

# Anti-Intellectualism: The Predicament of Our Time

By

*Azhar Ibrahim Alwee*

---

Anti-intellectualism is an adverse social phenomenon characterized by the belittlement, rejection and undervaluing any human attempts at reflection, creativity, social philosophizing, and an intellectual deliberation about man's life, including addressing the problems of human life and its adjustment in society and nature. As best expressed by Richard Hofstadter (*Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 1963), "anti-intellectualism is a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life." Anti-intellectualism in general, may take in different forms, often at times cloak in the very intellectual label which it claimed as the most appropriate, supreme and relevant by its proponents.

It must be emphasized at this point that a plain and innocent anti-intellectualistic attitude, which is *overt* in its absolute opposition against any kind of intellectual thinking, is actually not posing much a problem for it is often the result of plain ignorance or due to an unfortunate cerebral deficiency of its proponents. Given time and adequate intellectual exposure and education, such a situation can be rectified. In many cases, its humility embraces openness and zeal for intellectual activities, which in itself is a corrective mechanism.

But the problematic anti-intellectualism that concerns us here is a type that takes in more sophisticated forms and articulations. It may even be hegemonic, for its very existence renders us unable to recognize it, if not also the helplessness to counter against it. Certainly, the most potent danger that it posed is in the situation when anti-intellectualism exist amongst the intelligent few, who happened to dominate the domain of producing, censoring and disseminating ideas in society. Such anti-intellectualism amongst this powerful intelligent (read: not intellect), with its moral apathy and ferocious greed will thwart any kind of intellectual revisions and criticisms.

At this juncture, we shall only highlight the various forms of anti-intellectualism that manifest in our midst. In Hofstadterian parlance, three strands of anti-intellectualism can be identified, namely: ( a ) anti-rationalism, which often times comes from conservative religious groupings which sees only Reason as the cause for man turning away or being indifferent to certain absolute foundation; ( b ) anti-elitism, which rejects any form of excellence or standard as exclusive and deterrent for the understanding and acceptance by the larger masses and ( c ) an unreflective instrumentalism whereby the market forces of capitalism and the triumphant for practicality means very little place for critical assessment for rethinking and revaluating the rapacious consumerism and all human measurement through the signs of dollars.

Indeed it will be of great interest to explore the workings of anti-rationalism in certain religious discourse. In the latter, Reason is invariably pitted as an anathema to Faith. Pervasive in this style of thinking is that one's preponderance and intensity in the use of reason will certainly lead to an opening gate for doubts and disbelief, and very soon, heresy. Hence, to avoid such pitfall and intrusion, embracement without questioning is the criteria for a guaranteed (and expected) bliss. It becomes worse, when the rhetoric against reasoning are made and justified by a selected few, i.e. self-proclaimed custodians, to ensure the clarity and simplicity for the innocent masses. Much that there is a claim to ensure ideational stability in the public arena, one can also detect an ideological inclination to let the masses remain in darkness, so as not to disrupt the status quo. In the end, this fear of Reason becomes the very contempt for man and his existential needs. Reason as a grace best created by the Almighty, is therefore, relegated and labeled as potentially subversive to one's certitude to faith. Inevitably such anti-rationalism becomes the very obstruction to the search for man's existential meaning.

Similarly, Ortega's (*Revolt of the Masses*, 1964) critical denouncement of the pervasiveness of the mass-man mentality is another factor for us to link it to the phenomenon of anti-intellectualism. This mass-man mentality is a psychological attitude that affects one's thinking and valuation, in which his/her mediocre taste is made *the* standard authority or reference, while at the same time, abhorred against all forms of attempt towards excellence or refinement and revision. This leveling down of all human creations, especially in the realm of ideas, is the most debilitating effect to any culture. Indeed the very persistence of this mentality (thus the failure to counter it) is the result of anti-intellectualism. Another manifestation of mass-man phenomenon is *hermiticism*, whereby "the individual finds himself already with a stock of ideas. He decides to content himself with a stock of ideas....to content himself with them and to consider himself intellectually complete." Such path of parochialism paved for further narrow exclusivity and intellectual barrenness. In addition, it must be emphasized here that not just underdeveloped intellectual taste had resulted in shoddy intellectual output (pseudo ones to be exact); imitiveness of intellectuals is another factor - itself showcasing a trait of anti-intellectualism *par excellence*.

Other factors that can be attributed to the pervasiveness of anti-intellectualism are:

( a ) the primacy of obscurantism, that often command enthusiastic respond whereby non-clarity and escape from clarity is celebrated as the sophistication of ideas or applauded as advanced theorizing

( b ) an aversion to diagnostic thinking – i.e. a serious intellectual undertaking to unravel human predicaments – only to be replaced by an instant 'solution' which is invariably justified in the name of urgencies. In such instances, when facing a particular dilemma, the responses are mostly a reflection of a moral panic or the lamentations as to why the ideals are no longer being practiced or conformed at the present time. Instead of correctly diagnosing the situation, there is a rush to adopt a 'pragmatic' solution. The impatience for critical reflection, which is essential in social reconstruction, under-values the 'solution' in itself; in place is an arrogant insistence of an immediate implementation of an action to rectify a problem, even before a decent diagnosis of the situation has been carried out. Such immediate 'practicality' would only induce a false confidence, and this betrays the very intent

to address the problem at hand. If such an attitude prevails, it will certainly result in shoddy and flawed analysis of the problem and therefore have great ramifications on the solutions proposed henceforth

( c ) the persistence of a dogmatic mind which zealously holds to one's ideas or thinking as final, whereby any compromise to it is equated as a defiance to the Absolute. Hence submission is ennobled, and the desire of questioning and search is tantamount to disbelief

( d ) monopolistic exclusivity of a dominant group in a society which is often intolerant of dissenting voices or pluralistic tendency. Here the dispensing monopolists act as the final arbiter on what is good or bad intellectual thinking, and what should be sanctified or condemned and

( e ) the trivializing of the problems of society, in the pretext that is also 'occurring' in other groups. This is but a form of damaging relativism. Such trivialization, coupled with an underdeveloped sense of a commitment towards social reconstruction is also a form of anti-intellectualism.

The serious impact of anti-intellectualism to individuals and society at large should not be underestimated. We shall, by way of enumerating the main points above, highlight five effects. **Firstly**, anti-intellectualism will affect the education of our young which, if internalized, means the momentum of anti-intellectualism avalanching into a more damaging effect in the near future. **Second**, it will undermine an enlightened idea of culture since anti-intellectualism will circumscribe the very reflection and creation of a living culture, which is essential to ensure its continuity to serve man and his life. **Third**, it warrants danger to our moral visions because practical utility and simplicity, as well as the zealous call for non-complexities, means a leveling down of all phenomena into a simple category as to whether it could function or otherwise. **Fourth**, it stunted our intellectual imagination since anti-intellectualism abhorred any kind of commitment to exploration and testing. At the same time, ambiguity and dialectical fashion in an intellectual discoursing is dismissed as redundant since the formatted version of the 'standard intellectual' ( as promulgated by its proponents ) suffice for all - albeit without any qualifications nor exceptions. **Lastly**, it undermines, without much we realized, our own religious affirmation. With anti-intellectualism, high tolerance for mediocrity and succumbing to the fatalistic idea of the finality of unreflective traditionalism prevails. This will turn us away from the sublime Command that reiterates consistently the importance of man to reflect and create, in his search to find the meaning of this existence, along the path ennobled as Truth. To the believers, the eternal Message not only enjoins for man's reflection, but warrants him as a responsible steward, i.e. he has to bear the *will of* and the *act for* creation. This is only possible if we are consistently serious to respond and address this predicament of anti-intellectualism.

In the last analysis, apart from our discerning ability and the will to identify anti-intellectualism in our midst, it takes the will of morality to engage critically on the persistence of anti-intellectualism – of its transmutations in various forms in the current times and possibly in the future. At the same time, we should avoid at all costs, the naivety that this phenomenon is another kind of so-called 'intellectual' trend of our time. Our determination to respond to this, will also mean our realization that its damaging effects on man and

society, will plague a decrepitude culture of our own making, awaiting us in the soonest time than we expected. Such anti-intellectualism is a warrant for the demise of human culture. The next potent danger comes when there is anti-intellectualism in the garb of religious symbolism, which will definitely suffocate the perennial creativity that is central in all universal religion. It is a testament in the experience of mankind that truth will set them free. Little doubt, the reverse will happen if anti-intellectualism triumphs.

Addressing such anti-intellectualism is not simply an intellectual engagement, but also a moral-ethical calling which is to be heeded responsibly; for the unmasking of distortion and corruption of meanings must be undertaken by those who are capable. As eloquently reminded by Karl Mannheim, “fundamentally, the intellectual should recognize that his intellectual identity prescribes certain duties: he must learn to cherish the fact of his intellectual education as an obligation.” Certainly, one part of this obligation should be speaking truth to power, especially in the domain of the society’s intellectual life. Anti-intellectualism amongst the intelligentsia is indeed an intellectual pathology that demands serious attention. Contempt for reflection, which is the essence of anti-intellectualism, is the very antithesis of the Qur’anic noblest message for mankind to reflect, for its fruits shall guide us to the path of accountability – the answer to the predicament of our time.

\*\*\*\*\*

[This article was first published in *The Muslim Reader* magazine, Sep-Dec 2004 issue.]