

THE END OF FAITH:

Religion, terror, and the future of reason

by Sam Harris

2004, W.W. Norton, 301 pages

The End of Faith is the watershed book for uniting rational, spiritual—and yes, libertarian—humanists in an unprecedented worldwide exercise in the elevation of consciousness. Several books recently have taken up the cause of releasing our minds from specters of the past, particularly any sorts of deities that insist upon abandonment of natural reason for salvation.

All published in 2006, we have Harris's own Letter to a Christian Nation, which cleverly skewers the most extreme faith-based positions of too many of our neighbors; UK scientist and author Richard Dawkins gave us The God Delusion, a more academic dance around the escape hatches from reality; and on the lighter side we got The Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) by the one and only Bobby Henderson.

Right, Bobby Henderson, who built a letter he wrote to the Kansas School Board (advocating equal time for the FSM vs. teaching of Intelligent Design) into a modern satirical dynasty—complete with t-shirts and coffee cups.

These other works are fine, yet they lack the passion, urgency of mission, scope, and the pure moral and intellectual courage behind Sam Harris's magnum opus... to date. When I first saw his following marvelous, incisive quotes in a Playboy magazine article in January of '05, I rushed out to Borders to buy the book:

"Religious violence is still with us because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular interests have restrained the most lethal improprieties of faith. It is time that religious moderates recognize that reason, not faith, is the glue that holds our civilization together."

"Nothing is more sacred than facts. Where we have reason, we don't need faith. Where we have no reason, we have lost both our connection to this world and to one another."

"People who harbor strong convictions without evidence belong at the margins of our societies, not in the halls of power." —All quotes from page 225, Epilogue

In connection particularly with the latter, consider these sentiments of our current "leader of the free world:"

"I'm the commander—see, I don't need to explain—I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." —in a conversation with Bob Woodward about why Bush doesn't have to justify his actions or justify his words to the media.

Thus we have what amounts to a radical schism between perhaps half the people in this country who function on a level of just simple commonsense adult reasoning... and, roughly, the other half who proudly thrust an aspiring, particularly nasty, village idiot into the presidency... *twicet!* Per End of Faith, the Cheney-Bush malignancy would not have materialized without widespread Christian superstitious belief.

Harris doesn't dwell so much on the Bushoviks in particular, rather with the entire set of opportunistic faith-based politicians who pander to the lowest common denominator of religious faith—which Harris claims simply means "*unjustified*" belief in matters of ultimate concern." Who can forget the Terry Schiavo debacle, the stem-cell research kabosh, the beatification of sexual abstinence in teenage youth, the insanity of maintaining our 40-year, multitrillion dollar drug war, heartlessly destroying the lives of those they disagree with?

Harris touches all the bases and scratches all the itches. I feel like a cheerleader. Harris's striking prose reminds me of Ayn Rand with a sense of humor. Speaking of Catholic claims for holiness in communion:

"Jesus Christ—who as it turns out was born of a virgin, cheated death, and rose bodily into the heavens—can now be eaten in the form of a cracker. A few Latin words spoken over your favorite Burgundy, and you can drink his blood as well. Is there any doubt that a lone subscriber to these beliefs would be considered mad? Is there any doubt that he would be mad?!" — Page 73.

A gentleman in my book discussion club referred to the prose of The End of Faith as boring. (!) He had to be reading the wrong book; in another era Harris would have been burned at the stake for such scintillating effrontery. Consider the following passage concerning drug prohibition:

"...why would anyone want to punish people for engaging in behavior that brings no significant risk of harm to anyone? The idea of a victimless crime [that must be vigorously punished] is nothing more than a judicial reprise of the Christian notion of sin." — Page 159.

Harris's arguments against the drug laws are brilliant and concise; read page 162 and 163. (Or if his words cause you to nod off, just copy these pages and mail them to the opinion-page editor of your neighborhood newspaper.) Again, Harris points out that the egregious irrationality, not to mention immorality, of the war on drugs is only made possible by unthinking, blind, dogmatic faith. His words are like fire.

End of Faith is so rich on every front, you may open it to any page, start reading, and start learning and relearning. Even my second and third times through a passage I find I can't lay the book down. What distinguishes Harris's prose in particular is its slicing, uncompromising righteousness—again as if one is reading the best of an Ayn Rand morality play. To lunch off the famous Barry Goldwater quote written by Karl Hess: "Extremism in the pursuit of reason is no vice; moderation in the destruction of faith is no virtue."

Did you know that the Church of Rome did not officially condemn the use of torture until 1816, and that the men conducting the ritual tortures and killings of the Inquisition were acting in their most holy ecclesiastical roles?

Nor does Harris confine his criticisms to Christianity. The other Abrahamic faiths, Judaism and especially Islam, also come under heavy artillery. More important, as a neuroscientist, Mr. Harris has much to offer in constructive ideas for a healthy human spirituality.

We stand at the threshold of so many brilliant possibilities, from extended, youthful, vigorous lifespans to space colonization. But, as Harris points out in paragraph after paragraph, none of it will happen if the species does not break the bonds of dogmatic faith; our task as people who care about humanity is to drive the stake of reason and science quickly through the heart of the Insatiable Beast of Superstition.

This book is a masterpiece, a classic already.

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