

Gideon Addington

Prof. Tom Boyd

RELS 4323

August 28, 2007

SAM HARRIS'S LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION

THE PRINCIPLE POINTS

The important first step when discussing this book is to understand its purpose, and in that this a purpose which it pursues using inflammatory language, playing loose with facts and poor rhetoric, it is essentially propaganda. That is not to say there are not points worth thinking about or issues that are due some serious consideration, but simply that we must maintain a certain pragmatism regarding the information given to us because of the source's strong bias.

Harris's essential point, made in the introduction of the book, is that religion spawns a particular type of human evil, or at minimum, buttresses human evil with excuses for itself. In particular, he is aiming this book at the "fundamentalist" Christian in this country. Problems with the word "fundamentalist" aside, Harris feels this subset of the American religious map is problematic for our society and world at large. But not only are these particular religionists to blame, but even religious moderates and liberals who Harris would likely find a great deal of political agreement are to blame for "the respect they demand for their own religious beliefs gives shelter to extremists of all faiths" (ix).

Despite the fact that the world is overwhelmingly religious, Harris posits that America has a particular problem because of what he claims as religious inspired ignorance so pervasive here, and not in other industrialized countries. "Among developed nations, America stands alone in these convictions. Our country now appears, as at no other time in her history, like a lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant" (xi). But, in the last paragraph of his introduction, Harris makes one important statement: "that beliefs of this sort will do little to help us create a durable future for ourselves" (xii.)

In the opening section of the book, Harris further draws the lines - turning religion into a zero-sum game. Harris seems to be saying that true religion is of this fundamentalist sort, all others simply pandering pretenders, and so the choice is either atheism or this particular type of religion. It is ironic here that Harris is guilty of the same problem so many fundamentalists make - he fails to make a distinction between religious mythos and logos, and pretends they are one in the same so he can reject them both.

Harris continues forward, quoting the more brutal and bloody passages of the Bible and other holy texts. This is truly old hat, and is meaningful only to people not familiar with the Bible already. Where Harris makes more sense, however, is challenging the often held Christian ideal that "Christianity is the most direct and undefiled expression of love and compassion the world has ever seen"(11) with the wisdom and compassion of other religious traditions - ones that do not end in "the fires of the Inquisition"(11). Such as Jainism.

In some of the strongest passages of the book, Harris sets forth to discuss "real morality." Philosophical and epistemological issues aside, Harris maintains that the religious morality offered up not only often fails to take moral action, but is actively immoral. Looking at the rather

* - Paulson, Steve. "The Atheist Delusion." Salon.Com. 18 Dec. 2007. 28 Jan. 2008

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/12/18/john_haught/>.

objective experiences such as the spread of disease and death because of this ‘morality’ it is one of the more coherent parts of the book.

However, what momentum Harris has he promptly loses in his discussion of atheists being evil. It is a fine double standard to present the minority of religious extremism as par for the course while the sins of almost every “atheist” society the earth has ever experienced, more atrocious than even those of religion, are explained away by declaring these people not to truly be rational people. Mr. Harris, offers us the unwritten rule that atheism is simply a synonym for rational.

In his last hurrah in this section, Harris then goes on to present various statistics which show how much better secular societies fair against religious ones. You can guess which ones win, by his count.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

As mentioned previously, Harris’s book is essentially a polemic and thus it is wide open to all manner of criticism. The largest of these is the incessant straw man arguments, the distortion of facts, and the disingenuous double-standard he looks at religion and atheism with.

That being said, he does make a number of points which deserve a look at, perhaps not in the light Harris casts them in, but certainly merit a serious discussion. We will proceed now through the covered area and do our best to deal fairly with the high and low points of Harris’s work.

From the first page, Harris is providing his detractors with ammo. “Such hatred draws considerable support from the Bible. How do I know this? The most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse”(vii). Anecdotal evidence is hardly evidence, and while the

Bible certainly provides plenty of hateful ammo Harris offers no evidence that it is somehow further afield than that “human nature.”

The most problematic of Harris’s formulations however, at least in my mind, remain the enormous straw man he constructs in the first chapter and then proceeds to knock it around throughout the rest of the book. “We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so”(3). I imagine a great deal many Christians would disagree with this statement, but Harris’s argument only works when placed against the most extreme Christianity has to offer, the liberal or moderate religious response to most of Harris’s arguments invalidate the entire issue. If one can be religious and not promote all the “immoral” actions Harris claims, where is his argument? So, in lieu of sensible dialogue Harris beats up on the small, stupid kid who cannot really defend itself.

One point Harris does make well, and a point where all religious exclusivists should spend some time thinking on, is the rather brilliantly articulated statement that follows:

“Every devout Muslim has the same reasons for being a Muslim that you have for being a Christian. And yet you do not find their reasons compelling. ... Understand that the way you view Islam is precisely the way devout Muslims view Christianity” (5-6).

Indeed, this makes a strong case that it is reasonable not to believe, but it makes no such case showing that it is wrong to believe.

An area Harris spends a great deal of time on is quoting passages out of the Bible and Koran. There is no doubt that both works abound with rather dreadful things, but Harris deals with them exactly as a fundamentalist, oddly enough - ignoring context and whatever tradition may offer in their understanding. Does the Torah say that parents should kill a disobedient

* - Paulson, Steve. "The Atheist Delusion." Salon.Com. 18 Dec. 2007. 28 Jan. 2008

child? Yes. However, the understanding (handled by the Oral Law then written into the Talmud) placed so many regulations upon such a thing that it simply could not ever happen. Harris makes a great point in showing us the fallacy of Biblical literalism in maintaining a coherent culture, but fails miserably by ignoring the fact that most religionists do not take these things with absolute literalism.

Still, one must deal with his point that Christianity - the Bible and its adherents, present us “enlightened” individuals with a problem. What are we to make of Luther’s despicable behavior towards Jews and peasants, or Augustine’s advocacy of torture? It is something a person of faith must wrestle with, but it is of very little difference than the case of Aristotle or Socrates. To our modern understanding of many subjects - both of these men were terribly ignorant, almost ridiculous. But at the same time, they were unabashedly brilliant - but no matter their brilliance, they could not escape the time they were born into and the limitations that placed upon their minds and mores.

One of the most difficult issues to deal with in Harris’s book is the issue of morality, however. Despite what many people think, establishing what is right and wrong is far more complicated than it seems. There is a famous philosophical problem I will present you with now, to give you some idea of the truly grey areas involved.

Imagine an enormously fat man standing next to a train track. Further on down the track are two young children playing on the track itself. A train is barreling down the track towards the children, and you are standing next the fat man. If you don’t do anything, the train will kill the two children. If you push the fat

man onto the track, the train will stop, the two children will be saved, and the fat man will die. What would you do?¹

It's murky. And it should be. But it gives you some of what we're looking at with issues of subjective morality. I would certainly agree that the highest good would be an alleviation of suffering and the things many conservative religionists do are terribly immoral, but looking at it from their perspective (wrong as I may think it is) what am I to do? I am more than aware of my own limitations regarding what truth I can know and cannot, with such sand beneath my feet how can I demand anything? Harris would have you believe that these are simple issues, but they are not - issues of law cannot simply be "we do what we know/think/feel is right" there must be some sort of reliability of expectation and action for society to function. Unless we have a solid foundation of morality existing outside of these religious paradigms we cannot move ahead.

On the issue of Atheism, his own creed, Harris also gives short shrift to a rational discussion. He is quick to point out that the atheist governments and mass movements in our time have been led by, more or less, madmen but only so that he can distance himself. They were not "rational." Be that what it may, there has never been a mass secular or atheist movement for him to make any other comparisons. He can declare that atheists are rarely causing the trouble radical muslims do, but if he would consult history I'm sure he'd find many atheists causing a great deal of trouble a century ago. But even that is besides the point - atheism, where atheism is the prominent idea, has never achieved the status of a mass movement. Harris's elitism does not countenance the fact that for all his desires of a rational human race (and I would certainly hope for one

¹ http://blogs.princeton.edu/pia/SummerofService/2006/08/philosophy_club_kant_and_consequentialism.html

* - Paulson, Steve. "The Atheist Delusion." Salon.Com. 18 Dec. 2007. 28 Jan. 2008

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/12/18/john_haught/>.

as well) the human race, by and large, is not particularly rational. "I know of no society," he writes, "in human history that ever suffered because its people became too desirous of evidence in support of their core beliefs." (43). The problem for Mr. Harris is that there never has been such a society all, much less one that failed because of it.

Lastly, we shall deal with Mr. Harris's rather creative accounting with statistics. He states, on page 39, that of the members of the National Academy of Sciences "93 percent of them do not accept the idea of God." Even if this was damning testimony, as scientists are rarely all that concerned with such issues in any instance, Harris plays very fast and loose with the numbers. I was able to track down this study I believe he refers to - as reported in an 1998 issue of Nature. What the study actually said is that of the 50% of the scientists who actually replied 72.2% professed a "personal disbelief" in a personal god. Another 20.8% professed doubt or agnosticism. Firstly, agnostics and doubters are not de-facto atheists. Secondly, the lack of belief in a "personal god" does not an atheist make, either. There is no small number of theologians, philosophers of religion and clergymen who do not believe in a personal god as it is traditionally to be understood. Harris makes a great leap here.

"While you believe that bringing an end to religion is an impossible goal, it is important to realize that much of the developed world has nearly accomplished it" (43). What a grand statement! Nearly accomplished it? And Mr. Harris goes on to show how much better off these societies are according to data from the 2005 UN Human Development Report, which I was able to get my hands on as well. You'll be surprised, no doubt, that religion has no part of this report. But it does report on life expectancy, education, income, etc. And indeed, for the countries he mentioned it is going quite well. He mentions the Netherlands, for instance, which is #12 on the list - which is quite good. The United States meanwhile is at a miserable... nevermind, it is #10.

This data is iffy at best regarding his conclusions, but we shall investigate this issue of “nearly accomplishing” and end to religion. Norway was the country he mentions first on page 43, so referencing the same study he cites we should see religion nearly eradicated in cold Norway. According to the report by Norris and Inglehart (2004) “31% of Norwegians do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003) 54% of Norwegians said they did not believe in a “personal God... only 10% identify as atheist.”² It would seem Harris’s definition of “nearly” is far less than the standard.

2 *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin.

* - Paulson, Steve. "The Atheist Delusion." Salon.Com. 18 Dec. 2007. 28 Jan. 2008

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/12/18/john_haught/>.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASS

1) The issue of morality Harris addresses is far more than a presentation like this can get into admirably. How do you feel such issues can be resolved such as the problems in Africa where people are misled about disease and people actually die because of people's religious belief regarding sexual morality?

2) A theist has not quite/about the same/a bit more ground to stand on (depending on who you ask, and what time of the day it is) regarding these arguments as Harris does. Given that, are atheists correct in stating that the belief in God is only rational if there is proof and belief is therefore irrational by its very nature? What sort of arguments can (and do) theists provide that counter this argument?

3) American theologian John Haught, in an interview with Salon.com* said the following:

Q. Your forthcoming book, "God and the New Atheism," is a critique of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris. You claim that they are pale imitations of great atheists like Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre. What are they missing?

A. The only thing new in the so-called new atheism is the sense that we should not tolerate faith because, by doing so, we open people's minds to any crazy idea -- including dangerous ideas like those that led to 9/11. In every other respect, this atheism is similar to the secular humanism of the modern period, which said that faith is incompatible with science, that religion and belief in God are bad for morality, and that theology should be purged from culture and academic life. These are not new ideas. But there were atheists in the past who were much more theologically educated than these. My chief objection to the new atheists is that they are almost completely ignorant of what's going on in the world of theology.

They talk about the most fundamentalist and extremist versions of faith, and they hold these up as though they're the normative, central core of faith. And they miss so many things. They miss the moral core of Judaism and Christianity -- the theme of social justice, which takes those who are marginalized and brings them to the center of society. They give us an extreme caricature of faith and religion.

Q. You're saying older atheists like Nietzsche and Camus had a more sophisticated critique of religion?

A. Yes. They wanted us to think out completely and thoroughly, and with unrelenting logic, what the world would look like if the transcendent is wiped away from the horizon. Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus would have cringed at "the new atheism" because they would see it as dropping God like Santa Claus, and going on with the same old values. The new atheists don't want to think out the implications of a complete absence of deity. Nietzsche, as well as Sartre and Camus, all expressed it quite correctly. The implications should be nihilism.

What do think of these statements? Is this "new atheism" a callow form compared to the likes of Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus or Russell?

* - Paulson, Steve. "The Atheist Delusion." Salon.Com. 18 Dec. 2007. 28 Jan. 2008

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2007/12/18/john_haught/>.