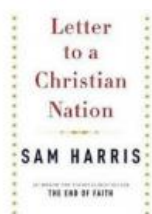


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## Sam Harris Writes *Letter to a Christian Nation*

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Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith*, 2004's surprising best-seller, has emerged as the frontline opponent of all theistic faith. Now, he is out with a second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and the gloves are off again.

“In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, I have set out to destroy the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms,” he announces.

Sam Harris is a philosophy graduate of Stanford University who has also studied neuroscience at the doctoral level. In his first book, he launched a broadside attack on theism. The time has come, he argued, to reject the toleration of backward and dangerous ideas — such as theism.

“Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible,” Harris asserted. “When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realizing just how much of our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past.”

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris repeats many of his previous arguments, but in a more concise and urgent format. He is honest in setting out his agenda — and he recognizes that he and the Christians he addresses share some common assumptions:

*We agree, for instance, that if one of us is right, the other is wrong. The Bible is either the word of God, or it isn't. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation (John 14:6), or he does not. We agree that to be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken, and profoundly so. If Christianity is correct, and I persist in my unbelief, I should expect to suffer the torments of hell. Worse still, I have persuaded others, and many close to me, to reject the very idea of God. They too will languish in “eternal fire” (Matthew 25:41). If the basic doctrine of Christianity is correct, I have misused my life in the worst conceivable way.*

I wrote a major essay about Harris's first book, and this new book covers much of the same ground.

One interesting facet of Harris's approach is his specific rejection of theological liberalism and moderating positions. He does see these for what they are — thinly disguised forms of unbelief.

*I have written elsewhere about the problems I see with religious liberalism and religious moderation. Here, we need only observe that the issue is both simpler and more urgent than the liberals and moderates generally admit. Either the Bible is just an ordinary book, written by mortals, or it isn't. Either Christ was divine, or he was not. If the Bible is an ordinary book, and Christ was an ordinary man, the history of Christian theology is the story of bookish men parsing a collective delusion. If the basic tenets of Christianity are true, then there are some very grim surprises in store for nonbelievers like myself. You understand this. At least half of the American population understands this. So let us be honest with ourselves: in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.*

In a 2005 address to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, Harris put it this way:

*Another problem with religious moderation is that it is intellectually bankrupt. It really represents a fundamentally unprincipled use of reason. At least fundamentalists talk about evidence. You ask a fundamentalist, "Why do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God and the Bible is the perfect Word of God?" and you'll get reasons. They're not good reasons, but you will immediately see that these people are engaged in an evidentiary pursuit. They'll say things like, "The New Testament confirms all of Old Testament prophecy for every prophecy in the Bible has come true." You know, these are specious claims, but contrast that to what moderates say. Moderates don't talk about evidence. Moderates talk about meaning. They talk about the good effects of believing as they do.*

And:

*Another problem with religious moderation is that it is theologically bankrupt. It is not like if we just read the books more closely we would discover all these reasons to be moderates. I've got news for you, I've read the books: God is not a moderate.*

In the end, Sam Harris is certain, like so many opponents of Christianity before him, that the Christian faith will simply pass away.

"Religious faith — faith that there is a God who cares what name He is called, faith that Jesus is coming back to earth . . . is on the wrong side of an escalating war of ideas," he insists.

Like I said . . . it's been said before.

