

REVIEW: LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION

by Sam Harris 2006, Alfred A. Knopf, 336 pages

Letter follows shortly after Sam Harris's masterpiece, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, and it should be considered a humanitarian-outreach appendix to that courageous, groundbreaking work.

Among fellow naturalistic humanists, I've seen a resurgence of "atheist and proud" assertiveness. I find that refreshing for many of the same reasons Sam Harris uses to suggest that atheism is not a philosophy, rather a moral testimony to one's loyalty to reality, life, and reason:

"...atheism, is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a 'non-astrologer' or a 'non-alchemist.' We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle." — pg. 51

Harris states atheists simply want those who assert God to provide some evidence. Moreover, we'd like some indication the dude is friendly, "given the relentless destruction of innocent human beings we witness in the world each day."

You may observe another quality in Harris's writing, something that's been missing since Madalyn Murray O'Hair wandered off the reservation: wit and humor. Harris's humor isn't disrespectful rather chiding, as one might color a point of basic logic to a child.

Because the author is writing in the form of a personal letter, most of the argument is directed to the ethical absurdities and dangers of believing in God, particularly that literal, cruel old slaver adopted by many Christians. I learn much I don't know. For example:

- As many as 50 percent of human conceptions end in spontaneous abortion, usually without the woman knowing she's pregnant. Approximately 20 percent of pregnancies result in miscarriages. Therefore if God exists, one can make a case he's pro-choice by example.
- The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease in the US, causing nearly 5,000 women to die of cervical cancer each year. An effective vaccine has been developed, but Christian conservatives in our government resist implementation on grounds that HPV discourages sex out of wedlock.
- The ratio of salaries paid to top CEOs over those paid to the same firms' average employees is 24:1 in Britain, 15:1 in France, and 13:1 in Sweden. In the US, where 80% of the population expects to face God on Judgment Day, the ratio is 475:1. As Harris remarks, "Many a camel, it would seem, expects to pass easily through the eye of a needle."

Among the best insights is Harris's general reasoning that religion enables people to feel moral about actions that inflict enormous suffering on others. This helps explain many were so blasé about the military napalming Vietnamese villages or, more recently, exploding depleted uranium shells around civilians in the Persian Gulf.

"And it explains why you can preach against condom use in sub-Saharan Africa while millions die from AIDS there each year." — pg. 25

If you are a Christian for moral reasons, this book will at least make you scratch your noggin. I'd call it perfect literature for universal distribution to schoolchildren and immigrants... not to mention to our political "leaders."

Note: Sam Harris doesn't pick only on Christians, rather the literalist-extremists of any Abrahamic religion (Judaism and Islam included)—a friend of mine recently commented, what the Abrahamic religions have uniquely in common is exclusivity of salvation and murderous inclinations toward the infidel.
