A Comparative Study of Atheistic Trends and Islamic Reform Movements in the Muslim World

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Abstract

In this comparative analysis, resurgence of atheistic tendencies (1-10% prevalence) among urban educated Muslim youth and counter-measures of Islamic reform movements (Tablighi Jama'at, Deobandi, Salafism, Minhaj-ul-Quran) in Muslim-majority societies are addressed. According to surveys, the rate of irreligiosity is accelerating, with Iran (8.8% atheists, GAMAAN 2020), Tunisia/Lebanon (7-13% non-religious, Arab Barometer 2010-2022) being the most irreligious, influenced by the digital media (r/exmuslim: 150k members), secular education, and disappointment with the hypocrisy of the clergy. The level of religiosity maintained by reforms is 85-95% by da'wah, madrasa networks (4,000+ Deobandi seminaries), theological rebuttals (Al-Ghazali to Ibn Baz) and welfare, reflected in 82% retention of UK-Pakistani and 12% Egyptian religiosity recovered after 2013. It is analyzed in terms of the social effectiveness of reforms against the elite infiltration of atheism and calls to digital hybridization (AI fatwas, Tik Tok apologetics), academies of ijtihad, and the cohesion of the OIC. The solution is policy advocacy of STEM-kalam curricula, atheist discussion forums to maintain tawhid despite 2.8 billion Muslims projected by Pew by the year 2050 and adaptive revivalism to prevent secular drift.

Keywords: Atheism, Islamic reform, Muslim youth, digital da'wah, secularization, ijtihad

Introduction:

Atheism as a phenomenon has also seen its significant revival in the past decades around the world, especially among the young people in the Muslim dominated countries where social media and secular education has enabled its propagation in spite of legal and cultural restrictions on its spreadz[1] Surveys show an increasing but fluctuating irreligiosity: a 2020 GAMAAN poll in Iran found 8.8% of people declaring themselves atheist and Arab Barometer data found the identification as not religious increasing slightly in some Arab countries with overall stability of religiosity.[2] Online atheist communities have grown in Persian Gulf and North Africa since the Arab Spring where youths are expressing nonbelief in over 50 Facebook groups, some of which have thousands of followers.[3] in intellectual roots (secularism and scientific materialism) and cultural globalization.[4]

In Arabic, atheism is called al-ilḥād (الحاد), meaning, etymologically, lahd, meaning to go off the path, to forsake the inner nature of the grave, the primordial fitrah (innate monotheism).[5] The Islamic scholarship is categorizing al-ilhad as a direct denial of the Creator, which is identical to kufr (disbelief), whereas

agnosticism or heresy is not; the Quran describes an atheist as the person who is uncertain (*ẓunūn*) or foolish (jahalah).[6] Contrarily, islahi tahrikat (SlHy tHrykht), or Islamic reform movements, are revivalist movements purifying faith by returning to Quran and Sunni, rejecting bidah (innovations), and adjustment to modernity without sacrificing orthodoxy, such as Salafism, Wahhabism and modernist authors like Muhammad Abduh.[7]

This research paper aims to achieve the following three things:

1.   outlining the character of, motivators, and population of atheism in the Muslim world;

2.   analyzing the strategies, and the responses of major Islamic reform movements; and

3.   analyzing their relative effectiveness in combating atheism using intellectual, educational and socio-political instruments.[8]

It uses a comparative qualitative framework based on primary Islamic texts and modern statistics through analyzing surveys, theological critique, and case studies in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

This question is very important to Muslim societies. With forecasts of Muslims constituting almost 30 per cent of the world population by the year 2050 - owing to high birth rate but susceptible to secularization among the youth nowadays- these trends pose threats to the level of communal unity and the teachings of Islam.[9] The successful reform movements would renew faith through ijtihad (self-critical reasoning) and outreach to the contemporary world, which would bring resilience to faith against atheism and respond to the disillusionment of the youth with inflexible traditionalism; otherwise there exists the danger of further polarization and thus the call to moderate revivalism is urgent.[10]

2.The Atheistic Trends in the Muslim world are outlined:

The intellectual origins of atheism in Muslim cultures can be traced to the pre-Islamic philosophical experiences of encounter with Greek materialism and dualism, but overt rejection of God was peripheral in the era of the dominance of the Islamic orthodoxy.[11] Medieval rationalist skepticism Medieval Muslim philosophers such as the Mu'tazilites frequently played with the idea of rationalism, although systematic atheism arose only sporadically, among them Ibn al-Rawandi (d. 911 CE), who criticized the miracles of the prophet, and Rhazes (d. 925 CE), who doubted the need of revelation- views repressed by Ash'arites and Maturidites alike in the early 10th century.[12] During the Ottoman period, some freethinking had been tolerated by secret society, but the open expression of atheism was harshly suppressed; contemporary irreligion had been unified in post-colonialism, already shaped by the Enlightenment secularism, and the Arab Nahda reformers who accidentally paved the way to rationalists.[13]

Modern polls show that atheism is increasing in the Muslim-majority environments in a fairly modest yet growing pace. An Iranian GAMAAN poll in 2020 revealed 8.8% atheists and 22.2% non-religious,

compared to insignificant numbers before the 1979 Revolution.[14] In 12 countries surveyed by Arab Barometer (2010-2022), the proportion of not religious answers increased by 7 to 13 per cent in Tunisia and Lebanon and remained constant in other countries, with 80-90 per cent religiosity.[15] A 2023 Gallup Pakistan poll stated that 2-5 percent of the youth (18-25) in Pakistan were being doubtful, and underground forums stated tens of thousands.[16] Lower incidence is reported in southeast Asia: atheists in Indonesia (as of 2021) were reported at 1.2 by WIN/Gallup, and in Malaysia (at 0.9) by urban youth through social media (rising agnosticism).[17] Although these figures are underreported as a result of stigma, they are the indicator of a silent exodus among educated millennials, as compared to the 2050 forecast of 2.8 billion Muslims in the world suggested by Pew.[18] .

There are numerous drivers of this trend. On the social level, the perceived religious hypocrisy triggers disillusionment in the youth; clerical corruption and sectarian violence undermine trust in the youth as observed during post Arab Spring MENA disillusionment.[19] Politically, repression is condoned by the authoritarian regimes who invoke Islam and isolate the youth who want to reform the society, the morality police in Iran are a typical backlash to this opposition to reforms.[20] Secular curricula with a high concentration of Darwinism and humanism without theological redress create uncertainty especially in post Erdogan reformation reforms of Turkey and English-based schools in Pakistan.[21] Western atheism is being transported to the world through Dawkins and Harris and increased with economic migration placing Muslims at the risk of liberal democracies.[22] The individualism of modernity is in conflict with the collectivist piety and produces cultural Muslims who privatize faith or abandon it.[23]

The age group of the population is almost exclusively urban, highly educated young men between 18-35, STEM graduates, middle-income, usually Sunni in Sunni-majority states.[24] Young professionals in Iran are skewed towards atheism; the Egyptian Atheist Spring was a Facebook campaign among engineers and doctors, organizing themselves into Facebook groups such as the Egyptian atheist (50,000+ members).[25] The same is reflected on the Pakistani former Muslim subreddit, r/exmuslim (100,000+ subscribers regionally): the former are IT workers, international students, citing science-religion conflicts.[26] The female gender is less visible because of gender norms, but there is increasing doubt, as indicated by the questionnaire survey conducted privately.[27]

Online media makes the spreading faster, and the sites get through censors. More than 100 Arabic atheist Facebook communities have more than 500,000 followers apiece; Persian and Urdu Telegram channels spread the translations of New Atheism;[28] ex-Muslim YouTube creators such as the harmonic atheist in Saudi attract millions of views, interspersing personal stories with content about the authenticity of the hadith.[29]. The normalization of nonbelief is established through global cultural exchange through

diaspora remittances and VPNs; the algorithm used in Tik Tok encourages the delivery of secular content to the Muslim youth and creates echo chambers (20)[30]. This online ummah of uncertainty is a contrast to the backward of reformists in digital da'wah, a role that technology might play that is two-sided.[31]

These are signs of trouble: although numerically minor (1-10% regionally), the intellectual appeal of atheism to influencers threatens significant secular drift, which requires more subtle attempts at reform. [32]

3.Islam Reformed Movements: Anti-Atheism:

The disbelief and secularism have been long treated in Islamic reform movements by purifying their doctrines and revitalizing their intellectual vigor and the roots of Islamic reform date back to medieval kalam defenses such as the refutation of philosophical atheism by Al-Ghazali.[33] The Wahhabi movement of the 18th century against the shirk and bid'ah were the gateway of irreligion, and the 19th-century modernists, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, opposed Islamic secularism in colonialism through pan-Islamism, and 20th-century responses to New Atheism diversified orthodoxy through globalization.[34]

Significant trends in reformists are strategically diverse. It is stressed by Tablighi Jama'at (founded 1926, India), which forwards 3-5 million missioners annually on khuruj missions to strengthen their iman against urban secularism, and functions in 150+ countries.[35] The Deobandi movement (1866, Darul Uloom Deoband) is a movement of hadith scholarship and fatwa issuance, with its counter to atheism being 4,000+ worldwide seminaries producing anti-secular ulama.[36] Salafism, inspired by the successors of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and through Salafism theorists such as Ibn Baz (d. 1999) has led to strict tawhid through a literalist interpretation of the Quran, and has funded 210 Islamic centers across the world,[37] refuting Darwinism. The Minhaj-ul-Quran International (1981, Pakistan) and its head Muhammad Tahir-ul- Qadri uses multimedia 600+ books, television, applications to repatriate young people, with fatwas such as the anti-terrorism edict of 2010, to reclaim the young people lost to ex-Muslim narratives.[38] Other movements are Jamaat-e-Islami (1941, Maududi), which emphasized the political aspect of Islam, and Ansar al-Sunna of Egypt that advocated Salafi education.[39]

Core strategies embrace a wholesome involvement. The Da'wah makes use of personal testification and circles in the mosques and the six ideals of Tablighi seal the existential gaps that were used by the atheist polemic.[40] Madrasa networks are created through education: Madrasa education incorporates kalam proofs (e.g. huduth al-'alam) against endless universe claims.[41] Theological responses undermine atheism: Salafi institutions such as Fatawa Ibn Baz disprove multiverse theories using the Quran 21:30; the Islam versus Atheism by Minhaj uses fine-tuning arguments to draw a link between the needy and faith in Islam[42](, Islam-funded charities like Salafi schools in Yemen serve 1 million people per year.[43]

The transformation into the digital plays behind yet expands, as the YouTube of Minhaj (2M+ subscribers) places the ex-Muslims face-to-face.[44]

These ideas are anchored by traditional institutions. Al- Azhar University (founded 970 CE) periodically publishes annual fatawa on irreligion and trains 40,000 students in usul al-din and hosts the 2023 Dialogue on Faith and Reason conference.[45] The Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi produces 5,000 Salafi scholars per year, which it exports curricula to counter secular universities.[46] This Islamic University creates bio-theology majors, such as the OIC declaration of 2024 on "Preserving Muslim Faith in Digital Age".[47]

Effectiveness is emphasized in case studies. In the Lahore district of Pakistan, 1,200 centers of the Islamic religion Minhaj-ul-Quran claimed a 25 percent retention of youth (2018-2023 internal surveys), through debate clubs refuting Reddit atheism.[48] The Deobandi mosques of UK (500+) also had 82% second-generation religiosity (Pew 2017) compared to 55% European Muslim average, as a result of weekend madrasas.[49] In post-2013 Egypt, 12% rise in religiosity was linked to Salafi da'wah (Arab Barometer 2018-2022), and Tahrir youth were stabilized through mosque welfare[50], and local imams reversed 15% apostasy rates in Bangladesh (Tablighi jamborees 2M attendees, 2022).[51].. Restrictions are evident in urban elites, in which inflexible strategies breed opposition, implying dialogic development [52].

These trends show strength, with 90 percent+ religion in the region and adjusting to the digital frontier of atheism.[53]

4.   **Comparison:** (Trends in Athiestics versus Trends in Islamic Reform Movements.)

In both the athistic tendencies and the Islamic reform movements there are glaring similarities in the way organizations appeal and the mode of mobilization but there are foundational distinctions in the way organizations are organized in the ideological aim and the approaches. Each uses digital networks: atheism has flourished on r/exmuslim (150,000+ members) on Reddit, and 500,000 users on Telegram (Arabic), the same way Tablighi Jama'at organizes its activities via WhatsApp (80 million followers) and Minhaj-ul-Quran uses YouTube to rebuttal (2M).[54] The appeal lies in the resolution of existential crises, with atheists providing members the relief of rite guilt, reformers the assurance of spirituality through tawhid, all of it aimed at the same audience, a group of urban youth between 18-35, STEM-educated, fed up with clerical scandals, etc.[55] The approaches are united by narrative persuasion: ex-Muslim testimonies are on a par with da wah khuruj, both use memes and short videos as their viral methods.[56] However there are more differences than there are similarities: atheism seeks personal independence and scientific materialism, denying the presence of an afterlife; reforms demand orthodoxy and eschatological salvation, imposing adherence to fiqh.[57] Aims come into conflict, secular humanism and

divine sovereignty, but one is guaranteed to give power to those who feel oppressed (state theocracy among atheists, Western imperialism among reformers).[58]

Depending on social and individual levels, it is not always effective. Reforms are socially better: Salafism has stabilized the Egyptian religiosity at 89% in 2013 (Arab Barometer), and Deobandi networks keep 82% of the UK-Pakistani youth faithful to their religion, compared to 55 years European Muslim average.[59] The 40-day retreats offered by Tablighi, when done individually, give 70 percent piety retention (internal studies), which is higher than atheism churn (50 percent return-to-faith per Iranian surveys).[60] Nevertheless, atheism is better at penetrating the elite: 15% of Iranian professionals consider themselves to be non-religious (GAMAAN 2020) undermining the position of reformers among influencers.[61] Reformation suppresses thoughts through fatwa ecosystems - Minhaj 600-page anti-suicide fatwa has already been downloaded 10M times - but fails to counter atheism unmonitored dark web forums.[62] Generally, the religiosity among movements has 85-95% regional religiosity (Pew 2025), with atheism 1-10, though urban centers have 20% skepticism.[63]

Reform movements are faced with a daunting task. Ritual worship is undernourished: The religiosity of Turkey declined by 10 percent (2010-2022) during Erdogan-approved reforms, similar to a 5 % spike in youth atheism in Pakistan.[64] The lack of engagement among youth is based on the perceived rigidity: Salafi literalism makes 30 percent of university students interested in ijtihad (IIUI surveys) seem to be alienated by atheism that is conveyed by the Tik Tok algorithms.[65] Political pressures contribute to: Saudi crackdowns on liberal clerics undermine Salafism, Egyptian Al-Azhar confronts Sisi with secular curriculum requirements, and the blasphemy laws in Pakistan also backfire, radicalizing moderates against doubts.[66] There is still digital asymmetry: former Muslim content receives 10x the views compared to reformist talks, and VPNs circumvent censors.[67] In-house divisions--Tablighi apoliticalism versus Jamaat-e-Islami activism--are a watered-down response.[68]

Religious identity reclamation is influenced positively by the reformist endeavors. The Pakistan programs of Minhaj-ul-Quran has increased the attendance of mosques by 25% (2018-2023) and makes hybrid identities of STEM and salat.[69] The Deobandi madrasas of UK maintained the observance of hijab at 75 percent of second generation women against the secular peer pressure.[70] Salafi dawmah in gulf countries equated to 12 percent less alcohol use (local health statistics), reclaiming cultural Muslims.[71] All these keep ummah together and 92 per cent of the Muslims worldwide confirm faith centrality (Pew 2020-2025).[72] However, atheism drives the evolution of identity: more and more reformed young people are increasingly moving to defend themselves rationally, which is clearly visible in the fact that 40 percent more Islamic apologetics podcasts have risen.[73]

This contest is determined decisively through education, media and policy. Darwinism without kalam counterbalance is spread in secular universities where 20% of those who leave universities are in doubt about it (Arab Barometer); bio-theology, the counter of Darwinism in Islamic universities, halves apostasy rates.[74] The slick production of atheism is preferred by the media dominance though reforms are getting through the debates of Al Jazeera and the Peace TV (100M reach).[75] Policy responses--The 2020 fatwa ministry of UAE, anti-atheism legislation in Indonesia, suppress popular expression but create risk growth in the underground spheres.[76] Moroccan reformed madrasas with balanced approaches, which also include civics, demonstrate 15 percent religiosity benefits.[77]

Reforms need to be re-calibrated to have more impact. To start with, be digital natives: create AI fatwa applications and TikTok scholars competing with ex-Muslim charisma(25)[78]. Two, hybridization of the curriculum: one required course, kalam in STEM subjects, tested by UINs in Malaysia (reduced the doubt by 18%).(26)[79]. Third, youth empowerment: ijtihad academies educating influencers, like Minhaj did, but scaled regionally.[80] Fourth, welfare-tech fusion: blockchain zakat platforms covering the drivers of economic atheism.[81] Fifth, inter-movement integrity: OIC-affiliated "Faith 2.0" coalition pooling resources against New Atheism.[82]Sixth, dialogue policies: guided discussions with atheists, personification of orthodoxy in the approach of Abduh.[83] These policies would see 20-30 percent of youth at risk rejoining the Muslim world and Islam with greater strength, in the face of globalization.[84]

5-Conclusion and Recommendations:

This comparative research clarifies the complex relations between emerging atheist trends and the old Islamic reform movements in the Muslim majority societies. Atheism, which occurs at 1-10 percent of the area, capitalizes on the Internet and rationalism to enter urban young educated populations, undermining piety by criticizing rituals and dogmatism. Reform movements, in its turn, such as 85-95% religiosity of Tablighi Jama'at at the grassroot, scholarly rigor of Deobandis, tawhid-focused purism of Salafists and multimedia outreach of Minhaj-ul-Quran, are maintained by comprehensive strategies including da'wah (preaching), education, scholarly rebuttal of theology and social welfare. Social effectiveness of reforms, including higher faith retention to second generation diaspora communities as well as post-political upheaval stabilization of religiosity, are highlighted through empirical evidence, but there remain weaknesses in the elite intellectual classes and digital echo chambers.

The necessity to strengthen the movements of reform by modern methodologies is indescribable. The adoption of the latest educational technologies in digital form (madrasas, AI-based fatwa services, and hybrid curriculum STEM-theology) shows the possibility of recapturing 20-30 percent of potential youth at risk due to the shortcomings in secular curricula. With viral content strategies, by following successful

patterns of multimedia expansion, generational differences can be bridged, and the socioeconomic conditions that cause disillusionment can be addressed by zakat-funded welfare-tech programs to fill the socio-spiritual paradigm of Islam.

There is also the paramount need to nurture positive discussions between the religious tradition and modernity to present the issues of the youth in an authentic way. Creation of ijtihad colleges that facilitated the spread of rational apologetics, moderated inter-faith discussions that humanize orthodoxy, and consolidated OIC-led alliances that combine Tablighi fieldwork with Salafiyya scholarship would be an effective response to the virtual communities of atheists. These methods are consistent with hikmah prophetic which is turning skepticism to empathy instead of confrontation.

Longitudinal digital atheism tracking, neurotheological fitrah studies, and comparative studies of adaptive madrasa models and underground networks should be the main focus of future research. The policy frameworks must require the integration of the kalam in the public schools, censor extremist VPN materials impartially and institutionalize the national dawah endowments. These united actions will maintain the strength of Muslim identity, to make tawhid intellectually and communally victorious in the face of inevitable globalization forces.

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