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Sam Harris on Religion in Peace and Conflict

Abstract

This thesis discusses the works and views of Sam Harris on topics related to religion in peace and conflict. A particular emphasis is placed on the topics of reason, atheism, terrorism, Islam, and morality. Using content analysis of a wide variety of works of Harris, including books, articles, talks, and podcasts, his main views on the aforementioned topics are presented and commented on. Moreover, through an analysis of Harris's techniques of argumentation, it has been found that some of the main techniques include: humor, thought experiments, comparisons, simplicity, and sophistication.

Keywords

Sam Harris, atheism, religion, peace, conflict, reason, Islam, morality

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1. Introduction

“This is what I think is so dangerous about religion. It actually allows people by the millions--perfectly sane, perfectly intelligent people--to believe what only lunatics or idiots could believe on their own, because the mode of discourse is systematically sheltered from criticism. If you wake up tomorrow morning believing that saying a few Latin words over your breakfast cereal is going to change it into the body of Julius Caesar or Elvis, you have lost your mind. There's no question about that. But if you believe the same thing about a cracker becoming Jesus, very likely there is nothing wrong with you; you simply happen to be Catholic.”

— Sam Harris

“It is taboo in our society to criticize a person’s religious faith [...] these taboos are offensive, deeply unreasonable, but worse than that, they are getting people killed. This is really my concern. My concern is that our religions, the diversity of our religious doctrines, is going to get us killed. I'm worried that our religious discourse- our religious beliefs are ultimately incompatible with civilization.”

— Sam Harris

Choice of the topic

The reason why I am writing this thesis is that someone has to. In fact, everyone with at least a little bit of common sense and whose moral values do not support slavery, suicide bombings, raping women and children, torturing and murdering people for imaginary crimes should write, speak, post on social media and use any communication channel to openly talk about the problem of religion. Every reasonable person should try to persuade enough people to reject and openly criticize religions in order to reach a turning point after which the terrors caused by faith will be significantly reduced and perhaps even eliminated.

I am writing this thesis also because the master program Religion in Peace in Conflict is a failure. It teaches tolerance towards religions to people who are likely to hold high positions in influential international institutions. Instead, it should teach the facts about religions, such as

what they are based on, how irrational they are, how many people have been raped and murdered by religious people, or how they have slowed down scientific and moral progress of humanity, and then teach effective methods of solving these problems. The previous paragraph will most probably not increase my final grade. I accept that, I am ready to sacrifice my scholastic achievement for the cause of making people aware of the true dangers of religions. By openly accepting reason, and thus rejecting religion, I only sacrifice my grade, but millions of people throughout the world would have to sacrifice their lives for the crime of demanding evidence in support of their core beliefs. Because under Islam, the penalty of apostasy is death. This sentence in itself should have ended any debate in defense of religions decades (if not centuries) ago. It has not.

In one of our classes in Uppsala, we were supposed to try to stop a congregation of neo-Nazis, I fail to see why we were not supposed to stop religious people when they gather in churches and mosques, since the actions of the latter are evidently almost incomparably most dangerous to the prospering of modern societies and much less reasonable than those of neo-Nazis. Apparently, this is not evident to modern societies and this is one of the main reasons why they continue to suffer from religion.

If we assume, for example, that people who openly defend Nazism (or keeping, beating, and killing slaves) should be, at least partially, accountable for the atrocities of Nazism (or slavery, respectively), then we must assume that people who openly defend religions should be, at least partially, accountable for the atrocities caused by religions.

In order to give you an idea of how I felt when I attended classes at Uppsala University, as well as when I read the assignments of my fellow students, imagine that you were sitting in a circle of otherwise very intelligent, educated, kind and friendly people, who were expressing their favorable views on the belief in Zeus and support for tolerance for the believers of Thor, Poseidon and any other gods who are no longer as popular as Allah and Yahve.

Alternatively, imagine that while you were sitting there, people around the world were murdering one another because 2.2 billion of them believed that Dumbledore was the creator of

the universe, 1.7 billion believed that it was Voldemort, 1.1 billion worshipped Gandalf¹. Imagine that in a quarter of the world's countries², if someone rejects the idea that Dumbledore (or Voldemort or Gandalf, respectively) were the creators of the universe, he (or she) will either be fined or murdered.

Finally, imagine that the room that you are sitting in is located in one of best universities in the world, sometimes also ranked the top university in a country which leads the whole world in terms of the percentage of its population who reject these impossible ideas. However, even in that room, any comment about the true consequences of such absurd beliefs is perceived as bigotry and frowned upon. If you could imagine this, you could imagine how I feel every day when I think about religions. One difficulty is that this vision of the world is almost unimaginably absurd, yet this is exactly the world that we are living in today.

When I wake up in this world (which everyone does every day), the most pressing problem to solve is how to convince the vast majority of the world that the universe was actually not created by the aforementioned fictional characters and that it is high time they stopped murdering one another because of this. Neo-Nazism, raping, poverty, or climate change are also very important problems to solve, but in order to solve them, it would certainly be beneficial to convince people that science and basing one's beliefs on evidence are better problem-solving tools than praying to Lord Voldemort. Whoever fails to understand (or chooses not to accept) this, will not understand this thesis.

By now it is probably already very clear that my stance about religion is not at all positive. This thesis will not defend the widespread and naïve (and extremely dangerous) view that religions are good and helpful and that worshippers of all denominations can happily cohabit the Earth, live in peace and harmony, hold hands and jump around in circles singing cheerful jingles.

It is very likely that some of the arguments that Sam Harris expresses and that I comment on will be considered somehow offensive by some readers. My purpose (and Harris's) is never to

¹ This comparison is actually too favorable for the Bible or the Koran, which make impossible claims about the whole universe (and are also badly written, in comparison), while *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* make impossible claims only about one small insignificant planet in an insignificant galaxy.

² Based on statistics of the Pew Research Center (Theodorou, 2016).

offend or to attack any person or groups of people; I am simply criticizing the ideologies and doctrines of religions (mostly Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, but also others).

If merely reading about the victims of religion makes you feel uncomfortable, I see it as a good thing, you will be one step closer to empathize with these victims and, you might even feel an urge to help liberate them from the shackles of religion. If you would like to empathize with me, please consider what would happen to me if I read this thesis aloud in a mosque, say, in Saudi Arabia or Sudan. If you are not concerned about the fact that I would be murdered there on the spot, I feel an even stronger urge to make as many people aware of these problems as possible, before it becomes too dangerous to criticize Allah and religions anywhere.

Many people who would read this introduction would think that perhaps I know nothing about religions or what it feels to have real faith, and they would be tempted to negate my whole thesis based on that. They would be completely wrong. Firstly, it should be obvious that one does not have to be an expert on Harry Potter to reject the idea that J. K. Rowling or one of her fictional characters created the whole universe. We just need to look at the universe with some intellectual honesty and use of the scientific method, for instance, we could see that Rowling looks younger than even the trees in a local park, the elixir of youth has not yet been invented, and neither have a time machine or a device to create universes, so every sane person would safely conclude that she has not created the cosmos. However, for some reasons, when a book is two-thousand year old, and was written by a bunch of men whose knowledge of the world was more limited than that of modern day's primary school graduates but whose moral values and levels of violence exceed those of today's psychopaths; billions of people worship such books and the fantastical characters described therein. In short, I do not need to be a studious expert of the contents (or the history) of a fiction book in order to repudiate its validity, I can simply put, say, the Bible on a shelf next to stories about angels, immortal heroes, and talking snakes.

Secondly, one's beliefs that something is true, regardless of the strength and sincerity of their faith, do not make this something true. For example, if a medium is genuinely convinced that she can talk with the dead, she is simply wrong³. Yet this is almost exactly what about two billion people do when they pray to Jesus.

³ Actually, she certainly could speak to them, the difficult part would be receiving a response...

Thirdly, I have some basic knowledge about religions, especially about social psychology and how it can lead to creation of (often-irrational) beliefs. Likewise, I have a good knowledge of the contents of the New Testament, which I have read over 50 times. Finally, I know exactly how it feels to believe in a god with all one's heart, to experience the transformative "touch" of god (or the holy spirit), and be completely vulnerable in his presence. I was a Catholic until the age of 22 and I have been an active member of various churches. Perhaps the most shameful chapter in my life was the time when I belonged to a Christian organization called *Living Water*, where I was actively promoting Christianity and trying to convert people to this religion. I am afraid that I have been at least partially "successful" in that venture. It is probable that there are at least several people, somewhere in the UK, who think that the purpose of their life is to serve Jesus and a part of their faith could be attributed to the conversations that they had with me almost a decade ago. It might be even worse, in that they themselves could spread this common delusion to others, and I admit that I should blame myself for that.

Soon after, I realized how wrong I was about religions. I was reading extensively about atheisms and the dangers of religions. I was also actively trying to persuade people to follow my new beliefs. I believe that I was not successful. I lost a lot of nerves, sleep, and even several friends because I was arguing with religious people. Hence, after some time, I stopped arguing at all. However, my blame still remains and, more importantly, religion still remains and rules the world. I feel a strong obligation not to sit idly and watch when Muslim men are detonating themselves in public spaces, killing innocent women and children, just because they believe in a promise of 72 virgins after death. A few years ago, I decided to write a book and produce a documentary about the atrocities and power of the Catholic church in my native country –Poland. Unfortunately, I have not started doing it yet; the hustle and struggles of ordinary days have overshadowed and delayed this project. Nevertheless, thanks to the program in Religion in Peace and Conflict, I have put myself in an environment where I am constantly reminded about the terrors of religions. In my head, I often see and hear Muslims killing, raping and subjugating innocent and defenseless women, I also hear the "politically correct" and "religious moderates" defending them (the killers and the rapists, not the victims). The message for me is simple: I must stop waiting and I must start taking action. To begin with, however, I should learn the best

methods to fight for reason and peace and against faith and war, thus, I decided that the subject of my final thesis will be a detailed analysis of the strategies and tactics used by Sam Harris to champion this purpose.

Why Sam Harris

As a learner, one of my main strategies is to learn from the best in a given field. Therefore, when I learn about, economics, I read books written by Nobel Prize laureates in economics; similarly, when I learn about Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, I watch videos made by the Gracie family (who are the inventors of this martial art). Because my purpose in studying religions is to free the world from them by convincing as many people to question and reject their religious beliefs, as well as to start openly criticizing them; I try to learn from the people who are most successful at this venture.

After having read extensively about atheism, it became quite clear to me that these people are Richard Dawkins (evolutionary biologist), Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens (deceased journalist), and Daniel Dennett (cognitive scientist). The most famous of them is almost certainly Richard Dawkins, whose 2006 book *God Delusion* remains the number one bestseller in the “atheism” category on Amazon.com and has sold over three million copies (Dawkins, 2015). I must admit that this book was the one that made me an atheist; it was the most popular atheist book when I was a devout Christian and continues to be now, when I am a strong supporter of atheism⁴.

Nevertheless, I prefer the style of writing and speaking of Sam Harris to the styles of Dawkins, Hitchens or Dennett. Moreover, in my opinion, Harris’s wisdom, intelligence, and breadth of expertise are simply incredible, yet he is extremely humble, calm and respectful. Whereas Dawkins may sometimes lose his temper in a confrontation with a religious fundamentalist, Harris always remains composed and polite; similarly, his attacks are never directed at his interlocutor but rather at their beliefs or opinions. However, when he delivers a

⁴ Even though atheism is not a dogma or an ideology, it is just common sense and admission of the obvious, as I will discuss later.

blow at an idea, he expresses himself clearly, concisely and often uses humor. These are some of the qualities that I admire in Harris and that I am trying to acquire myself.

In terms of Harris's success at freeing the world from religions, he is certainly one of the most important public figures today. He has published several international bestsellers, spoke at TED twice, appeared on some of the most popular TV and radio shows, and runs a regular podcast⁵.

Finally, the book *The End of Faith* has helped me abandon the Catholic faith for which I will always be indebted to Harris. Moreover, thanks to his work, I have learned invaluable lessons about many important topics, which of course includes most aspects of religions, but also martial arts, meditation, spirituality, politics, neuroscience, free will, and a number of others.

About Sam Harris⁶

Sam Harris was born in 1967 in Los Angeles, he is an author, philosopher and a neuroscientist. He holds a B.A. in Philosophy from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in Cognitive Neuroscience from the University of California, Los Angeles. He is the author of five New York Times bestsellers. His books include *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, *The Moral Landscape*, *Free Will*, *Lying*, *Waking Up*, and *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (with Maajid Nawaz). *The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction. His writing and public lectures cover a wide range of topics—neuroscience, moral philosophy, religion, meditation practice, human violence, rationality—but generally focus on how a growing understanding of ourselves and the world is changing our sense of how we should live. Harris's work has been published in more than 20 languages and has been discussed in *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Scientific American*, *Nature*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other journals. He has written for *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *The Times (London)*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic*, *The Annals of Neurology*, and elsewhere. Harris also regularly hosts a popular podcast *Waking Up*.

⁵ More details will follow in the next section.

⁶ The information from this section is compiled from Samharris.org/about, [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris), and Amazon.com/Sam-Harris

Research methods

The primary research methodology that I use throughout this thesis is content analysis. I have done an extensive literature review of the works of Sam Harris, which include books, articles, lectures, debates, interviews and other sources. I have then selected the sources which are most relevant to the topics of religion in peace and conflict, with a particular emphasis on the role of religious beliefs on violence, wars and terrorism. In the following sections I present a detailed analysis of these topics. Due to the very nature of content analysis, I provide many quotes and from Harris's work, I organize them in a logical and coherent sequence and I provide my comments and conclusions⁷.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1.

According to Harris, religions are a major source of conflict in the world, rather than a source of peace.

Hypothesis 2.

Harris bases his views and arguments on reason and science, rather than faith.

Hypothesis 3.

Harris sees reason in a very unfavorable position in the battle against religion, yet, he calls for four main ways to improve this position (hypotheses 3.1., 3.2., 3.3).

Hypothesis 3.1.

According to Harris, most questions related to morality (including conflict and violence) could and should be answered by science, rather than left to be answered by religions.

Hypothesis 3.2.

According to Harris, the main goal of discussions about morality should be decreasing human (and other conscious creatures) suffering and increasing their well-being.

Hypothesis 3.3.

⁷ I have tried to arrange a Skype interview with Sam Harris in order to discuss such topics as religion and terrorism in Sweden, the role of religion in Poland and Eastern Europe, the Master in Religion in Peace and Conflict program, as well as a possible use of martial arts in a project to reduce violence; among other topics. Unfortunately, I did not receive a personalized response from him, other than one saying that he receives too many emails to reply to all of them. Consequently, I cannot incorporate the interview in this thesis.

According to Harris, the taboo around religion should be eliminated, so that it becomes open to public criticism.

Hypothesis 4.

The techniques of argumentation and persuasion used by Harris include: humor, thought experiments, comparisons, simplicity, and sophistication.

2. Religion and atheism

At this stage of this thesis, I believe that it is important to explain, in sufficient detail, what Sam Harris means by atheism and how he often criticizes its alternative definitions and uses, as well as the problems associated with using this term in public discourse.

To begin with, let me quote an excerpt from *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which poignantly and wittily summarizes his general view:

“Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious. In fact, 'atheism' is a term that should not even exist. No one needs to identify himself as a 'non-astrologer' or a 'non-alchemist.' We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.” (Harris, 2007)

In a talk given at the Atheist Alliance International convention in Washington in 2007, Harris addresses a range of problems associated with using the term “atheism”. Firstly, he acknowledges something which I myself (and probably everyone who calls themselves an atheist) encounter on a regular basis, namely, “that every religious person thinks he has a knockdown argument against atheism.”

He adds that we have “all heard these arguments, and we are going to keep hearing them as long as we insist upon calling ourselves “atheists”. Arguments like: atheists can’t prove that God doesn’t exist; atheists are claiming to know there is no God, and this is the most arrogant claim of all. As Rick Warren put it, when he and I debated for Newsweek—a reasonable man like himself “doesn’t have enough faith to be an atheist.” The idea that the universe could arise without a creator is, on his account, the most extravagant faith claim of all.”

Harris continues with: “of course, as an argument for the truth of any specific religious doctrine, this is a travesty. And we all know what to do in this situation: We have Russell’s teapot, and thousands of dead gods, and now a flying spaghetti monster, the nonexistence of which also cannot be proven, and yet belief in these things is acknowledged to be ridiculous by everyone. The problem is, we have to keep having this same argument, over and over again, and the argument is being generated to a significant degree, if not entirely, over our use of the term “atheism”.” (2007, Sep).

Then he presents the common argument used by religious people who assert that atheism causes violence on a mass scale, which he calls “greatest crimes of the 20th century argument”. He asks the audience the rhetorical question: “How many times are we going to have to counter the charge that Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot represent the endgame of atheism?” and answers: “I’ve got news for you, this meme is not going away. I argued against it in *The End of Faith*, and it was immediately thrown back at me in reviews of the book as though I had never mentioned it. [...] I can assure you that this bogus argument will be with us for as long as people label themselves “atheists.” And it really convinces religious people. It convinces moderates and liberals. It even convinces the occasional atheist.” Harris then concludes amusingly by asking: “why should we fall into this trap? Why should we stand obediently in the space provided, in the space carved out by the conceptual scheme of theistic religion? It’s as though, before the debate even begins, our opponents draw the chalk-outline of a dead man on the sidewalk, and we just walk up and lie down in it.” (2007, Sep).

Harris also argues that it is virtually impossible to have a successful political career if one is openly an atheist. He supports it with the following evidence: “atheists are the most reviled minority in the United States. Polls indicate that being an atheist is a perfect impediment to running for high office in our country (while being black, Muslim, or homosexual is not).” (2007). He obviously finds this to be a problem and he expresses it in an amusing (but disturbing) way: “the president of the United States has claimed, on more than one occasion, to be in dialog with God. If he said that he was talking to God through his hairdryer, this would precipitate a national emergency. I fail to see how the addition of a hairdryer makes the claim more ridiculous or offensive.” (2007).

In one of his speeches (Harris, 2007, Jan), he makes a clear and convincing point about why atheism does not lead people to do bad things and why religion is not the pinnacle of human morality: “if religion were the only durable foundation for morality you would suspect atheists to be really badly behaved. You would go to a group like the National Academy of Sciences. These are the most elite scientists, 93 percent of whom reject the idea of God. You would expect these guys to be raping and killing and stealing with abandon”.

Nevertheless, he does not see atheism as an alternative to religion, he expresses this as follows: “what is the alternative to religion as we know it? As it turns out, this is the wrong question to ask. Chemistry was not an “alternative” to alchemy; it was a wholesale exchange of ignorance at its most rococo for genuine knowledge. We will find that, as with alchemy, to speak of “alternatives” to religious faith is to miss the point.” Instead, Harris often argues for accepting reason, which is why he co-founded the Project Reason (Project-reason.org).

Reason and evidence

What Sam Harris calls for most strongly is the spread of reason and the scientific method. He wants the humanity to become more reasonable, and that it honestly and critically examines evidence. He often says that “no culture in human history ever suffered because its people became too reasonable or too desirous of having evidence in defense of their core beliefs” (Harris & Saltman, 2006).

As I have mentioned in the previous section, Harris does not favor using the term “atheism”. Instead, he encourages us to: “consider what would happen if we simply used words like “reason” and “evidence.” What is the argument against reason? It’s true that a few people will bite the bullet here and argue that reason is itself a problem, that the Enlightenment was a failed project, etc. But the truth is that there are very few people, even among religious fundamentalists, who will happily admit to being enemies of reason. In fact, fundamentalists tend to think they are champions of reason and that they have very good reasons for believing in God. Nobody wants to believe things on bad evidence. The desire to know what is actually going on in world is very difficult to argue with. In so far as we represent that desire, we become difficult to

argue with. And this desire is not reducible to an interest group. It's not a club or an affiliation, and I think trying to make it one diminishes its power." (2007, Sep)

Unique treatment of religion

According to Harris, religion is more dangerous than any other ideology. For example, in an interview with Saltman (Harris & Saltman, 2006), he said: "If I could wave a magic wand and get rid of either rape or religion, I would not hesitate to get rid of religion. I think more people are dying as a result of our religious myths than as a result of any other ideology. I would not say that all human conflict is born of religion or religious differences, but for the human community to be fractured on the basis of religious doctrines that are fundamentally incompatible, in an age when nuclear weapons are proliferating, is a terrifying scenario. I think we do the world a disservice when we suggest that religions are generally benign and not fundamentally divisive."

Harris also argues that "criticizing a person's ideas about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolitic in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not." (2006) and that this problem is exacerbated because "while religious faith is the one species of human ignorance that will not admit of even the possibility of correction, it is still sheltered from criticism in every corner of our culture." (2006)

Furthermore, Harris regularly stresses the unique arrogance which characterizes the believers of religions: "Religious faith is the only area of discourse where immunity through conversation is considered noble. It's the only area of our lives where someone can win points for saying, 'There's nothing that you can do to change my mind and I'm taking no state of the world ultimately into account in believing what I believe. There's nothing to change about the world that would cause me to revise my beliefs.'" (2005, Dec). For some reason however, worshipping unpopular gods, such as the gods of the Olympia does not grant such privileges to its believers:

"While believing strongly, without evidence, is considered a mark of madness or stupidity in any other area of our lives, faith in God still holds immense prestige in our society. Religion is the one area of our discourse where it is considered noble to pretend to be certain about things no human being could possibly be certain about. It is telling that this

aura of nobility extends only to those faiths that still have many subscribers. Anyone caught worshipping Poseidon, even at sea, will be thought insane.” (2007)

Let me summarize and close this section by reiterating the famous quote from *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006):

“The problem with religion, because it's been sheltered from criticism, is that it allows people to believe *en masse* what only idiots or lunatics could believe in isolation.” (2006)

Science versus religion

Religious people often claim that religion does not stand in opposition to science, but it either concerns other issues, or complements it. According to Harris, such view is absolute nonsense. In an article for *The Huffington Post*, with a provocative (yet perhaps somewhat hopeful) title *Science Must Destroy Religion*, he encapsulated the difference between science and religion in one sentence: “The difference between science and religion is the difference between a willingness to dispassionately consider new evidence and new arguments, and a passionate unwillingness to do so.” (2006, Jan). The quote below summarizes this view:

“Every one of the world's "great" religions utterly trivializes the immensity and beauty of the cosmos. Books like the Bible and the Koran get almost every significant fact about us and our world wrong. Every scientific domain -- from cosmology to psychology to economics -- has superseded and surpassed the wisdom of Scripture. [...] Everything of value that people get from religion can be had more honestly, without presuming anything on insufficient evidence. The rest is self-deception, set to music.” (2016)

Harris very often provides evidence of how unscientific religious beliefs are and how the latter are completely protected by any critical analysis or rational examination in the public discourse. For example, he says: “water is two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. What if someone says, "Well, that's not how I choose to think about water."? All we can do is appeal to scientific values. And if he doesn't share those values, the conversation is over. If someone doesn't value evidence, what evidence are you going to provide to prove that they should value it? If someone doesn't value logic, what logical argument could you provide to show the importance of logic?” (2011, Apr). The second part of this excerpt encompasses one of the

greatest problems with religions and their adherents: they value neither evidence nor logic, it is therefore close to impossible to convince them using scientific evidence or logical arguments.

This problem is particularly difficult to solve (it may even seem utterly hopeless) because of the power and status of religious beliefs, which make them likely to be preserved since they are effectively almost completely immune to change, and the reason for this is similar to the ridiculous: “just because”. In the words of Harris: “the point is that most of what we currently hold sacred is not sacred for any reason other than that it was thought sacred yesterday.” (2006)

Religion and education

In an article titled *Politics of Ignorance*, Harris (2005, Aug) wrote: “unreason is now ascendant in the United States—in our schools, in our courts, and in each branch of the federal government. Only 28 percent of Americans believe in evolution; 68 percent believe in Satan. Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.” By comparing the proportions of the population who believe in evolution to those who believe in Satan, he makes a convincing point about the state of American education (it is convincing, of course, only to those who do not believe in Satan). Elsewhere, he says that: “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.” (2006)

Harris often provides various statistics which prove how insidious religious are for American education, here are two selected ones:

“44% of Americans want us to stop teaching our children about the biological fact of evolution. 62% actually want us to teach creationism in schools, but 44% want only creationism. [...] we are building a civilization of ignorants.” (2007)

“120 million of us [US Americans] place the big bang 2,500 years after the Babylonians and Sumerians learned to brew beer.” (2006)

These numbers are strongly reflected in American politics, which is very strongly dependent on the Bible, due to the fact, as Harris argues, the US citizens believe the following:

“The God that our neighbors believe in is essentially an invisible person. He’s a creator deity, who created the universe to have a relationship with one species of primates –

lucky us. And he's got galaxy upon galaxy to attend to, but he's especially concerned with what we do, and he's especially concerned with what we do while naked. He almost certainly disapproves of homosexuality. And he's created this cosmos as a vast laboratory in which to test our powers of credulity, and the test is this: can you believe in this God on bad evidence, which is to say, on faith? And if you can, you will win an eternity of happiness after you die. And it's precisely this sort of god and this sort of scheme that you must believe in if you're going to have any kind of future in politics in this country, no matter what your gifts. You could be an unprecedented genius, you could look like George Clooney, you could have a billion dollars and you could have the social skills of Oprah and you are going nowhere in politics in this country, unless you believe in that sort of god."

(2010, Mar1)

All religions are not equal

It is very clear from Harris's writings that all religions are not equal, as many religious moderates and supporters of religious tolerance claim. He often warns from using the term "religion", for instance, he says that it "is a nearly useless term. It's a term like "sports". Now there are sports like Badminton and sports like Thai Boxing, and they have almost nothing in common apart from breathing. There are sports that are just synonymous with the risk of physical injury or even death. There is, I'm happy to say, a religion of peace in this world, but it's not Islam. The claim that Islam is a religion of peace that we hear ceaselessly reiterated is completely delusional. Now Jainism actually is a religion of peace. The core principle of Jainism is non-violence. Gandhi got his non-violence from the Jains. The crazier you get as a Jain, the less we have to worry about you. Jain extremists are paralysed by their pacifism. Jain extremists can't take their eyes off the ground when they walk lest they step on an ant. Needless to say, they are vegetarian. So the problem is not religious extremism, because extremism is not a problem if your core beliefs are truly non-violent. The problem isn't fundamentalism. We often hear this said; these are euphemisms. The only problem with Islamic fundamentalism are the fundamentals of Islam."

(2010, Dec)

Jainism seems to be Harris's pick as to the religion that is least conducive to violence. He compares it to Islam in the following way: "The principal tenet of Jainism is non-harming. Observant Jains will literally not harm a fly. Fundamentalist Jainism and fundamentalist Islam do not have the same consequences, neither logically nor behaviorally." (Samharris.org).

Similarly, he compares Jainism to the Christianity and Judaism by saying that "'Mahavira, the Jain patriarch, surpassed the morality of the Bible with a single sentence: "Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being." (2007).

Harris speaks quite favorably about Buddhism (relative to other religions), for example, in *Killing the Buddha* (Samharris.org), he wrote: "One could surely argue that the Buddhist tradition, taken as a whole, represents the richest source of contemplative wisdom that any civilization has produced. In a world that has long been terrorized by fratricidal Sky-God religions, the ascendance of Buddhism would surely be a welcome development".

In a similar fashion, Harris also makes comparisons between various denominations within a religion. For instance, he has the following to say about Mormonism in relation to Christianity: "Mormonism, it seems to me, is—objectively—just a little more idiotic than Christianity is. It has to be: because it is Christianity plus some very stupid ideas." (Samharris.org)

3. Terrorism and religious wars

Let me start this section with this quote from *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which concisely summarizes the extent of religious wars:

"Incompatible religious doctrines have balkanized our world into separate moral communities, and these divisions have become a continuous source of bloodshed. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it has been at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews vs. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians vs. Catholic Croats; Orthodox Serbians vs. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants vs. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims vs. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims vs. Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite vs. Sunni Muslims), and the

Caucasus (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis vs. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. These are places where religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in recent decades. Why is religion such a potent source of violence? There is no other sphere of discourse in which human beings so fully articulate their differences from one another, or cast these differences in terms of everlasting rewards and punishments. Religion is the one endeavor in which us--them thinking achieves a transcendent significance. If you really believe that calling God by the right name can spell the difference between eternal happiness and eternal suffering, then it becomes quite reasonable to treat heretics and unbelievers rather badly. The stakes of our religious differences are immeasurably higher than those born of mere tribalism, racism, or politics." (2007)

The aforementioned wars and conflicts refer to the current times; however, there are countless examples of religious wars in the history of humanity, in fact, according to Harris, most of historical wars were waged with the help of some gods on both sides of the conflict. The crusades are a classic example, which even Christians cannot dispute. In the excerpt below, Harris provides another example, whose concluding sentence could even be funny, if it were not so incredibly macabre:

"Over one million people died in the orgy of religious killing that attended the partitioning of India and Pakistan. The two countries have since fought three official wars, suffered a continuous bloodletting at their shared border, and are now poised to exterminate one another with nuclear weapons simply because they disagree about "facts" that are every bit as fanciful as the names of Santa's reindeer. And their discourse is such that they are capable of mustering a suicidal level of enthusiasm for these subjects without evidence." (2006)

Harris also argues that people who turn to violence because of religious reasons are not "stupid" or uneducated, they suffer from something much more dangerous, namely, from faith:

"The problem is not that religious people are stupid. It's not that religious fundamentalists are stupid. I happen to think that you can be so well educated that you can build a nuclear bomb, and still get--and still believe that you will get the 72 virgins in paradise--that is the

problem. The problem is that--religion--because it has been sheltered from criticism as it has been--allows people--perfectly sane, perfectly intelligent people--to believe *en masse*, what only idiots or lunatics could believe in isolation.” (2006)

“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; it is what we do with words like 'God' and 'paradise' and 'sin' in the present that will determine our future.” (2006)

After the terrorists attacks of 9/11, Harris urged people to admit that the “war on terrorism” was actually a war with Islam. For example, in an article in Washington Times (2004, Dec), he wrote: “It is time we admitted that we are not at war with "terrorism". We are at war with Islam. This is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims, but we are absolutely at war with the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran. The only reason Muslim fundamentalism is a threat to us is because the fundamentals of Islam are a threat to us.” He also rejects the idea that only so called “fundamentalist” Muslims have dangerous beliefs. It is essentially the core of Islam that moves people to become terrorists.

ISIS and terrorist groups

In one of the Waking Up podcasts, titled *What do Jihadists Really Want?* (2016, Aug), Harris makes an attempt to understand and illustrate a possible way of thinking of someone who joins ISIS:

“Picture a young man, who’s spent his entire life being the least confident guy in the bar. But now, he’s been recruited into a cult that gives him a new understanding. All those hot chicks who he’s been worried about rejecting him, well now they’re his slaves, whether they’re his wife, or wives, he actually can have more than one, or his actual sex slaves. He rules. He’s to be feared and obeyed. So he might have been bored with his life before and he might have seemed destined for a life of boredom. But now his life has suddenly become this massive first-person shooter game, where he’s been inducted into a fraternity of tough guys and given absolute dominion of women. Picture the emotional attraction of that to a certain type of man and then add the intellectual or pseudo-

intellectual component to it, so whatever his actual intellectual actual intellectual accomplishments, at the level of his mind, now he's suddenly a philosopher and a scientist and a priest, all in one, because god has simply given him the truth about the cosmos in the Koran."

Suicide bombing

Harris sees suicide bombing as a phenomenon that nowadays is almost exclusively practiced as a consequence of believing in Islam. He chose this phenomenon to begin his book *The End of Faith* (2006), where he narrates an imaginary story which takes place on a public bus. There, a young man smiles triumphantly right before blowing himself up, and everyone around him. Then, Harris asks the following series of rhetorical questions: "These are the facts. This is all we know for certain about the young man. Is there anything else that we can infer about him or the basis of his behavior? Was he popular in school? Was he rich or was he poor? Was he of low or high intelligence? [...] Did he have a college education? Did he have a bright future as a mechanical engineer?" Then, Harris adds that "his actions leave no clue at all [and] his behavior is simply mute on questions of this sort, and hundreds like them." He closes with the following punchline question: "why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy—you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy—to guess the young man's religion?" (2006).

The effect of this tactic is that when one recognizes that this question is rhetorical and that the answer is obvious, then it must follow that it is obvious that suicide bombing is (at least predominantly) characteristic of Muslims and that such factors as education, intelligence, income, or popularity may be irrelevant when one believes that by killing infidels, he will be rewarded after death with an abundance of virgins to rape.

Another quote on terrorism and suicide bombing, from an article aptly titled *Bombing Our Illusions* and published in *The Huffington Post*, summarizes well Harris's opinion on this problem:

"Open the newspaper today—or tomorrow, or almost any day for many years to come—and you will discover that some pious Muslim has deliberately blown himself to bits for the purpose of killing "infidels" or "apostates." It is likely that the bomber was male, middle class, and comparatively well educated. It is especially likely that he was guided

by the sincere expectation of spending eternity in Paradise. In fact, suicide bombing is now so commonplace in our world that most of us have lost sight of just how unimaginable it should be. It is, perhaps, the least likely thing human beings could ever be inclined to do. What, after all, is less likely than large numbers of middle class, educated, psychologically healthy people intentionally blowing themselves up—in crowds of children, in front of the offices of the Red Cross, at weddings—and having their mothers sing their praises for it? Can we even conceive of a more profligate misuse of human life? As a cultural phenomenon, suicide bombing should be impossible. But here it is.” (Harris 2011, May)

Although Harris emphasizes that suicide bombing is practically always a Muslim phenomenon, he also admits that Christians (and other religious groups) could also (at least potentially) succumb to the temptation of blowing themselves up with a hope to get a straight ticket to heaven, or to using other terrorist means in order to punish the infidels:

“As we have seen, there is something that most Americans share with Osama bin Laden, the nineteen hijackers, and much of the Muslim world. We, too, cherish the idea that certain fantastic propositions can be believed without evidence. Such heroic acts of credulity are thought not only acceptable but redeeming — even necessary.” (2006)

Harris also criticizes (and worries about) a religious war in his own country, he says:

“44% of Americans, if they turned on their television tomorrow morning, and saw that a mushroom cloud had replaced Jerusalem, or New York, would see a silver lining in that cloud, because that cloud would be a portent that the best thing that is ever gonna happen is about to happen: the return of Christ. [...] these people not only elect our congressmen and our presidents, they get elected as our congressmen and presidents. We are not talking about the fringes of society; we are literally talking about the fringes of the oval office, if not its present occupant. So, one thing that I argue is: this should be terrifying to us.” (2007)

Islam

Sam Harris often stresses that Islam has a unique position as it is the most problematic and violent religion in the 21st century. By comparing two evils, it fares even worse than Christianity and Judaism, as the following quote suggests: “As a source of objective morality, the Bible is one of the worst books we have. It might be the very worst, in fact—if we didn't also happen to have the Koran.” (2006, Mar).

He compares the beliefs and behaviors of Muslims of today to those of Christians of the past. For example, he says that “Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible.” (2007).

In a debate against Reza Aslan, (a Muslim, a popular scholar of religion and its defender), when he talked about the morality of the Bible, Harris responded by illustrating what would happen if people followed the prescriptions of the books of the Hebrew Bible, where “it’s just spelled out, *ad nauseam*, when you should kill people for theological offences, and if you followed those prescriptions, you would have very much a world like we’ve witnessed under the Taliban in Afghanistan, where people had their heads cut off in half-time in a soccer match for adultery.” (Harris & Aslan, 2012, May).

Moreover, in an article with a revealing title: *Sleepwalking Toward Armageddon*, he summarizes the central message of the Koran as “hatred of infidels” (2014, Sep). This is particularly worried about this pernicious situation, because ““in the year 2006, a person can have sufficient intellectual and material resources to build a nuclear bomb and still believe that he will get seventy-two virgins in Paradise.” (2016). Harris, therefore, is seriously afraid about the future of our civilization⁸. He provides countless examples to illustrate how dangerous the Koran is, he also demonstrates how dangerous the book itself (a physical copy of the book) can be:

“But what do you think would happen if we had burned a copy of the Koran on tonight's show? There would be riots in scores of countries. Embassies would fall. In response to our mistreating a book, millions of Muslims would take to the streets, and we would spend the rest of our lives fending off credible threats of murder. But when ISIS crucifies

⁸ and so am I...

people, buries children alive, and rapes and tortures women by the thousands—all in the name of Islam—the response is a few small demonstrations in Europe and a hashtag.” (2014, Oct)

Terrorism and freedom of speech

Most Muslims would assert that Islam is a religion of peace. Harris interprets this assertion as follows: “the position of the Muslim community in the face of all provocations seems to be: Islam is a religion of peace, and if you say that it isn't, we will kill you.” (2008, May). He often supports this with relevant statistics, for instance, in *The Moral Landscape* (2006), he wrote: “According to a recent poll, 36 percent of British Muslims (ages sixteen to twenty-four) think apostates should be put to death for their unbelief”.

The terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo in 2015 resulted in many heated debates about Islam, the freedom of speech and terrorism. Perhaps most astoundingly, there were countless people who were defending Islam and even the terrorists. Sam Harris responded to that event with a long and detailed moral analysis, which he posted on Twitter: “People have been murdered over cartoons. End of moral analysis. #CharlieHebdo” (2015, Feb).

As one might imagine, Harris is highly skeptical about the concept of freedom of religion. He compares it with freedom of speech using the following words:

“We hear everywhere about this false trade-off between freedom of speech and freedom of religion, as though there were some kind of balance to be struck here. There is no balance to be struck. Freedom of speech never infringes on freedom of religion. There is nothing I can say in this podcast about religion in general, or about Islam in particular, that would infringe upon someone else's freedom to practice his or her religion. If your freedom of religion entails that you force those who do not share it to conform to it, well that's not freedom of religion; we have a word for that – that's theocracy. This respect that we are all urged to show for "religious sensitivity" is actually a demand that the blasphemy laws of Islam be followed by non-Muslims.” (2015, Jan)

The CharliHebdo employees were not the only cartoonists who were facing death because of simply doing their job. As Harris recounts: “Recently , crowds of thousands gathered

throughout the Muslim world - burning European embassies, issuing threats, taking hostages, even killing people - in protest over twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were first published in a Danish newspaper.” He then asks a rhetorical question: “when was the last atheist riot?” (2007).

Harris’s simple conclusion of this state of affairs is very simple: “we are now in the 21st century: all books, including the Koran, should be fair game for flushing down the toilet without fear of violent reprisal.” (2011, May).

Malala vs Ayaan Hirsi Ali

In an interview with Tim Ferris (a bestselling author), Harris speaks very highly of Malala Yousafzai, he says that she deserved the Nobel Prize “more than almost anyone [he] could think of” and calls her “the best thing that has come out of the Muslim world in a thousand years” and “an absolute hero” (Harris & Ferriss, 2015). Nevertheless, he states that the reason why she is celebrated to such a high degree, apart from her heroism, is that “she has not repudiated Islam, she is Muslim and a believer, and is still just a kid in many respects”. Then he compares Malala to “someone who is very much like her” –his friend Ayaan Hirsi Ali– , who “is often vilified on the political left”.

She is a Somali woman who fled a forced marriage and emigrated to Holland, learned Dutch, got a degree in political science and became a member of the Dutch Parliament, where she fought for the rights of Muslim women “who were living with men who imported all of the same practices of female genital mutilation, and other forms of coercion, and her collaborator on a film Theo Van Gogh was killed. [...] and she has essentially ever since lived in a perpetual flight from theocrats who want to kill her, and also under the perpetual shadow of criticism of liberals who attack her as a bigot because she says [that] there is a unique problem with Islam in this moment in history [...], it is certainly not a religion of peace [and] all the oppression of women in the Muslim world is not an accident, it actually has a very strong scriptural foundation. [...] she suffered herself female genital mutilation and has been running from bearded men who want to kill her, she still doesn’t have the right to say that” (Harris & Ferriss, 2015).

Hirsi Ali was also given an honorary degree from Brandeis University, but after a protest by a handful of Muslim organizations the honorary degree was removed, which Harris comments in the following way: “our liberal institutions are getting bullied by theocrats under the guise of political correctness and multiculturalism, and it’s really depressing”.

Muslim immigrants in Europe

In brief, Harris is afraid that the waves of Muslim immigrants pose a threat to the safety of Europe (and even the world as a whole). For example, in *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he wrote:

“Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on Earth. According to the United Nations' Human Development Report (2005) they are also the healthiest, as indicated by life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate, and infant mortality. Insofar as there is a crime problem in Western Europe, it is largely the product of immigration. Seventy percent of the inmates of France's jails, for instance, are Muslim. The Muslims of Western Europe are generally not atheists. Conversely, the fifty nations now ranked lowest in terms of the United Nations' Human Development Index are unwaveringly religious.

Other analyses paint the same picture: the United States is unique among wealthy democracies in its level of religious adherence; it is also uniquely beleaguered by high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and infant mortality. The same comparison holds true within the United States itself: Southern and Midwestern states, characterized by the highest levels of religious literalism, are especially plagued by the above indicators of societal dysfunction, while the comparatively secular states of the Northeast conform to European norms.” (2007)

In a conversation with his aforementioned friend –Ayaan Hirsi Ali–, who actively opposes honor violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation (and is an atheist), she asked Harris this long question:

“These men [Muslim immigrants] come from cultures that are prejudiced against women and just because they cross the German border, it doesn’t mean that they immediately become German. They bring with them those attitudes and customs and values and outlook on the status and position of women, so you cannot sacrifice the rights of women and children in order to hold onto this false and dangerous ideology of multiculturalism, which is not working, it has failed. [...] if a victim of rape is now pretending that it was German man who did it, how are you ever going to correct this?” (Hirsi Ali, in Harris and Hirsi Ali, 2016, Nov).

Harris shared her opinion and concern and added an example of a 10-year-old boy in Austria who was raped when a group of recent migrants were brought to a public swimming pool as an integration outing. “One of these men, when we went into the bathroom, got his hands on a 10-year-old boy and raped him in the stall, and then [...] the man claimed that he had no idea that there was anything wrong with this, that he was having a quote: “sexual emergency”, he hadn’t seen his wife in 4 months and he was initially prosecuted, but the charges against him were dropped [because] as a matter of cultural difference, he couldn’t have known that it wasn’t ok to rape a 10-year-old boy anally and injure him and all the rest. And it’s just when you focus on a case like that, it just seems like we’re witnessing the suicide of the civilization” (Harris and Hirsi Ali, 2016, Nov).

Religious morality and violence

For Harris, morality should be predominantly (if not uniquely) concerned with decreasing suffering and increasing happiness of conscious creatures. He expresses his views about morality in detail in his book *The Moral Landscape* (2014). Nevertheless, I believe that a brief excerpt from his talk titled *Can Science Determine Human Values?* provides a basic overview of his main arguments about morality from a philosophical perspective:

“Values reduce to facts about the well-being of conscious creatures; the well-being of conscious creatures is what can be valued in this universe. Now, here’s the one bit of philosophy I’m going to anchor this too: imagine a universe in which every conscious creature suffers as much as it can for as long as it can – I call this the worst possible misery

for everyone. The worst possible misery for everyone is bad. If the word bad is to mean anything, surely it applies to the worst possible misery for everyone. The moment you grant me that the worst possible misery for everyone is bad and therefore worth avoiding. Well then you have every other possible constellation of conscious experience which, by definition, is better. So you have this continuum here of states of consciousness and given that consciousness is related to the way the universe is, it's constrained by the laws of nature in some way, there are going to be right and wrong ways to move along this continuum. Now this is, in philosophy, a somewhat controversial statement. I do not see how." (2010, Dec)

Harris argues that questions of morality have objective answers which should be reached through the scientific method. He clearly repudiates the idea that there should be different moralities, for example, he says that "just as there is no such thing as Christian physics or Muslim Algebra, we will see the there is no such thing as Christian or Muslim morality." (2006). In his first TED talk, titled *Science Can Answer Moral Questions* (2010, Feb) he expresses this idea in the following way:

"So, what would happen if I showed up at a physics conference and said, "String theory is bogus. It doesn't resonate with me. It's not how I chose to view the universe at a small scale. I'm not a fan." Well, nothing would happen because I'm not a physicist; I don't understand string theory. I'm the Ted Bundy of string theory. I wouldn't want to belong to any string theory club that would have me as a member.

How have we convinced ourselves that in the moral sphere there is no such thing as moral expertise, or moral talent, or moral genius even? How have we convinced ourselves that every opinion has to count? How have we convinced ourselves that every culture has a point of view on these subjects worth considering? Does the Taliban have a point of view on physics that is worth considering? No. How is their ignorance any less obvious on the subject of human well-being?"

He also maintains that what religious people consider moral is fundamentally flawed and immoral:

“Indeed, religion allows people to imagine that their concerns are moral when they are highly immoral - that is, when pressing these concerns inflicts unnecessary and appalling suffering on innocent human beings. This explains why Christians like yourself expend more "moral" energy opposing abortion than fighting genocide. It explains why you are more concerned about human embryos than about the lifesaving promise of stem-cell research. And it explains why you can preach against condom use in sub-Saharan Africa while millions die from AIDS there each year.” (2007)

Furthermore, treating the Bible or the Koran as a source (let alone the perfect and infallible source) of moral values is (by now certainly unsurprisingly) wrong, for example:

“We read the Golden Rule and judge it to be a brilliant distillation of many of our ethical impulses. And then we come across another of God’s teachings on morality: if a man discovers on his wedding night that his bride is not a virgin, he must stone her to death on her father’s doorstep (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).” (2007)

As is evident by now, Harris does not spare criticism towards the god of the Old Testament, nevertheless, he does not describe him using offensive vocabulary. Perhaps the harshest criticism that I have found was “utter psychopath”, used in *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), in the following context: “Everyone who has eyes to see can see that if the God of Abraham exists, He is an utter psychopath--and the God of Nature too. If you can't see these things just by looking, you have simply closed your eyes to the realities of our world.” For the sake of comparison with criticisms voiced by other atheists, this sentence is surely less harsh than, say, the famous description of the god of the Old Testament by Richard Dawkins in his *The God Delusion*: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” (Dawkins, 2008)

Many supporters of religions, especially religious moderates, claim that the times have changed and that what was moral in, for example, the Old Testament, is no longer moral today and that god had to give such instructions and moral principles to our ancient ancestors that they would be able to understand and follow them. Harris would probably respond by saying that he

admits that it is possible that religion could be useful in the past if, because it might have allowed prehistoric humans to work together in order to increase their chance of survival, however, he rejects that it is needed in the present:

“Some researchers have speculated that religion itself may have played an important role in getting large groups of prehistoric humans to socially cohere. If this is true, we can say that religion has served an important purpose. This does not suggest, however, that it serves an important purpose now. There is, after all, nothing more natural than rape. But no one would argue that rape is good, or compatible with a civil society, because it may have had evolutionary advantages for our ancestors. That religion may have served some necessary function for us in the past does not preclude the possibility that it is now the greatest impediment to our building a global civilization. [...] We must continually remind ourselves that there is a difference between what is natural and what is actually good for us. Cancer is perfectly natural, and yet its eradication is a primary goal of modern medicine. Evolution may have selected for territorial violence, rape, and other patently unethical behaviors as strategies to propagate one’s genes—but our collective well-being clearly depends on our opposing such natural tendencies.” (2006)

Religious moderation and tolerance

“Religious moderation is the direct result of taking scripture less and less seriously. So why not take it less seriously still? Why not admit that the Bible is merely a collection of imperfect books written by highly fallible human beings.” (2007)

I was tempted to explain, with my own words, how Harris understands the problem of religious moderates, however, try as I might, I could not express it better than the following excerpt from his conversation with Maajid Nawaz in *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*:

“The problem is that moderates of all faiths are committed to reinterpreting, or ignoring outright, the most dangerous and absurd parts of their scripture—and this commitment is precisely what makes them moderates. But it also requires some degree of intellectual dishonesty, because moderates can’t acknowledge that their moderation comes from outside the faith. The doors leading out of the prison of scriptural literalism simply do not

open from the inside. In the twenty-first century, the moderate's commitment to scientific rationality, human rights, gender equality, and every other modern value—values that, as you say, are potentially universal for human beings—comes from the past thousand years of human progress, much of which was accomplished in spite of religion, not because of it. So when moderates claim to find their modern, ethical commitments within scripture, it looks like an exercise in self-deception. The truth is that most of our modern values are antithetical to the specific teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And where we do find these values expressed in our holy books, they are almost never best expressed there. Moderates seem unwilling to grapple with the fact that all scriptures contain an extraordinary amount of stupidity and barbarism that can always be rediscovered and made holy anew by fundamentalists—and there's no principle of moderation internal to the faith that prevents this. These fundamentalist readings are, almost by definition, more complete and consistent—and, therefore, more honest. The fundamentalist picks up the book and says, "Okay, I'm just going to read every word of this and do my best to understand what God wants from me. I'll leave my personal biases completely out of it." Conversely, every moderate seems to believe that his interpretation and selective reading of scripture is more accurate than God's literal words. Presumably, God could have written these books any way He wanted. And if He wanted them to be understood in the spirit of twenty-first-century secular rationality, He could have left out all those bits about stoning people to death for adultery or witchcraft. It really isn't hard to write a book that prohibits sexual slavery—you just put in a few lines like "Don't take sex slaves!" and "When you fight a war and take prisoners, as you inevitably will, don't rape any of them!" And yet God couldn't seem to manage it. This is why the approach of a group like the Islamic State holds a certain intellectual appeal (which, admittedly, sounds strange to say) because the most straightforward reading of scripture suggests that Allah advises jihadists to take sex slaves from among the conquered, decapitate their enemies, and so forth." (2015)

The idea that everyone's beliefs should be respected has terrible consequences, in Harris's view. For example, he says that: "there are also very practical, moral concerns that follow

from the glib idea that anyone is free to value anything—the most consequential being that it is precisely what allows highly educated, secular, and otherwise well-intentioned people to pause thoughtfully, and often interminably, before condemning practices like compulsory veiling, genital excision, bride-burning, forced marriage, and the other cheerful products of alternative “morality” found elsewhere in the world. [...] There are women and girls getting their faces burned off with acid at this moment for daring to learn to read, or for not consenting to marry men they have never met, or even for the crime of getting raped.” (2010, Mar2)

Perhaps the most shocking example of the extremes to which religious tolerance can take otherwise intelligent people is Harris’s encounter with a prominent scholar, whose name he does not reveal). This is how he described that conversation in his blog:

“At the conclusion of my talk, I fell into debate with another invited speaker, who seemed, at first glance, to be very well positioned to reason effectively about the implications of science for our understanding of morality. She holds a degree in genetics from Dartmouth, a masters in biology from Harvard, and a law degree, another masters, and a Ph.D. in the philosophy of biology from Duke. This scholar is now a recognized authority on the intersection between criminal law, genetics, neuroscience and philosophy. Here is a snippet of our conversation, more or less verbatim:

She: What makes you think that science will ever be able to say that forcing women to wear burqas is wrong?

Me: Because I think that right and wrong are a matter of increasing or decreasing wellbeing—and it is obvious that forcing half the population to live in cloth bags, and beating or killing them if they refuse, is not a good strategy for maximizing human wellbeing.

She: But that’s only your opinion.

Me: Okay... Let’s make it even simpler. What if we found a culture that ritually blinded every third child by literally plucking out his or her eyes at birth, would you then agree that we had found a culture that was needlessly diminishing human wellbeing?

She: It would depend on why they were doing it.

Me (slowly returning my eyebrows from the back of my head): Let's say they were doing it on the basis of religious superstition. In their scripture, God says, "Every third must walk in darkness."

She: Then you could never say that they were wrong."

Harris concludes his account of that event by saying: "I confess that once we did speak, and I peered into the terrible gulf that separated us on these issues, I found that I could not utter another word to her. In fact, our conversation ended with my blindly enacting two, neurological clichés: my jaw quite literally dropped open, and I spun on my heels before walking away." (2010, Mar2)

Political correctness, in general, is also an almost unsurmountable problem, because helps religions to flourish. Even universities⁹ are not immune from the negative influences of political correctness. In *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, Harris argues that:

"The public conversation about the connection between Islamic ideology and Muslim intolerance and violence has been stifled by political correctness. In the West, there is now a large industry of apology and obfuscation designed, it would seem, to protect Muslims from having to grapple with the kinds of facts we've been talking about. The humanities and social science departments of every university are filled with scholars and pseudo-scholars—deemed to be experts in terrorism, religion, Islamic jurisprudence, anthropology, political science, and other fields—who claim that Muslim extremism is never what it seems. These experts insist that we can never take Islamists and jihadists at their word and that none of their declarations about God, paradise, martyrdom, and the evils of apostasy have anything to do with their real motivations." (2015)

Spirituality

The subject of spirituality is so important for Harris that he has spent over two decades learning from some great spiritual masters from various religious and cultural traditions, moreover, he published a whole book about it: *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2015) whose subtitle already suggests that he does not see religion as the only true (or, in fact, as one

⁹ Including the Uppsala University

worthy of pursuing) path towards spirituality. He states simply that “spirituality must be distinguished from religion—because people of every faith, and of none, have had the same sorts of spiritual experiences.” (2015)

Many people claim that their lives have been transformed for the better because they have accepted a particular religion, hence, they claim that religions are beneficial. Needless to say, Harris disagrees:

“I have no doubt that your acceptance of Christ coincided with some very positive changes in your life. Perhaps you now love other people in a way that you never imagined possible. You may even experience feelings of bliss while praying. I don’t wish to denigrate any of these experiences. I would point out, however, that billions of other human beings, in every time and place, have had similar experiences - but they had them while thinking about Krishna, or Allah, or the Buddha, while making art or music, or while contemplating the beauty of Nature. There is no question that it is possible for people to have profoundly transformative experiences. And there is no question that it is possible for them to misinterpret these experiences, and to further delude themselves about the nature of reality. You are, of course, right to believe that there is more to life than simply understanding the structure and contents of the universe. But this does not make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about its structure and contents any more respectable.” (2007)

4. Techniques of argumentation

In his strife for reason and secularity, which he wages (most probably solely) with words, Sam Harris uses a number of tactics and techniques that make his words persuasive, and hence effective. I have identified the following five as the most interesting methods that he uses: humor, thought experiments, comparisons, simplicity, and sophistication. Due to the limited scale and scope of this thesis, I will limit myself to providing just a couple of examples of each of the main methods that I describe below.

Humor

Harris considers humor a powerful weapon in general, and against religion in particular. For example, in *The Moral Landscape* (2006), he recounts a story about how Ku Klux Klan almost completely lost its popularity as a result of the fact that a young writer and activist named Stetson Kennedy infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan, learned about the internal functioning, code words, and rituals of the Klan and then approached the writers of the highly popular *The Adventures of Superman* radio program, who then produced and broadcast a series titled “Clan of the Fiery Cross”, where the KKK were the villains in white hoods. Consequently, they soon became a subject of mockery, and hence, joining the Klan lost most of its previous appeal.

Accordingly, Harris often uses amusing and funny arguments, especially in his talks and debates. It is particularly effective because then the subject of the joke is forced to laugh at himself. Moreover, because humor is far less offensive than vulgar or denigrating invectives, it is very hard to defend oneself from it, unless one is at least equally skillful at creating witty ripostes (since retorting with forceful diatribes is generally perceived as a sign of weakness rather than strength, and thus, as less effective). Below is a selection of three of my favorite lines from Harris:

“Jesus Christ—who, as it turns out, was born of a virgin, cheated death, and rose bodily into the heavens—can now be eaten in the form of a cracker.” (2006)

“44% of Americans also believe that the creator of the universe literally gave the land of Israel to the Jews. This is God as an omniscient real estate broker.” (2007)

“If you wake up tomorrow morning thinking that saying a few Latin words over your pancakes is gonna turn them into the body of Elvis Presley, you have lost your mind. But if you think more or less the same thing about a cracker and the body of Jesus, you're just a Catholic.” (2010, Mar1)

Thought experiments

Harris often asks his audience and readers to “imagine” or “picture” a scenario, which he then likens to a real-life situation in order to demonstrate a desired conclusion. This tactic encourages the readers to put themselves in a specific position, to empathize with a certain person, or to analyze a given situation from another perspective. For example, in his first TED talk (2010, Feb),

Harris was talking about the issue of wearing veils or burkas “voluntary”, at one point he said: “what does “voluntary” mean in a community where, when a girl gets raped, her father's first impulse, rather often, is to murder her out of shame? Just let that fact detonate in your brain for a minute: Your daughter gets raped, and what you want to do is kill her. What are the chances that represents a peak of human flourishing?” This way, he asked the audience to imagine that their own daughter got raped and that the first thing that comes to their mind is to murder her in order to avoid some negative comments from their neighbors. In my opinion, the use of such thought experiments is extremely powerful and persuasive.

In another experiment, Harris encourages his readers to “imagine a world in which generations of human beings come to believe that certain films were made by God or that specific software was coded by him. Imagine a future in which millions of our descendants murder each other over rival interpretations of Star Wars or coding of Windows 98. Could anything --anything -- be more ridiculous? And yet, this would be no more ridiculous than the world we are living in.” (2006). This thought experiment is similar to the one that I used in the introduction to this thesis.

Another thought experiment, which suggests a high level of intellectual retardation among religious people, invokes a very similar scenario to the one used in a popular series of French films: *The Visitors*, where a medieval knight was transported in time to the modern-time France:

“Imagine that we could revive a well-educated Christian of the fourteenth century. The man would prove to be a total ignoramus, except on matters of faith. His beliefs about geography, astronomy, and medicine would embarrass even a child, but he would know more or less everything there is to know about God.” (2006)

Comparisons

Harris very often uses various kinds of comparisons to prove his points. I have already presented some in previous sections, for instance, comparing murdering people over religious books to murdering them over Star Wars or Windows 98. Because comparisons create a vivid picture of a topic and place them in a context, they are often effective, memorable, and can serve as a good learning tool. For example, by using the short comparison: “the only differences between a cult

and a religion are the numbers of adherents and the degree to which they are marginalized by the rest of society” in *Waking Up* (2015), Harris manages to define the terms “religion” and “cult”, to explain how they are related, and to mock them both; all in just one sentence.

Similarly, the following quote illustrates how Harris compares abortion to killing a fly, scratching one’s nose, and even to the Holocaust:

“A three-day-old human embryo is a collection of 150 cells called a blastocyst. There are, for the sake of comparison, more than 100,000 cells in the brain of a fly. The human embryos that are destroyed in stem-cell research do not have brains, or even neurons. Consequently, there is no reason to believe they can suffer their destruction in any way at all. It is worth remembered, in this context, that when a person's brain has died, we currently deem it acceptable to harvest his organs (provided he has donated them for this purpose) and bury him in the ground. If it is acceptable to treat a person whose brain has died as something less than a human being, it should be acceptable to treat a blastocyst as such. If you are concerned about suffering in this universe, killing a fly should present you with greater moral difficulties than killing a human blastocyst.

Perhaps you think that the crucial difference between a fly and a human blastocyst is to be found in the latter's potential to become a fully developed human being. But almost every cell in your body is a potential human being, given our recent advances in genetic engineering. Every time you scratch your nose, you have committed a Holocaust of potential human beings.” (2006)

Simplicity

Simple concepts and arguments are, almost by definition, relatively easy to understand. They are, therefore, a very effective tool in persuasion and influence. Statements that are short, crisp, and easy to understand are often the most powerful in Harris’s arsenal of weapons against religion and unreason. In the previous sections, I have presented dozens of such short and simple arguments, two more are in order:

“If God exists, either He can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities, or He does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil.” (2007)

“20 percent of all recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage. There is an obvious truth here that cries out for acknowledgment: if God exists, He is the most prolific abortionist of all.” (2006)

Sophistication

Even though Harris very often uses simple arguments and expresses them in simple words (as I have illustrated above), he also often uses a sophisticated style, a highly formal register, and urbane vocabulary. I believe that this might be due to the fact that he is a highly educated philosopher and scientist, whose target audience is also generally relatively well-educated (judging by the fact that the degree of religiosity is, in general, negatively correlated with the level of education). For example, paragraphs such as the following one are not uncommon in both his written texts and spoken interactions:

“The idea, therefore, that religious faith is somehow a sacred human convention—distinguished, as it is, both by the extravagance of its claims and by the paucity of its evidence—is really too great a monstrosity to be appreciated in all its glory. 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.” (2006)

5. Conclusion

Summary

Among all the books, essays and articles by Sam Harris that I have read, as well as among all the debates, conversations, podcasts, and videos where I have heard him speak, one argument stands out as the most powerful blow that Harris has dealt against religions. It comes from a long debate against William Lane Craig, called *The God Debate* (2010, Mar1). In my opinion, it perfectly summarizes many of Harris’s main ideas and arguments on the subject of religion. It ends with the line: “If there is a less moral framework than the one Dr. Craig is proposing, I haven't heard of it.” If there is a better response to a person who supports religion, I have not heard of it.

"Nine million children die every year before they reach the age of five. Picture an Asian tsunami of the sort we saw in 2004 that killed a quarter of a million people—one of those every 10 days, killing children only under five: that's twenty-four thousand children a day, a thousand an hour, seventeen or so a minute. That means before I get to the end of this sentence, some few children very likely will have died in terror and agony.

Think of the parents of these children. Think of the fact that most of these men and women believe in God and are praying at this moment for their children to be spared, and their prayers will not be answered. But according to Dr. Craig, this is all part of God's plan. Any god who would allow children by the millions to suffer and die in this way and their parents to grieve in this way, either can do nothing to help them or doesn't care to. He is therefore either impotent or evil. And worse than that, on Dr. Craig's view, most of these people, many of these people certainly, will be going to hell because they're praying to the wrong god. Just think about that: through no fault of their own, they were born into the wrong culture, where they got the wrong theology, and they missed the revelation. There are 1.2 billion people in India at this moment; most of them are Hindus, most of them therefore polytheists. In Dr. Craig's universe, no matter how good these people are, they are doomed. If you are praying to the monkey God Hanuman, you are doomed—you'll be tortured in hell for eternity. Now is there the slightest evidence for this? No. It just says so in Mark 9 and Matthew 13 and Revelation 14.

So God created the cultural isolation of the Hindus; he engineered the circumstance of their deaths in ignorance of revelation, and then he created the penalty for this ignorance, which is an eternity of conscious torment in fire.

On the other hand, on Dr. Craig's account, your run-of-the-mill serial killer in America, who spent his life raping and torturing children, need only come to God, come to Jesus on death row, and after a final meal fried chicken, he's going to spend eternity in heaven after death.

Ok—one thing should be crystal clear to you: this vision of life has absolutely nothing to do with moral accountability.

And please notice the double standard that people like Dr. Craig use to exonerate god from all this evil. We're told that God is loving and kind and just and intrinsically good. But when someone like myself points out the rather obvious and compelling evidence that God is cruel and unjust, because he visits suffering on innocent people of a scope and scale that would embarrass the most ambitious psychopath, we are told that god is mysterious. Who can understand god's will? Yet this merely human understanding of God's will is precisely what believers use to establish his goodness in the first place. If something good happens to a Christian—he feels some bliss while praying, or he sees some positive change his life—we're told that God is good. But when children by the tens of thousands are torn from their parents' arms and drowned, we are told god is mysterious.

This is how you play tennis without the net.

And I want to suggest to you that it is not only tiresome when otherwise intelligent people speak this way, it is morally reprehensible. This kind of faith really is the perfection of narcissism: "God loves me, don't you know? He cured me of my eczema; he makes me feels so good while singing in church; and just when we had given up hope, he found a banker who was willing to reduce my mother's mortgage."

Given all this god of yours does not accomplish in the lives of others, given the misery that's being imposed on some helpless child at this instant, this kind of faith is obscene. To think in this way is to fail to reason honestly, or to care sufficiently about the suffering of other human beings. And if god is good and loving and just and kind, and he wanted to guide is morally with a book, why give us a book that supports slavery? Why give us a book that admonishes us to kill people for imaginary crimes, like witchcraft.

Of course, there's a way of not taking these questions to heart. According to Dr. Craig's divine command theory, God is not bound by moral duties. God doesn't have to be good; whatever he commands is good. So when he commands the Israelites to slaughter the Amalekites, that behavior becomes intrinsically good because he commanded it.

Here we're being offered (I'm glad [Craig] raised the issue of psychopathy), we're being offered a psychopathic and psychotic moral attitude. It's psychotic because this is

completely delusional: there's no reason to believe that we live in a universe ruled by an invisible monster Yahweh. But it is psychopathic, because this is a total detachment from the well-being of human beings. This so easily rationalizes the slaughter of children.

Just think about the Muslims at this moment who are blowing themselves up, convinced that they are agents of God's will. There's absolutely nothing that Dr. Craig can say against their behavior in moral terms, apart from his own faith-based claim that they're praying to the wrong God. If they had the right god, what they were doing would be good on divine command theory. Now I'm obviously not saying that Dr. Craig or all religious people are psychopaths and psychotics, but this, to me, this is the true horror of religion: it allows perfectly decent and sane people to believe by the billions what only lunatics could believe on their own.

If you wake up tomorrow morning thinking that saying a few Latin words over your pancakes is gonna turn them into the body of Elvis Presley, you have lost your mind. But if you think more or less the same thing about a cracker and the body of Jesus, you're just a Catholic.

And I'm not the first person to notice that it's a very strange sort of loving God who would make salvation depend on believing in him on bad evidence. If you lived 2000 years ago, there was evidence galore; he was just performing miracles. But apparently he got tired of being so helpful. And so now we all inherit this very heavy burden of the doctrine's implausibility. And the effort to square it with what we now know about the cosmos and what we know about the all-too-human origins of scripture becomes more and more difficult.

It's not just the generic god that Dr. Craig is recommending; it is God the father and Jesus the son. Christianity, on Dr. Craig's account, is the true moral wealth the world. And I hate to break it to you here at Notre Dame, but Christianity is a cult of human sacrifice. Christianity is not a religion that repudiates human sacrifice; it is a religion that celebrates a single human sacrifice as though it were effective: "God so loved the world he that gave his only son," John 3:16. The idea is that Jesus suffered the crucifixion so that none need suffer hell, except those billions in India and billions like them throughout history. This

doctrine is astride a contemptible history of scientific ignorance and religious barbarism. We come from people who used to bury children under the foundations of new buildings as offerings to their imaginary gods.

Just think about that. In vast numbers of societies, people would bury children in postholes—people like ourselves—thinking that this would prevent an invisible being from knocking down their buildings. These are the sorts of people who wrote the Bible.

If there is a less moral framework than the one Dr. Craig is proposing, I haven't heard of it."

A glitter of hope

Sam Harris is openly worried about the future of our civilization. He argues that the prosperity (and even the very survival) of our species will depend on whether we solve the problems related to religions. In the epilogue of his first book *The End of Faith* (2006), he writes:

"No myths need be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstance. No personal God need be worshiped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish. The days of our religious identities are clearly numbered. Whether the days of our civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend, rather too much, on how soon we realize this."

Moreover, he concludes *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007), with a glitter of hope:

"This letter is the product of failure –the failure of the many brilliant attacks upon religion that preceded it, the failure of our schools to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand, the failure of the media to criticize the abject religious certainties of our public figures–failures great and small that have kept almost every society on this earth muddling over God and despising those who muddle differently. Nonbelievers like myself stand beside you, dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the living. But we stand dumbstruck by you as well–by your

denial of tangible reality—by the suffering you create in service to your religious myths and by your attachment to an imaginary God. This letter has been an expression of that amazement— and, perhaps, of a little hope.”

Support for hypotheses

My analysis of the work of Sam Harris on the issues of religion in peace and conflict has found support for all the hypotheses stated in this thesis, namely:

Hypothesis 1.

According to Harris, religions are a major source of conflict in the world, rather than a source of peace.

Hypothesis 2.

Harris bases his views and arguments on reason and science, rather than faith.

Hypothesis 3.

Harris sees reason in a very unfavorable position in the battle against religion, yet, he calls for four main ways to improve this position (hypotheses 3.1., 3.2., 3.3).

Hypothesis 3.1.

According to Harris, most questions related to morality (including conflict and violence) could and should be answered by science, rather than left to be answered by religions.

Hypothesis 3.2.

According to Harris, the main goal of discussions about morality should be decreasing human (and other conscious creatures) suffering and increasing their well-being.

Hypothesis 3.3.

According to Harris, the taboo around religion should be eliminated, so that it becomes open to public criticism.

Hypothesis 4.

The techniques of argumentation and persuasion used by Harris include: humor, thought experiments, comparisons, simplicity, and sophistication.

Afterword

In my opinion, religion is the darkest chapter in human history, and the stupidity and atrocities caused by religion are still being constantly added to it. Future generations will feel dumbfounded and ashamed by the fact that in the 21st century, their ancestors were killing one another because of ancient literature. It is high time that we closed this chapter and open a new one, one in which reason, science, tolerance and love will improve the wellbeing of humans (and other animals) not only on this planet, but also on others that we will colonize.

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