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The End of Faith–Secularism with the Gloves Off

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In The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason, Harris presents a frontal assault on the edifice of faith, charging the God-believers with murderous intentions, intolerance, and intellectual repression–and that's just for starters.

"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 asserts. "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."

Harris levels his attack at theism in any form, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While he appears to find some potential benefit to society in the meditative traditions of Eastern religions, theistic faiths bear the blame for monstrous evil and human suffering.

Harris represents the hard left of militant secularism. He minces no words and writes with a "take no prisoners" aggressiveness. Take this passage for example: "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. That so many of us are still dying on account of ancient myths is as bewildering as it is horrible, and our own attachment to these myths, whether moderate or extreme, has kept us silent in the face of developments that could ultimately destroy us."

While most Americans–even those on the cultural left–would suggest some positive contributions attributable to faith in God, Harris discards all claims of theistic value. This author is not out to resist religious extremism. As Harris sees it, all faith is extremism. Faith in God–whatever its form–is the problem, he insists, and religious liberty is a threat to the Republic itself.

Pursuing his argument to its logical conclusion, Harris admits that he hopes "to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance–born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God–is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss." So much for the myth of liberal tolerance.

Harris, a philosophy graduate of Stanford University now completing a doctorate in neuroscience, clearly hopes to change the terms of our current debate. He does not want militant Muslims to moderate, he wants them to become atheists. He does not call upon Christians to forfeit belief that Jesus is the only way of salvation; he calls upon Christians to abandon the faith altogether. The poisonous influence of theism and the dangerous intoxication of belief in God must be eliminated. But how? In an op-ed column published in the August 15, 2004 edition of The Los Angeles Times, Harris calls for an all-out attack upon faith, seeking to mobilize militant secularists to action. He blames Christians–particularly Christians in elected office–with obstructionism, hatred, and intellectual backwardness. Such believers are responsible for the nation's focus on "pseudo-problems like gay marriage" and the like.

Harris would have Americans ban all belief in God from the public square and the culture. Insofar as Christians look to the Bible as the revealed authority, they must be marginalized. After summarizing the Bible's teachings against homosexuality, Harris presents his argument with full force: "What should we conclude from all this? That whatever their import to people of faith, ancient religious texts shouldn't form the basis of social policy in the 21st century. The Bible was written at a time when people thought the Earth was flat, when the wheelbarrow was high tech. Are its teachings applicable to the challenges we now face as a global civilization?" Believers are "the genuine enemies of civilization," Harris argues, and religious tolerance–much less religious liberty–is simply too high a price to pay.

As a matter of fact, Harris aims his sharpest criticism at those who would pose as "moderates" in matters of faith. Those who seek to accommodate theistic faith with the claims of modern culture "are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma." Furthermore, they blind themselves to the fact that they are lying to themselves and misrepresenting their faith.

In other words, Harris argues that one may be liberal or religious, but not both. Take Christianity for example. Liberal theologians and self-styled moderates have sought to accommodate Christianity's central truth claims with the worldview of secularism. Nevertheless, Harris correctly describes their predicament. "The first thing to observe about the moderates' retreat from scriptural literalism is that it draws its inspiration not from Scripture but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God's utterances difficult to accept as written."

Thus, moderates seek to argue that the authoritative text, the Bible, should be "reinterpreted" in light of modern knowledge and sensitivities. These efforts fail to remove the underlying problem, Harris insists. At the same time, the accomodationists destroy the very faith they claim to be attempting to save. "This is a problem for 'moderation' in religion," Harris argues, "It has nothing underwriting it other than the unacknowledged neglect of the letter of the divine law."

While believers place their trust in God and believe in life after death, "religious moderation consists in not being too sure about what happens after death." Nevertheless, even religious liberals pay lip service to vague promises concerning the afterlife and ambiguous assertions concerning God and his purposes in the world.

In Harris's view, this amounts to an exercise in mass self-delusion on the part of religious moderates. Furthermore, the very existence of supposed moderates in matters of faith provides cover for what Harris alleges is the heart of the problem –the very idea of belief in God. As he explains, "Religious moderation still represents a failure to criticize the unreasonable (and dangerous) certainty of others."

Those on the secularist side who fail to take their argument to its ultimate conclusion also come under Harris's condemnation. Moderate believers and moderate secularists are, in his view, combined as a massive obstacle to human progress. Religious beliefs are not to be fixed, Harris asserts, nor are beliefs to be merely tolerated. Sam Harris believes that civilization must eradicate belief in God–nothing less will do.

What about the American tradition of respect for believers? "As a consequence of our silence on these matters, we live in a country in which a person cannot get elected president if he openly doubts the existence of heaven and hell." Harris looks at this reality with sheer incredulity: "In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. Could there be any clearer indication that we are allowing unreason and otherworldliness to govern our affairs?"

In a fascinating section, Harris attacks the fragile house of religious liberalism, directing his scrutiny to Paul Tillich, one of the most perversely influential theologians in the history of the Christian church. Tillich, a native of Germany who taught at the University of Chicago and Harvard Divinity School, exerted an inordinate influence on Christian liberals at the middle of the twentieth century. Tillich lied both to himself and to believers, Harris alleges. As another famous atheist once observed, it takes one to know one–and Tillich was clearly an atheist.

As Harris insists, Tillich redefined the word "faith" so that belief in God was removed, and some version of a vague existentialistic experience remained–all based in Tillich's concept of an "ultimate concern." Thus, Paul Tillich plays his part in Harris's conspiracy theory. While Tillich may have been an intellectual, he lacked intellectual honesty. "Despite the considerable exertions of men like Tillich who have attempted to hide the serpent lurking at the foot of every altar, the truth is that religious faith is simply unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern–specifically in propositions that

promise some mechanism by which human life can be spared the ravages of time and death."

One of the most interesting features of Harris's book is its back cover. Endorsements–known in the publishing world as "blurbs"–include statements by Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, notorious Princeton bioethicist Peter Singer, and Joseph C. Hough, Jr., president of Union Theological Seminary in New York City. One can only wonder if Dershowitz and Hough actually read the book.

Dershowitz, a Jewish agnostic, has built his reputation as a defender of civil liberties. Has he now decided that religious liberty is simply too dangerous for American society? If so, it would be most interesting to read Dershowitz's own version of this argument.

The statement by Joseph Hough represents the insanity of religious liberalism in its purest form. Union Theological Seminary represents the castle of protestant liberalism in America, proudly harboring various heresies throughout the last century. No informed observer of American religious life should be surprised by any inane idea emerging from that seminary's campus in Morningside Heights. Hough's endorsement reads: "Here is a ringing challenge to all Americans who recognize the danger to American democracy posed by the political alliance of right-wing religion and politics and the failure of the tepid and tentative responses by liberal persons of faith. While one might dispute some of the claims and arguments presented by Harris, the need for a wake-up call to religious liberals is right on the mark."

Assuming that President Hough had even the most minimal understanding of Harris's book–an assumption that would seem warranted given the fact that he endorsed it–one can only be reminded of Vladimir Lenin's prediction that, when it came time to hang the capitalists, the capitalists would compete for the contract to sell the rope.

The End of Faith presents us with a portrait of secularism with its gloves off. Harris's argument is almost certain to be repeated again and again as America continues its slide into secularism and hostility toward all believers.

In today's climate of secular advance, the prophets of unbelief think time is on their side. Sam Harris's book is a wake-up call indeed, and it should awaken believers to the true character of aggressive secularism and the true agenda of its proponents.

Furthermore, believers should pay particular heed to Harris's argument about the nature of religious liberalism. As Joseph Hough's endorsement makes clear, when it comes time to hang belief in God on the gallows of modern secularism, the theological liberals will be more than willing to sell the rope–and endorse the book.