

FOREWORD

BY GARY DEMAR

I LIKE FREE BOOKS. So I was excited when I opened a package that contained a book that I had not ordered. Apparently, I'm on someone's list of notables because Alfred A. Knopf thought I should have a copy of Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*. And since I had received one unsolicited, surely there were others who were equally blessed with the freebie. I can't believe that anyone at Knopf thought I would be persuaded by it, so I'm assuming that an enterprising marketer saw it as a way to get some free publicity out of the gesture. It worked! And I am grateful.

There's little that's new in *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It's the old atheism wrapped in a new package. The same tired arguments that have been answered convincingly by any number of Christian writers over the centuries have been

trotted out again in the vain hope that atheism will find a new audience.

Sam Harris wants to assure us that atheists aren't monsters. He's somewhat miffed that "atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural."¹ Harris is here to tell Christians, and anyone else who will listen to him, that these are mischaracterizations. This is why he feels compelled to remind his critics that "atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society."² Because of this, he continues, "it seems important to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse."

The first myth Harris wants to dispel is that "atheists believe life is meaningless." He argues that "atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious. Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived." Of course, he is arguing in a circle. How does he know when life is being really and fully lived unless he first assumes life is meaningful, the very thing he must prove as a self-avowed materialist? And how does a

materialist who believes in the random origin of the universe account for meaning among the “things” that an impersonal conglomeration of atoms spontaneously brought into existence without rhyme or reason? As a letter writer to *Time* magazine put it in his response to a series of articles on the mind and body that appeared in an issue of *Time*, “I’m not sure I’ll ever have the same degree of self-respect now that I know I’m just an illusion created by 100 billion jabbering neurons.”³ I suspect that any number of people—Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, to name a few—conceptualized that they were living life to the fullest, believing that their idea of life would be more meaningful if certain people didn’t share it with them.

I won’t question his claim that he *believes* life is meaningful, but as an atheist Harris must account for the meaningfulness of life given the naturalistic presuppositions he shares with other prominent atheists. Consider, for example, the opening comments of John Gribbin in his book *The Scientists*. How does the atheist account for even the idea of morality when science has determined that there is no evidence “for a special ‘life force’

Dear Mr. Harris

I WOULD LOVE TO begin by saying something like “Greetings in the Lord,” but I have no idea what your background is or whether you have ever been baptized. And so, not to presume, let me begin simply by greeting you warmly in a general fashion and thanking you for setting your thoughts down so plainly. I would also hope that I might raise some equally clear questions about what you have written.

On the first page of your small book, you begin by discussing some of the reaction you got to your first book, *The End of Faith*. You say that the “most hostile” responses came to you from Christians. “The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ’s love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism” (vii). You suggest the possibility that this might just be attributable to human nature,

but you don't think so. You go on to suggest that "such hatred" draws "considerable support from the Bible." You say your reason for saying this is that the "most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse" (vii).

I think I know why you began your book this way. I have been in evangelical Christian circles my entire life, and one of the *standard* concerns that many Christians have is presenting "a bad testimony" to nonbelievers. Of course this doesn't prevent some Christians from presenting that bad testimony anyway, oblivious to all surrounding concerns. But your opening is guaranteed to cause many Christian readers to lament the fact that a number of professing Christians have sought to clobber you for Christ through their hostility. And then when you didn't respond favorably to "the treatment," these sorts of people have another chapter and verse handy that can explain *that*.

You opened your book this way because you knew (quite accurately) that Christians generally would be upset by it, would be put on the defensive, would be sorrowful over what some have done to you in the name of Christ,

and so on. I know, and you clearly know, that Christians can behave badly in this way, and you also knew that a lot of other Christians would be ashamed of this undeniable fact. And you are right: We are ashamed of this kind of thing. Like you, I've had first-hand experience. When my son (a Christian) published an article showing how the Shroud of Turin could easily have been produced with medieval "off-the-shelf" technology,¹ he got lots of mail—from professing Christians—with all sorts of variants of "go to hell" or "I hope you rot in hell."

The Christian Church has a problem with this kind of person in our midst. We are embarrassed by it, believing it to be inconsistent with what Christ taught and what we profess to believe. Attributing it to human nature doesn't cut it with us because we believe that Christ came to transform human nature. You knew this about us and started out very shrewdly. You knew that we would disapprove of this kind of thing, just as you do.

But *that*, actually, was the surprising thing: you disapproved of that kind of hateful behavior too. You used a number of words

ADVANCED PRAISE FOR DOUGLAS WILSON'S
Letter from a Christian Citizen



"Douglas Wilson has done the near impossible. He made me glad that Sam Harris wrote his anti-God tract because it provided an occasion for Doug to write such a literate, compelling, and engaging response. I hope Bible study groups and Sunday school classes across the country set aside their normal lessons for a few weeks and gather together to study and discuss Wilson's *Letter from a Christian Citizen*."

Craig J. Hazen, Ph.D.

Director, Master of Arts Program in Christian Apologetics
Biola University, La Mirada, California



"Douglas Wilson has written a book that can give Christians a place to stand in regard to Sam Harris' book *Letter to a Christian Nation*. The primary usefulness of Wilson's book is that it gives readers a point-by-point response to the arguments advanced by Harris in an engaging and compelling way."

Dr. Leland Ryken

Professor of English at Wheaton College



"In the interaction between Doug Wilson and Sam Harris, one of them is wrong and one is right. If you can't figure it out after reading this exchange, you never will."

Hanna Rosin

Washington Post staff writer & contributing editor,
The Atlantic Monthly

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