISIS—one of the most infamous extremist groups—continues torturing minorities and beheading people in the name of Allah. Boko Haram, a terrorist organization in Nigeria, is not only forcing women and girls into prostitution but also massacring thousands of people mercilessly in the name of God. These are only a few examples of the viruses of faiths, and they're happening all around us.

I don't claim to have come up with any new or novel concept in *Biswasher Virus*. Those who are familiar with Richard Dawkins's revolutionary idea of the meme (introduced in his 1976 magnum opus *The Selfish Gene*) are acquainted with the viral metaphor for religious ideas. Based on this idea, numerous authors have suggested the religion memplex can behave like a "biological virus" acting in a living organism. Computer scientist Craig James (author of *The Religion Virus*) and psychologist Darrel W. Ray (author of *The God Virus*) independently proposed that the "religion meme" can be viewed as a virus. Philosopher Daniel C. Dennett (author of *Breaking the Spell*) suggested

that religions display behavioral control over people in much the same way that parasites invade organisms. For example, the rabies virus infects very specific neurons in the brain of a mammalian host, later inducing the host to bite or otherwise attack others. The lancet fluke (*Dicrocoelium dendriticum*), a parasite, infects the brains of ants by taking control and driving them to climb to the top of blades of grass, where they can be eaten by cows. Another parasitic hairworm, scientifically known as *Spinochordodes tellinii*, infects grasshoppers' brains in a way that makes grasshoppers more likely to jump into water and commit suicide, allowing the worm to mate.

Don't we see similar occurrences in our human society? Take the horrifying videos of hostage beheadings by ISIS as an example. Regardless, President Barack Obama has made it abundantly clear that the United States is not at war with Islam. On laying out a strategy for dealing with ISIS (or, alternatively, ISIL), Obama declared: "Now, let's make two things clear: ISIL is not Islamic. No religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL's victims have been Muslim. . . . ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple." Obama also remarked, "ISIL speaks for no religion. Their victims are overwhelmingly Muslim, and no faith teaches people to massacre innocents. No just God would stand for what they did yesterday, and for what they do every single day."

Whatever the motivation behind President Obama's statements—whether it is simple strategy or so-called political correctness—there is very little doubt that ISIS speaks exactly for Islam. ISIS is what unfolds when the virus of faith launches into action and the outbreak becomes an epidemic. The Quran clearly states, "when ye meet the unbelievers (in fight), strike off their heads" (47:4), "smite ye above their necks" (8:12), and "kill them wherever you find them" (2:191). According to the early biography of the Prophet Muhammad by Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad himself sanctioned the merciless massacre of the Banu Qurayza, a vanquished Jewish tribe. Some six hundred to nine hundred Qurayza men were led on

Muhammad's orders to the market in Medina. Trenches were dug, those men were beheaded with swords, and their decapitated corpses were buried in the trenches in presence of Muhammad. Citing the references to the massacre in *Shahi Bukhari*, the Pakistani Taliban (*Tehreek-e-Taliban*) considered their recent killing in Peshawar to be consistent with what Prophet Muhammad did to his enemies 1,400 years ago. Even Karen Armstrong—who has become immensely popular among Muslim apologists for “correcting” Western misconceptions about Islam—was so disgusted that she compared Muhammad's massacre to the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of holy Islam, still utilizes public beheading as a form of capital punishment for crimes including apostasy. When a person is convicted, he or she is taken to a public square, bound, and forced to kneel in front of the executioner. The executioner uses a sword to remove the criminal's head from his or her body at the neck, following Islamic Sharia law.

ISIS is merely following the tradition that its holy prophet established more than a thousand years ago. We are familiar with the stories of Daniel Pearl, Nick Berg, Kim Sun Il, and Paul Johnson, who were captured by the soldiers of Allah and then beheaded. We witnessed the same unfortunate fate for American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, as well as British aid worker David Haines. ISIS's cruel way of killing infidels is indeed sanctioned by holy texts and Islamic *sharia* laws. Biologist Jerry Coyne was absolutely right in his essay in *New Republic*: “If ISIS is not Islamic, then the Inquisition was not Catholic either.”

It seems as if the American president has made a vow to avoid criticizing religion at all costs—particularly Islam. Such an attitude is nothing new. Coming just after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush famously proclaimed that Islam is a “religion of peace.” However, rational scrutiny can show hundreds of verses in the Qur'an, which, by any standard are not “peaceful” but inhuman, parochial, and dangerously viral. For example, the Qur'an tells believers “not to make

friends with Jews and Christians” (5:51) but to fight them “until they pay the Jizya (a penalty tax for the non-Muslims living under Islamic rule) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued” (9:29); to “kill the disbelievers wherever we find them” (2:191); to “murder them and treat them harshly” (9:123); to “fight and slay the non-believers, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stragem” (9:5); to “fight the unbelievers until no other religion except Islam is left” (2:193); and so on. Such teachings can easily incite hatred and violence in the mind of a fanatical believer. Just as a parasite can hijack the brain of a grasshopper to promote suicidal behavior, certain texts of a holy book can influence a terrorist's mind—as seen in the cases of Nafis and Atta—into pursuing hugely destructive works through an insane sacrifice of the host's life.

Of course I know that most Muslims are not terrorists; they are peaceful. The reason is that they do not follow the Qur'an literally. As Taner Edis (author of *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam*) pointed out in one of his essays, “Ordinary Muslims depend heavily on local religious scholars, Sufi orders and similar brotherhoods. . . . They hold Quran sacred, but their understanding of what Islam demands comes through local religious culture.” Moderate Muslims are, however, quite happy with descriptions such as “religion of peace”; they are similar to rhetoric from seasoned politicians. Osama Bin Laden, Anwar al-Awlaki, the Kouachis and Coulibaly, Nidal Hasan, al-Qaeda, and ISIS—all of whom follow the scripture literally—are deemed responsible for mass destruction while their cherished dogma remains unquestioned. Those who wish to be factually correct rather than politically correct may be outcast or even physically threatened.

This is exactly what happened to me. Rahman, the known cyber-terrorist of Bangladesh, issued laughably ironic death threats for my writing of *Biswasher Virus*. I found there was no difference between them and the “peaceful” Muslim demonstrators in Britain who were photographed (after the Dutch

cartoon controversy) bearing banners that read, “Behead those who say Islam is a violent religion.” The phrase “religion of peace” gives me a belly laugh nowadays, and the association of Islam's followers with terrorism never surprises me. It has been revealed that Rahman is linked to the radical Islamist party, *Jamaat-e-Islami*, and a terrorist organization, *Hizbut Tahrir*. Last year, Rahman threatened to kill a Muslim cleric who officiated at the funeral of Ahmed Rajib Haider (the aforementioned freethinker who was hacked to death). Under tremendous public pressure, Rahman was arrested, but to everyone's surprise, he was granted bail within few months. Since then, he has continued to threaten many progressives in Bangladesh, while no official action has been taken against him.

The story doesn't end there. Rahman also sent a death threat to Rokomari.

***“Whatever the motivation behind President Obama's statements—whether it is simple strategy or so-called political correctness—there is very little doubt that ISIS speaks exactly for Islam.”***

com (Bangladesh's first online bookstore) and ordered the site to stop selling my books. In his Facebook post, Rahman published the office address of Rokomari.com and called upon his “Islamist friends” to attack the locality. He also told Mahmudul Hasan Sohagh, the owner of Rokomari.com, that he would suffer the same fate as Haider if he did not comply with Rahman's demands. As a result, Rokomari.com took my books off its list. The news created a great uproar, and the issue came to the attention of national and worldwide media. Prominent online newspapers in Bangladesh prominently

featured this story; international sites and newspapers reported the incident with due importance. Bangladesh's government, however, was reluctant to take any action. Rahman was not arrested, and Rokomari.com did not apologize for its wrongdoings.

Regardless, many of my friends, readers, fans, and well-wishers took the issue quite seriously. Many bloggers and writers protested by withdrawing their books from Rokomari.com; others organized a campaign to boycott the company's products. The situation drew continuous attention in news media, social media, and other circles devoted to free speech and freethought. After two days, Rokomari.com issued a statement on its Facebook page saying, "Rokomari is an online bookstore that does not sell or distribute books that has been banned by state [sic]." Rokomari.com also mentioned that some groups were trying to tarnish its image and reputation. I found Rokomari.com's statement rather amusing. It is important to note that nobody ever went to court to complain about my book; furthermore, neither the state nor the government banned

any of my books. Most of my writings deal with modern science and philosophy and include proper references to journals, newspapers, and academic literature. Nevertheless, Rokomari.com withdrew my books from its site solely based on Rahman's demand. Rokomari.com's actions contradict the statement it issued. The site coordinators could have simply said, "Look, since these books were not banned by the state, we can't withdraw them without a proper investigation." Or, they could have asked, "Where exactly is the objectionable material?" By getting rid of my books in a medieval fashion, Rokomari.com failed to conduct business in a professional manner.

During a total solar eclipse in 1919, Sir Arthur Eddington's historical experiment paved the way to test Einstein's theory over classical Newtonian physics. In a similar way, I think the

publication of *Biswasher Virus* created grounds for testing the hypothesis of whether religious faith can and does act as a virus. The aftermath of the Rokomari.com-Rahman episode and the recent Peshawar and *Charlie Hebdo* massacres proved the hypothesis to be correct. If one thing is certain, it is that the virus of faith is dangerously real. 

Dr. Avijit Roy was a Bangladeshi-American blogger, published author, and prominent defender of the freethought movement in Bangladesh. He was well-known for his writings on his self-founded site, Mukto-Mona—an Internet congregation of freethinkers, rationalists, skeptics, atheists, and humanists of mainly Bengali and South Asian descent. As an advocate of atheism, science, and metaphysical naturalism, he published eight Bengali books, and many of his articles have been published in magazines and journals. His last two books, *Obisshahser Dorshon (The Philosophy of Disbelief)* and *Biswasher Virus (The Virus of Faith)*, have been critically well-received and are popular Bengali books on science, skepticism, and rationalism. At press time, we learned that Dr. Roy was killed and his wife injured by unknown assailants while visiting Bangladesh.

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