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A Faith in Ends: Sam Harris and the
Gospel of Neo-Atheism

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“A Faith in Ends: Sam Harris and the Gospel of Neo-Atheism”
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Good afternoon; many thanks for inviting me; thank you to Jim Wright, etc.

I should say from the outset that this isn't the kind of work I usually do. I tend to spend my time with philosophers and theologians rather than social critics, which I believe is the most appropriate title for Mr. Harris. So I am grateful for this opportunity to hit the ground, as it were, and to engage such a contemporary, relevant, readable text (these aren't adjectives to which I'm all that accustomed). That having been said, I should *also* disclose at the outset I am deeply troubled by this book, for reasons that will become clear. What I'm hoping, however, is that this text's situation in the thorny intersections of religion, politics, and violence—not to mention its immense popularity (obviously, there's a need to think through these problems)—will generate some discussion and allow us to think together about concerns I imagine we all share, even if our thoughts about what's to be *done* about them might vary considerably.

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason was published in 2004 and spent months on the *New York Times* bestseller list, as has Harris's more recent *Letter to a Christian Nation*, a brief recapitulation

and update of the central arguments he makes in the earlier book. Harris himself is a rather elusive figure: although he has appeared on many television and radio programs (including the Colbert Report—Stephen Colbert opened the conversation by asking, “Sam, if there’s no Jesus, then who carried me on that beach?”), despite these appearances, Harris does not want many of his biographical details to be known. In one interview, he said he was concerned about the possibility of setting off another Rushdie affair. The man is no Rushdie, but he’s certainly got good reason to be worried about death-threats.

The information Harris does allow to circulate is as follows: two years into a B.A. at Stanford, Harris took ecstasy, dropped out of college, and traveled the world to study eastern philosophy and Buddhist meditation. Ten or twelve years later, he returned to Stanford, completed his degree in philosophy, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in neuroscience at UCLA. He began writing *The End of Faith* on September 12, 2001, out of a frustration with the administration’s and the media’s purported efforts to exculpate Islam; that is, to assure the nation that Islam is not the enemy, America is not at war with Islam, etc. Harris writes,

Why did nineteen well-educated, middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our

neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of human beings so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been reluctant to accept this explanation? (29).

One might answer this question, as many have tried, by arguing that the men who flew the planes weren't all that religious; by pointing out that their targets were the loci of political and economic power, rather than religious power; or, of course, by saying that Islam is a religion of peace that has been warped by radicals, just like many of our global religious traditions. Harris, however will have none of it; he insists that the monotheisms are murderously intolerant at their core and to claim that Islam is a religion of peace is nothing short of "prestidigitation" (33).

Because of his absolutely uncompromising views on Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and to a lesser extent, Judaism, Harris has been hailed by some bloggers as the savoir of the secular world. By others, he has been likened to the anti-Christ. Most of the book's *formal* reviews and responses strike a compromise between the two—they tend to sympathize with a number of Harris's concerns, but criticize his argument's lack of nuance and, in many places, its lack of evidence. So what is the argument?

It's fairly simple: from the Crusades to the Inquisition, from the witch trials through September 11, religion has been and continues to be

unthinkably violent. Islam is the most violent religion of all. So-called religious moderates, with their call to tolerance and respect, only make the situation worse by shielding religion from rational critique. Once religion *is* subjected to rational critique, it falls apart entirely; that is, there is no sound reason to believe what religious people believe. Therefore, what Harris calls “faith-based religion” belongs in the “graveyard of bad ideas,” on the shelf with “Batman, the philosopher’s stone, and the unicorn.” To sum it up, “God and Allah must go the way of Apollo and Baal or they will unmake our world.”

The last piece of Harris’s argument is that people don’t have to believe indefensible things in order to be spiritual, and so the last full chapter in the book is a rather vague recommendation of heightened states of awareness—both plant-induced and otherwise—that increase our compassion for all sentient beings. Through a carefully cultivated, entirely rational “science of the mind,” we will come to appreciate the deep-running connections between human beings without recourse to myths and fairy-tales. The end of faith will finally be accomplished by the triumph of reason.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Harris’s critics—at least the ones who don’t want to do him bodily harm—tend to say his argument is too simplistic. They argue, and with good reason, that Harris blames all the

world's problems on religion without attending to the interlocking factors of politics, economics, history, and ethnic rivalry. Furthermore, they point out, *because* of the interrelation of these different forces, religion isn't just going to go away; we can no more excise religion from our world than we could simply decide one day to get rid of culture. Another line of critique points out that the greatest horrors in recent memory have been carried out, not by religious fanatics, but by atheists: here we might think of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot. Moreover, I would add that there is nothing "irrational" about their gas chambers, machine guns, and chemical weapons. The hands of Lady Reason are hardly clean here; it's certainly not "faith" that has produced weapons of small- and large-scale destruction; rather, it is calculative, dispassionate, evidential, level-headed *reason*.

Still other readers of Harris—liberal Christians and Muslims among them—have argued that he is only alienating potential allies by condemning religious moderates; that he cherry-picks offensive phrases from the Koran or the Bible without paying any attention to the history of Koranic or biblical interpretation; that he knows nothing about theology—the list goes on. To this list of gripes, I would submit that Harris often lets ridicule stand in for substantive critique. Of the inanity of Christian doctrine, Harris writes, "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” (73). He attributes to Muslims “a conception of paradise that resembles nothing so much as an al fresco bordello” (127), and shakes his head at the foolishness of the Jews: “If having half of your people systematically delivered to the furnace does not count as evidence against the notion that an all-powerful God is looking out for your interests, it seems reasonable to assume that nothing could” (67). So the argument is at times simplistic, unevenly substantiated, and often sophomoric, but again, Harris raises concerns about the connection between religion and violence with which I imagine we can all sympathize. And his proposed solution—just get *rid* of religion—can certainly be attractive on a kind of visceral level. It is for this reason that I think it important to get clear about the details and implications of Harris’s argument. Ultimately, I would like to argue that the *real* problem with *The End of Faith* lies in Harris’s understanding of the terms religion and faith themselves. As will become clear, by identifying all religion with faith and all faith with certainty, Harris not only commits a grave error of reductionism, but also ends up advocating a position just as violent as the one he is opposing.

In a recent article from the *L.A. Times* called “God’s Dupes,” which you’ve got in front of you, Harris explains his understanding of what he calls “faith-based religion.” You can read along with me—I’ve highlighted a fairly long section so that we can all enter into the Harris universe together:

Of course, no religion is monolithic. Within every faith one can see people arranged along a spectrum of belief. Picture concentric circles of diminishing reasonableness: At the center, one finds the truest of true believers—the Muslim jihadis, for instance, who not only support suicidal terrorism but who are the first to turn themselves into bombs; or the Dominionist Christians, who openly call for homosexuals and blasphemers to be put to death.

I’ll pause for a moment here to point out a few things: first, Harris is equating religion and faith. More on that in a moment. Second, he is saying that all “faiths” have the same organizational structure, so that Muslims who call for *jihad* and Christians who call for the total reign of Christ are more or less the same thing. No need to contextualize them within their own, very different, traditions. So although he says “no religion is monolithic,” he seems to believe that all religions put *together* are monolithic. Third, the monolith rests on a base of crazy people. The people Harris calls the “least reasonable” members of any tradition occupy the core, the center, of his religious cosmos—they are “the truest of the true believers.” What this

means, at the end of the day, is that Harris has taken Christian fundamentalists and Muslim extremists at their word when they say they alone are the true believers and everyone else has fallen away from the literalist core. Harris has signed on to the “fundamentalist” understanding of what it means to be religious. This will prove to be a substantial problem.

Moving on:

Outside this sphere of maniacs, one finds millions more who share their views but lack their zeal. Beyond them, one encounters pious multitudes who respect the beliefs of their more deranged brethren but who disagree with them on small points of doctrine—of course the world is going to end in glory and Jesus will appear in the sky like a superhero, but we can’t be sure it will happen in our lifetime. Out further still, one meets religious moderates and liberals of diverse hues—people who remain supportive of the basic scheme that has balkanized our world into Christians, Muslims, and Jews, but who are less willing to profess certainty about any article of faith. Is Jesus really the son of God? Will we all meet our grannies again in heaven? Moderates and liberals are none too sure.

As you may have noticed, with his concentric circles of lunatics, Harris has just drawn for us the image of a target. Send a dart, or a cruise missile, at it, and even if you miss what you’re aiming for, you still get points for coming close. As we’ll see, this sort of militaristic imagery shows up throughout Harris’s work. The reason religion is a target for Harris, and the reason we ought to behave toward it the way one behaves toward targets, is that as far

as he's concerned, religion means nothing more or less than a set of unjustifiable beliefs about this world and the next. Religion, he claims, is a set of beliefs that are "purest" at their most intolerant and most violent. Religious moderates, then, can only get in the way of rational critique. When progressive believers argue that religion is at all compatible with tolerance, or peace, or reason, they effectively shield religion *itself* (the "pure," violent, nasty kind) from criticism, *harboring*, in essence, the bad Muslims in the middle.

The ironic twist is that while Harris *hates* the Muslims in the middle, and the Dominionists, he actually has a fair amount of respect for them. At least they have the courage to take Scripture at its worst. Religious moderates, by contrast "don't really know what it's like to believe in God" (Frederick Clarkson, "Gimme That Old Time Religion (Bashing)," talk2action.org). One wonders if a lifelong atheist is really the best person to make such a judgment, but either way, if Harris knew anything about theology, he would know that the great minds of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have even from the depths of the dark ages argued that Scripture is not meant to be read literally. Maimonides, the rabbis, Ibn-Sina, the *mutakallimun* (that is, mediaeval Muslim theologians), Augustine, Aquinas, the church fathers—all of them developed highly nuanced ways to interpret

scripture in conversation with a living, breathing, changing community of faith. So-called fundamentalism is a relatively new phenomenon that hardly represents the core of any of these traditions.

But, since Harris accepts the position that pure religion is at once exclusive of all other worldviews *and* divinely bound to destroy all dissenters, his own response can be nothing but reactionary: get rid of religion. Demolish it entirely; by any means necessary. What this means, as the target image already insinuates, is that Harris becomes the very atheist whom crusader fundamentalists are looking for. To cite one progressive Christian blogger, “If Sam Harris did not exist, Tim LaHaye or Pat Robertson...would have to invent him ...He is the personification of the almost entirely imaginary campaign against religion itself” (Clarkson). In other words, rather than *criticizing* so-called religious violence, Harris joins right in, dividing the world into the atheist “us,” the fanatical “them,” and entreating his audience to climb into his bunker, take cover, and fire.

This call to join in the war against religion (which, viewed from the other side, is the war against secularism) seems innocuous enough—even agreeable—when Harris addresses domestic policy. It is inane, he argues, that laws about drug use, sex education, reproductive rights, sexual orientation, and stem-cell research are informed by biblical—and selectively

biblical—ethical codes. It is time for us to realize, says Harris, that “Any person who lies awake at night worrying about the private pleasures of other consenting adults has more than just too much time on his hands; he has some unjustifiable beliefs about the nature of right and wrong” (171). Fair enough.

It is not until Harris turns to the international sphere that the dangers of his all-out assault on religion become clear. Of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, which President Bush euphemistically calls “the war on terror,” Harris insists we call a spade a spade and recognize that “We are at war with *Islam*.” He then goes on to claim that given the threat of Islam, America is justified in using almost any means of eliminating it. “What will we do,” he asks with his characteristic sneer,

if an Islamist regime, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, ever acquires long-range nuclear weaponry?...In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe (129).

Now the problem here is that “what Islamists believe” is exactly what Harris believes; that is, that true Islam requires the conversion or death of the whole

world. By taking people whom he himself calls maniacs at their word, what option does Harris have but to kill them before they kill us?

Therefore, having secured our ethical duty to strike preventively, Harris goes on to justify collateral damage as the unfortunate effect of well-intentioned military strikes. The difference between George Bush and a suicide bomber, says Harris, is that if perfect weapons existed, Bush wouldn't kill civilians, while a suicide bomber would. Now of course, Harris knows there are no perfect weapons, and that our highly imperfect ones have destroyed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, but what matters ethically, he says, is nothing more than the presumed *intent*: George Bush would never intentionally murder an innocent person, so the civilian deaths in Iraq are morally justified (all 600,000 of them). The ethical task of modern warfare is therefore to learn to understand “the difference between intending to kill a child, because of the effect you hope to produce on its parents (we call this ‘terrorism’) and inadvertently killing a child in an attempt to capture or kill an avowed child murderer (we call this ‘collateral damage’)” (146). And then, just to make sure we have all the tools we need to wage this war on Islam, Harris concludes by extending his defense of collateral damage out to practices of torture.

Now. To our excessively religion-poisoned ears, torture might sound objectionable. But Harris recalls for us the ticking-bomb justification that Alan Dershowitz presented on CNN: if you had, in your custody, a terrorist whom you knew had planted a bomb that was about to explode in a city, then you would have to torture him in order to prevent tens of thousands of deaths. So the argument goes. It's a fairly macabre scene to begin with. But Harris goes even farther:

picture your seven year-old daughter being slowly asphyxiated in a warehouse just five minutes away, while the man in your custody holds the keys to her release. If your daughter won't tip the scales, then add the daughters of every couple for a thousand miles—millions of little girls have, by some perverse negligence on the part of our government, come under the control of an evil genius who now sits before you in shackles (193).

What is *wrong* with this guy, you might be asking—it's perverse even to come up with such scenarios. What's the point even in conducting such a thought-experiment?

The point, Harris explains, is to get each of us to realize that, deep down, we really do believe in torture. Specifically, we believe in torture to the extent that we believe in collateral damage. Collateral damage is, after all, torturous to its victims, and it's far wider-reaching, *and* victims of

collateral damage are more likely to be innocent than the prisoners down at, say, Guantanamo Bay. So, especially if some well-timed torture will stave off a bit of collateral damage, we should be more than willing to carry it out. Using the example of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Harris argues, “If there is even one chance in a million that he will tell us something under torture that will lead to the further dismantling of Al Qaeda, it seems that we should use every means at our disposal to get him talking” (198). Given what Muslims believe, we cannot afford to be squeamish about torture.

It is a bit jarring, then, immediately on the heels of this apologia for nuclear pre-emption, collateral damage, and torture, to encounter Harris’s final chapter on meditation, awareness, nonduality, and the continuum of experience. It is as if the lighting has suddenly changed and we’re now in Harris’s dorm room, staring at his lava-lamp. Harris entreats us in these pages to turn to the wisdom of Asia, which alone offers a rational way to expand consciousness beyond the subject/object distinction and to cultivate compassion. I found myself thinking, “What would we think of collateral damage if there were no subject/object distinction? Would Harris justify torturing himself for information? And was it compassion that prompted Harris, for example, to ridicule Iraqis for praying while they witnessed the obliteration of their city? “Their society was in tatters,” he writes of Iraqis

who survived the shock and awe campaign. “Fresh water and electricity were scarce. Their schools and hospitals were being looted. And an occupying army was trying to find reasonable people with whom to collaborate to form a civil society. Self-mortification and chanting should have been rather low on their list of priorities” (149). “If that is compassion,” I found myself thinking, “then he can keep it.”

So the problem with *The End of Faith*, I would submit, is quite simple: by waging *war* on faith, Harris is capitulating to the *logic of war*. What’s more, he ends up missing the ethical work that can be carried out by faith itself. I pointed out earlier that Harris reduces all religions to one “religion,” and all religion to “faith.” Any of you who has taken a course in religious studies will know that this is the cardinal sin from a religionist’s perspective. Faith-alone is a specifically Protestant way to understand religion, and scholars have warned us ever since religious studies began breaking free from theology that we miss the richness of what people *do* if we try to make religion entirely a matter of what people *believe*. Since, however, faith is the term Harris uses, it makes sense to ask what faith means.

For Harris, faith means certainty. Specifically, certainty about specific propositions for which a person can have no evidence (Jesus was born of a

virgin, Joshua made the sun stand still, Mohammed received divine revelations from the angel Gibreel, etc.). The “purest” faith for Harris, as we saw illustrated with his target, takes every word of a sacred text literally and is willing to die to uphold the integrity of the propositions it contains.

Putting an end to this sort of faith, then, should be a relatively straightforward affair. Demonstrate the incoherence of these propositions (Christ-in-a-cracker, al fresco bordello, wouldn't a *real* God have saved you from the Holocaust), demonstrate the *absurdity* of faith, and faith will have to give way to clear-headed reason.

It's at this point that the stuff I usually read becomes helpful. There are a number of ways to think about the relationship between faith and reason in the western tradition; for our purposes, I'll pick out two. The first way sees faith as Harris does: as an uncritical, or pre-critical certainty about extraordinary things. Georg Wilhelm Hegel thought of faith this way, arguing that the problem with certainty is that you can be certain and wrong. Hegel therefore calls the certainty of faith *subjective* certainty. The task of thinking is to gain *objective* certainty, which is accomplished as faith gives way to knowledge. Again, this is the Harris line: the faithful are essentially developmentally impaired, and need to be led out of faith into knowledge, into reason.

A different way to construe this relationship is to say that, rather than being replaced by reason, faith actually breaks in where reason leaves off. This brings us into the realm of someone like Søren Kierkegaard, who granted that reason can take us very far indeed, but who suggested that such thinking will ultimately collide against something unthinkable: “this, then, is the paradox of thought,” he writes in the *Philosophical Fragments*: “to want to discover something that thinking itself cannot think.” At the moment when it collides against the unthinkable, Kierkegaard tells us that the understanding can do one of two things. Either it insists there is nothing it can’t understand (a reaction that Kierkegaard calls “offense”), or the understanding gives way to this absurdity, and this giving-way, this stepping-aside in the face of the incomprehensible, is what Kierkegaard calls faith. So this is the distinction: for Hegel, faith is an uncritical certainty that functions before knowledge comes along. For Kierkegaard, faith kicks in—if it does—at the outer limits of knowledge, past the boundaries of the possible, the thinkable, and the ordinary.

Viewed in this light, faith cannot give a person certainty. Certainty belongs in the realm of the reasonable, the expected, the demonstrable. I am certain that when I let go of this pen, it will drop; I am certain that Sam Harris didn’t go to Shul yesterday; I am certain there will be a Starbuck’s at

the airport. Certainty functions in relation to the probable and the possible. Faith, on the other hand, looks out for the improbable and the impossible—that which exceeds all reason, understanding, and certainty.

So why is this interesting? How does this help us out of Harris' war games? Well, if faith is tuned in to the possibility of the impossible, then faith is always on the lookout for the unexpected. The possibility of new possibilities; of different ways to think and live. And here we might think about some of the great visionaries of our time: Abraham Heschel, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Interestingly enough, none of these people makes it into Harris's book, apart from Gandhi, whom Harris, in passing, accuses of masochism. At two points in the book, Harris does acknowledge that some nice things have been done by some nice religious people, but, he insists, "we need not believe anything on insufficient evidence to feel compassion for the suffering of others"

(106). Elsewhere, he writes, "it can be quite possible, even reasonable, to risk one's life to save others without believing any incredible ideas about the nature of the universe" (78). So, we are led to infer, King and Heschel and Day would have done even better things, had their heads been screwed on straight—had they not believed in such fantastical things. But I disagree. In fact, I would argue that we absolutely *have* to believe in things we have no

evidence for in order to respond to the needs of others. Now don't get me wrong here. We don't need to believe that there are 613 commandments rather than 614, or that wine can become blood, or even that there is no God but God, but we absolutely *must* believe in the possibility of a different kind of world—a *just* world—and for that we have no evidence; only a kind of impossible hope. So to excise that hope from our worldview, as Harris himself demonstrates, is to foreclose the possibility of anything genuinely new: to close down into the probable and the possible, into the “rational” consideration of how much collateral damage is useful, and how much torture it makes sense to inflict. To have faith, on the contrary, is to go as far as possible with reason, realize its limitations, and *then* to look *beyond* the limits of the reasonable, for something like the unimaginable: whether that be peace where peace seems impossible, forgiveness where forgiveness seems impossible, or justice where justice seems impossible. The problem with Harris is that he leaves us stuck in the same old violence and injustice, calculating our equally awful options.

I'd like to close by telling you briefly about a lecture I heard Daniel Berrigan give last year. Dan and his brother Phil were those radical Jesuits behind the Catonsville Nine. During the Vietnam War, they walked into a draft office in Maryland, pulled out A-1 draft files, brought them into the

parking lot in the back, poured homemade napalm over them, and set them on fire to protest the war. Phil Berrigan was the founder of the Plowshares Movement—a group of Catholic activists who hammer on nuclear warheads and try to disarm bombers, taking seriously the promise in Isaiah that “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not rise up against nation; neither shall they study war anymore.”

So last year, I organized an interfaith forum at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York called “Study War No More,” and Dan Berrigan was the keynote speaker. Dan is 85 now, and very frail, with a thin voice and a shaky step but a firm gaze, and an impossibly kind heart. He spoke, again, of Isaiah, and the promise; in particular, of what a ridiculous promise it was. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” Didn’t Isaiah know you can’t beat a sword into a plowshare? God knows the Berrigans have tried. And the longer they’ve tried—Dan is *still* holding rallies every Saturday at noon in Union Square, and won’t stop until the war does—the longer they’ve tried, the more impossible the promise seems. I’ll read a bit from the lecture he gave last February.

Isaiah announces the impossible. I call it the necessary impossible. The absolutely crucial impossible, the impossible

that must come to pass. He summons what shall come to pass precisely because it is impossible. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” A terrifying experiment. The crucial must somehow be joined to the improbable. Something new, something beyond all effort and imagining, must come to be. Swords into plowshares. The image is crucial to the prospering of any culture, to the survival of individuals, to honor, to religious faith, to a civilized sense of one another, crucial, finally, to the faith of the earth. But, but, but. The oracle is also impossible. Who then—who now—believes it could come to pass? After Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iraq—who? Still believes. Therefore the conclusion of Isaiah. Because the task is necessary and because it’s radically impossible, therefore, it must be done....The worst time, Isaiah dares imply, is the apt time. It’s the time when our hands drop in helplessness and resources fail, this is the time of the toppling of those thrones; if only we believed.

“The worst time is the apt time.” There where it seems hopeless to work for peace and justice in the world, it is necessary to work for peace and justice in the world. This is faith for Dan: not assent to indefensible propositions, but rather a vision of an impossible world order, where torture and war and inequality are *always* unacceptable. This is what we lose when faith is subtracted out of the political equation: the prophetic promise, the transformative vision that refuses to bend to cynicism and despair; the impossible possibility that things might be otherwise.