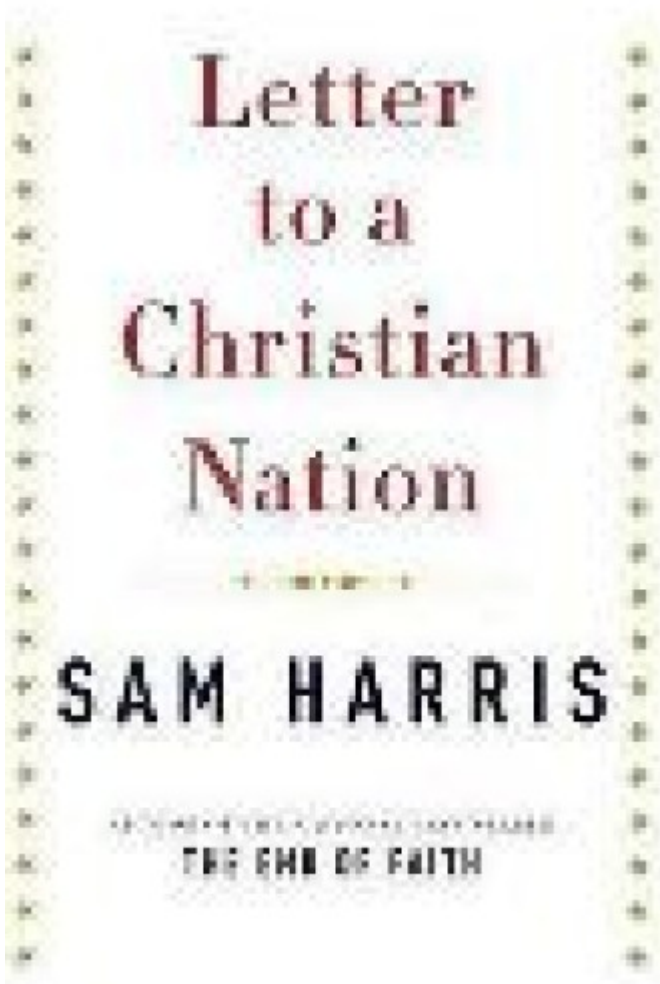


Letter to a Christian Nation

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [December 12, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Letter to a Christian Nation

Sam Harris
Knopf

There is something charmingly quaint about Sam Harris's new book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. If not for religious belief, he says, this country would be pouring

resources into such worthy efforts to alleviate suffering as stem cell research, not indulging in hand-wringing over preposterous moral qualms about the destruction of embryos. This and other moral travesties are nothing that a little blast of common sense can't cure. So Harris is taking off the kid gloves with which religion is publicly treated in America's budding "civilization of ignorance." He will "arm secularists in our society" to do battle with religious believers. As if that catechetical effort weren't enough, he will also "demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms." All in 112 pages.

If this sounds familiar, it is—similar books have been written since the Enlightenment, and indeed since long before that. Harris's charges against theism are predictable: the problem of evil, the irregularities of scripture, the hypocrisy of believers, the collision between religion and science, religion's failure to alleviate suffering. He just shouts louder than most. The Bible fails to condemn slavery, and that was "the easiest moral question our society has ever had to face." Concern over embryonic clumps of cells are especially ridiculous, as we all destroy larger clumps without worry: "Every time you scratch your nose, you have committed a Holocaust of potential human beings." Religious believers must find divine purpose in such catastrophes as Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, if New York City were engulfed in flames tomorrow, those expecting the apocalypse would rejoice, for this would be a sign of Jesus' return (an odd inference, considering that evangelicals were the most zealous about exacting revenge in the wake of 9/11). The end result of religion, then, is to diminish concern about suffering in the present—and on behalf of something with as much empirical evidence in its favor as belief in Zeus.

If there is anything fresh here, it is Harris's linkage of his broadside against religion with what have become commonplaces on the political battlefield in America: 53 percent of Americans believe in a literal six-day creation, blue-state residents are more moral than red staters, sex education is being eviscerated by abstinence-only political platforms, Europe's post-Christian civil society is much more compassionate than America's, etc. Harris's real goal, it seems, is to save American civilization: we have become a "lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant," but the country's greatness can be unlocked if only we will heed this prophet.

Harris's book would be stronger if it offered evidence that he has ever spoken with any living, breathing Christians. He frequently refers to Gallup polls, to standard storylines from the *New York Times* and to angry e-mails he receives in response to his work. He knows enough to be aware that self-professed liberal and moderate

Christians exist, but he attempts to keep at arm's length such milquetoast believers, who simply lack the courage of conviction of their fundamentalist brethren—who, in fact, enable the destructive tendencies of irrational belief by dressing it in a cloak of respectability. Harris is in this sense comfortable with fundamentalists, for both he and they loathe moderates. "Either the Bible is just an ordinary book, written by mortals, or it isn't. Either Christ was divine, or he was not." That Christ might be both divine and human, that scripture might be both inspired and humanly authored, as Christians both fundamentalist and liberal believe, seems not to have occurred to him.

At times Harris slips from the grating and smarmy to the chilling. "One of the most pernicious effects of religion is that it tends to divorce morality from the reality of human and animal suffering." Once the alleviation of suffering is the chief moral goal, however, it is a short step to the elimination of sufferers, as Harris's blithe dismissal of prenatal moral concerns and his heartless comparison of lost nasal cells to the Holocaust suggest. America's believers "should be obliged" to present empirical evidence for their belief. Obligated by whom? Harris decries the failure of schools "to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand"—an illiberal policy on religion in schools if there ever was one. Harris is blissfully unaware of how close his rationale is at points to those of Stalin and Mao: religion causes suffering; ergo, elimination of religion will eliminate suffering. When Harris asks (in one of his few, always unsuccessful efforts at whimsy), "When was the last atheist riot?" any number of bloody revolutions, from the French to the Russian to the Cultural Revolution in China, come immediately to mind.

But religion is tenacious. Even when it is buried, it has this odd resurrectional habit. Witness Harris's own work, which flashes moral passion: "An atheist is a person who believes that the murder of a single little girl—even once in a million years—casts doubt upon the idea of a benevolent God." That very recognition and decrying of injustice is itself a religious posture—atheist postmoderns know enough not to cry to heaven with outrage, because they know no one is listening. Several times he voices his "sincere hope" that this breviary will aid his co-religionists in their noble cause of beating back the barbarians. "I would be the first to admit that the prospects for eradicating religion in our time do not seem good," but there is eschatological hope. No one thought slavery would end in the 19th century either. (Previously he called that debate "easy," but never mind.) Harris's booming dictates, his refusal to let his straw man be endangered by what actual educated religious believers have taught,

his starry-eyed optimism for his homemade religious revolution—all resemble nothing so much as an evangelical crusade.

Or even a fundamentalist one. Harris's posture is often that of the ancient Manichaeans, the heretical group that St. Augustine opposed for its failed metaphysic. That is, the Manichaeans held that light and dark were two fundamentally opposed principles, constantly at odds in the world. The elect are full of light, the condemned full of darkness, with no admixture permitted. It took Augustine years to work out a scriptural metaphysic in which all people seek good but fall short, yet in which anything that genuinely *is*, is good. For Harris, religion is simply awful—irrational, violent, the chief enabler of suffering—and only a newly confident, thundering atheist voice is needed to forever shout it down. Irreligious people, like most scientists and geniuses, are humble, thoughtful, self-sacrificing servants of humanity, like the do-gooders in Doctors Without Borders. This is a simple metaphysical divide between good and evil of the sort that allows one happily to dismiss the bulk of humanity as ignorant, evil and unworthy even of pity. “The core of science is . . . intellectual honesty.” All else, presumably, is a lie.

Those of us who are not Manichaeans can glimpse the truth even in Harris's blind gropings. When Harris thinks he is applying his rhetorical coup de grace, he produces this howler: a really divinely inspired Bible would give us something we could use. Why doesn't scripture contain the cure for cancer or the map for the human genome? (By the same reasoning, he should condemn Shakespeare for failing to invent electricity.)

When Harris laments the harshness of the e-mails he gets from Christians, he notes the irony that “Christians generally imagine that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own.” Most Christians—even immoderate ones—will wince with recognition. Indeed, we are all hypocrites. The difference between us and atheists is that our own faith requires us to repent, and not only for our own misdeeds, but for our community's past ones. Even the fundamentalist Southern Baptist Convention apologized for slavery over a decade ago. Who apologizes on behalf of atheists?

Finally, this: “An average Christian, in an average church, listening to an average Sunday sermon, has achieved a level of arrogance simply unimaginable in scientific discourse—and there have been some extraordinarily arrogant scientists.” On this we must agree completely: the belief that the God of the universe takes inordinate

care with the creatures on one planet around one star in one galaxy in one corner of the universe, to the point of becoming incarnate among them in Christ and in his body the church, is the height of hubris and ought to evoke a lifetime of humble awe.

These moments when critics' attacks illumine Christians' faith anew come more generously when we read such anti-Christian luminaries as Nietzsche, Foucault and Derrida. For the most part, Harris is still too religious himself to cast new light on what he hates so maniacally.