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Imagine

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Abstract Review of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2005), by Sam Harris.

IMAGINE

Michael D. Jibson

Every now and then it all becomes clear. The incessant vagaries of history, the complex interactions of cultures, the unfathomable dynamics of human behavior are no longer mysteries, but all fall into predictable patterns when the one great unifying factor of human experience is identified. Karl Marx figured it out—all history is the manifestation of class struggles.¹ Sigmund Freud knew what was lurking beneath the surface of conscious humans and their history—it was the conflict between the social norms of civilized society and the personal aggressive instincts of its members.² B. F. Skinner unraveled the great mystery—it was the interaction of causally determined behavior with the environment.³ John Lennon knew the secret—it was about allegiance to nations and religions.⁴ Francis Fukuyawa had it nailed—

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959), 7.

2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 82.

3. B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 175.

4. John Lennon, “Imagine” (Apple Records, 1971). I include Lennon’s rather cursory musical analysis among the more serious works mentioned because Harris’s thesis most closely parallels Lennon’s lyrics.

Review of Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 2005. 348 pp., with index. \$13.95.

it was all about the inexorable progression of societies toward liberal democracy.⁵ Somehow, each theory failed to pan out, but the search goes on.

Enter Sam Harris with the latest addition to the historical equivalent of unified field theory. The conflicts of nations, the violent clashes of ethnic communities, the personal crimes of aggressive leaders all arise from a single overriding factor. It is all about their mindless acceptance of religious faith.

Summary and Critical Comment

Harris's book—a mix of antireligious diatribe, philosophy term paper, and personal testimony—opens with a provocative series of assertions. First, suicide bombing is a unique evil in the world, representing an escalation of violence never before seen. Second, suicide bombing is not the product of one religiously preoccupied culture pushed too far but is the inevitable consequence of any religion taken too seriously. Third, all organized (and much individual) violence throughout history arises from religious faith. Finally, the availability of nuclear materials to terrorists makes it essential that those who harbor dangerous religious beliefs be rendered inoperable (i.e., killed) and that faith-based religion be quashed in all its forms.

Curiously, Harris does not discount spirituality, or even the adherence of large groups to a unifying practice of spiritual exploration. On the contrary, he speaks earnestly of his own spiritual exercises and insights and strongly advocates their acceptance by society at large. He has his own presumably harmless version of religion. His objection is instead to religious faith that purports to teach us anything about the way the world works, about transcendent realities not verifiable by scientific methods.

His use of the term *faith* is entirely within this context. Faith, by his definition, is what we exercise when there is no evidence in sup-

5. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), xi–xxiii.

port of a proposition.⁶ This he sees as the inherent, core problem with harmful religions. They blithely assert the unknowable. He acknowledges no evidence for a personal God, divine special revelation, literal readings of scripture, miraculous events, the existence of heaven, or any version of salvation or damnation. Without such evidence there is no basis for belief and certainly none for knowledge of divine things. We are left with dogma—unquestioned assertions rigidly held despite a paucity of data in their support, perhaps even despite obvious evidence to the contrary.

If such beliefs were harmless, they could be ignored by the more enlightened among us, but they are not. Because they are without empirical validity, they are virtually random in their assertions, mutually incompatible, and uncompromisingly hostile to one another. Thus, true believers of these superstitions are inevitably drawn toward acts of violence against opposing doctrines. There are no true religious moderates, only failed “fundamentalists” who lack the courage of their convictions.

Harris pushes the point further, however, not only asserting that religious faith leads to violence, but also that all violence ultimately originates from some form of religious belief. “I take it to be self-evident,” he tells us, “that ordinary people cannot be moved” to the extreme forms of violence that religious hatreds achieve (p. 31).

True spirituality, in contrast, can be described as experiences “of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identity as ‘selves’” (p. 39). If this sounds a lot like Buddhism, it is. Harris finally admits late in the book that he openly espouses Buddhism, or rather one branch of Buddhism, as the only true path to enlightenment. That this experience of spirituality can transform us is “proven” by the effects of psychotropic medications and psychedelic drugs. Consciousness, he argues, is entirely subjective, as it is impossible to experience the real world directly. Since most subjective experience is altered by mental state, it follows that perception of the world

6. The nature of faith is too rich a topic to dismiss with Harris’s narrow definition or to discuss at length in this review. For a more insightful perspective, an unparalleled resource is found in *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993).

can be altered by spirituality. Although “a scientific approach to these subjects is still struggling to be born” (p. 42), once a full “science of the mind” (p. 20) has matured, it will be able to answer all questions of a spiritual, aesthetic, emotional, and existential nature.

I must point out here that such a science exists in experimental psychology, which Harris largely overlooks. At the outset, it appeared that he was going to undertake a review of the neuroscience of religiosity, regarding which there is a small but interesting body of research, or perhaps the more extensive work related to cognition or ethical decision-making. Aside from a few superficial references, however, Harris did not attempt to cover these topics at all, despite his repeated references to neuroscience as holding the key to these areas. I thought it rather akin to an expectation that the problem of Internet pornography would be solved if we had a more complete understanding of the physics of semiconductors. The references he did include were mostly from cognitive philosophy, an interesting field in its own right, but one firmly entrenched in the philosophy department, not bound by the evidential standards Harris demands of religion. Neuroscience was held out as the bastion of empirical understanding of these issues, but in the absence of even a rudimentary review of the topic, readers were left to take that on faith.

Aside from the obvious gaps in Harris’s empirical database respecting human behavior and historical activity, I was troubled by the tone of this first chapter of his book. I had hoped to find here an intellectually satisfying critique of modern faith, or at least a coherent argument for a more rational theology. Instead I found a harsh, overgeneralized, and self-congratulatory denunciation of persons of faith as stupid, blind, hypocritical, and dangerous. The book drifted into diatribe at several points. If my descriptions seem extreme, they are considerably softer than their source, which became quite wearing with repetition. Note the following:

There seems, however, to be a problem with some of our most cherished beliefs about the world: they are leading us, inexorably, to kill one another. A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of

human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion. (p. 12)

We have been slow to recognize the degree to which religious faith perpetuates man's inhumanity to man. (p. 15)

Religious moderation, insofar as it represents an attempt to hold on to what is still serviceable in orthodox religion, closes the door to more sophisticated approaches to spirituality, ethics, and the building of strong communities. (p. 21)

To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of our world—to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish—is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. (pp. 22–23)

In fact, every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even *conceivable*. (p. 23, emphasis in original)

But in its effect upon the *modern* world—a world already united, at least potentially, by economic, environmental, political, and epidemiological necessity—religious ideology is dangerously retrograde. (p. 25, emphasis in original)

Our world is fast succumbing to the activities of men and women who would stake the future of our species on beliefs that should not survive an elementary school education. (p. 25)

Insufficient taste for evidence regularly brings out the worst in us. (p. 26)

Because most religions offer no valid mechanism by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors. (p. 31)

We must find our way to a time when faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it. (p. 48)

It is imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs. (p. 48)

Faith is what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse—constraints like reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor. (p. 65)

Most religions have merely canonized a few products of ancient ignorance and derangement and passed them down to us as though they were primordial truths. This leaves billions of us believing what no sane person could believe on his own. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions. . . . 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. Is there any doubt that a lone subscriber to these beliefs would be considered mad? Rather, is there any doubt that he would *be* mad? The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*. Because each new generation of children is taught that religious propositions need not be justified in the way that all others must, civilization is still besieged by the armies of the preposterous. We are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature. Who would have thought something so tragically absurd could be possible? (pp. 72–73, emphasis in original)

Indeed, we know enough at this moment to say that the God of Abraham is not only unworthy of the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man. (p. 226)

The absence of evidence for various religions' assertions about the nature of the world was one of Harris's key points throughout the book. He made some form of the statement that religious beliefs have

no empirical basis over 40 times in 237 pages. I thought it curious that he did not develop this idea more completely, rather than simply asserting it repeatedly. The one attempt that he made to justify his charge of irrational belief focused on the doctrine of inerrancy of scripture. Specifically, he attacked the belief that scripture is the exact and unalterable word of God spoken by God's own mouth. There may be some legitimacy to this attribution within Islam, where the Qur'an purports to be precisely that, but within contemporary Christianity it is a definite minority of conservative Protestants that views the entire Bible as infallible and inerrant. His argument that the Bible is self-contradictory and of uncertain provenance has an element of truth but is largely beside the point.

His second chapter opened with a brief review of what is known about cognition, including how beliefs are formed, how they are related to the external world, and how conflicts among them are resolved. Most of this discussion was at the level of philosophical speculation since neuroscience is not sufficiently well developed to explain how the brain constructs beliefs.⁷ He barely touched, however, on a vast and mature body of research in this area from the field of cognitive psychology. It is true that how the brain generates beliefs, resolves conflicts among them, and stores them for future reference remains a mystery. How the mind operates in these areas, in contrast, has been the subject of serious research for more than a century.⁸ A review of

7. For a novice's guide to cognitive psychology and its relationship to neuroscience, see Floyd E. Bloom, Charles A. Nelson, and Arlyne Lazerson, *Brain, Mind, and Behavior*, 3rd ed. (New York: Worth, 2001). For the definitive review of where the field stands, see Eric R. Kandel, James H. Schwartz, and Thomas M. Jessell, *Principles of Neural Science* (New York: McGraw-Hill Medical, 2000). Most recently, Eric R. Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of Mind* (New York: Norton, 2006), shares his thirty-year journey from psychoanalyst to Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist with a compelling combination of scientific and personal memoir.

8. For example, William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), has been in print continuously since 1890 and remains an exceptionally insightful source. The first of this two-volume set deals almost exclusively with cognition. For a recent review, an excellent textbook for undergraduate and graduate level students is Robert L. Solso, M. Kimberly MacLin, and Otto H. MacLin, *Cognitive Psychology*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2004).

this literature would have been helpful and would have helped Harris avoid some of his less defensible conclusions.

Curiously, in the midst of a discussion of cognitive philosophy, Harris drifted back into the topic of the absence of evidence for religious beliefs, repeating much of his earlier argument. He then went on to something of a non sequitur, a brief description of all dogma as essentially religious. Among the beliefs that he attributed to religion were Nazism and Communism, which he characterized as “political religion” (p. 79). This is a circular argument of short radius. Since any belief that causes people to kill one another is defined as religious, it is self-evident that religion is the cause of all evil in the world. Harris pauses briefly here to tell us that what he really opposes is not just religion, but dogma in any form; then he quickly drops the point and returns to his focused attack on religions of faith in God. This was unfortunate. The hypothesis that rigid dogma in any realm leads to problems would have been more defensible and probably more useful. It certainly would have allowed a more nuanced view of religious faith and practice that recognized the benefits of faith to individuals and communities.

The most chilling component of this chapter was a bold announcement that there may be ethical justification for killing some people simply because of what they believe. Harris is clearly not at all opposed to killing people on the basis of his own beliefs.

The link between belief and behavior raises the stakes considerably. 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. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion, while inspiring them to commit acts of extraordinary violence against others. 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. This 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 to innocents abroad, elsewhere in the Muslim world. We will continue to spill blood in what is, at bottom, a war of ideas. (pp. 52–53)

The book's third chapter is a descent into hell, graphically describing religion's ugliest moments. No detail is spared in the anatomically correct depictions of torture in the Inquisition, step-by-step characterizations of the execution of witches in late medieval Europe, and the recurrent fruits of Christian and Islamic anti-Semitism. Harris asserts that these religions have not developed or advanced over the years, that they are frozen in a barbaric past. Thus, the apparent absence of recent witch burnings is deceptive, for the Holocaust is depicted as exactly the same thing. Because secular anti-Semitism followed religious persecution of Jews, the Nazis were acting out their latent religious beliefs. Dogmatic loyalty to Hitler was a religious loyalty, as evidenced by Himmler's bizarre personal beliefs (pp. 100–101). "At the heart of every totalitarian enterprise, one sees outlandish dogmas" (p. 101). That may well be true, but are they religious dogmas? Do they involve belief in God? Or are they atheistic? Harris's final assertion in this context, that killers always believe preposterous things, is certainly not true.

The fourth chapter is more ambiguous in its stance, if not more nuanced. Indeed, at times it was hard to discern just where Harris stood on certain critical issues. He acknowledged that not all religions are equally bad, but he did so primarily in the context of singling out militant Islam for attack. In this, I suspect, he has many followers. Certainly there has been no shortage of books and articles in the West on the problems of Islam as a religious faith or cultural anchor. Harris, however, takes his argument in two troubling directions. First, he equates Islam with most other religions and with totalitarian ideologies. Second, he concludes that Islam is not compatible with civil society and must be eliminated by a combination of "economic isolation" and "military intervention" (p. 151), lest we be left with no option but "a nuclear first strike of our own" (p. 129). Following that housecleaning, we would need to establish a world government so

that war between countries will be as unimaginable as war between states. Since “diversity of our religious beliefs constitutes a primary obstacle” (p. 151), religion of all kinds must be abandoned. Perhaps I missed some subtle shade of difference, but this looked to me a lot like the violent dogma that he spent most of the book condemning. His only argument to the contrary was that intent is more important than action, and our intent would be to save ourselves, whereas theirs is to spread their beliefs. He showed no hint of irony as he endorsed the very course of military intervention in Afghanistan that was set by the religiously tainted leaders of American government he later decried (pp. 155–58). I also found his inability to imagine war between the states a curious historical blind spot.

Chapter five turns from the problem of Islam’s confrontation with the Western world to the impact of religion in American society. He first expresses horror and disdain that American political leaders include individuals who openly avow religious beliefs. Most of the chapter, however, focuses on morality laws of various kinds, including drug abuse, victimless crimes, and restrictions on stem-cell research. “The idea of a victimless crime is nothing more than a judicial reprise of the Christian notion of *sin*” (p. 159, emphasis in original), and the proscription of such “crimes” blindly subverts the harmless pursuit of enjoyment. To his credit, Harris equivocates as to whether pornography and prostitution are truly victimless, but most of his arguments would tend to include these crimes. Recreational drugs contribute to human happiness but are banned because pleasure is averse to piety. There is no basis for the astronomical sums spent fighting the futile battle against them. Our drug laws are the height of absurdity, and they endanger us by diverting resources from defense against terrorists. Furthermore, if we behaved consistently, alcohol would have to be banned, for it is the most damaging of all. Finally, we have the death penalty, but ignore the role of “bad genes, bad parents, bad ideas, or bad luck” (p. 157). This was a particularly disappointing and poorly thought-out section. These libertarian arguments ignore significant facts of public health that have nothing to do with religious morality.

Harris moves on to a philosophical treatise, positing that happiness and suffering are measurable qualities and are therefore the appropriate basis for an ethical framework. Ethical law is what contributes “to human happiness in the present” (p. 185). He somewhat implausibly argues that concern for others is a natural phenomenon, biologically driven and not arising from any religious institution. As such, it is a brain function and will be elucidated in its final and perfect form by neuroscience. Religion may be dismissed because theodicy, the problem of suffering and cruelty in the world, is incompatible with the concept of God. Counterarguments invoking free will are “incoherencies” (p. 173), for free will violates laws of cause and effect as applied to neuronal systems (pp. 272–74). This is familiar ground, and he acknowledges the contributions of the dean of atheist apology, Bertrand Russell, with a quotation or two, but overlooks B. F. Skinner’s messianic foray into utopian behaviorism.⁹ He makes an exception, however, for Buddhism, which provides empirical evidence that moral living leads to happiness through greater positive emotions, proved in the “laboratory of one’s life” (p. 192). With this background, he conducts a lengthy discussion on the merits of torture in the interest of self-preservation and the selfish immorality of pacifism, citing Gandhi’s tepid response to the Holocaust as a failure of insight and courage.

In the final chapter he speaks of the merits of what he calls “spirituality,” as opposed to religious faith. Spirituality is transcendent experience in the exploration of consciousness by meditation, chanting, fasting, and drugs. Spirituality need not fall into the trap of making insupportable claims about the nature of the world, such as the existence of God, heaven, spirits, or life after death. Epistemology, the study of how and what we know, is the realm of science only. Science, he notes however, is incapable of fathoming consciousness, so spiritual exercise is essential to its understanding. These investigations will lead to an understanding that the “self” is not just a set of cells surviving by interdependence with nature or social interactions, but independent consciousness that emerged at some point in evolution. It is

9. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom*, 175–206.

possible to overcome the sense of “I” as separate from the experience of the world, for “I” was not there at birth but formed gradually as “an implied center of cognition that does not, in fact, exist” (p. 213). Since conflict in the world arises from conflicts among “selves,” it would end if we achieved a transcendence of subjective and objective views of the world. This is empirical, not speculative, is available to everyone, and can be studied just as any other subjective experience can. “Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not” (p. 221). The greatest obstacle “to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience” (p. 214) is our current belief in God. The end of faith is the bringing together of “reason, spirituality, and ethics” (p. 221).

An epilogue summarizes much of the earlier thesis, adding a new twist here and there. Briefly stated, faith causes us to believe and act irrationally, so we sacrifice happiness and justice for fantasies of heaven. Religions of faith are inherently incompatible with one another and are therefore destined for war; we need to stop allowing our faith to lead us to such wars. “Where we have reasons for what we believe, we have no need of faith” (p. 225), and the test of reasonableness is acceptance of facts. Foremost among facts is that we are all going to die. Knowing that, why should we be anything but kind to one another? We don’t need a final judgment to be ethical, just acknowledgment of our mortality should be enough. The logic here completely eluded me.

The second edition of the book includes an afterword that summarizes and responds to the more common critiques the book has received. Among the objections that have been raised are that most organized violence in the last century was about politics and ethnicity, led by atheists such as Mao Zedong, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Pol Pot. Even among suicide bombers, there have been more among the separatist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka than among religiously motivated Muslims. Second, objection has been raised to the narrow interpretation of “faith” as the antithesis of “knowledge,” rather than as an essential precursor to action. Third, historians and sociologists assert that most of the Islamic world is not engaged in violence, which arises not from their faith alone but from the political and economic forces

that have brutalized them. Finally, atheists complain that after happily reading the first several chapters, they find themselves mired in a plea for religious conversion after all.

Harris's responses to these points begin with his reiterating his definition of "faith" as "dogma" (p. 231), irrespective of whether it is theological, political, cultural, or economic. That argument would be more credible, however, if 99 percent of the book were not focused on religious faith. He answers the statistics about the Tamil Tigers with the same approach. They are motivated by a rigid adherence to a cultural identity that is in part religiously defined and they are willing to kill themselves because of a belief in an afterlife, so they are really just religious fanatics after all. Regarding the importance of faith as essential to any action, Harris acknowledges that people "occasionally" use the word in that way, but his definition is "the license they give themselves to *keep believing when reasons fail*" (p. 232, emphasis in original). Harris dismisses assertions that political and social factors may play a part in motivating suicide bombers, asking where the Buddhist bombers are. He seems to have forgotten the kamikaze pilots who crashed planes without landing gear into Allied ships and airfields for the glory of a predominantly Buddhist Japan. Ironically, his response to betrayed atheist readers is a frank acknowledgment that we have no idea where consciousness arises or how it is related to brain function and so we must accept at least the possibility of spiritual realities, including life after death.

General Comments

In responding to Harris's book as a whole, I find myself troubled by the sense that for all his insistence on the need for facts, he has allowed his hypothesis to drive not only his selection but also his interpretation of available data. This is not empiricism but advocacy. He is certainly at liberty to write such a book but owes his readers an acknowledgment that it is a political and ideological recruiting tool, not a neuroscientific or sociological text, and not one whose thesis is demonstrable by clear evidence to objective readers. I disagreed with most of his assertions and many of the examples he cited to prove his case.

His opening theses—that suicide bombing is uniquely evil and dangerous, that religious zeal inevitably leads to violence, that most organized violence arises from religious chauvinism, and that the nascent threat of nuclear terrorism necessitates preemptive violence against those of particular beliefs—are either demonstrably false or ethically indefensible. Suicide bombing is exceptionally frightening and is therefore useful as a tool of terror but is not a particularly effective weapon of war. Neither is it clear that the victims of civilian bombings have any preference as to whether the perpetrator carries the bomb or leaves it behind and flees the scene. Suicide bombing is a subtype of a much more common phenomenon of murder-suicide, which has occurred in all industrialized societies at a steady annual rate of 2–3 per million of population for the last several decades.¹⁰ Most cases are driven by jealous rage or profound depression and involve relatives or sexual partners as victims. The banality of domestic violence hardly captures our attention but teaches us much about the personal dynamics of an individual willing to give up his own life for the privilege of killing another. Rage, jealousy, and hopelessness, not religious dogma, are the operative issues and must be considered in any discussion of the motivation of suicide bombers.

Among the faithful of most religions, the idea that they have become carriers of “tribal hatreds” (p. 31) or have latent homicidal thoughts toward their unbelieving neighbors is untenable. Particularly for those whose beliefs include an emphasis on the importance of moral agency, such as Latter-day Saints, the association between religious fervor and violence falls flat. The few brief lapses into violence in Latter-day Saint history were driven by self-preservation and carried no hint of missionary zeal.

Finally, the concept of preemptive violence against whole communities because of our perception of what they believe and what that might lead them to do is antithetical to the most basic human rights and to the broader values of a free society. Even if Harris’s background arguments had been indisputable, his thesis would have to be rejected

10. Peter M. Marzuk, Kenneth Tardiff, and Charles S. Hirsch, “The Epidemiology of Murder-Suicide,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 267 (1992): 3179–83.

on the basis of this conclusion alone. We would do well to reflect on the consequences of simplistic ideas applied with idealistic zeal. As Adam Hochschild noted in relation to Stalinist purges:

The desire to eradicate tyranny and suffering is one side of the Utopian impulse. All sorts of good ideas, from abolition of slavery to equal rights for women, were first scorned as Utopian, then gradually accepted. However, there is another, more hazardous facet of Utopianism: the faith that if only we make certain sweeping changes, then all problems will be solved. Most of us have felt, at one time or another, the appeal of a simple solution for life's difficulties.¹¹

Harris would merely have us overthrow one set of values and beliefs for another and is prepared to advocate the use of violence to do it.

I was left wondering for whom the book was written. It was certainly not calculated to persuade those of militant Islam to abandon their beliefs, or if it was, it was a uniquely futile attempt. Neither was it for the secular democracies of western Europe now threatened by Islamist terrorism. Europe already boasts nations no longer besotted with the taint of fundamentalist faith, yet they face violence in their own homelands and lack interest in pursuing the roots of terror elsewhere. They have been unable to unify even their financial systems, not because of religious divisions but rather because of economic self-interest. This is hardly a model Harris could champion.

Perhaps he is targeting the United States, a country where religious faith runs strong in public and private life (p. 17), and the will to confront a real or imagined threat with military might has not waned. The book has two apparent objectives: First, to encourage wider military intervention against all Islam, an unjustified and almost certainly impossible task smacking of hubris perhaps even the Crusaders would not fathom, and second, to promote the transformation of the United States into a secular humanist society along the lines of the current regimes of western Europe. Before we go that way, we ought to

11. Adam Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), xviii–xix.

remember Neal A. Maxwell's adage, "In the case of a value-free society, the bottom line is clear—the costs are prohibitive!"¹²

Origins of Violence

Several of Harris's isolated assertions also need to be answered. For example, can "ordinary people" (p. 31) commit acts of horrible violence? Harris tells us that they cannot, but virtually all the historical and psychological data we have says otherwise. Among the most enlightening and disturbing psychological studies of the last century were the experiments of Stanley Milgram¹³ and Philip Zimbardo.¹⁴ Over a ten-year period comprising most of the 1960s, Milgram assigned volunteers to administer potentially lethal electric shocks to other individuals whom they believed to be volunteers but who were in fact actors pretending to experience the shocks. The conditions of the experiment were varied to investigate the role of proximity to the victim, institutional authority, and other variables. To his surprise and dismay, most volunteers were willing to continue administering shocks at ever-increasing voltage over the objections and despite the cries of distress of their supposed victims. Although the percent of volunteers continuing the experiment to the end decreased as the victim was moved into the same room with them, as they were asked to have physical contact with him, and when the experiments were moved away from Yale into an industrial warehouse, a large percentage of the volunteers continued under each of these conditions simply because they were told to do so. Milgram was a careful and ethically sensitive researcher who systematically screened and debriefed his subjects to

12. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Prohibitive Costs of a Value-free Society," *Ensign*, October 1978, 55. This talk, given to Salt Lake Rotarians, for me remains the definitive answer to the allure of secular humanism.

13. Stanley Milgram, "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," *International Journal of Psychiatry* 6 (1968): 259–76.

14. Craig Haney and Philip G. Zimbardo, "Social Roles and Role-playing: Observations from the Stanford Prison Study," in *Current Perspectives in Social Psychology*, ed. Edwin P. Hollander and Raymond G. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 266–74. Zimbardo has created a Web site photoessay of the experiment at www.prisonexp.org (accessed 6 May 2006).

ensure that none entered the experiment with conspicuous pathology and none came out overtly traumatized. The absolute “ordinariness” of his subjects was among the most striking of his findings.¹⁵

Zimbardo’s prison experiment at Stanford University in 1971 was designed to simulate the conditions of inmates in penal institutions. Ten student volunteers from a pool of seventy-five were selected at random to act as prison guards for the duration of the two-week experiment conducted in the basement of the Stanford psychology building. The experimental paradigm was that guards and prisoners playing their roles would be able to simulate real-life situations. The experiment had to be terminated on its sixth day, in part because the brutality of several guards had reached intolerable levels. In contrast to Milgram’s experiment, this was not simulated or feigned violence and in all cases the guards and prisoners were in immediate contact with one another. These were college students, unique only in the fact that they were willing to volunteer for an unusual experiment.

From the historical perspective, consider World War I, in which millions of young men placed themselves at risk and took the lives of others out of a sense of duty to their countries, when even the leaders of those nations were not clear themselves on the issues that led to war.¹⁶ Ethnic hatreds were a minor factor compared with nationalistic fervor and the imperialistic ambitions of nations and governments. Mostly, however, it was about leaders without vision allowing events to sweep them along to a disastrous conclusion.¹⁷ Religion was nowhere on the scene.

What motivated the great acts of murder of the twentieth century? Mao Zedong is blamed for the deaths of sixty-five to seventy million of his own people,¹⁸ quite possibly the most destructive regime in

15. Hannah Arendt popularized the phrase *the banality of evil*, applying it to Adolf Eichmann in particular.

16. Jere Clemens King, *The First World War* (New York: Walker, 1972), xiii–xl.

17. This is the overriding theme of Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962).

18. The higher estimate is from Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 1. The more conservative number is from Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

world history. He was not motivated by religion or even by political dogma but by pure thirst for power. Dogma was wielded in the service of authoritarianism, not the other way around.

Josef Stalin likewise liquidated twenty million of his own people to ensure continuity of his political power.¹⁹ These people were not sacrificed on the altar of unquestioned assumptions but rather of institutional paranoia,²⁰ or they simply had the audacity and bad judgment to oppose a corrupt and oppressive political machine.²¹

The Holocaust is more complex but still fails to meet the standard of a religiously motivated action and provides a unique opportunity to elucidate the mentality of mass murders. Although Jews may be identified as a religious group, it was not their religion but their ethnicity that marked them for destruction. It would not have helped a German Jew to convert to Christianity or even to Nazism. Nor was the Nazi agenda religious. It is also debatable whether it was driven by unquestioned dogma or if the dogma was merely used as justification for an act of hatred in the context of a government freed of ethical and institutional constraints. Initially, however, the systematic killings were entirely medical and perversely rational. The first executions, in 1939, were actually euthanasia of newborns with severe birth defects, followed by older children with similar conditions, then the mentally ill.²² As wounded soldiers returned from the front, the medical establishment was faced with the choice of how best to use limited medical resources. Was it preferable to use a hospital bed to treat an incurable schizophrenic or severely mentally retarded patient while an otherwise healthy young man died of treatable battle wounds? Faced with that choice, physicians began to justify themselves in administering to children lethal doses of barbiturates, which they had dissolved in their tea or sprinkled in their food.²³ They betrayed the various justifications they gave for the

19. Hochschild, *Unquiet Ghost*, xv–xvi. Courtois et al., *Black Book of Communism*, 4.

20. Hochschild, *Unquiet Ghost*, xvi–xvii.

21. Courtois et al., *Black Book of Communism*, 1–31.

22. Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 51–76.

23. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 55–57.

practice by falsifying the death certificates of the patients,²⁴ hoping that families of their victims would not notice the sudden epidemic of “pneumonia” cases that was emptying the mental hospitals and allowing them to be converted to trauma units. The slope is indeed slippery, and it was only a short time before the physicians found themselves at the death camps making “selections” of Jews, Gypsies, and the politically inopportune as they were unloaded from boxcars, determining with a quick glance and nod of the head which went to the slave labor barracks and which directly to the gas chambers.²⁵ A significant portion of the physicians in the SS had no particular loyalty to the Nazi party, never served prison time, and were not closely identified with the death camps, despite their participation in one of history’s most singular acts of cruelty. What was most striking about them was their “ordinariness”; “they were by no means the demonic figures . . . people have often thought them to be.”²⁶ Despite Harris’s assertion to the contrary, Robert Lifton tells us:

What I have struggled with . . . is the disturbing psychological truth that participation in mass murder need not require emotions as extreme or demonic as would seem appropriate for such a malignant project. Or to put the matter another way, ordinary people can commit demonic acts.²⁷

Amateur historian Matthew White has compiled an exhaustive review of the almost unfathomable violence of the twentieth century, which shows no obvious pattern of religious motivation or intolerance.²⁸ In fact, no particular pattern emerges at all.²⁹ Political, ethnic, economic, and other factors all seem to be in play.

24. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 74.

25. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 163–79.

26. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 4–5.

27. Lifton, *Nazi Doctors*, 5.

28. Matthew White, “Source List and Detailed Death Tolls for the Twentieth Century Hemoclysm,” available at users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat1.htm (accessed 6 May 2006).

29. Matthew White, “30 Worst Atrocities of the 20th Century,” which is available at freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/560855/posts (accessed 6 May 2006).

Drugs, Crime, and Accountability

Further, I object to Harris's support for the legalization of drugs. A significant part of my career has been spent picking up the pieces of lives gone to ruin in the pursuit of happiness by drug use, including alcohol. If we made strictly rational decisions regarding financial allocations and their consequences for public health, we would focus entirely on the effects of alcohol and drug abuse and would disregard the threat of terrorism altogether. Statistically, they are not even on the same order of magnitude. Even in 2001, only 2 percent of all trauma deaths were attributable to terrorism. In other years the numbers are too small to appear in public health statistics. The three leading causes of death below age 45 are accidents, homicide, and suicide.³⁰ Collectively, they constitute more than 150,000 deaths per year in the United States. Nearly 40 percent of the deaths in all three categories involve intoxication.³¹ This is a painfully high price for pleasure. Harris argues that since alcohol is the biggest offender, it makes no sense to ban other intoxicants. On the contrary, alcohol is legal, cheap, and readily available. By what logic are we to conclude that making other drugs more accessible will lead to fewer comparable problems?

Harris's inclusion of drug-induced states as a legitimate form of spiritual experience is misplaced and weakens his arguments. The initial excitement about the mind-expanding ("psychedelic") value of hallucinogens such as LSD, mushrooms, and psilocybin quickly waned in responsible circles. One of my favorite anecdotes from this era is an experience that was shared by one of my early psychiatric mentors. As a young psychiatrist in the 1950s he tried LSD and discovered through this enhancement of his brain's serotonin systems that the entire meaning of life was encoded in Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." Satisfying as this discovery was, he soon became disillusioned with

30. Arialdi M. Miniño et al., "Deaths: Injuries, 2002," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 54 (31 January 2006): 35.

31. Lawrence A. Greenfield, "Alcohol and Crime" (U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998), iii-vii. Available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ac.pdf (accessed 2 May 2006).

this path to inner knowledge as his insights evaporated with the return of sobriety.

I have the same feelings about supposed victimless crimes. I have seen few arguments in support of these activities made by anyone who actually knew the individuals involved in prostitution or the production of pornography. These activities are demeaning and destructive to those who participate. Prostitution is highly correlated with addiction, homicide, suicide, and sexually transmitted diseases.³² Early exposure to pornography is a risk factor for substance abuse and criminal behavior.³³ Society may yet decide that such activities are not crimes, but they cannot be made victimless.

Further, I object to the exculpatory invocation of “bad genes, bad parents, bad ideas, or bad luck” to the exclusion of bad choices in dealing with criminals. Biological, sociological, and psychological reductionism leads nowhere useful—not to a functioning society and not even to the type of rational thought Harris purports to advocate.

Origins of Ethical Behavior

If religion does not motivate most of us to kill one another, what motivates us to do good? Harris suggests that it is a natural biological instinct, but if so, it is only within the narrow spectrum of immediate family or community that we easily love one another. And even there it can be a challenge. As the circle widens, we experience less intensity of whatever emotion connects us. Acts of kindness, charity, courtesy, and love are acts of maturity and conscience, not responses to biological instincts. Most of us learn those behaviors in the context of religious and social institutions, occasionally flavored with a sprinkling of moral philosophy from the classroom.

32. Stuart Brody et al., “Psychiatric and Characterological Factors Relevant to Excess Mortality in a Long-term Cohort of Prostitute Women,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 31 (2005): 97–112.

33. Michele L. Ybarra and Kimberly J. Mitchell, “Exposure to Internet Pornography among Children and Adolescents: A National Survey,” *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 8 (2005): 473–86.

I likewise found implausible his assertion that knowledge of our mortality should naturally lead us to be kind to one another. I came to the opposite conclusion. If we are all just going to die anyway, why does it matter how we treat each other? Shortly after being expelled from the Soviet Union, where he experienced the full weight of political oppression, Nobel laureate Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn observed in his 1978 Harvard University commencement address,

Yet there is a disaster which is already very much with us. I am referring to the calamity of an autonomous, irreligious humanistic consciousness. It has made man the measure of all things on earth—imperfect man, who is never free of pride, self-interest, envy, vanity, and dozens of other defects. . . . On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility.³⁴

If we are not accountable to such a being after the end of this life, what will constrain us? Will the values of secular humanism do so?

Spirituality

The larger questions Harris raises are likewise problematic. Consider what he calls “spirituality” and its relationship to epistemology. Harris argues that spirituality is an exploration of consciousness that cannot teach us anything about the external world. He apparently does not really believe that, however, as he concludes that the loss of a subjective sense of “I” that comes with meditation, chanting, and drugs represents the reality of interpersonal connectedness. I do not agree with either of the extreme views he expressed at different points in the book: First, that we cannot really know anything about the world around us but can only experience our subjective sense of that world and, second, that we can reach a higher truth by systematically

34. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *East and West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 69.

subverting the conscious processes that occupy most of our waking thoughts.

Both our sensory organs' and our brains' capacity to process and respond to their input meaningfully represent the world around us and our place in it. Irrespective of whether they were the product of divine creation, natural selection, or some other process not yet proposed, they would serve no purpose if they were merely fantasies or misrepresentations. Our sensory organs and mental constructs of the objective world are of value specifically because they allow us to interact with the world in consistent and useful ways. In fact, we can know a great deal about the world.

Does the development of "spirituality" teach us anything beyond our everyday world? Spirituality might be a search for transcendent experience, the pursuit of understanding beyond our immediate sensory and intrapsychic surroundings. This endeavor constitutes some part of all major religions, but they differ dramatically in what they seek and how they search for it. One consequence of this diversity of spiritual traditions is the possibility of misunderstanding and disdain for one another, but this does not necessarily mean they are mutually exclusive.

Meditation, for example, is recommended by practitioners of many faiths. Various forms of quiet reflection, self-examination, contemplation, prayer, fasting, journaling, and focused study may all be included under this general heading. The extreme version of it prescribed by some branches of Buddhism purports to lead to experiences consistent with interpersonal transcendence. This degree of consistency among practitioners is intriguing and opens the possibility that some aspect of the experience may produce valid knowledge. The alternative possibility that this exercise in sensory deprivation and forced mental emptiness—states foreign to the native working of the human mind—is largely an artifact must also be considered. There is no obvious reason why our minds would hold but conceal so important a truth about our existence in such an inaccessible crevasse. There is certainly no justification for Harris's contention that this sense of interpersonal transcendence represents a higher reality in which we are not really individuals.

Consider, in contrast, David O. McKay's teachings on spirituality. He was a man of unimpeachable character and widely recognized spiritual depth, who remained consistent in his religious commitments over a remarkably long life. By whatever measure we choose, if there is anyone in modern times to whom we can look for guidance on this topic, he qualifies. He taught the principle of spirituality in a series of talks in general conferences and to the BYU student body beginning in 1936. His definition of spirituality is familiar to Latter-day Saints; the context in which it occurred is less so. One pertinent sample of these teachings is from 1956:

Spirituality, our true aim, is the consciousness of victory over self and of communion with the Infinite. Spirituality impels one to conquer difficulties and acquire more and more strength. To feel one's faculties unfolding and truth expanding the soul is one of life's sublimest experiences. Would that all might so live as to experience that ecstasy!

Being "honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men" are attributes which contribute to spirituality, the highest acquisition of the soul. It is the divine in man, the supreme, crowning gift that makes him king of all created things.

The spiritual life is the true life of man. It is what distinguishes him from the beasts of the forests. It lifts him above the physical, yet he is still susceptible to all the natural contributions that life can give him that are needful for his happiness or contributive to his advancement. "Though in the world, not of the world." (See John 8:23.) . . .

Spirituality and morality as taught by the Church of Jesus Christ are firmly anchored in fundamental principles—principles from which the world can never escape even if it would, and the first fundamental is a belief—and among the members of the Church who are truly converted, a knowledge—of the existence of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Children of the Church are taught, at least should be taught, to recognize him and to pray to him as one who can

listen and hear and feel just as an earthly father can listen and hear and feel, and they have absorbed into their very beings, if taught rightly, from their mothers and their fathers, the real testimony that this personal God has spoken in this dispensation.

Inseparable from the acceptance of the existence of God is an attitude of reverence, to which I wish now to call attention most earnestly to the entire Church. The greatest manifestation of spirituality is reverence; indeed, reverence is spirituality. Reverence is profound respect mingled with love. It is a complex emotion made up of mingled feelings of the soul. Carlyle says it is “the highest of human feelings.” I have said elsewhere that if reverence is the highest, then irreverence is the lowest state in which a man can live in the world. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless true that an irreverent man has a crudeness about him that is repellent. He is cynical, often sneering, and always iconoclastic.³⁵

I would call attention to several aspects of this passage. David O. McKay concurs that spirituality includes an expansion of consciousness. From that point on, however, he diverges from Harris’s ideas. Spirituality is achieved through a virtuous life, and spirituality and morality cannot be separated. Further, spirituality is tied to a specific understanding of the nature of God and our relationship to him. Belief and knowledge are on a continuum: Belief is adequate and serviceable, and knowledge is desirable and attainable. Spirituality inspires reverence. His characterization of the irreverent provides a most pithy critique of Harris’s book.

Faith and Knowledge

To address Harris’s contention that religion is incapable of teaching us anything about the real world requires an examination of both the nature of knowledge and the basis of religious doctrine. Harris makes a brief reference to the limitations in our capacity to truly know

35. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1956, 6.

anything. This is true, but not terribly enlightening. That we may call into question the validity of any memory, sensory perception, emotional experience, logical connection, or other mental process is not helpful in discerning what is true. Such arguments are more about intellectual sophistry than sophistication. A more useful approach is to acknowledge the limitations of what we can know without despairing of our capacity to at least experience and understand things at some level. The recognition that there is always room for further understanding should not be taken to invalidate what we now know in part.

Complicating things further is the need for some sort of framework within which to interpret our experience and beliefs about how the world is constructed and functions. This is akin to the “paradigms” described by Thomas Kuhn in reference to the progress of modern science.³⁶ He argues that one may gather observations at great length without contributing to knowledge until some coherent system is proposed to make the data meaningful. The empirical process of scientific investigation does not consist merely of observations, hypotheses, predictions, and tests. This entire endeavor must occur within a larger belief system about how the world works. Physical science is impossible unless one believes that the world is an orderly place in which natural laws are constant and detectable.

Turning to the topic of religious faith, these two points are crucial: First, we may know only in part and yet have true knowledge. Second, our perception of experience and willingness to act upon it—to test our faith—is dependent on what we believe about how the world works.

Harris contends that religious faith is bankrupt because it is not based on knowledge. He has a point. Some religious traditions long ago abandoned the pursuit of empirical validation in favor of philosophical extrapolation. I found myself sympathetic to Harris’s repeated pleas for evidence, for a more rational theology. He erred, however, in asserting that “every religion preaches the truth of propositions for

36. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 10–22.

which no evidence is even *conceivable*” (p. 23, emphasis in original). This is a problem of paradigm. If you begin with the understanding of “spirituality” as an exploration of internal experience, then it is impossible to validate any observations of faith in the exterior world.

But what happens if someone sees God? More to the point, what happens when that person tells the rest of us about having seen God?

Most of what we know and believe about the world is based on other people’s experience. Even when we have personal knowledge, most of our understanding is based on paradigms elucidated by others. This is as it must be. To insist that only what we experience ourselves is valid and that we are obliged to find our own unique way to organize it is to invite a life of chaos and futility. On the other hand, we often take some small element from the observations of others and test it in our own lives. If it proves consistent and useful, we incorporate it. If it does not, we reject it.

Harris dismisses belief in the Bible as unjustified because the Bible could not have come directly from the mouth of God. He points out internal contradictions and translational problems. I would add questionable integrity of manuscripts³⁷ and historical evidence of a politically charged environment within which early Christian manuscripts were selected for canonization.³⁸ A more realistic view of the Bible is as a compilation of witnesses, of individuals who have something to tell us about their experiences with God—in some cases their direct experience. Harris dismisses stories of the virgin birth, miracles, and the resurrection as preposterous only because his religious paradigm does not include such things. This is a dogmatic, wholesale rejection of evidence in defense of the unprovable proposition that such things could not occur.

John tells us that he saw Jesus Christ risen from the dead (John 20–21), Paul says that several hundred others saw him (1 Corinthians 15:6), and Luke cites “many infallible proofs” that it really happened

37. Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 112–36.

38. For a sympathetic treatment of the conflicts, see Patzia, *Making of the New Testament*, 61–66. For a less idealized view see Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 2:295–367.

(Acts 1:2–3). What are we to make of this? There are only a few possible options. First, it really happened and the story is basically accurate. Second, they were mistaken and inadvertently wrote something that was not true. Third, they lied and intentionally wrote something untrue. Fourth, their oral accounts were distorted and embellished during innumerable retellings. Fifth, they were psychotic. They lived a long time ago, and it is difficult to reconstruct anything of their lives beyond what is in their writings. Perhaps that is why prophets of ages past are easier to deal with than current ones.

Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon tell us that they saw God the Father, Jesus Christ, angels, Lucifer, heavenly kingdoms, hell, and numerous other things they were not allowed to talk about (D&C 76). There is an extensive record of their lives and a detailed description of their experiences. It is highly unlikely that these were psychotic perceptions: They did not occur in a context of other symptoms typical of psychotic disorders, they were not shallow or chaotic, and they were shared by more than one person. Few writers have concluded that it was all an honest mistake. They wrote firsthand accounts that have not been changed in the retelling. That leaves intentional fraud or true story. Historians, theologians, psychiatrists, and innumerable others have weighed in on this issue without arriving at a consensus.

How are we to know what to believe? Cognitive psychology has studied this process and noted several patterns but offers no mechanism for validation of belief. We believe what we are taught to believe by people important to us, less by their explicit instruction than by the implications of their actions and priorities. We are conservative in changing our beliefs, doing so only when faced with a compelling reason. We seek internal consistency but are capable of compartmentalizing beliefs if they do not fit well together. There is a hierarchy of beliefs with some being given greater weight than others. Finally, when there is a discrepancy between our beliefs and our actions, there is a tendency for one of them to change to resolve the conflict,³⁹ but it is more often

39. Simon Draycott and Alan Dabbs, "Cognitive Dissonance I: An Overview of the Literature and Its Integration into Theory and Practice in Clinical Psychology," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 37 (1998): 341–53.

the belief that changes. All of this is intended to ensure that our beliefs are accurate, but none of it guarantees that it will be so.

Some trust what their senses tell them—what they see. Others trust their intuition—what they feel. There is a place for both in spiritual learning, but we are usually led first by intuitive knowledge, the sense of recognition we experience when we hear truth. In a wonderfully insightful paper on ethical decision-making in medicine, Edward Hundert suggested that we would do better to stop trying to impose acceptance on ethical decisions reached by intellectual reasoning, but begin instead with our sense of right and wrong and then reflect on what that sense teaches us about our personal values.⁴⁰ The implication is that we have such a sense but may learn to ignore it by forced rationality. We have no trouble with flow of information in this direction in other realms, such as falling in love or appreciating a work of art. Only afterward do we rationalize the feeling by struggling to find reasons for it.

An analogous process is at work with things of the Spirit. We hear an eternal principle, and something within us responds with recognition and acceptance. We may subsequently discover the logic of it, but that is not what gives it significance. It is as natural for us to respond to spiritual truths as it is to respond to the love of our families. Authentic spiritual experience not only gives us a sense of transcendence but also opens our minds and teaches us something, not just about ourselves but about the nature of the eternal world. Faith in this context follows knowledge. We first learn a principle, then believe it, then act on it.

But that is just the beginning. We must then observe the consequences of the action. This is the empirical component of faith, not simply to wait for enlightenment, but to act, assess, and adjust. In fact, scriptural teaching is rife with passages that introduce faith as the product of empirical investigation.

And prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts.
(Malachi 3:10)

40. Edward M. Hundert, "A Model for Ethical Problem Solving in Medicine, with Practical Applications," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144 (1987): 839–46.

If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. (John 7:17)

Awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words. (Alma 32:27)

Try the experiment of its goodness. (Alma 34:4)

These are not invitations to blind but to enlightened faith, informed by experiential knowledge. It is true, however, that the first steps toward this understanding are generally into the darkness. Consider once again the familiar insights of David O. McKay:

I am going to tell you what happened to me as a boy upon the hillside near my home in Huntsville. I was yearning, just as you boys are yearning, to know that the vision given to the Prophet Joseph Smith was true, and that this Church was really founded by revelation, as he claimed. I thought that the only way a person could get to know the truth was by having a revelation or experiencing some miraculous event, just as came to the Prophet Joseph.

One day I was hunting cattle. While climbing a steep hill, I stopped to let my horse rest, and there, once again, an intense desire came over me to receive a manifestation of the truth of the restored gospel. I dismounted, threw my reins over my horse's head, and there, under a serviceberry bush, I prayed that God would declare to me the truth of his revelation to Joseph Smith. I am sure that I prayed fervently and sincerely and with as much faith as a young boy could muster.

At the conclusion of the prayer, I arose from my knees, threw the reins over my faithful pony's head, and got into the saddle. As I started along the trail again, I remember saying to myself: "No spiritual manifestation has come to me. If I am true to myself, I must say I am just the same 'old boy' that I was before I prayed." I prayed again when I crossed Spring Creek, near Huntsville, in the evening to milk our cows.

The Lord did not see fit to give me an answer on that occasion, but in 1899, after I had been appointed president of the Scottish Conference, the spiritual manifestation for which I had prayed as a boy in my teens came as a natural sequence to the performance of duty. For, as the apostle John declared, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” (John 7:17.)

Following a series of meetings at the conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, was a most remarkable priesthood meeting. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the intensity of the inspiration of that occasion. Everybody felt the rich outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. All present were truly of one heart and one mind. Never before had I experienced such an emotion. It was a manifestation for which as a doubting youth I had secretly prayed most earnestly on hillside and in meadow. It was an assurance to me that sincere prayer is answered sometime, somewhere.⁴¹

The critical element to the achievement of knowledge of divine things is not limited to studied meditation or prayer but “the performance of duty” to which these manifestations follow as a “natural sequence.” This is the true nature of faith—willingness to act in anticipation of full knowledge, followed by confirmational experience.

These experiences are humbling, not compatible with the dogmatic rage described by Harris in reference to a handful and ascribed by him to many. The fact is that few of us are killing each other and those who do have lost touch with the personal transformative power of faith and have fallen into the baser experience of cultural identification and fanatic advocacy. As Gibbon wryly noted of the Christians of the fifth century:

After the extinction of paganism, the Christians in peace and piety might have enjoyed their solitary triumph. But the principle of discord was alive in their bosom, and they were more

41. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, October 1968, 85–86.

solicitous to explore the nature, than to practise the laws, of their founder.⁴²

Perhaps this is the essence of fanaticism, identification with a doctrine to the exclusion of its practice. That such may occur among the religious is a sad fact but not a sufficient cause to abandon all faith. As Huston Smith noted:

Probably as much bad music as good has been composed in the course of human history, but we do not expect courses in music appreciation to give it equal attention. Time being at a premium, we assume that they will attend to the best. I have adopted a similar strategy with respect to religion.⁴³

Harris, and all of us, would do well to do the same.

Conclusion

Harris has thrown down a challenge to all who champion faith as a source of understanding, basis for moral behavior, and companion to knowledge. His book carries energy and zeal, but little in the way of a coherent critique of the broad spectrum of religious faith. It was particularly disappointing in its unfulfilled promise of a neuroscientific perspective on religious belief, acquisition of knowledge, and behavioral motivation. The book's primary appeal will be to those who have not experienced the transformative power of religious conversion and look disdainfully on those who have. Despite its failings, however, the book does offer one interesting challenge for those whose experience with religion has been more constructive, by posing the question of how and what we know. Beyond that, the book was more chaff than wheat. Like John Lennon, Harris would have us imagine an ideal world without faith. I would really rather not.

42. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 5:3.

43. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 4.