

Letter to a Christian Nation [Random House] 2006

By Sam Harris

Review

2006

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Harris has produced an impressive, well-written work, which is an exposé of the lack of evidence to support the claims of the Bible and of the fundamentalist Christian believers who define their worldview in terms of it. In the current time and condition of our culture, Harris also suggests the detrimental effects of fundamentalist religious belief and dogma on the prospects for survival and advancement of human civilization. The book is a well-reasoned attack for its time on Christianity and religious belief systems in general, as so many other similar works have been comparable attacks in their time. The problem is that none of these attacks to date have had any substantive effect – except to stir the pot of controversy. There are good reasons why Harris’ work does not succeed in overcoming this problem.

The key weaknesses of the Harris work:

- 1) While addressing his work to Christian religious conservatives, Harris’ tone of address is frequently so condescending [loaded with pejorative adjectives] that he puts his audience off by this alone, making it that much less likely that his “announced” audience will ever get to a consideration of his factual argument. This tonal problem in effect reduces the book to a good sermon to the choir, to those who already have adopted Harris’ negative view of religion and who will cheer his “charged” harangue. However worthy the argument, the book fails rhetorically for this reason.
- 2) While at the end of the work Harris alludes to the value of a transcendent view of reality, he does not develop this view to indicate how it can offer an alternative to religious belief and not be in conflict with the intellectual and rational. He did the same thing in The End of Faith, leaving the reader with only the tantalizing notion that there may be a way to see the transcendent in a positive light.

By not offering a compromise between the religious and secular views, between religious dogma and rational science, the Harris book can only focus on the inadequate evidence that religion offers for its claims. As a result, Harris works from the restrictive dichotomy of religious belief versus atheism, ending up celebrating atheism. In so doing he places himself at the extreme as a secular humanist, rationalist, having no sympathy for religion whatever. It is not necessary to deny the value of the spiritual and

intuitive principles which underlie religion [the transcendent view that Harris credits] and offer only atheism as the alternative. And it would seem that Harris does not really want to do this, but it is in fact the extent of what he offers in this work.

Harris' very important argument against religious moderates and their view that tolerance is what is called for in dealing with religion and religious fundamentalists is not as well developed in this work as in The End of Faith. It is this contribution that is the highlight of what Harris contributes that is "new" to the debate over the appropriate role of religion in the modern civilized context.