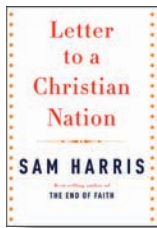


Religion and Reason



LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION

By Sam Harris

Alfred A. Knopf, 2006; 112 pp.; \$16.95 (cloth)

REVIEWED BY B. ALAN WALLACE



ILLUSTRATION BY ALAN GORDON AND CHRISTIE BUCALO

SAM HARRIS BEGINS *Letter to a Christian Nation* by describing it as “a short broadside against fundamentalist Christianity” with the primary purpose of arming “secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy.” Millions of religious and non-religious people would happily endorse such an endeavor.

He concludes his book with the declaration that “any genuine exploration of ethics or the contemplative life demands the same standards of reasonableness and self-criticism that animate all intellectual discourse.” This is a principle for which he could also find many supporters among those who are deeply concerned with ethics and contemplation.

Unfortunately, Harris spurns all such potential allies—liberal and moderate Jews, Christians, and Muslims—by insisting that even the most progressive faiths give shelter to extremists and lend tacit support to religious divisions in our world. Basically, he condemns everyone who adheres to any religious tradition as being complicit in the world’s violence and ignorance. In short, this letter is a declaration of war against any belief system Harris deems “religious.” The problem is that nowhere in *Letter to a Christian Nation* does he explain what he means by the word “religion.”

Harris’ *Letter* expresses intellectual disdain for religion coupled with moral contempt for religious believers. Without exploring the reasons why so many Americans are religious, he ridicules them and their beliefs. While deriding the fundamentalist beliefs of Muslim terrorists, he then makes the absurd claim that, unlike such extremists, liberal and moderate religious believers “don’t know what it is like to really believe in God.” This is the kind of black-and-white thinking that characterizes every kind of ideological fundamentalism.

Harris’ passionate aversion toward religion is coupled with an equally ardent attachment to science and atheism. He informs his readers that “science represents our best efforts to know what is true about our world...The core of science is not controlled experiment or mathematical modeling; it is intellectual honesty.”

This idealized vision ignores the limitations of science as it has evolved over the past four hundred years, and fails to take

into account the many kinds of biases, errors, dogmatism, and lapses of intellectual honesty to which scientists, like everyone else, are prone. While Harris disparages religious people—Jews, Christians, and Muslims, in particular—as intellectually demented and morally corrupt, he idealizes scientists as rational and morally upright.

One of the central themes of *Letter* is the author’s insistence that “nothing is to be believed on insufficient evidence.” On the surface, this appears to be a valuable principle, but Harris fails to address three crucial questions: What constitutes “evidence”? Who needs to observe it and by what means? How is it to be interpreted? While he insists that he does not wish to denigrate the feelings people experience while praying, for instance, he rightly points out that they may misinterpret their experiences and “further delude themselves about the nature of reality.” But what about Christian contemplatives over the past two millennia who claim to have direct knowledge of God, visions of Jesus, and inspiration and blessings from Christian saints? Do their experiences count as evidence, and, if so, who has the authority to evaluate it?

In presenting his own faith, Harris declares, “Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious.” But for whom is this truth obvious? One could rightly claim, as the author does, that the burden of evidence is on those who believe in God, not on those who find no grounds for such belief. But at no point does he give an objective evaluation of religious people’s beliefs based on uniquely religious kinds of experiences.

What does science really tell us about the existence of God or any other possible non-physical realities? According

to a 1998 poll published in the journal *Nature*, when queried about belief in a “personal god,” 7 percent of the members of the National Academy of Science responded in the affirmative, while 72 percent expressed “personal disbelief” and 21 percent expressed “doubt or agnosticism.” Harris misrepresents the findings of this poll by stating that 97 percent of those polled reject a belief in God. In fact, the poll reports that only 72 percent declared their disbelief in a personal god and said nothing about other kinds of belief in a supreme being or other transcendent realities. According to a poll published in the *Scientific American* in 1914, 40 percent of scientists stated they believed in God. A poll with the same set of questions was again conducted in 1997 and it also indicated that 40 percent of scientists believed in God. A more recent survey indicated that 60 percent of scientists claim to believe in God. The National Academy of Science formally declares, “Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral.” Harris misrepresents the poll reported in *Nature*, doesn’t report the two polls presented in *Scientific American*, and denounces the statement by the National Academy of Science. In so doing, he fails to abide by the scientific principle of accuracy and rejects the conclusion of the premier scientific organization in the United States. The nonexistence of God is obvious to him, but not to a great number of scientists in the past and the present.

To anyone who has carefully studied the European cultural history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is clear that from its beginnings, modern science was profoundly influenced by both Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian beliefs. Virtually all the great pioneers of the scientific revolution—including Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, and Newton—were devout Christians who acknowledged that their religious beliefs strongly influenced their scientific thinking. During the nineteenth century, science continued to develop under the guidance of pious Christians such as

Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell, as well as deists who believed in a God who breathed the first life into the universe, which He constructed according to His intelligent design.

Well into the twentieth century, Einstein expressed his “firm belief, a belief bound up with a deep feeling, in a superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience.” He added that “you will hardly find one among the profounder sort of scientific minds without a religious feeling of his own” and that “in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people.” Harris makes no reference to this ongoing historical relation between science and religion.

The many great discoveries of the natural sciences—including the physical, life, and cognitive sciences—are based upon objective, physical, quantifiable evidence that can be measured with the instruments of technology and analyzed with the tools of mathematics. Four hundred years of rigorous inquiry have provided humanity with a rich and majestic view of the objective dimension of the universe. This scientific focus stems from the early and persistent aspiration of generations of scientists to achieve a “God’s-eye” view of reality, interpreted in terms of “God’s own language” of mathematics. Such an approach, they believed, revealed those aspects of nature that exist independently of subjective human awareness and language. The pursuit of this same ideal of objectivity dominates science today, despite the fact that most scientists are atheists or agnostics and no longer believe in a God’s-eye view.

But what does science tell us about the rest of the natural world, let alone supernatural realities, which its empirical and analytical tools are incapable of detecting? One of the most common philosophical fallacies is to “mistake absence of evidence for evidence of absence.” One prominent example of this ideological bias is the physicalist assertion that the universe consists only of configurations of space, time, and matter and their emergent properties that can be measured objectively. Subjec-

tive experience of thoughts, emotions, desires, and other mental processes, including consciousness, cannot be directly observed with any tools of science.

Are any scientists foolish enough to deny the reality of their own subjective experience simply because it cannot be objectively measured? In fact, generations of behaviorists throughout the first half of the twentieth century readily embraced this anti-empirical, irrational position, and this bias continues to the present day among reputable neuroscientists and philosophers who marginalize subjective experience by claiming—on the basis of inconclusive evidence—either that the mind doesn’t exist or that it is nothing more than a passive epiphenomenal function of the brain. According to such philosophers and scientists, not only does religious experience not count as evidence, *all* subjective experience of our own mental processes constitutes nothing more than an illusion. Scientists who make such unproven claims appear as narrow-minded and irrational as the most bigoted religious fundamentalists.

In his comparison of religion to atheism, Harris asks, “When was the last atheist riot? Is there a newspaper anywhere on this Earth that would hesitate to print cartoons about atheism for fear that its editors would be kidnapped or killed in reprisal?” In the Soviet Union under Stalin, millions of people were persecuted for failing to embrace atheism, and during Communist China’s Cultural Revolution, millions more religious believers suffered the same fate. Harris explains that such violence in the name of science and atheism is due not to the rejection of religious dogma but to the acceptance of “other life-destroying myths.” But many of those myths have been created and promoted by people waving the banner of science and rationality. If Harris evaluated scientists by the same criteria by which he judges religious people, he would condemn “scientific moderates and liberals” for tacitly supporting these atrocities. But instead he blames “other life-destroying myths,” which is similar

to what moderate Jews, Christians, and Muslims would say about fundamentalism. It isn't the beliefs that promote dogmatism but the fundamentalists who lock on to a belief system and dogmatically reject other views.

It is certainly true, as Harris points out, that much of the suffering throughout history has resulted from religious hatred, religious wars, religious taboos, and religious diversions of scarce resources. But the twentieth century—during which atheism was violently imposed on much of the world—witnessed the greatest acts of inhumanity in history. In no preceding century of religious intolerance were more people persecuted and killed than in the communist regimes of the twentieth century, whose zeal was to eradicate religion from the face of the planet and replace it with science and atheism.

This is exactly Harris' hope; he is now in the process of creating a foundation for the purpose of waging his own war against religion and promoting atheistic science in its stead.

Religious people have no monopoly on dogmatism, and they are not solely responsible for the many divisions of our world into separate moral and ideological communities. The root of human suffering is not religion; it is mental afflictions such as hatred, attachment, and delusion. While Harris embraces the noble ideal of reducing suffering in the world, to a tragic extent *Letter to a Christian Nation* promotes the mental toxins that perpetuate human divisiveness, conflict, and misery.

This is especially unfortunate in light of the many valid points he makes throughout this poignant critique of religious fundamentalism, including his insistence that ethics be based on the goal of alleviating suffering and promoting genuine happiness, and his conviction that religious beliefs be subjected to rational analysis. If he had shifted his efforts from waging war on religion to eliminating hatred, attachment, and delusion in public policy, he would have made a significant contribution to promoting world peace. ♦