

THE TEMPLE OF REASON

SAM HARRIS ON HOW RELIGION PUTS THE WORLD AT RISK

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Sam Harris is a brave man. In a country where 90 percent of adults say they believe in God, he has written a bestseller condemning religion. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (Norton) has won numerous awards for its meticulous and far-reaching arguments against the irrationality of religious belief. Harris has also drawn criticism from all sides, endearing himself to neither religious moderates nor fundamentalists, and even irritating atheists. His latest book, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (to be published this month by Knopf), is a bold attack on the heart of Christian belief. Clearly, this is someone who is not afraid to speak his mind.

As a teenager in the eighties, Harris became fascinated with Buddhism and Hinduism, and he made several trips to India and Nepal, where he participated in many silent meditation retreats. He later studied philosophy at Stanford University and came to see the more dogmatic teachings of both faiths as, in his word, “nonsense.” He’s currently completing his doctorate in neuroscience, researching what happens in the brain when we experience belief, disbelief, and uncertainty.

Harris began writing his first book almost immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He was dismayed by how quickly public discussion turned from pointing the finger at Islamic fundamentalism to calling for religious tolerance. As he saw it, 9/11 should have exposed the dangerous irrationality of religious belief, but instead it pushed the United States even deeper into its own religiosity. And so he began work on *The End of Faith*, whose central tenet is that religion — and religious tolerance — perpetuates and

protects unjustifiable (not to mention just plain silly) beliefs. In an age of nuclear proliferation and jihad, Harris says, religion paves the way for violent destruction on a terrifying scale.

Harris goes after religious belief with a mixture of humor and deadly seriousness. “Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him,” he writes, “or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.” Unlike some atheists who cast clever barbs at all spirituality, Harris sees value in what he calls the “contemplative experience” and views his own Buddhist-inspired meditation practice as an evidence-based, rational enterprise.

Since the publication of *The End of Faith*, Harris has appeared in the documentary *The God Who Wasn’t There*, as well as on various cable-television programs, including *The O’Reilly Factor* on FOX News and Comedy Central’s news-lampoon show *The Colbert Report*. Though busy working on his new book, Harris made time to talk to me twice. He was charming and witty — joking, when I talked to him the second time, that he had converted to Islam since we’d last spoken — but also tough. His arguments are tight and well rehearsed, and, like a politician, he can stay “on point” and turn a question on its head. I sometimes found it frustrating to discuss life’s deepest mysteries in scientific terms. As one respondent wrote on Harris’s

website (www.samharris.org): "As far as trying to rationally prove that God exists, I don't even try. . . . So how do I know God exists? . . . I FEEL him." This is the kind of faith Harris would like to see the end of.

Saltman: Do you think religious identity is always destructive?

Harris: Yes, insofar as people believe that such identities matter. Sure, we can all point to people who call themselves Christians or Muslims or Jews but who don't really take their religion seriously. Obviously I'm not lying awake at night worrying about these people. But where people think there is a profound difference between being a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew, I think those identities are intrinsically divisive. Devout Muslims generally think that the Christians are all going to hell, and devout Christians return the favor. And the difference between going to hell and going to heaven for eternity really raises the stakes in their disagreements with one another.

Saltman: How is religious identity different from ethnic or national or racial identity?

Harris: I think it's similar in the sense that they are tribal identities of a sort, and it's across these tribal lines that human conflicts tend to occur. The problem with religion is that it is the only type of us/them thinking in which we posit a transcendental difference between the in-group and the out-group. So the difference between yourself and your neighbor is not just the color of your skin or your political affiliation. It's that your neighbor believes something that is so metaphysically incorrect, he's going to spend eternity in hell for it. And if he convinces your children that his beliefs are valid, your children will spend eternity in hell. Muslim parents are genuinely concerned that their children's faith is going to be eroded, either by the materialism and secularism of the West, or by Christianity. And, obviously, our own fundamentalist communities in the West are similarly concerned. So if you really believe that it matters what name you call God, religion provides far more significant reasons for you to fear and despise your neighbor.

Saltman: What about someone who, say, identifies as Jewish and wants to preserve that tradition, but isn't really worried about what other religions are doing?

Harris: Well, that's easier in Judaism than in most religions, because Judaism does not tend to be particularly concerned about what happens after death and focuses more on living well in this life. It also tends to be more of a cultural identity than a faith-based one. That said, the extreme forms of Judaism are quite divisive. There are, I'm sure, Orthodox Jews who are waiting for the Temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and once that happens, they'll be eager to live out of the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and kill people for adultery or for working on the Sabbath — because that is what those books say you should do.

Saltman: Isn't religion a natural outgrowth of human

nature?

Harris: It almost certainly is. But everything we do is a natural outgrowth of human nature. Genocide is. Rape is. No one would ever think of arguing that this makes genocide or rape a necessary feature of a civilized society. Even if you had a detailed story about the essential purpose religion has served for the past fifty thousand years, even if you could prove that humanity would not have survived without believing in a creator God, that would not mean that it's a good idea to believe in a creator God now, in a twenty-first-century world that has been shattered into separate moral communities on the basis of religious ideas.

Traditionally, religion has been the receptacle of some good and ennobling features of our psychology. It's the arena in which people talk about contemplative experience and ethics. And I do think contemplative experience and ethics are absolutely essential to human happiness. I just think we now have to speak about them without endorsing any divisive mythology.

Saltman: Your analogy between organized religion and rape is pretty inflammatory. Is that intentional?

Harris: I can be even more inflammatory than that. If I could wave a magic wand and get rid of either rape or religion, I would not hesitate to get rid of religion. I think more people are dying as a result of our religious myths than as a result of any other ideology. I would not say that all human conflict is born of religion or religious differences, but for the human community to be fractured on the basis of religious doctrines that are fundamentally incompatible, in an age when nuclear weapons are proliferating, is a terrifying scenario. I think we do the world a disservice when we suggest that religions are generally benign and not fundamentally divisive.

Saltman: I've interviewed a lot of born-again Christians. Many of them said they were praying for me because they were convinced I'm going to hell, since I'm not a "believer." Sometimes this irritated me, but I never felt that I was in real danger.

Harris: Even Christian fundamentalists have learned, by and large, to ignore the most barbaric passages in the Bible. They're not, presumably, eager to see people burned alive for heresy. A few centuries of science, modernity, and secular politics have moderated even the religious extremists among us. But there are a few exceptions to this. There are the Dominionist Christians, for example, who actually do think homosexuals and adulterers should be put to death. But the people going to a megachurch in Orange County, California, are not calling for this.

They are, however, quite sanguine about human suffering. Their opposition to stem-cell research, for instance, is prolonging the misery of tens of millions of people at this moment. Michael Specter wrote an article in the *New Yorker* titled "Political Science" about how the Christian Right is distorting the



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government's relationship to science. One example is that we now have a vaccine for the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, which causes cervical cancer, of which five thousand women die every year in the United States. The vaccine, which can be given to girls at age eleven or twelve, is safe and effective. Yet evangelical Christians at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — political appointees — have argued that we should not use this vaccine, because it will remove one of the natural deterrents to premarital sex. Reginald Finger, who's on the immunization advisory committee of the CDC, has said that even if we had a vaccine against HIV, he would have to think long and hard about whether to use it, because it might encourage premarital sex.

Now, these people are not evil. They're just concerned about the wrong things, because they have imbibed these unjustifiable religious taboos. There is no question, however, that these false concerns add to the world's misery.

Saltman: If we were to eliminate religious identity, wouldn't something else take its place?

Harris: Not necessarily. Look at what's going on in Western Europe: some societies there are successfully undoing their commitment to religious identity, and I don't think it is being replaced by anything. Sweden, Denmark, Canada, Australia, and Japan are all developed societies with a high level of atheism, and the religion they do have is not the populist, fundamentalist, shrill version we have in the U.S. So secularism is achievable.

I think the human urge to identify with a subset of the population is something that we should be skeptical of in all its forms. Nationalism and tribal affiliations are divisive, too, and therefore dangerous. Even being a Red Sox fan or a Yankees fan has its liabilities, if pushed too far.

Saltman: You mentioned Canada. I have good friends in Canada who are practicing Buddhists and have lived for several years in a monastery. They have a difficult time, because Canadians are extremely suspicious of any religious activity. Everybody thinks they're fundamentalists.

Harris: To some degree your friends are casualties of the fact that we have not learned to talk about the contemplative life in terms that do not endorse a particular religious ideology. If you go into a cave for a year to meditate, you are, by definition, a religious extremist. You have to be able to explain how you are different from Osama bin Laden in his cave.

Saltman: Are you a Buddhist practitioner?

Harris: I'm a practitioner, but I don't really think of myself as a Buddhist. Buddhism can be distinguished from other religions because it's nontheistic. But I think Buddhists have to get out of the religion business altogether and talk about what the human mind is like, what the potential for human happiness is, and what are some reasonable approaches to seeking happiness in this world.

Saltman: How did you come to Buddhist practice?

Harris: I came to it initially through a few drug experiences. I had a brief psychedelic phase around twenty years ago that convinced me, if nothing else, that it was possible to have a very different experience of the world. I began reading

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about mysticism and contemplative experience, and it led me to Buddhist practice — Dzogchen practice, in particular.

Saltman: So you see Buddhist meditation not as a religious practice, but as something that can yield results.

Harris: Clearly, there are results to any religious practice. A Christian might say, "If you pray to Jesus, you'll notice a change in your life." And I don't dispute that. The crucial distinction between the teachings of Buddhism and the teachings of Western religions is that with Buddhism, you don't have to believe anything on faith to get the process started. If you want to learn Buddhist meditation, I could tell you how to do it, and at no point would you have to believe in God or an afterlife. Whereas if you're going to be a Christian and worship Jesus to the exclusion of every other historical prophet, you have to accept that he was the Son of God, born of a virgin, and so on. And I would argue that those beliefs are unjustifiable, no matter what the results of Christian practice are. The fact that you prayed to Jesus and your life was completely transformed is not evidence of the divinity of Jesus, nor of the fact that he was born of a virgin, because there are Hindus and Buddhists having precisely the same experience, and they never think about Jesus.

Saltman: Do Buddhists have a better chance of transforming their lives?

Harris: I wouldn't say that, but they have a better chance of talking reasonably about the capacity of the human mind to experience transcendent states, and about the relationship between introspection and such states of mind. The Buddhist discourse on the value of introspection is much more reasonable and evidence-based and unconstrained by dogma. If you become a Catholic and spend eighteen hours a day praying, you're going to experience a radical transformation in consciousness and maybe become an extraordinarily compassionate person. But when it comes time to talk about *why* that's happening, you're likely going to speak in terms of mythology.

Saltman: But even Buddhists believe some tenets on

faith.

Harris: Right. They believe in rebirth, for example. Some believe that this Dalai Lama was the Dalai Lama in a previous life. The distinction is that you can be a practicing Buddhist, who recognizes all the core truths that the Buddha spoke of, without ever believing in the lineage of the Dalai Lama, whereas you cannot be a Christian if you're not convinced of the core dogmas of Christianity.

Saltman: Would you identify yourself as an atheist?

Harris: Well, I'm not eager to do that. For one thing, atheists have a massive public-relations problem in the United States. Second, atheists as a group are generally not interested in the contemplative life and disavow anything profound that might be realized by meditation or some other deliberate act of introspection. Third, I just think it's an unnecessary term. We don't have names for someone who doesn't believe in astrology or alchemy. I don't think not believing in God should brand someone with a new identity. I think we need to speak only about reason and common sense and compassion.

Saltman: Atheism doesn't always go hand in hand with reason and compassion. Look at the destruction and violence caused by atheist ideology in China and the old Soviet Union.

Harris: What I'm really arguing against is dogma, and those communist systems of belief were every bit as dogmatic as religious systems. In fact, I'd call them "political religions." But no culture in human history ever suffered because its people became too reasonable or too desirous of having evidence in defense of their core beliefs. Whenever people start committing genocide or hurling women and children into mass graves, I think it's worth asking what they believe about the universe. My reading of history suggests that they always believe something that's obviously indefensible and dogmatic.

Saltman: Do you think that there is such a thing as a peaceful religion?

Harris: Oh, sure. Jainism is the best example that I know of. It emerged in India at more or less the same time as Buddhism. Nonviolence is its core doctrine. Jain "extremists" wear masks in order to avoid breathing in any living thing. To be a practicing Jain, you have to be a vegetarian and a pacifist. So the more "deranged" and dogmatic a Jain becomes, the less likely he or she is to harm living beings.

Jains probably believe certain things on insufficient evidence, and that's not a good idea, in my opinion. I can even imagine a scenario in which Jain dogma could get people killed: I don't actually know what Jains say on this subject, but let's say they became unwilling to kill even bacteria and forbade the use of antibiotics.

Saltman: They'd probably want to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

Harris: Probably. But the point is, we're not likely to be in a situation where Jains start to endanger people's lives and rights, because they're so peaceful.

Saltman: In evangelical circles I hear a lot of tirades against "moral relativism" — the idea that right and wrong can vary depending on the culture or time period or situation. Liberals and secular humanists all get accused of moral relativism. You

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are opposed to moral relativism. Do you feel as if that places you, on some level, in the same camp as the born-again?

Harris: No, I don't think I'm in the same camp with them at all. They have a great fear that unless we believe the Bible was written by the creator of the universe, we have no real reason to treat one another well, and I think there's no evidence for that whatsoever. It's just fundamentally untrue that people who do not believe in God are more prone to violent crime, for instance. The evidence, if anything, runs the other way. If you look at where we have the most violent crime and the most theft in the United States, it's not in the secular-leaning blue states. It's in the red states, with all their religiosity. In fact, three of the five most dangerous cities in the United States are in Texas.

Now, I'm not saying that we can look at this data and say, "Religion causes violence." But you can look at this data and say that high levels of religious affiliation don't guarantee that people are going to behave well. Likewise if you look at UN rankings of societies in terms of development — which includes levels of violent crime, infant mortality, and literacy — the most atheistic societies on the planet rank the highest: Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark. So there is no evidence that a strong commitment to the literal truth of one's religious doctrine is a good indicator of societal health or morality.

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