

Just a Few Questions for Richard Dawkins and Sulome Anderson

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Richard Dawkins, the retired Oxford evolutionary biologist, whose best-known books are *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*, is a celebrated atheist routinely critical of all religions, but is known especially for his severe criticism of Islam. He has noticed that Islam is treated with kid gloves by many of his “liberal” colleagues, who are reflexively defenders of that faith, privileging it above all others: “My love of truth and honesty forces me to notice that the liberal intelligentsia of Western countries is betraying itself where Islam is concerned.” He has insisted that “Islam is the greatest force for evil in the world today.”

Some time ago Dawkins criticized Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of

Brunei for adopting a law that would mandate death by stoning for those convicted of being homosexual in his largely Sunni Muslim country. Noting Brunei's adoption of the Sharia death penalty, Dawkins tweeted that it was in order "'To obey Allah's command as written in the Quran.' So you'd better not object or you'll be accused of Islamophobia & Cambridge will de-platform you." [This was a reference to the withdrawal by Cambridge of an invitation to Professor Jordan Peterson, merely for having been photographed next to someone wearing a t-shirt that read "I'm proud to be an Islamophobe."]

Dawkins frequently claims that Islam is the sole object of his criticism, not Muslims, and those who label Islam's critics, such as himself, as "bigots," are failing to recognize the distinction he makes between Islam and Muslims. Some may think Dawkins is too soft on the adherents of Islam, as he depicts them as victims of brainwashing; he claims endlessly that Muslims are the "greatest sufferers" from Islam as a way of justifying, quite unnecessarily, his criticism of the faith; over the past 1,400 years, on the receiving end of Muslim aggression and murder, many Infidels would disagree. Does one find fault only with the ideology of Nazism and give members of the Nazi Party a pass, as victims of brainwashing who do not deserve criticism?

"I hate cancer," Dawkins tweeted after being criticized for his first tweet on Brunei. And he continued: "Aha, so you hate cancer sufferers. Bigot! The principal sufferers from Islam are Muslims. Especially women and homosexuals. Muslimophilia can inspire and justify Islamophobia." He is comparing Islam to cancer; we don't blame the sufferers, he says, but only try to eradicate the illness. The analogy is a poor one. Victims of cancer do not choose whether they get cancer or not. But there is an element of will in those who "suffer" from Islam. Those born into the faith still have the freedom, when they grow up, to exercise moral choice and if appalled by the teachings of Islam, can choose to become merely "cultural"

Muslims or, if they live in the West where they need not hide their apostasy, even to leave the faith altogether; according to a Pew Report, about a quarter of adults who were raised Muslim (23%) in the United States no longer identify as members of the faith. Those who remain Muslims, or convert to Islam, are not innocent victims; they choose freely to belong to the faith that Dawkins calls the “greatest force for evil in the world today.”

Dawkins has no need to claim that what he wrongly mischaracterizes as his “Islamophobia” is justified by what he calls “Muslimophilia.” Apparently, it is mainly because he hates the way many Muslims suffer from Islam that he opposes the faith, not because of what Islam has meant for Unbelievers over the past 1,400 years. Dawkins accepts the word “Islamophobia,” the same term used by apologists for Islam in order to shut down all criticism of Islam. It is disappointing that Dawkins has not questioned such verbal mendacity. Dawkins himself is not guilty of “Islamophobia.” He does not exhibit a “baseless fear and hatred of Islam.” He is, rather, an “islamocritic” and a valuable one; neither Dawkins nor any other islamocritics need to justify themselves by claiming to be “Muslimphiles.” He has a perfect right to describe himself as severely critical of Islam, and therefore to be deeply distrustful of, and hostile to, those whose minds are in thrall to that same faith. No defensiveness (“I’m a Muslimphile”) is necessary.

Among the replies to the tweet where Dawkins compares Islam to cancer was one from Sulome Anderson, a Beirut-based journalist:

“Mr. Dawkins, Islam is not a cancer any more than other religions,” replied Beirut-based journalist Sulome Anderson, author of The Hostage’s Daughter: A Story of Family, Madness, and the Middle East (2016). “The real cancer was colonialism and neocolonialism that economically and politically exploited Islamic countries for centuries, killing

democratization and progress—and white saviors like you were the carcinogens.”

“The real cancer was colonialism.” What can Sulome Anderson be thinking? When does she think European “colonialism” began? What “Islamic countries [were] economically and politically exploited [by Europeans] for centuries, killing democratization and progress”? For more than four hundred years it was the Ottoman Turks – Muslims – who ruled over most of the Middle East and North Africa. Europeans did not arrive in the area until Napoleon entered Egypt in 1798. There were no European “colonies” in the accepted sense of that word; that is, a place both with a large influx of settlers from the colonial metropolis and economic exploitation of that colony, anywhere in the Middle East. North Africa has a slightly different history.

We need only go down the list of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, to see how little they suffered from what Sulome Anderson describes as “colonialism.” Iran never suffered from European colonialism; it has been a unified and independent state since the rise of the Safavids in the 15th century. As for Iraq, the modern state was created by the British, who remained there for little more than ten years, from 1921 to 1932, as the Mandatory authority, not to colonize, but in order to help shepherd the country that had been created from the three Ottoman vilayets of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, to full independence. In Lebanon/Syria, the French played the same role, that of the Mandatory authority, helping guide the local Arabs to independence in two nation-states, Lebanon and Syria.

In Egypt, the British did not come as colonialists, there to exploit the country’s (non-existent) riches, and to settle in large numbers; they arrived in order to put the country’s finances on a firmer footing and to end the inefficiency and corruption in the civil service. This was, of course, partly

to assure the smooth workings of the Suez Canal. Lord Cromer appeared in 1877 to assume both tasks and had remarkable success. By 1922 Egypt, which had since December 1914 been a British protectorate, was declared by Great Britain to be fully independent. For the British, Egypt had not been a source of revenue (revenues from ships using the Suez Canal accrued to the Suez Canal Company), but a drain on resources. The British were happy to pull out, though because they wanted to ensure the continued security of the Suez Canal, they left a small contingent of army officers and civilian officials, who remained as advisers to the Egyptian government for several decades. The closest thing to true "colonialism" that Egypt endured was that which began in 1517, when the Ottoman Turks defeated the Mamelukes, who in 1250 had themselves defeated the Ayyubid dynasty founded by the Kurd Saladin. Under the nearly 400 years of Ottoman rule Egypt remained immobile; it was the British who helped to reform the civil service along modern lines and install a semblance of efficient government.

As for the Arabian peninsula, there were no European colonies in what became Saudi Arabia; infidels were not permitted, on religious grounds, in Arabia. That rule was strictly observed, for a long time, in Saudi Arabia. Nor were there European colonies in the places that were, or later became, known as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. Only in the entrepôt of Aden was there a British crown colony from 1937 to 1963; before that it had been administered by the Government of India. Aden was important as a refueling and re-provisioning stop for ships on the England-to-India route. Even in Aden, there were only a handful of British military and civilian officials; Aden had no colonists and no resources to exploit.

For many hundreds of years the Arabs of the Middle East and North Africa had been subject to imperial rule, varying in the degree of its immediacy and severity, of the Ottoman Turks. It

was the Europeans who freed them from their subjugation to the Ottomans. This does not fit Sulome Anderson's version of history. She wants us to believe that all the ills of the Muslim and Arab world have come from Europeans, the self-appointed "white saviors" whom she describes as "carcinogens"; the "cancer" is "colonialism."

The vast interior peninsula of Arabia (renamed after the Al-Saud family in 1932), as noted above, was never subject to European colonial rule. The British did, however, intervene in the Gulf in two ways, both praiseworthy. First, they used their naval power to end the Arab slave trade in black Africans; second, they established a modicum of peace between the constantly warring Arab tribes on the Gulf coast, including stamping out their piracy, for this threatened the sea route to India and the East. And that was about it. There were a few small British garrisons established at Aden and in the "Trucial States" (so named because they had signed truce treaties with the British); they were there only to maintain the peace. The British treated the Trucial States collectively as a protectorate, not a colony; these included the six emirates of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah, which joined in the Act of Union to form the United Arab Emirates in December 1971; the seventh emirate, Ras Al Khaimah, feeling threatened by Iran, joined the U.A.E. in February 1972. The British never settled in the Emirates as "colonists," nor did they economically exploit the U.A.E. British troops were completely withdrawn, in fact, in 1971, because of their expense; Her Majesty's Government could no longer afford to keep the peace in the upper Gulf.

There was no large-scale settlement by Europeans in these Middle Eastern countries (always excepting the special case of Israel, which was hardly a case of "colonialism"), nor were there riches to exploit. Oil was discovered in the region, and produced, only much later, when the European presence in the Middle East, always small, was already much diminished, and

the oil-producing states were independent. In Lebanon and Syria, where the French Mandate lasted from 1923 to 1946, the French did two things which helped them project soft power for decades to come. First, during the mandatory period, they protected the local Christians from Muslim mistreatment; the Lebanese Christians have felt a bond with France ever since; second, the French spread the use of the French language by both subsidizing, and supplying French teachers to, French-language schools and universities; by supporting French-language newspapers and publishing houses. The Christians of Lebanon still use French, often preferring it to Arabic. One suspects Sulome Anderson would manage to find something sinister about this cultural mission of the French, just one more aspect of "European colonialism." The Lebanese Christian beneficiaries of France's *mission civilisatrice* would doubtless disagree.

In Iraq, as the Mandatory authority, the British not only managed to create a country out of those three Ottoman vilayets, but during the Mandatory period, they protected the Christians; before leaving the country, they extracted a promise from the Iraqis that they would not harm the Assyrians. However, within a year of the British officially leaving, Muslim Arabs and Kurds carried out a pogrom against the Assyrians at Simele, and several thousands were killed. Can Sulome Anderson find a way to blame the European "colonialists" and American "neocolonialists" for that attempt, by Arab and Kurdish Muslims, at genocide? What does she make of the attacks on Lebanese Christians during the Lebanese civil war? Or the attacks on Copts in Egypt that began after the British withdrew in 1922, and that have continued up to the present? Or doesn't she think the mass murder of Christians by Muslims is important enough to mention?

North Africa presents a slightly different picture from the Middle East. In Libya, after the Italian conquest of the

country that began in 1911, there was an effort to colonize the vast, underpopulated country. About 100,000 Italians eventually moved to Libya. The Italians were there to farm, and to build. They introduced modern systems of agriculture – crop rotation, irrigation, new kinds of fertilizers – that allowed what had become desert to again flourish; knowledge of these methods were freely shared with the Arabs. The Italians built 4000 kilometers of roads, 400 kilometers of railroad lines, bridges, ports. They built a modern highway all the way from Tripoli to Tobruk. They plowed large sums into these projects; they wanted Libya to flourish and it did so, as it had not done since the days of the Roman Empire. These projects (roads, railroads, ports), and the improvements to agriculture, were for the benefit of all the people in Libya, not just Italians. Most of what one now sees of lasting worth in Libya's infrastructure was built either by the Romans two thousand years ago, or by their descendants, the Italian builders and craftsmen who came to Libya during the period 1911 to 1939. Sulome Anderson might visit Libya and take a good look, before she concludes that "European colonialism" is everywhere A Bad Thing.

Huge improvements to agriculture and infrastructure were not the only benefits of Italian rule.

The Italians also introduced their own legal code to replace the rudimentary Sharia of the Arabs. Comparing how Libyans fared under the Italians with how they fared during the rule of King Idris, or Muammar Qaddafi, or most recently, during the period of the half-dozen warring militias still fighting for power since the fall of Qaddafi, it is hard not to see the Italian rulers as the best of the lot. This was "colonialism," but it was not the resource-draining sort, and it provided a better life for the Libyans than any they had experienced before.

France effectively ruled Morocco from 1912 to 1956, and Tunisia, from 1881 to 1956, both considered administratively

not as colonies but as protectorates. Were the French ruthless colonialists as the Turks had been? Did the French government move hundreds of thousands of its own citizens into Morocco and Tunisia as *colons*, colonists? No, they did not have such a policy; they did not prevent French people, as individuals, from moving to those two countries, which is a different thing. The French who settled in Morocco and Tunisia did so only by the tens of thousands.

Did the French, if we accept Anderson's view that in North Africa they were everywhere "colonialists," ruthlessly exploit these *soi-disant* "colonies"? No. The French built the first modern hospitals and universities in North Africa, built school systems where before there had mainly been madrasas, supplied a constant stream of teachers from France to the schools and lycées of the Maghreb. They introduced modern methods of agriculture which increased crop yields, including those of olive trees, and introduced vineyards, too. Despite Islam's ban on alcohol, Morocco and Algeria are now major producers of wine. Most significant, perhaps, was that these supposedly exploitative "colonialists" offered the *maghrebins* the gift of the French language, which made the advanced West – its culture, art, politics, science, medicine, higher education – all now accessible to the Tunisian and Moroccan elites.

Only in Algeria was there a deliberate large-scale transfer of French citizens into the region. Like Morocco and Tunisia, Algeria had been under the suzerainty of the Ottomans; unlike Morocco and Tunisia, when under French control Algeria was administratively ruled from Paris; it was treated as part of metropolitan France. Hundreds of thousands of French colonists moved into Algeria. By independence, in 1962, Algeria had more than a million people of European descent.

Clearly the journalist Sulome Anderson wishes to blame the ills of the Arab and Muslim world on European "colonialism and neocolonialism that economically and politically exploited

Islamic countries for centuries, killing democratization and progress." When we look closely at the recent history of the Middle East and North Africa, we see both what little actual effect European "colonialism" had on the region, and when it did have an effect, the benefits to the Arabs always outweighed the burdens. A mandate is not "colonialism." A protectorate is not "colonialism." Only in Algeria and Libya were there real "colonies" with substantial numbers of "colonists." But instead of being "economically and politically exploited" by the Europeans, these Arab territories were the recipients of large investments. We saw how in Libya the Italians built the infrastructure of the country and modernized methods of agriculture. The French did the same in Algeria, but also built hospitals, universities, and a secular school system with many teachers sent from France..

Anderson also claims that the Arabs endured "centuries" of Europe colonial rule. Her history is wrong. Only one Arab country, Algeria, was under European rule for more than a century, from 1830 to 1962. The Arabs endured a harsh imperialism for centuries, it's true, but the imperialists in question were not Europeans, but their fellow Muslims, the Ottoman Turks.

The Europeans never colonized Iran, which maintained its independence throughout the centuries. Britain held the League of Nations mandate in Iraq, and France held that for Lebanon/Syria. These were examples not of colonialism, but of its very opposite; the holders of the mandates were responsible for guiding these inchoate countries to full independence. The interior of the Arabian peninsula was never penetrated by the Europeans. Britain did describe Aden as a "crown colony," but it was hardly that; only officials and soldiers, not ordinary Britons, lived there. It was important only as a base for refueling ships going to and from India.

Egypt had its civil service revamped by the British, and put

on a sound footing; that does not constitute "colonialism." Libya became a colony of Italy, in the sense that large numbers of Italians, by the hundreds of thousands, settled there. But instead of being exploited by Italy, the Libyan economy was greatly improved by the Italians, through their massive investments in infrastructure (roads, highways, railroads, ports) and in improvements to agriculture.

Arab Muslims suffered far less from European colonialism than did any other people in the *soi-disant* Third World – far less than those in sub-Saharan Africa, in Central and South America, and in southeast Asia. Indeed, it might be argued, and has been, by such non-Arab ex-Muslims as Anwar Shaikh (in his *Islam: The Arab Imperialism*) that the most successful imperialism in history has been that of the Arabs, who exploited Islam as a vehicle for arabization, especially of the cultural and linguistic kind.

So great was the prestige of the Arabs within Islam that non-Arab converts often took Arab names and assumed false Arab lineages. It's not surprising. The message of Allah was transmitted to a 7th century Arab, and in his language, Arabic. Muslims when they prostrate themselves in prayer five times a day turn toward Mecca, in Arabia, and recite their prayers in Arabic. It is also to Mecca that Muslims make the hajj, if able, at least once in their life. Believers ideally read the Qur'an in Arabic and memorize its verses in the original. No wonder many non-Arab Muslims adopted Arabic names and even false Arab lineages.

Arab imperialism in the newly-islamized Middle East and North Africa was followed by the imperialism of the Ottoman Turks, who for four hundred years ruled the Middle East and North Africa. Unlike the Europeans later on, the Ottomans did not invest in the lands they ruled over, and instead squeezed what they could out of their subjects. It made no difference to them if those subjects were Arabs, and thus fellow Muslims. Sulome Anderson fails to mention the four hundred years of

Ottoman rule. Has she forgotten about it, or does it get in the way of her anti-European ("white men are the carcinogens") narrative?

Whenever the word "colonialism" is flung at the West, there is an immediate impulse to apologize. There is no need. We should be ready to recognize the benefits that colonialism could, and often did, bring to many peoples. The Arabs, in particular, benefited economically in North Africa from the modernization of agriculture and the massive investments made in infrastructure, education, and hospitals. They benefited politically, too, from the Mandatory authorities, France and Great Britain, who created the conditions that allowed Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, formerly lands under Ottoman rule, to independence. In Egypt, the British so improved the civil service that after eight years (1914-1922) of being a "protectorate" Egypt was deemed ready for full independence, and received it in 1922.

Sulome Anderson claims that "colonialism" managed to "kill democratization and progress" in Muslim states. The opposite is true. Democracy is alien to Islam; for Muslims the legitimacy of a ruler depends on whether his rule follows the will of Allah, as expressed in the Qur'an. He may be a despot, as long as he is a good Muslim. The idea of democracy was brought to the Arabs by the very West that Sulome Anderson blames for "killing" it. The elections held in Iraq have been reasonably fair, thanks to the Americans; elections have at various times been held, and their results sometimes honored, in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, "Palestine." Even the family despotism in Saudi Arabia now allows elections at the local level. The very notion of elections was an alien import from the Europeans. The West did what it could to promote, not "kill," the idea of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa.

As for Anderson's charge that "colonialism" killed "progress," this is the very opposite of the truth. The Europeans, unlike

the Ottomans, tried to promote, not stifle, economic progress in the Arab lands. In Libya, the country which conformed most closely to being a "colony," the country was transformed by the Italian colonists. Roads, highways, railroads, and ports built by the Italians served Libyans as well as Italians. The modern methods of agriculture the Italians introduced were also shared with the Libyan Arabs. In Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia the French, similarly, built the first hospitals, universities, and school systems. They modernized agricultural methods, built networks of roads, the first railroads, and ports – all of these being needs the Ottoman rulers had ignored.

Progress had long been limited in Muslim lands because of Islam itself. First, the hostility in Islam to *bid'a*, innovation, which was originally aimed at suspect "innovation" in matters of faith, became a wider hostility to any new way of doing things. Thus did Muslim peoples prove naturally refractory to the idea of progress; it was the Europeans who imposed what progress there was. Second, the fatalism of Muslims, expressed in the one word "inshallah" or "God willing," naturally diminished the Muslim will to strive. Why bother if, in the end, Allah will decide who succeeds and who fails? Europeans brought with them the idea of progress, and demonstrated in all that they created the obvious benefits of active effort over *Inshallah*-fatalism and passivity. The European presence in the Middle East and North Africa was, by any fair-minded standard, a godsend, politically and economically.

If there is to be any apologizing for colonialism, it should be not to, but by, the Arabs. For they have been the most successful colonizers in history, who managed to convince those they conquered to forget or despise their own pre-Islamic histories, as representing the Time of Ignorance, or *Jahiliyya*, before the arrival of Islam, and to identify instead with their Arab conquerors. Every aspect of Islam

reinforces the prestige of the Arabs. The Qur'an, the Word of Allah, was delivered to a 7th century Arab, and in his language, Arabic. Muslims turn prostrate in prayer toward Mecca, in Arabia. They must make the hajj, if financially able, at least once in their life to that same Mecca. Even if they are non-Arabs they recite the daily prayers in Arabic and, ideally, should read the Qur'an in Arabic. That is why so many non-Arab Muslims take Arab names, and assume false Arab lineages. Islam has always been a vehicle for Arab imperialism.

The next time Sulome Anderson, or others of that ilk, snarlingly attack the malignant "white saviors" of the West for a "colonialism" that, it is claimed, over the "centuries" was responsible for "killing democratization and progress" in the Islamic world, have ready a series of questions for them:

First, for how long were the Arabs ruled by the Ottoman Turks, their fellow Muslims, and what benefits, and burdens, resulted from that rule?

Second, exactly where, and for how long, were the Arabs ruled by Europeans? Which Arab states did the Europeans help bring to independence under the League of Nations mandate system? Which states were "protectorates," whom the Europeans guarded from possible outside aggressors, and from internecine strife? Which states were "colonies" in the generally accepted sense of that word?

Third, which Arab states were exploited economically by the Europeans, and in what way? in which states did the Europeans invest far more than they received in benefits?

Fourth, what was the effect in North Africa of the massive European effort to build transportation infrastructure (roads, highways, railroads, ports), to set up schools, hospitals, universities? What was the effect on the local Arabs of the French government disseminating the French language in both

Lebanon and in the Maghreb, by sending French teachers and supporting French-language schools and media?

Fifth, in what ways did Europeans bring modern methods of agriculture to Libya and Algeria?

Sixth, what political changes did the Europeans help bring about in the Middle East and North Africa? In what countries did they encourage democracy, and in which countries did they manage to “kill” democracy?

Those are some of the questions to which we deserve answers. Richard Dawkins is free to use them, the next time, during one of his many appearances, that he is confronted by some Defender of the Faith claiming that European “colonialism and neocolonialism” have been responsible for everything that ails the Arab and Muslim world.

And Sulome Anderson should certainly be asked these questions, which were prompted by her own resentful blame-the-infidel (“white saviors”) remarks. But as for her deigning to answer them – well, don’t hold your breath.

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