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## THE NEW ATHEISM MEETS THE NEW SPIRITUALITY: BUDDHISM THROUGH THE FILTER OF SAM HARRIS

by Elliot Miller

A Summary Critique of:

*Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*

by Sam Harris

(Simon and Schuster, 2015)

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Spirituality for atheists! Is this not a contradiction in terms? Thirty years ago in this magazine,<sup>1</sup> I argued that philosophical naturalists are generally unprepared for the dynamic experiences that can be unleashed in altered states of consciousness; and when such mystical experiences are brought into the laboratory, science itself can be subverted. With the publication in September of Sam Harris's bestselling<sup>2</sup> book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, I believe the day I foresaw has dawned.

Skeptics and New Agers may seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but behind the views that divide them exist larger views that can bring them together. Atheists believe that the universe is essentially physical, and pantheists believe it is essentially spiritual, but both groups are naturalists, denying the existence of a supernatural realm beyond the universe. This means that miracles and special revelation are out of the question; it is only science, whether viewed in conventional or

esoteric/occult terms, that has the potential to unlock the secrets of existence and to transform man from a vulnerable primate to a virtual god.

The one big difference between them is that atheists tend to be rationalists (for whom reason is the ultimate authority) while pantheists tend to be mystics (for whom intuition is the ultimate authority). But even here, both rationalists and mystics are subjectivists, looking to themselves to determine truth rather than yielding to an objective authority. Both camps also therefore tend to be humanists, adhering to situation ethics and seeing politics from similar socially progressive perspectives.

With so many points of contact in their worldviews and values, if the rationalism of enough secularists were compromised by flirtation with mysticism, many would naturally drift into the pantheistic camp, and a true skeptic could become increasingly hard to find. Although this result was not Sam Harris's intention, his book has already set such a transition into motion, and I see little reason to doubt it will continue.

### THE IRONY OF IT ALL

As one of the "Four Horsemen of the Non-Apocalypse," Sam Harris (along with Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett) helped launch and fuel the new atheist movement with best-selling books such as *The End of Faith* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2005) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (Vintage, 2006). Although more tolerant skeptics sometimes disagree with Harris's aggressive antitheist approach, more militant ones tend to view him as a hero and devour each of his new books. This is why I was particularly interested to see how his *Guide to Spirituality* would be received by the secular community.

An Internet search reveals that Harris has started quite a conversation. Unsurprisingly, many atheists are not going to consider spirituality no matter who is selling it, but many more are giving it a second look.<sup>3</sup> This is not to deny that some atheists were exploring spirituality prior to Harris's book,<sup>4</sup> but Harris has brought the conversation to the front burner. From now on, a strong precedent exists for skeptics to explore spirituality: if one of the Four Horsemen can pursue mystical enlightenment, then so can you!

So how did an avowed atheist such as Harris develop an interest in spirituality? Actually, Harris is finally writing about something he has been actively pursuing since his college years. In 1987, he took the drug ecstasy (MDMA) with a friend and was overwhelmed with a sense of universal love. This led him down the well-trod path of first experimenting with psychedelics such as psilocybin and LSD, and then dropping out of college to pursue enlightenment at the feet of Hindu and Buddhist meditation

masters in India and Nepal. Roughly a decade later, he returned to Los Angeles and completed his BA in philosophy in 2000.

It was only after the 9/11 terrorist attacks that Harris's convictions about the dangers of religion, particularly theistic religion, seemed so confirmed that he felt compelled to publish them. But his belief in the value of meditation never wavered, and it was the interplay of these contrasting beliefs that led him to do doctoral research in cognitive neuroscience at UCLA, where he received his PhD in 2009.

## **SPIRITUALITY FOR SKEPTICS**

Harris assures his readers that his "bullshit detector" remains well calibrated. He further assures them that nothing in the book needs to be accepted on faith. All his assertions can be tested in the laboratory of their own lives (p. 7).

Harris insists that spirituality must be distinguished from religion because people of every faith, and of none, have the same spiritual experiences of self-transcending love, ecstasy, inner light, and so forth, but their religious doctrines are mutually exclusive (8–9). For Harris, self-transcendence means experientially grasping that the "the feeling that we call 'I' is an illusion." He defines spirituality as "deepening that understanding, and repeatedly cutting through the illusion of the self" (9).

### **Harris's Stripped-Down Version of Buddhism**

Harris is a Buddhist, and the spirituality he offers his readers is a stripped-down or secularized version of Buddhism. While Buddhist doctrine is incredibly complex and has many diverse expressions, at its core are the discoveries that Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha, ca. sixth to fifth centuries BC) formulated as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The truths are that (1) all of life involves suffering; (2) the cause of suffering is desire (not only for things but, more fundamentally, for life as a separate individual or ego); (3) suffering ceases when desire ceases; and (4) the cessation of desire and, with it, suffering, is found by following the Eightfold Path, which consists of developing right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Buddhism is essentially an anthropocentric (man-centered), autoteric (self-saving) system developed to address the problem of human suffering. It has been called "the most radical system of self-deliverance ever conceived in the world."<sup>5</sup> The Sanskrit adjective translated "right" means "complete" or "perfect," and the goal of the Eightfold Path is nothing less than complete self-mastery in the areas of wisdom, ethics, and mental practice.

Great stress is placed on the final two traits: “mindfulness” involves the practice of learning to be a detached observer of one’s own thoughts, feelings, reactions, and so forth, while “concentration” refers to the practice in daily meditation of single-focused absorption in one’s contemplative object until both thoughts and sense of self cease.

When the Eightfold Path is successfully followed, the practitioner achieves Nirvana, which in this life means the extinguishing of desire, suffering, and the sense of individual self, and after this life it means the extinguishing of karma, reincarnation, and individual existence, but not necessarily consciousness itself.

Buddhism is compatible with some forms of atheism, pantheism, and polytheism (but not theism); it must be recalled, however, that it was formulated against the backdrop of a Hindu worldview and therefore its doctrines and practices fit best in that context. In the Buddhist system, as formulated from the Buddha on down, there is no way that salvation could be achieved in one lifetime, and so the doctrine of reincarnation is essential to classical Buddhism. Yet, this belief is modified by the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, in which the individual ego is illusory: it is not a soul but rather an aggregate of traits determined and fueled by the force of karma (volitional cause and effect) that passes from one life to the next.

As a secularist, Harris cannot endorse the doctrine of reincarnation in any form, and so his version of Buddhism is not fully formed and therefore seems rather limp. Nonetheless, the spirituality that he offers to his readers is essentially Buddhist.

Harris notes that life’s pleasures are fleeting and our desires are fickle, leaving us in a state of *dissatisfaction* (which he believes better conveys the meaning of the Sanskrit word normally translated “suffering” [38]). He does not dispute that some Christians, Muslims, and Jews experience self-transcendence, but he says this is largely despite, not because of, their faiths’ doctrines. He observes, “One can speak about Buddhism shorn of its miracles and irrational assumptions. The same cannot be said of Christianity or Islam” (23). He further notes that “many Westerners have recognized this and have been relieved to find a spiritual alternative to faith-based worship. It is no accident that most of the scientific research now done on meditation focuses primarily on Buddhist techniques” (28).

Harris affirms that “the reality of your life is always now. And to realize this, we will see, is liberating. In fact, I think there is nothing more important to understand if you want to be happy in this world” (33). He further explains, “The difference I am describing is not a matter of achieving a new conceptual understanding or of adopting new beliefs about the nature of reality. The change comes when we experience the present moment prior to the arising of thought” (36–37). He acknowledges that thought is essential to human functioning, but “our habitual identification with thought— that

is, our failure to recognize thoughts as thoughts, as appearances in consciousness—is a primary source of human suffering. It also gives rise to the illusion that a separate self is living inside one’s head” (100).

Harris’s assault on the human ego is central and repeated. He grants that even if you don’t believe the self exists, “you almost certainly feel like an internal self in almost every waking moment. And yet, however one looks for it, this self is nowhere to be found. It cannot be seen amid the particulars of experience, and it cannot be seen when experience itself is viewed as a totality. However, its absence can be found—and when it is, the feeling of being a self disappears” (91–92).

In good Buddhist fashion, Harris’s assault on the ego is also an assault on the soul. He draws on his past brain research to deliver what he considers a fatal blow: “Much of what makes us human is generally accomplished by the right side of the brain. Consequently, we have every reason to believe that the disconnected right hemisphere is independently conscious and that the divided brain harbors two distinct points of view. This fact poses an insurmountable problem for the notion that each of us has a single, indivisible self—much less an immortal soul” (69).

In Harris’s formulation, the spiritual equation for solving the human problem is simple: no thought = no self = transcendence = happiness. To achieve this, he recommends various forms of Buddhist meditation and offers exercises for some of them. He makes no promise of perfect enlightenment but says “the realistic goal to be attained” is “a capacity to be free in this moment, in the midst of whatever is happening. If you can do that, you have already solved most of the problems you will encounter in life” (49).

### **The Place of Consciousness in Harris’s Worldview**

From my standpoint, the big question was how Harris understands enlightenment. Fortunately, he speaks right to the subject: “It is quite possible to lose one’s sense of being a separate self and to experience a kind of boundless, open awareness—to feel, in other words, at one with the cosmos. This says a lot about the possibilities of human consciousness, but it says nothing about the universe at large. And it sheds no light at all on the relationship between mind and matter” (43–44).

Harris thus retains his secularist bona fides by resisting the mystical temptation to embrace pantheism (the universe and God are ultimately identical) and vitalism (life is a nonphysical principle in the universe). He also expresses skepticism about near-death experiences and the miraculous claims of gurus.

Nonetheless, a dyed-in-the-wool materialist would still be troubled by some of Harris's positions. While denying vitalism, he simultaneously argues that every effort he has seen by neuroscientists and philosophers to explain the emergence and nature of consciousness in strictly physical terms fails. He further affirms that consciousness is "the one thing in this universe that cannot be an illusion" (53). He holds consciousness to be a mystery, perhaps a brute fact of nature that simply cannot be explained (56–57).

For Harris, consciousness is the basis of all human value and ethics (77–78). He argues that the impenetrability of consciousness to objective, causal explanation means that the only way science can explain it is by means of something akin to his definition of spirituality: "Only consciousness can know itself—and directly, through first-person experience. It follows therefore that rigorous introspection—'spirituality' in the widest sense of the term—is an indispensable part of understanding the nature of the mind" (61–62).

As I noted thirty years ago, because naturalists do not recognize the limits of science (the physical world), they can easily go beyond those limits and attempt to do science in a realm of experience that is by nature psychological, spiritual, and intensely subjective. Mysticism by nature conveys a sense of absolute certainty based on direct experience that is not demonstrable scientifically and is unamicable to scientific objectivity. The scientist immersed in it can lose his tether, as the consciousness and dolphin researcher John Lilly (on whom the novel/film *Altered States* was based) did, no longer able to recognize the difference between sound scientific research and mind-warping self-experimentation. What Harris is laying the foundation for here appears to be exactly that.

### **HAS HARRIS DELIVERED WHAT HE PROMISED?**

Materialism leaves a spiritual void, and Harris is to be commended for recognizing and attempting to fill it. He is doing his best to offer skeptics a spiritual path that will not lead them away from skepticism. The question is: can a materialist embrace Eastern spirituality without compromising his materialism? If anyone could succeed at such a project, it would be Harris, but I will demonstrate that Harris has failed to deliver the promised goods.

### **Does Harris Accurately Define Spirituality?**

I find Harris's extremely narrow definition of spirituality presumptuous (and we Christians are supposed to be the exclusive ones!). In my own lectures on spirituality,<sup>6</sup> I have been careful to acknowledge that the subject is understood in many different

ways. I offer a definition that can be applied to all these paths: “The way we live out our approach to the transcendent or Ultimate Reality, including spiritual or devotional practices, code of behavior, and lifestyle.”

Harris acknowledges the occurrence of spirituality in Christianity in only those rare instances where it fits his definition. So the Christian’s lifelong pursuit of an increasingly close relationship with God and increasing conformity to the image of Christ is not spirituality!

### **Is Harris Really Offering “Spirituality without Religion”?**

It is no surprise that Harris and other atheists have adopted Buddhism to explore spirituality, since it explicitly rejects the notion of a creator God. He and the other Westerners he references like to fancy that it is scientific and not religious, but historically Buddhism is a religion nonetheless. Religions vary greatly, and only a few claim divine revelation as their basis, but they all are based on metaphysical presuppositions and offer a complete life path to salvation from humanity’s fundamental problem(s), however defined. This is so much more than science or a psychotherapeutic methodology could legitimately claim.

Buddhism also, of course, has no shortage of masters, disciples, monastics, temples, shrines, scriptures, doctrines, traditions, paraphernalia (e.g., prayer wheels and beads), and other features that help define it squarely as a religion, and no Buddhist practitioner can completely avoid such elements, as Harris himself admits (e.g., 137–38). So, Harris could accurately have titled his book, *Spirituality without God*, but the title *Spirituality without Religion* is very misleading.

The union of spirituality and skepticism that Harris seeks to achieve seems unsustainable. In the context of pantheistic monism, where all is consciousness, and consciousness is Ultimate Reality, the doctrine of no-self makes sense. We should not identify with our illusory ego but rather with the infinite consciousness that is our true essence. But without a nonmaterialistic metaphysical context to put it in, what does self-transcendence mean? What is this consciousness that he values so highly, and why should anyone else value it? Why is identifying with it better than having an abiding sense of self?

There seems to be an irreconcilable tension between first agreeing with materialist scientists that there is no evidence for consciousness apart from the brain and then maintaining that science cannot account for subjectivity or consciousness, and that this is where all value lies. To suggest that consciousness is simply an unexplainable mystery is intellectual laziness. What should constitute compelling proof for a nonphysical dimension to reality is arbitrarily taken off the table so that

materialists can go on with their business as usual. Such circular reasoning—assuming the physicalism that you have yet to prove—results in invincible ignorance.

But at times Harris rather sounds like a closet pantheist. If consciousness is not the essence of Ultimate Reality, what is the reality that Harris tells us “we are always and everywhere in the presence of”—that we “wake up to from the dream of being merely ourselves” (206)? If questions about the meaning of life and our purpose on earth “are some of the great, false questions of religion” (202), and “the cosmos is vast and appears indifferent to our mortal schemes” (206), then how can Harris claim that “every present moment of consciousness is profound. In subjective terms, each of us is identical to the very principle that brings value to the universe” (206)?

It is more than a little debatable whether Harris succeeds at remaining secular while immersing himself in such mysticism, but if he does, it is at the price of coherence. No wonder he proceeds to advise his readers, “Experiencing this directly—not merely thinking about it—is the true beginning of spiritual life.” Indeed, the less thinking Harris and his readers do about this marriage of materialism and mysticism, the longer they will be able to postpone the inevitable divorce. And with that, Harris closes his book in true evangelistic flair: “Open your eyes and see.” If anyone doubted that the celebrated atheist Sam Harris has written a book to convert secularists to religion, this should settle it.

### **Can Harris’s Prescription Really Cure What Ails Us?**

Harris proposes that what comes natural to human beings (thinking) is a problem, and the answer lies in fighting against nature to suspend our thoughts. We need not accept this proposition on faith, Harris avers. Once we stop thinking, we will know the truth. This is a lot for a thinking person to swallow.

Harris invariably describes the sense of self as a “feeling.” This seems arbitrary. Is the sense of self primarily a feeling to you, or is it an awareness of yourself as a human being with both the universal attributes of personality and a very specific history and individualized traits and capacities?

Once again, Harris’s position is incoherent. This is demonstrated inescapably by his continual references to “I” and “me” throughout his narrative. There seems to be a reality underlying Harris’s quest for self-transcendence that remains constant no matter how his experiences change, and this provides a framework for the discussion. It is only because Harris settles for a superficial definition of self that he can so easily cast it aside. Nonetheless, he cannot consistently live this belief out. The effort simply reduces him to a level of absurdity and hopeless self-contradiction.



The doctrine of the soul, on the other hand, perfectly fits our experience and thus passes the test of coherence that we should require of any worldview before we embrace it. If we have enduring souls, then our sense of being a permanent self through all of life's changes is both grounded and vindicated. While some mystery remains, the fact of consciousness is not a problem for substance (body-soul) dualism; but it is an insuperable problem for Harris's physicalism.

Conversely, the split-brain research that Harris believes poses an insurmountable problem for a single, indivisible self or a soul is only a problem if we engage in Harris's reductionism (the same reductionism that says the self cannot be real because it is merely a feeling that disappears when scrutinized). Both neurobiology and psychology assure us that our brains, minds, and personalities are complex entities that are whole only when their constituent parts are well integrated. If a personality becomes fragmented, we are not dealing with multiple personalities but rather a poorly integrated person, and so on. Furthermore, contrary to Harris, the human soul is believed to include, but not to be coextensive with, consciousness. Indeed, it is the very principle that would unite a divided brain or consciousness in one person, so Harris's example hardly disproves it.

Harris confuses the concepts of self and self-image. Based on my own extensive pre-Christian experience of the "ego death" process Harris describes, I will grant that when there is no perception occurring in consciousness, there is also no sense of self. But still, the same subject endures, remembers the experience, and tries to describe it later on. The attributes of a self—cognition, emotion, volition, speech, aesthetic awareness, and so forth—continue to be evident to some degree or other even during the experience of "selflessness." The person remains himself—he is just feeling detached from that fact. Now, this can affect his personality over time, as it did to me, but in retrospect, and from subsequent research and interviews, this is not a good thing. It is a process of depersonalization.

From a Christian theological standpoint, it leads to a diminishing of the image of God in oneself. As the saying goes, "You become like your god" (cf. Ps. 115:4–8). If your god (or view of Ultimate Reality) is impersonal, you will be less likely to place ultimate value on personhood. If you experience mystical states of "oneness" with an impersonal god, then you will become all the more depersonalized. If your God is superpersonal (perfect and fully realized in all personal capacities), then you will be drawn to become more like Him— more of what a human being is intended to be.

Buddhism is like a management program for the effects of the fall. We escape the suffering in life and achieve a state of well-being by detaching ourselves from our thoughts and observing them without pleasure or pain, identifying not with our thoughts but with contentless consciousness. But this antidote to the fall is one of going

back to the original “void” state of creation before God brought organization, complexity, and content to it (Gen. 1:2). Indeed, in Buddhism, the phenomenal world was originally, and remains essentially, a Void (Śūnyatā), and salvation is equated (variously in the different traditions) with returning to it.

The problem according to the Bible is that our persons have been infected by sin, which debilitates and corrupts our characters. God’s antidote is Christ’s vicarious death and resurrection, which bring forgiveness and deliverance from the deteriorating effects of guilt, the power to live differently, and the replacement of self with God at our center, which radiates outward through our beings with love, compassion, righteousness, sound judgment, and other attributes Buddhists would hope to attain.

How can one really be loving and compassionate if one becomes detached even from those feelings and merely observes them? Christianity is rather a passionate faith in which we love the Lord our God with our whole hearts, minds, souls, and strength (Mark 12:30). Desire is not the problem. Wrong desire is.

Furthermore, to the extent that not identifying with thoughts is valid, the Bible teaches it (e.g., Rom. 13:12–14; Col. 3:1–17). But according to Jesus (Matt. 15:18–20), thoughts in the mind reflect the condition of the heart. This problem cannot be corrected simply by dissociating from our thoughts, for they reflect a heart condition that is enduring, and that is our real problem. The answer is a change of heart that will result in different thoughts and different deeds. The question of heart attitude is a nonissue for Harris, but it is the critical issue for the God of the Bible (1 Sam. 16:7; Prov. 21:2; Luke 16:15).

Harris seems oblivious to the ubiquitous testimonies of born-again Christians that a personal relationship with God through Christ completely satisfied their souls and brought an end to the haunting sense that something was missing from their lives. Why has he missed this? Apparently, he has no category that he considers valid that would allow for it; but it is true nonetheless.

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## NOTES

- 1 See Elliot Miller, “A ‘New Age’ of Science,” *Forward* 8, 3 (1985): <http://www.equip.org/article/a-new-age-of-science/#christian-books-2>.
- 2 Harris’s book entered the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction Best Sellers list at no. 3, and at the time of this writing is no. 1 on Amazon’s “Best Sellers in Sociology and Religion” list.
- 3 See, e.g., *eSKEPTIC*, the e-mail newsletter of the Skeptic Society, Wednesday, September 10, 2014,

<http://www.skeptic.com/eskeptic/14-09-10/>.

- 4 See, e.g., the following websites representing atheists and other secularists involved in spiritual pursuits: <http://atheistspirituality.net/>; <http://www.centerforabetterworld.com/SpiritualAtheism/about-spiritual-atheism.htm>; <http://secularbuddhism.org/>.
- 5 David Bentley-Taylor and Clark B. Offner, "Buddhism," in *The World's Religions*, ed. Sir Norman Anderson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 174.
- 6 I've posted the audio of one of my lectures on my YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8qhEG289Tk&t=55>.