

Review: JAE125

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE
**THE END OF REASON:
Secularism, Paranoia, and the Folly of Sam Harris**

a book review of
*The End of Faith:
Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*
by Sam Harris
(W. W. Norton, 2005)

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Sam Harris is terrified. He worries that human civilization is racing toward the brink of self-destruction on the fuel of religious fanaticism. Nothing less than total eradication of the religious impulse can stave off this horrible fate. This is the message of his book *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*.

What is this faith that instills such dread? It is religious faith of almost any kind. Harris's main targets are Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, though his harshest criticism is directed at Christians, and not only fundamentalists. Harris attacks the whole spectrum of Christian belief. At one end are the literalists, the fundamentalists—exclusive, intolerant, irrational, superstitious, and “subservient to tradition” (p. 21)—whose action-guiding beliefs are irrational and dangerous. At the other end are liberals—the enablers, the ultra-tolerant who cannot make a clean break with religious belief. Their toleration of irrational traditional believers is a betrayal of reason.

The Consequences of Faith. Chapter 1, “Reason in Exile,” describes the irrationality and practical dangers of religious faith. Chapter 2, “The Nature of Belief,” stresses the need for evidence in grounding belief. These chapters prepare readers for substantive charges made against believers in the rest of the book.

Chapter 3 is a potpourri of potshots against Christianity. Harris protests that countless horrifying consequences “have arisen, logically and inevitably, out of Christian faith” (106). From historical data he fashions distorted descriptions of witch hunts, inquisitions, Crusades, and of an anti-Semitism that is “intrinsic to Christianity” (92). He even blames the Nazi Holocaust on medieval Christianity (101). He derides the Bible for its discrepancies, the idea of a virgin birth, neuroses about sex, and for its miracles and prophecies. These specious allegations amount to little more than acrimonious assertion.

Chapter 4, “The Problem with Islam,” is unoriginal. Yes, the tenets of Islam do seem to arouse and embolden terrorists of Islamic persuasion, the common good is threatened by Islamo-fascist terrorism, and the political establishment in America is naive about the root causes of this terrorism; but Harris's calculation of this threat is skewed. There are sincere Muslims who disavow Islamic terrorists. Harris draws unqualified conclusions from atypical examples of religious zeal. Such hasty generalizations are especially obvious, even obnoxious, in this chapter. While hammering Islamic belief, Harris shifts to a more general conclusion: “As I argue throughout this book, we have a problem with Christianity and Judaism as well. It is time we recognize that all reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself” (131).

Chapter 5 warns against the thought that religion's influence in the West is benign, in comparison with Islam's more visible repercussions (153). The risky courtship between the United States and Israel is religiously motivated (153–54). Private faith has rudely invaded the public square; for example, judge Roy Moore's antics over exhibition of the Ten Commandments in his court, John Ashcroft's religiously motivated behavior as attorney general, the inordinate influence of special interest groups with a religious agenda, the intrusion of faith in policy making through Bush administration consultants and nominees, and the overtly religious basis that congressmen and judges have for political and legal decisions that they make. Harris prefers a vision of life where peace-loving perpetrators of "victim-less crimes" are spared prison sentences, and where stem cell research proceeds unhindered by religiously based concern for the unborn. He frets that we are on the verge of becoming a theocratic society (156), which "should be terrifying to anyone who expects that reason will prevail in the inner sanctums of power in the West" (157).

The Immorality of Faith. Harris forgets that we live in a democracy, where people, reasonable or not, have a say in how our country will be governed. Our representative government must represent religious believers no less than their "cultured despisers." If voters and elected officials are irrational, there's not much that elitists like Harris can do about it, without resorting to fascism. It's not at all clear that Harris has taken that option off the table. Harris understands that the utter privatization of Christian faith is incompatible with Christian belief. He can't be very optimistic that Christian influence will deteriorate to a sufficient degree.

Harris recognizes that religious belief is the ground of moral conviction for a host of individuals. Having dispensed with religious faith, he is desperate to find a rational basis for a secular morality, but he realizes that many of the nonreligious have opted for a sentimental relativism that can hardly be a ground for our moral intuitions. In chapter 6, "A Science of Good and Evil," he devises a scheme to ground ethical principles that floats free of religion without collapsing into moral relativism. This scheme must yield just the content Harris prefers, with none of the onerous sin-mongering rules that accompany a religiously based morality. What he proposes is sketchy, hopeful, and ultimately incoherent.

As if to ease his own argumentative burden, he scorns the Christian ethic, and includes Christianity in the following indictment: "Once a person accepts the premises upon which most religious identities are built, the withdrawal of his moral concern from those who do not share these premises follows quite naturally" (176–77).

If Harris sincerely thinks that Christianity's foundational beliefs entail withdrawal of moral concern for non-Christians, he needs to demonstrate that, beginning with the New Testament, in which Jesus teaches His disciples to love their enemies and their neighbors as themselves. Has Harris bothered to read Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus commends the peacemakers and the poor in spirit?

Harris does not accuse Christians of hypocrisy, of acting inconsistently with their professed beliefs. He assumes, rather, that the bad behavior of professed believers is a natural concomitant to irrational beliefs at the core of their professed faith; they are misguided zealots in both belief and action. He ignores the possibility that zealots are either hypocrites or pretenders to Christian faith, whose behavior departs from the counsel of Scripture.

Harris repeatedly commits the logical fallacy called *ignoratio elenchi* ("missing the point"), where the premises of his argument support a conclusion that is only vaguely related to the very different conclusion he draws. Here, the conclusion implied in his argument is that some self-described religious believers either are hypocrites or are not true believers. Harris's premises have no bearing on the truth or rationality of Christian beliefs.

Harris reasons that hell is an invention by Christians to justify indifference and hatred toward others. The New Testament, however, teaches that God desires that none should perish. Harris thinks it morally abhorrent to believe in and teach about the existence of hell. It was an act of compassion, however, for Jesus to warn that there is a hell to avoid, and it was an act of mercy for Him to point the way to avoid it.

That way cost Jesus His own life. As He said Himself, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends” (John 15:13 ESV).

It would be morally abhorrent for anyone who believes the Christian doctrine of hell to ignore the plight of those destined for destruction. So it comes down to this question: Is there any good reason to believe in the reality of hell? Harris believes there isn't, but he doesn't even attempt to argue that the doctrine is false or that it's irrational to believe that it's true; rather, he argues that *if* it's unreasonable to believe there's a hell, *then* it's morally dubious to threaten nonbelievers with the prospect of ending up there. *Ignoratio elenchi*, once again.

Harris seldom considers the *rationality* of fundamental Christian beliefs in any direct way. He makes himself judge of what is reasonable and what is not, and agrees with Christopher Hitchens's question-begging dictum: “What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence” (176). This sword cuts both ways.

The Product of Faith. Let's examine an argument Harris does make—the argument from evil against the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent Deity. Harris's version of the argument may be formulated step-wise as follows (172–73):

1. Theism entails that “God created the world and all things in it.”
2. Smallpox, plague, and filariasis are examples of things in the world.
3. Therefore, God created smallpox, plague, and filariasis.
4. If God created smallpox, plague, and filariasis, then God is the cause of smallpox, plague, and filariasis.
5. Anyone who causes the existence of things like smallpox, plague, and filariasis is morally deficient.
6. Therefore, the God of theism is morally deficient.

In the paragraph that follows, Harris writes: “The problem of vindicating an omnipotent and omniscient God in the face of evil...is insurmountable” (173). Harris dismisses two replies to this problem. The first is that “the Creator...is beyond human judgment” in these matters (173). This defense fails, says Harris, because the same Creator is “consistently ruled by human passions,” according to the Abrahamic tradition (173). He ignores the legitimacy of *anthropomorphism*, that is, speaking of God's divine passions in human terms. Harris uses emotionally charged language to characterize the passions associated with God's relation to the human community: “jealousy, wrath, suspicion, and the lust to dominate” (173). The God of the Bible cannot be accused of any “lust to dominate.” On the contrary, the scope of human freedom and its exercise is truly remarkable in light of God's sovereignty. God's self-imposed restraint of power is best explained by God's patience toward a human community bent on moral corruption. The other passions Harris mentions are appropriate under certain conditions and need not be understood as being the same as changing human passions.

Second, theists often deal with the problem of evil by appealing to “notions of free will and other incoherencies,” says Harris. In a lengthy footnote Harris argues that the concept of human freedom is incoherent (262–64). He stipulates a bizarre criterion for the conceptual coherence of free will: “No one has ever described a manner in which mental and physical events could arise that would attest to its existence” (264). Human freedom is best attested, however, not by a model of mind/body interaction, but by our knowledge of ourselves as agents who act freely and with moral responsibility. Harris must deny this, of course, but his denial creates special difficulties for him because he wants to provide for genuine moral responsibility on secular grounds.

The Alternative to Faith. Harris's promise to show that we can dispense with the illusion of free will and still explain morally responsible behavior (263) is empty. When he finally states in a direct way his own fundamental moral principle, it comes down to this: “To treat others ethically is to act out of concern for their happiness and suffering” (186). Notice, however, this statement only masquerades as a basic moral precept. Ethics is a *normative* discipline. An ethical theory centered on human happiness must make sense

of the *obligation* to act for human happiness. We may *feel* that loving others is conducive to happiness (187), and it may *be* conducive to happiness. Certainly, we do naturally want to be happy (whatever precisely that means). But so what? Why think that anyone is *entitled* to happiness, so that others are *morally obligated* to act for their happiness?

According to Harris, to be “loving and compassionate” (191) means doing for others those things that result in pleasurable feelings for them and for ourselves. Harris thinks this sort of behavior makes one ethical, but it doesn’t. He does not explain why it would be *unethical* not to act in these ways. He says, “The point is that the disposition to take the happiness of others into account—to be *ethical*—seems to be a rational way to augment one’s own happiness” (192). Here we have mere assertion and no account of ethical normativity. We might agree that it would be *foolish* to act contrary to Harris’s principle. In what sense, however, would it be *unethical*?

In short, Harris misses the whole point of ethical theory—but that’s not all. Remember, he also repudiates human freedom—all we really have are dispositions, not choices. If our ineluctable dispositions are to act or not act for the happiness of others, however, there cannot be anything morally commendable or objectionable about any of our actions, since we could not have done otherwise. Harris’s position is hopelessly confused.

Things don’t improve for Harris in the final chapter, “Experiments in Consciousness.” Here he attempts to explain how a human community devoid of religious belief could still be “spiritual.” For him, spirituality is reducible to the transformation of consciousness to achieve “a more profound response to existence” (204). Consciousness is reducible to physical activity occurring in the brain, and the self is reducible to neurons that see, hear, taste, touch, think, and feel (212). Harris mixes an exotic concoction that is three parts philosophical and scientific naturalism and two parts Eastern mysticism. He embraces Buddhism for its insight into the nature of spirituality and unity, and its development of neurophysiological machines and technologies that are conducive to spiritual attunement.

How can Harris allow any kind of spirituality and condone apparently religious practices when he demands “the end of faith”? Because the spirituality he permits is purely a matter of experience, and “there is nothing we need to believe to actualize it” (219). And so we come to the ironic conclusion: “Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not” (221).

Harris’s book is the product of a bizarre logic. First, he argues that religious believers inflexibly shun evidence and cling in ignorance to utterly irrational beliefs; but his own book is short on the objective evaluation of evidence on all sides of the issues he confronts. Second, he thinks any attempt to persuade believers with evidence is hopeless; yet he imagines that his book will somehow help to stem the tide of fanaticism. Does Harris expect believers to shed their faith willingly, or does he condone the divestment of their faith by force? That would be truly apocalyptic.

Harris avoids a balanced appraisal of forces shaping Western culture. He is altogether silent about the prevalence of antireligious bias in the media and in the nation’s universities, where social influence is unmatched. His diatribe against faith presents a spectacle of alarmist folly equal to what he attributes to religious believers. He’s right about one thing, though: “This world is simply ablaze with bad ideas” (224). Let’s hope that some day Harris will lower his voice to a more conversational and less paranoid level, and listen carefully to the challenges confronting his own position.

— reviewed by R. Douglas Geivett