A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: SAM HARRIS'S ARMORY FOR SECULARISTS AGAINST A CHRISTIAN NATION

a book review of
Letter to a Christian Nation
by Sam Harris
(Knopf, 2006)

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National Public Radio recently aired a program to discuss Sam Harris's Letter to a Christian Nation. To frame the discussion, the host asked, “Since religion is based on faith and not reason, should it have a say in public policy?” The question the host posed committed the fallacy of “the complex question,” whereby one assumes what needs to be proved, and then asks a question based on that assumption.

Harris claims that religious faith cannot be based on reason; therefore, if we want a rational public policy, religion should be excluded. Harris writes, “The primary purpose of this book is to arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right” (p. viii). If solid reasons can be given for Christianity, however, everything changes.

Sam Harris experienced a meteoric rise to fame with the release of his first book, The End of Faith, a strident attack on all traditional religion as irrational, backward, and dangerous. The book surprisingly became a bestseller. Harris was stirred to write such a book after the terrorist apocalypse of 9/11. The answer to the persistent hazards of religion globally, according to Harris, is thorough-going secularism. Letter to a Christian Nation was written as an addendum to The End of Faith in light of the many responses Harris received to his first work. He summarizes the ideas of his earlier book and sticks the knife in once again: religion is a harmful (not harmless) delusion. It must be abandoned, not tolerated. In just 96 pages, he sets out “to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms” (ix).

Harris’s polemical efforts have been supplemented by other works written in the same spirit: religion must be rejected root and branch for the betterment of humanity. The God Delusion by scientist and longtime militant atheist Richard Dawkins, and Breaking the Spell by a similarly inclined philosopher, Daniel Dennett, have contributed to what has been called “the new atheism” by Wired magazine. Their arguments against religion are not new, but the rhetorical tone of the attacks surpasses what is common for unbelievers. The gloves are off.

Harris’s attack in Letter to a Christian Nation focuses on three main areas: (1) How Christians (and other religious people) believe, (2) what they believe, and (3) the ethical implications of what they believe. As in The End of Faith, Harris asserts that to “have faith” means that no reasonable warrant can be offered for
that faith; there are only ad hoc or unsatisfying reasons, which are really window dressing for pure fideism (faith without or even against reason). It is sadly and shamefully true that many Christians hold their beliefs in this manner; however, Harris errs by painting with such a broad brush.

“Irrational Belief.” Throughout the history of Christianity, top-notch thinkers have engaged unbelievers rationally. This begins in the New Testament itself when Jesus challenges His followers to love God with all their minds (Matt. 22:37–40), and when the apostle Peter commands Christians to be ready to have an apologetic for what they believe (1 Pet. 3:15). We find this in the rational strategies of Jesus¹ and Paul, for example. Paul held his own with the Athenian philosophers of the day and became a model for philosophical engagement with learned unbelievers (Acts 17:16–34).² Harris makes no mention of these aspects of Christianity, nor does he even allude to the rich history of Christian engagement with philosophy, an engagement that has often resulted in apologetic efforts.³ Christians stand on only their irrational faith, argues Harris, with no incentive to defend it rationally and without apologetic models. These unfair and misleading omissions make for a distorted presentation.

The resurgence of Christians in professional philosophy (led by Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga) in recent years even prompted atheist philosopher Quentin Smith to lament that beliefs of many atheists were in rational jeopardy.⁴ Harris, however, mentions none of this, omitting references to high-level philosophical defenses of Christianity (such as those of Plantinga, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland, and Richard Swinburne), as well as more popular but intellectually serious efforts, such as those by Lee Strobel.⁵ He commits the straw-man fallacy by presenting caricatures of theistic arguments, then rejecting the caricatures, as when he gives a fallacious version of the cosmological argument and rejects Intelligent Design arguments with little more than a wave of the hand (71–75).

Harris, like Dawkins, thinks that the question, “Who created God?” puts an abrupt end to theistic arguments, since this would mean an infinite regress of explanation (73). A designing mind would have to be as complex as the creation itself, so the creation is never explained. Cosmological and design arguments, however, rest on the existence of finite and contingent states of being. They argue that the universe does not explain itself—either in terms of its origin or its form—and therefore, the best explanation is something outside of the finite and contingent universe: God. God, unlike the universe, is not a collection of finite and contingent states that require explanation. God is understood to be nonfinite and noncontingent. God’s character as designer and creator, therefore, does not demand explanation, as does the universe and its form. God is self-explanatory and explains everything else rationally.⁶

Before turning to Harris’s attacks on what Christians believe, readers should note that Harris often refers to the religious beliefs of Muslims, which he takes to be irrational and dangerous, despite the fact that the book is addressed to Christians. “Consider: Every devout Muslim has the same reasons for being a Muslim that you have for being a Christian” (6). These reasons, for Harris, are mere appeals to religious authority: the Qur’an or the Bible. This is part of Harris’s scorched earth policy on religion: since it is all irrational, an attack on any religion is an attack on every religion. This commits two logical fallacies, however. First, it begs the question concerning the irrationality of every religion. Some religions may be constitutionally irrational (such as Islam), while other religions may not be. Second, it employs guilt by association. Muslims who believe in God and think they are doing God’s will (by engaging in terrorism) are considered to be in the same camp with North American Christians who believe in God and think they are doing God’s will.

An equivalence of this type could only be sustained if both parties appealed to religious authority utterly without rational warrant. Many Christian thinkers have taken Islam as a whole and Islamic terrorism to task along just these lines, arguing that the Qur’an denies well-established history (that Jesus was crucified), that it misrepresents the Trinity (as God, Jesus, and Mary), and that Islam has perpetuated itself far more through the sword than by the word.⁷ Muslims often make a bare appeal to the authority of the Qur’an (apart from corroborating evidence), but Christians can argue that the claims of the
Christian worldview are internally consistent, fit the facts of history, and give objective meaning to life, death, and eternity.

The Qur’an was supposedly revealed through an angel to one man (Muhammad) who memorized it and recited it to others who wrote it down. This book contradicts key claims of the New Testament about Jesus and His message. By contrast, the books of the New Testament were written by several eyewitnesses or those who consulted eyewitnesses, and were written shortly after the events described. Many historical references made in the New Testament (particularly in the Gospels and Acts), moreover, have been verified by extrabiblical sources, either from historians or from archaeology. The Qur’an, which was received in the early seventh century, can claim no such historical credentials. Blind leaps of faith are required for Muslims, but not for the thinking Christian.

One would never know, according to Harris’s story, that Christians have analyzed Islam rationally, by standards that they also apply to the rationality of their own worldview. How could the blind critique the blind? Harris taunts the Christian reader, “Why don’t you lose sleep over whether to convert to Islam?” (6). The answer for the informed Christian is this: “Because Islam is supported by neither history nor logic. Its threats are, therefore, null and void. Christian faith, on the contrary, is well established historically and logically.”

“Offensive” Beliefs. To his credit, Harris realizes that the prudential stakes are high with respect to what Christians believe. “The Bible is either the Word of God or it isn’t. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation (John 14:16), or he does not. We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so. If Christianity is correct, and I persist in my unbelief, I should expect to suffer the torments of hell” (3–4). He also rightly chastises theological liberals for muddying the waters with references to “mystery” where the Bible is clear. What Harris takes to be clear concerning “the wisdom of the Bible,” however, he profoundly misunderstands.

Harris tries to discredit the Bible morally by appealing to passages in the Old Testament stipulating capital punishment for crimes outside of homicide, laws about slavery, and holy wars that God commanded. He likewise deems the New Testament barbaric, since Jesus endorsed the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–20) and taught the doctrine of hell. He also claims that the first four of the Ten Commandments have nothing to do with morality, and that whatever is truly good can be known through common sense.

Of course, Christians (and Jews) have written at length about the ways in which the Bible sometimes offends our moral sensibilities. The short answer is this: when viewed as a whole, the moral principles (pertaining to commands) of the Bible can be divided into three basic categories: the ceremonial law, the civil law, and the moral law. (Harris does not address the ceremonial law, but its relation to the New Covenant is spelled out in the Book of Hebrews.) Crimes punished severely during the days of the Old Testament—elements of the civil law—were part of God’s special administration of His Kingdom in a theocracy where people were held to strict standards in light of the clarity of the revelation they received. The movement of God’s Kingdom, however, is away from a theocracy toward the dispersion of the Kingdom of God to all nations, in which God’s people act as salt and light (Matt. 5:13–16). Jesus endorsed the divine authority of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–20; John 10:35, etc.), but His life and teaching demonstrated that He was bringing into reality a new chapter in the unfolding of God’s Kingdom, not reinstating a theocracy. The Mosaic Law, then—given under unique conditions by God Himself—contained numerous penalties that we may chafe at, but this does not entail either that: (1) God did not stipulate them, or (2) they should be applied in any literal manner today. Christian thinkers have approached the Old Testament in a variety of ways with respect to ethics, but almost no one has advocated a wholesale adoption of Mosaic Law for today.10

The situation is similar with respect to divinely sanctioned wars in the Old Testament. The covenant Lord
of Israel used His people to bring judgment on incorrigibly corrupt cultures. There is no indication in the rest of Scripture, however, that such a situation would ever occur outside of ancient Israel, since God no longer works in this manner. Christians today may abide by the deep moral principles of the Ten Commandments in light of the further revelation given through Jesus and His apostles, without fear of being led into executing rebellious children or declaring holy war on individuals or nations, Sam Harris to the contrary.

Harris, of course, believes that the first four commandments traditionally understood to relate to God are morally irrelevant, since he is an atheist. If the biblical God exists, however, these commands form the foundation for all that follows, since God is the Lawgiver of the universe. Jesus understood this when He was asked what was the greatest commandment. He answered: first to love God with all our being, then to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40).

To address the doctrine of hell adequately would require far more space than is allotted here. Suffice it to say here that the truth of this doctrine is based primarily on the authority of Jesus, His moral character, and His supernatural status. If the authority of Jesus can be supported historically and logically, His teachings—even difficult ones—should be accepted. The Christian worldview, given its views of God’s holiness and human sin, also makes sense of hell.

“Harmful” Beliefs. Harris further inveighs against Christianity by assailing the moral beliefs of Christians. Harris makes few distinctions and emits more invectives than arguments. He assumes from the start that religious beliefs have no rational foundation, and that any moral claims based on religious convictions therefore must be irrational. He dismisses opposition to stem-cell research as blind prejudice and overstates the promise of creating embryos for the purpose of research (which means their destruction). He also cites extreme statements against all forms of contraception (even to prevent the spread of AIDS) as more evidence of religious irrationality, when many Christians would not oppose this. (There is a categorical moral difference between abortion and contraception, one that most evangelicals acknowledge.)

I could go on about Harris’s straw-man presentations and logical fallacies. The upshot of this small book is that it is thin in actual arguments. It is a literary hand grenade thrown into the enemy’s camp, which turns out to be a dud.

— reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

NOTES


6. Some Christians also have argued that God’s existence is absolutely simple, lacking in parts. If so, the complexity issue would not arise at all concerning God’s existence.


10. The one exception today would be the Reconstructionist or Theonomy movement, originated by R. J. Rushdoony and defended most ardently by Greg Bahnsen. Only a very small percentage of Christians today endorse this agenda.


13. For a philosophical defense of humans as deserving of respect as embodied souls from the time of conception, see J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body and Soul* (InterVarsity Press, 2000).