

Book Review – Letter to a Christian Nation

By

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Introduction: Why Sam Harris Wrote Letter to a Christian Nation?

In *Letter to a Christian nation*, Sam Harris makes a sneering, feeble and condescending attempt to demonstrate that religion is an imagination of human mind and the sooner humanity discards it, the better. The letter echoes ideas of his previous book, *The End of Faith*, in which he had said:

“There seems...to be a problem with some of our most cherished beliefs about the world: they are leading us inexorably ,to kill one another...It seems that if our species ever eradicates itself through war, it will not be because it was written in the stars but because it was written in our books”.¹

In response to his book, *The End of Faith*, Harris had received a very “hostile communication” from Christians. It is in response to this hostile communication, he wrote, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, to respond to many of the arguments that Christians put forward in defence of their religious beliefs.² In the letter, however, Harris makes two flawed assumptions upon which he builds his intellectual edifice.

The two flawed assumptions he makes are:

1. All faiths are antithetical to western values. Islam due to its ideology of jihad is worse because it threatens freedom of people living in west.
2. The moral value of rational atheism can replace religious morality

This article will discuss that Christianity is more vulnerable to the attacks of Harris because its teachings, though divine, have become distorted with the passage of time. Harris holds Christianity responsible for corporal punishment, intolerance, and other moral shortcomings that apparently he can't seem to find in Islam. That is why Harris invokes Jihad and Islam's agenda of world conquest to prove that Islam, instead of being a more modern religion, is a greater threat to west than Christianity. His argument to replace all religions with rational atheism is nothing but a vague assertion without any deep philosophical foundations and hence not comparable to Islamic moral system.

¹ Harris, Sam, *Reason in Exile*, in *The End of Faith*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2004, New York, p. 12

² Harris, Sam, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2006, p. viii

ASSUMPTION 1: All religions are antithetical and Islam is the biggest threat

In his book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he sets out to “*demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms*”.³ But at the same time, he asserts that this letter is intended for people of all faith. Here he makes his first flawed assumption that the teachings of all religions and the deeds of all its followers are same. Given the fact that he mentions Islam in only few places in his book, one can't help but think that he considers his critique of Christianity automatically valid for Islam and all other religions as well. This is how he conveniently avoids delving into beliefs that are not common across all religions. He assumes that all faiths are same and completely ignores the reality that within one faith there are many denominations, the beliefs of which further vary across culture, history and geography.

Harris, unfortunately, views and interprets religion from the ideological lenses of militant atheism. He argues for the eradication of all religion after speciously pinning the blame for almost all problem of the world to religion. He has nothing but contempt for religion. He does believe that religion did play a part in the evolution of society but now it is nothing but a burden of the past that humanity should get rid of.

In the beginning of the book, Harris identifies dogma as the common element of Islam and Christianity. He argues that every “*devout Muslim has the same reason for being a Muslim that you have for being a Christian*”.⁴ People of both faiths, he continues, consider their respective scriptures as the “*perfect word of the creator of the universe*”⁵ and goes on to argue that Christians view Islam in precisely the same way the devout Muslims view Christianity.⁶

His criticism is vague. He should at least explain his position as to what he means by saying that Christians and Muslims view each other “*in precisely the same way*”. He does not realize that Islam does not view Christianity as evil or demonic force but consider it a religion from God, also known as Allah, which over the period of time lost its true essence in the storm of history. Islam arose not to compete with Christianity but to rediscover and further develop the true spirit of Christianity and the religions before Christianity. Harris fails to discuss this purpose of Islam in his book because he wants to fit the reality into his “*rational arguments*”. He accuses religions for intolerance but himself fails to show any tolerance towards any religions. According to him, all religions and their followers are violent and a threat to peace.

He attacks Christianity for having “*imaginary God*” and “*religious myth*” but his criticism of Muslims is even more derisive. In the final part of his book, for instance, he announces to Christians that he is “*dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the*

³ Ibid, p. ix

⁴ Ibid, p. 6

⁵ Ibid, p. 6

⁶ Ibid, p. 7

living”.⁷ He suggests the Christians to discard religion and join the army of atheists to protect the free world from the “*death chanters*” i.e. Muslims. Like all Islamophobes, he is buttressing his argument by fear-mongering. Why does he view Islam as a greater threat to the civilization compared to Christianity? The answer to this question is essential to better understand the intentions of his letter in which, however, he rarely provides reasons for his prejudice against Islam. One needs to revisit his previous book, *The End of Faith*, to better understand his view of Islam. In that book, his description of Islam is almost irresponsible and illogical.. He argues:

*“...the evil that has finally reached our shores is not merely the evil of terrorism. It is the evil of religious faith at the moment of its political ascendancy. Of course, Islam is not uniquely susceptible to undergoing such horrible transformations, though it is, at this moment in history, uniquely ascendant.”*⁸

In the same book, he insists that Muslims are bent on world conquests and the idea of inner jihad is a charade by Muslims to hide their true intentions. It is interesting how Harris is able to indict a religion of 1 billion because he claims to know the true intentions of all Muslims. He states :

*“The feature of Islam that is most troubling to non-Muslims, and which apologists for Islam do much to obfuscate, in the principle of Jihad...While Muslims are quick to observe that there is an inner (or “greater”) jihad – war against infidels and apostates – is a central feature of the faith. Armed conflict in ‘defence of Islam’ is a religious obligation for every Muslim man. We are misled if we believe that that phrase ‘in defence of Islam’ suggests that all Muslim fighting must be done in ‘self-defence’. On the contrary, the duty of jihad is an unambiguous call to world conquest”.*⁹

Harris discounts the cultural, economic and political reasons behind violence perpetrated by Muslims. Radical elements of Islam that target innocent civilians do not represent mainstream Muslims. They do not reflect the pure teachings of Islam. The Holy Quran permits only defensive war while the Holy Prophet taught Muslims not to hurt innocent civilians during war. Here are the first two verses which gave Muslims the permission to take up arms in self-defence

Holy Quran says:

Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is made, because they have been wronged — and Allah indeed has power to help them — Those who have been driven out from their homes unjustly only because they said, ‘Our Lord is Allah’ — And if Allah did not repel some men by means of others, there would surely have been pulled down cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is oft commemorated. And Allah will surely help one who helps Him. Allah is indeed Powerful, Mighty —(22:40-41)

⁷ Ibid, p. 91

⁸ Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith*, p. 130-131

⁹ Ibid, p. 111

However, in case, the need for a defensive war arises, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (saw) gave a list of things to his followers that they shouldn't do during the times of war. For instance, he said:

- The old and decrepit and women and children are not to be killed. The possibility of peace should always be kept in view (Abu Dawud).
- When Muslims enter enemy territory, they should not strike terror into the general population. They should permit no ill-treatment of common folk (Muslim).
- The least possible losses should be inflicted upon the enemy (Abu Dawud).
- When a Muslim takes charge of a prisoner of war, the latter is to be fed and clothed in the same way as the Muslim himself (Bukhari).

It is unfortunate that radical Muslims are often given more coverage in the media than those hundreds of millions of Muslim men and women who serve humanity as doctors, scientists, charity workers, social workers, human right activists or lawyers. But Harris either disregards all this information or flatly refuses to believe it.

Harris finds it hard to attack Islam because it is science-friendly and preaches compassion and tolerance and respects pluralism. So he targets Islam by invoking politically charged term Jihad.

As for Jihad, Harris should read about the advent of the Promised Messiah (as) in Islam. The coming of the Promised Messiah was foretold by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (as) in time when Islam would become a shell without any kernel and the scholars of Islam would be worse creatures on the face of Earth. The Promised Messiah has categorically rejected the use of the ideology of Jihad for the purposes of world conquest. Based on the true essence of the Holy Quran, the Promised Messiah has taught compassion and tolerance for everyone. He explains:

“It should also be remembered that Islam permits the taking up of the sword only in opposition to people who themselves take it up first and it permits the slaughter only of those who embark upon slaughter first. It does not lay down that Muslims while they are the subjects of a non-Muslim sovereign who deals with them with justice and equity should take up arms against him as rebels”¹⁰.

Harris' attempts to discredit Islam by linking Jihad with world conquest fall flat in light of the advent of the Promised Messiah who preached universal brotherhood not world conquests.

Ahmadi Muslims strongly feel that the religion of Islam, as restored to its true essence by the Promised Messiah (as), can not only withstand but also reverse the tide of rational atheism.

Harris attacks Bible on the account of its intolerance. He says:

“You probably think the Inquisition was a perversion of the “true” spirit of Christianity. Perhaps, it was. The problem, however, is that the teachings of the Bible are so muddled and

¹⁰ Ahmad, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam, “Jihad with the Sword” Essence of Islam, Volume II, 2004 Edition p. 324

self-contradictory that it was possible for Christianity to happily burn heretics alive for five long centuries. It was even possible for the most venerated patriarchs of the Church, like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, to conclude that heretics should be tortured (Augustine) or killed outright (Aquinas). Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated the wholesale murder of heretics, apostates, Jews, and witches....Of course, many Christians believe that a harmless person like Martin Luther King Jr. Is the best exemplar of their religion. But this presents a serious problem, because the doctrine of Jainism is an objectively better guide for becoming like Martin Luther King Jr, than the doctrine of Christianity is”¹¹

Harris should not hold the religion of Christianity responsible for inquisition. However, Bible, unfortunately, is vulnerable to such criticism because its teachings have become distorted and are not the original teachings of Jesus (Pbuh).

His analysis briefly acknowledges that secular teachings can also be employed in the service of violence but he explains such violence by blaming delusional minds not secular systems. But he doesn't stop there, he also blames holocaust, Nazi death camps as a direct inheritance of medieval Christianity.

“Christians like yourself invariably declare that monsters like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Kim Sung Il spring from the womb of atheism. While it is true that such men are sometimes enemies of organized religion, they are never especially rational. In fact, their public pronouncements are often delusional: on subjects as diverse as race, economics, national identity, the march of history, the moral dangers of intellectualism. The problems with such tyrants is not that they reject the dogma of religion, but that they embrace other life-destroying myths...Tyrants who orchestrate genocides , or who happily preside over the starvation of their own people, also tend to be profoundly idiosyncratic men, not champions of reason.”¹²

“Consider the Holocaust,: the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity. For centuries, Christian Europeans had viewed the Jews as the worst species of heretics and attributed every societal ill to their continued presence among the faithful....Auschwitz, the Soviet gulags, and the killing fields of Cambodia are not examples of what happen to people when they become too reasonable. To the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of political and racial dogmatism...The problem with religion – as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totalitarian mythology- is the problem of dogma itself. I know of no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too desirous of evidence in support of their core beliefs.”¹³

¹¹ Harris, Sam, The End of Faith, p. 12

¹² Harris, Sam, Letter to a Christian Nation, p. 39-41

¹³ Ibid, p. 41-43

In the mind of Harris, Hitler and Stalin committed mass murder because they were not reasonable not because they were secular. He does not explain why we can't make such a distinction in the matters of religion. Shouldn't we also view the violent or peaceful behaviour of religious people as delusional or reasonable respectively as opposed to labelling all of them inherently violent?

ASSUMPTION 2: RATIONAL ATHEISM CAN REPLACE RELIGION

Harris believes that rational atheism is capable to provide objective morality to the world thanks to the increasing knowledge of human psychology. In his view, scripture is not necessary to teach humanity about moral codes anymore.

*"You believe that unless the Bible is accepted as the word of God, there can be no universal standard of morality...IF there are psychological laws that govern human well-being, knowledge of these laws would provide an enduring basis for an objective morality."*¹⁴

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, however, he does not provide a detailed account of such a secular moral system. In his new book, *The Moral Landscape*, he tries to make the case for rationally determined moral values but clearly fails.

Marilynne Robinson, a scholar, finds the ideas presented by Harris in *The Moral Landscape*, neither new nor bold. She says:

*Sam Harris begins his new book with a celebration of the ideal of cooperation, a value that has been in eclipse among us...What specific forms is cooperation to take? Mr. Harris is a little vague on this point. He strongly favors "maximizing the well-being of conscious creatures." He imagines potential human circumstances as landscapes of peaks and valleys, with different models of moral success on each of the peaks and of moral failure in each of the valleys...Many of his aspirations are highly respectable but they are neither bold nor new, at least from the point of view of certain religious traditions. If he were to articulate a positive morality of his own.*¹⁵

Robinson finds that the moral system - presented by Harris in his new book, *The Moral Landscape*, - to be standing on a shaky evidence.

*A neuroscientist, he places his hopes in an increasing knowledge of the brain. But whose brain is he talking about? Magnetic resonance imaging is the tool Mr. Harris brings to bear on all this. Neither the body of Mr. Harris's book nor the lengthy endnotes provide precise information about the pool of test subjects or the methods of the tests themselves that yielded his information about the brain.*¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 24-25

¹⁵ Marilynne Robinson, Book Review of Sam Harris' *Moral Landscape*, Wall Street Journal, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703882404575520062380030080.html>

¹⁶ ibid

Robinson also highlights how Harris dismisses religions as “pious delusions” and fails to acknowledge the positive contributions of religion in human lives.

*He has returned now to tell us to look to the sciences for enlightenment and decry that "many scientists feel that they must pretend that religion and science are compatible." Mr. Harris has no such feelings and continues his attack on the "pious delusions." Yet he never notices that many of the good things he embraces—for example, equality and opportunity for women—have been championed and better realized in mainline churches and the larger community than in the sciences.*¹⁷

Briefly, it might be pointed out that Islamic role for social, economic and gender equality has predated modernity. What Islam did for equality 1400 years ago is unparalleled to any other religion or moral system. The lack of cultural empowerment of women in Muslim countries in the current times is not due to Islam but due to political, historical and cultural factors. Muslim women would be empowered once Muslims return to the essence of the original teachings of Islam. Elsewhere, many scholars have discussed this point.

Going back to religion and science debate; Harris has attempted to show incompatibility between religion and science since his first book, *The End of Faith*. In Letter to a Christian Nation, he also asserted this incompatibility. He says:

*“The truth however, is that the conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma comes at the expense of science...The conflict between science and religion is reducible to a simple fact of human cognition and discourse: either a person has good reason for what he believes, or he does not. If there were good reasons to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that Muhammad flew to heaven on a winged horse, these beliefs would necessarily form part of our rational description of universe. Everyone recognizes that to rely upon ‘faith’ to decide specific questions of historical fact is ridiculous – that is until the conversation turns to the origin of books like the Bible and the Koran, to the resurrection of Jesus, to Muhammad’s conversation with archangel Gabriel, or to any other religious dogma. It is time that we admitted that faith is nothing more than the license religious people give on another to keep believing when reason fails.”*¹⁸

In the west, faith in human reason emerged only a few hundred years ago. While the west was immersed in the dark ages, reason and religion coexisted in the Islamic world. During that time, Muslims not only made prominent contributions to algebra, chemistry, pharmacy, astronomy and philosophy but also laid foundations of tolerant societies where the rights of minorities were

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Harris, Sam, Letter to a Christian Nation, p. 66,-67

respected and protected. Islamic Spain is a perfect example that reason and revelation coexisted in Islam well before modernity found its way into Europe.¹⁹

Akbar S.Ahmed, describes:

“If we define a civilized society as one which encourages religious and ethnic tolerance, free debates, libraries and colleges, public baths and parks, poetry and architecture, then Muslim Spain is a good example. Take the example of a library, always a useful index of civilization. The library of the ruler of Cordoba in the tenth century contained 400,000 volumes – more, it is said, than in all the libraries of Europe at the time.”²⁰

Islam encourages intellectual progress. The stories that Harris relies on to make his point such as the one of Holy Prophet (sa) travelling on winged horses is not believed to be literal by many Muslims. Many Muslims, including Ahmadis, believe that his ascension to heaven was not physical but spiritual. Harris, as a scientist, of course, is not expected to believe in ascension of prophets but his analysis of Islamic beliefs should be more rational and informative and less emotional. He should not treat all Muslims as one and same in their beliefs and actions.

Conclusion

Harris near the end of his Letter to a Christian Nation, appeals for intellectual honesty and rationality.

“One of the great challenges facing civilization in the twenty-first century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns-about ethics, spiritual experience, and the inevitability of human suffering- in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. We desperately need a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty. ..Clearly, it is time we learned to meet our emotional needs without embracing the preposterous. We must find ways to invoke the power of ritual and to mark those transitions in every human life that demand profundity – birth, marriage, death – without lying to ourselves about the nature of reality.”²¹

His objectives are noble but his path to these objectives is arrogant to say the least. He is not just trying proving the worth of his atheistic beliefs instead he is blatantly and arrogantly arguing for the discarding of all religions. In doing so, he relies on vague assertions and relies on flawed logics to make his point. Harris is not a rational atheist but a militant one. He does not use violence like Hindu, Muslim or Christian extremists to impose his views on others but he does show disdain for all religious beliefs and his disdain borders on arrogance.

¹⁹ More information about Islam and Science may be obtained from Zakaria Virk's article:
<http://islamquranscience.org/2010/08/science-and-technology-in-the-islamic-spain/>

²⁰ Ahmed, S. Akbar, *“The Challenge of the Past: Empires and Dynasties”* in Islam Today, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London, 2001, p. 62

²¹ Harris, Sam, Letter to a Christian Nation, p. 87-88

Harris is welcome to show the beauty of his scientific moral system but should not derisively attack all religions without strong logic. His attack on Islam is very biased to say the least. He barely touches upon the scientific achievements of Islam and what Islam did for gender and economic equality but dwells on the vision of militant Muslims who are using religion for their political gains.

He must make an honest effort to constructively study the pure teachings of Islam and avoid making generalizations against Islam based on the action of terrorists. By doing so, Harris will realize that all religions, including Christianity, came from Allah and their pure teachings culminated and grew into Islam.