

Atheism in the service of political reaction: A comment on author Sam Harris

By Christie Schaefer
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In the recent review of Richard Dawkins' new book, *The God Delusion*, Joe Kay mentions in passing the author Sam Harris, noting that the idealist standpoint of Harris and some of the other advocates of atheism is often bound up with reactionary political conceptions. (See "Science, religion and society: Richard Dawkins's *God Delusion*).

Kay writes that Harris generally adopts a "contemptuous attitude toward the religiously-minded population" and that he develops the position that "it is ultimately the population itself that is to blame for belief in religion and whatever policies are justified in the name of religion."

The perspective of Harris deserves a closer study. Kay's statements to some extent underestimate the truly reactionary views that Harris advances. In their approach to religion, Dawkins and Harris have much in common. However, Harris' views are more politically calculated than Dawkins'. While Dawkins is an opponent of the war in Iraq, Harris is a staunch defender of the actions of American imperialism. Indeed, Harris' entire work appears largely devoted to constructing an atheist's justification for the outrageous actions of the American government in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Harris appeared as if out of nowhere and has quickly gained much attention with the publication of his books, *The End of Faith: Terror, and the Future of Reason*, and *Letters to a Christian Nation*, as well as a number of op-ed pieces in various mainstream newspapers.

Harris has been hailed by some as something of a rationalist savior. While on the surface his arguments against the current violent trends in fundamentalist religions seem something with which most people would agree, it does not take much examination to reveal an extremely backward and reactionary perspective underneath.

There is no question that the grip that religion has maintained on the thinking of so many people must be combated. Much damage has been done, physical as well as psychological and social, by religion's call for rejecting scientific thinking in favor of faith in a supernatural creator. This perpetuation of ignorance has had a terrible effect on humankind. Time and again, reactionary regimes have used religious appeals to justify the most horrific deeds—often with the complicity of the earthly religious institutions. There is also no denying the role of religion, as Marx famously expressed it, as the "opiate of the masses."

Certainly, we do need a call to reason. This call, though, must itself be based on an objective, scientific outlook, particularly as regards the origins and nature of religion itself. It is not a question here of denying the significance of ideas in history and politics, but of developing an explanation for where these ideas come from. Harris' work fails completely in this task. While ostensibly a call to oppose religious bigotry, Harris' work serves the agenda of those right-wing forces seeking to inflame public opinion against Islam.

This tendency comes out most clearly in his first book (*The End of Faith*), which he began writing within days of the September 11 terrorist attacks. In it, Harris echoes the position taken by the Bush administration, branding illegitimate any attempt to analyze the social and political

factors motivating the attack. Instead, he simply declares that Islam itself is responsible for the atrocity.

For example, Harris writes: "Given the vicissitudes of Muslim history, however, I suspect that the starting point I have chosen for this book—that of a single suicide bomber following the consequences of his religious beliefs—is bound to exasperate many readers, since it ignores the painful history of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. It ignores the collusion of the Western powers with corrupt dictatorships. It ignores the endemic poverty and lack of economic opportunity that now plague the Arab world. But I will argue that we can ignore all of these things—or treat them only to put them safely on the shelf—because the world is filled with poor, uneducated, and exploited people who do not commit acts of terrorism, indeed who would never commit acts of the sort which has become commonplace among Muslims; and the Muslim world has no shortage of educated and prosperous men and women, suffering little more than their infatuation with Koranic eschatology, who are eager to murder infidels for God's sake." (p. 109)

The implications are clear: it is the Islamic faith that is responsible for terrorism. Throughout the book, Harris conflates Islam and "the Muslim World" with terror. But, of course, if it is the "Muslim world" that is responsible for terrorism, repressive actions against this "Muslim world" are justified.

Thus we have Harris' extraordinary declaration that in dealing with religious extremism, it may be necessary to employ military force, even extermination. He states on pages 52-53: "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live."

Harris goes on to use this statement as a justification for US military aggression: "There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense. That is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, at an even greater cost to ourselves and innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world. We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas."

If Islam is responsible for Islamic fundamentalism, and Islamic fundamentalism is responsible for terrorism, then does this not imply that it in combating Islamic fundamentalism it may be "ethical" to kill the entire "Muslim world"? Harris does not draw this conclusion, but it is certainly latent in his entire mode of reasoning. Presumably the 750,000 Iraqi deaths produced by the US invasion of that country are also justified in this "war of ideas." Harris' book is filled with various attempts to defend the most horrific aspects of US policy—from the war in Iraq to the policy of torture.

Harris adds deliberately provocative turns of phrase throughout his book—for example, referring to the "twin terrors of Koranic literalism" (p. 34), an obvious reference to the bombing of the World Trade Center.

Another passage: “Yes, the Koran seems to say something that can be construed as a prohibition against suicide—‘Do not destroy yourselves’ (4:29)—but it leaves many loopholes large enough to fly a 767 through...” (p. 33)

There is also a five-page (pp. 118-122) stretch of selected Koranic exhortations to do violence unto unbelievers of various sorts. While it makes chilling reading, similar passages could be found in the Bible. There can be no argument that the Koran is over-represented in Harris’ work. It could well be asked why the Bible is rarely cited. It is an easy game to pick out calls for slaughtering unbelievers from these holy books, but what is it meant to accomplish?

Harris identifies the perpetrators of “acts of terrorism” with the Arab masses. However, those Islamic fundamentalists who pursue a reactionary policy of individual terrorism (mostly against innocents) and those who struggle against imperialist occupiers are not politically equal.

Harris’ pervasive anti-Islamic bent is the more insidious because it is framed as an argument in favor of reason and science. Take for example, the following, found on page 35: “We live in an age in which most people believe that mere words—“Jesus,” “Allah,” “Ram”—can mean the difference between eternal torment and bliss everlasting. Considering the stakes here, it is not surprising that many of us occasionally find it necessary to murder other human beings for using the wrong magic words, or the right ones for the wrong reasons. How can any person presume to know that this is the way the universe works? Because it says so in our holy books. How do we know that our holy books are free from error? Because the books themselves say so. Epistemological black holes of this sort are fast draining the light from our world.”

At one point (p. 180) we find: “I believe that [cultural] relativism and pragmatism have already done much to muddle our thinking on a variety of subjects, many of which have more than a passing relevance to the survival of civilization.

“In philosophical terms, pragmatism can be directly opposed to realism. For the realist, our statements about the world will be ‘true’ or ‘false’ not merely in virtue of how they function amid the welter of our other beliefs, or with reference to any culture-bound criteria, but because reality simply is a certain way, independent of our thoughts. Realists believe that there are truths about the world that may exceed our capacity to know them; there are facts of the matter whether or not we can bring such facts into view.”

By “realism” Harris, it can be assumed, means philosophical materialism; that is, the belief that the external world, existing independently of man and reflected in thought, is the sole reality. But he never uses the word, perhaps from ignorance, perhaps because of a capitulation to popular prejudice against the term. What is clear, however, is that while decrying religion, Harris himself lacks a consistent and thought out worldview. If a materialist, Harris is at best a vulgar materialist, that is; he rejects the application of the materialist method to a study of man and society.

As Engels demonstrated in his pamphlet Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy, vulgar materialism inevitably leads back to idealism because it is unable to deal with the question of social man, that is man as he has developed historically in class society. For such thinkers, instead of man’s social consciousness reflecting his social being, social being is determined by man’s ideas.

Harris advances the idea that religion as a thing unto itself is to blame for the woes wrought by those wielding it. There is no serious attempt to analyze the factors that gave rise to religion and serve to maintain its grip over wide layers of the population. While it can generally be agreed that religion has played an important role historically, to view it as the prime motivating factor is wrong. The absurdity of this method is illustrated when the author describes Stalinism and Maoism as “political religions,” a characterization that contributes nothing to the understanding of the

nature of bureaucratic regimes in the former Soviet Union and China.

In his later work, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris takes up Christianity and the Bible directly. It is notable, however, that Harris never discusses Christians or the “Christian world” with the same language that he directs against Muslims.

There is an incredible level of dishonesty involved here. Even if one were to accept Harris’ premises—that it is primarily religions belief that is responsible for acts of violence—one must, if looking at the situation objectively, conclude that the most dangerous force in the world is the United States, propelled by the Christian fundamentalism that permeates the entire American government, and particularly the Bush administration, which has taken great strides in the direction of theocracy. After all, the number of people killed by the US in the course of the war in Iraq by itself dwarfs the number killed in the attacks of September 11.

This dishonesty is particularly repugnant coming from someone claiming to be a scientist (Harris, according to the biography on the cover of his book, is currently working on a doctorate in neuroscience by “studying the neurological basis of belief, disbelief, and uncertainty”), as it flagrantly disregards any observance of the scientific method. Harris tends to leave out any evidence that does not lead to the conclusions he prefers to draw.

However, Harris’ principal targets are Muslims, largely because this focus provides a rationale for American foreign policy. In his *Letter to a Christian Nation* Harris makes statements, to take a couple of examples, that “insofar as there is a crime problem in Western Europe, it is largely the product of immigration. Seventy percent of the inmates of France’s jails, for instance, are Muslims,” he writes (pp. 43-44). Thus we are to conclude that Muslims in France are a bunch of criminals, and Harris says nothing about the repression and racism directed against the Muslim population and encouraged by the French government.

Later we read, “Throughout Europe, Muslim communities often show little inclination to acquire the secular and civil values of their host countries, and yet they exploit these values to the utmost, demanding tolerance for their misogyny, their anti-Semitism, and the religious hatred that is regularly preached in their mosques. Forced marriages, honor killings, punitive gang rapes, and a homicidal loathing of homosexuals are now features of an otherwise secular Europe, courtesy of Islam.” This is just a repetition of the chauvinist and racist ideology of the extreme right in Europe.

At the end of this work Harris assures the “Christian Nation” that he stands “beside you, dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the living.” It is clear where Harris stands politically here, regardless of his subsequent declaration that he is also dumbstruck by the irrational beliefs of Christians.

A call for reason is indeed needed at this time—perhaps more than ever before—but the tendencies expressed by Harris do not constitute this call.

As socialists, we realize the long history of oppression wrought in the names of various religions. We absolutely reject the continuance of superstitious and backward thinking represented by religious faith. Just as strenuously, though, do we reject the reactionary calls for a new crusade against Islam.

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