



A Militant Attack on Faith

**Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*,
New York, WW Norton, 2004**

A BOOK ANNOUNCING THE END OF FAITH should be of immediate interest to Sea of Faith readers, for whom faith is usually cast in a positive light as a non-doctrinally uplifting human urge. But in 1992 the British philosopher Anthony Kenny came to very different conclusions about faith. In *What is Faith?* Kenny, a lapsed Catholic, concluded that faith was a not a virtue at all, but a vice. Faith, Kenny argued, only has meaning unless it is faith in something for a particular reason, namely that God has revealed it. But unless the existence of this God can be demonstrated by means other than faith, then that faith becomes insubstantial and prone to manipulation in the service of unreason. As Goya warned years previously, ‘the sleep of reason brings forth monsters.’ Well, a new century has opened, and events have done little to dispel the fears of Goya and Kenny. In fact, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris carries on in their footsteps.

Sam Harris has nothing positive whatsoever to say about faith. Early in the book Harris notes that while all faiths have dabbled to some extent in ecumenism, ‘the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete.’ Later on the same page Harris states that ‘[c]ertainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.’ (p. 13) Another example: Faith ‘is the search for knowledge on the instalment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right.’ (p. 66) The first few chapters lay out his argument to justify these claims. None of the arguments are particularly new but Harris’s turn of phrase and confident generalisations add bite to familiar territory.

At times his enthusiasm runs away a bit. He declares that we ‘are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so.’ (p. 109) This is getting back into the more hysterical clash of civilisations rhetoric that I thought we’d finished with.

What is valuable about Harris’s book is that his militant attack on faith will hopefully open up much needed discussion about the role faith really should have in people’s lives. His scorched earth approach has created room for more measured criticisms to survey what has for too long been a no-go area. This book should help expose the long-standing unwillingness to expose religious beliefs to any sort of rational criticism.

A more trivial gripe is that titles like *The End of Faith* may help to sell books, but it probably doesn’t help much to generate understanding. Whether we like it nor not, we will never see the end of faith. The focus for people’s faith may change, but as a human foible, we are unlikely ever to see the end of it. Faith is not going to go away, any more than atheism is going to go away. But the British apologist Alister McGrath had his book entitled *The Twilight of Atheism*, presumably in same vein of wishful thinking that motivated Harris. It would be wiser, rather than wishing the end of something, to suggest ways we can live together in harmony.

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