

Psychotic Thinking by Another Name:

Sam Harris on Why We Should Talk about Religion

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

Sam Harris, a Ph.D. student in neuroscience, practicing Buddhist, and author of the New York Times best sellers “The End of Faith” (W. W. Norton, 2005) and “Letter to a Christian Nation” (Knopf, 2006; Bantam hardcover, 2007), has placed himself in the middle of a huge, swirling controversy. He began his first book on September 12th, 2001, and has since been featured in, or discussed by, nearly every major news outlet in the United States, appearing on TV shows like “The O’Reilly Factor” and “The Colbert Report.”

His basic thesis is this: Because of our culture’s agreement to turn a blind eye toward one another’s religious beliefs, we are giving each other a free pass to suspend rational thought. In other words, what would certainly be seen as ridiculous, insane and even dangerous (suicide bombers will go to heaven) in any other context, is sanctioned by calling it religious. He believes that we needn’t scratch the surface of the horrifying problems of our world too deeply to find unchecked religious dogma holding things up.

While Harris is associated with a group of atheists who are currently in the public eye (see below), he takes issue with the term, saying things like, “We’re all atheists in relation to Poseidon.” He’s smart as a whip, funny, and apparently ready to get out of what he calls “the religion bashing business.” I wonder if he’ll pull it off. From what we have seen of Harris, he’s a man on a mission.

InsideOut: What do you think about the fact that in the past year, at least four books have been published in response to your book, “Letter to a Christian Nation”?

Sam Harris: Well, I’m sorry to say that it says that the bar for publishing a book has gotten lower and lower. What’s more interesting has been the responses in the mainstream media from journalists and the op-ed writers and otherwise serious people who have taken



Photo: Sara Allan

not just me on, but [Richard] Dawkins [author of “The God Delusion”], [Christopher] Hitchens [author of “God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything”] and [Daniel] Dennett [author of “Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon”] with kind of an essay form. The best arguments people put forward reliably fall into one of three categories: Either someone argues that their specific brand of religion is true, or they argue that all religion is useful whether or not it’s true, or they just attack atheism as another religion saying that it’s tolerant, dogmatic and irrational. I feel like I and others have sufficiently dealt with each of those maneuvers so as to be fundamentally immune to surprise on any of those. I’ve never heard anyone — from Francis Collins [Director of the National Human Genome Research Project] on down — put forward even a subtle modification of those arguments that was at all interesting or valid or escaped its own self-contradiction.

IO: So where does that leave you?

SH: Well, it leaves me wondering about how to get through to people who are otherwise reasonable. It’s amazing to me that somebody like Francis Collins who’s clearly smart and scientifically literate and making significant contributions to scientific discourse, still feels that when he is hiking in the Cascade Mountains and comes upon a frozen waterfall and is overwhelmed by its beauty, that is reason enough to, as he said “fall to his knees in the dewy grass” and give himself to Jesus. That a frozen waterfall could convince him that the specific doctrine of Christianity is true is psychotic thinking by another name.

IO: You’re great at establishing the problem for anybody whose mind or heart is open to what you are saying. How do you get through to people for whom it’s not clear and to people who aren’t open?

SH: There are some people for whom my books or lectures or Dawkin's book do serve as the final straw. There is a moment in many people's lives where it doesn't make sense. [As a culture,] I think it is possible in that we do move forward incrementally on most subjects, subjects where scientists and rational thought have weighed in so that the truth is just irrefutable. The perfect case for me is on all questions of medicine. You still have some people who think that epilepsy is really demonic possession, etc., but not many, and when you do find those people, even in a fundamentalist community, they are looked at with suspicion.

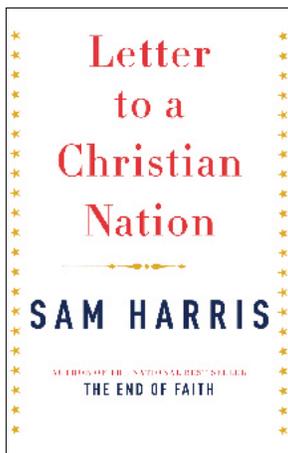
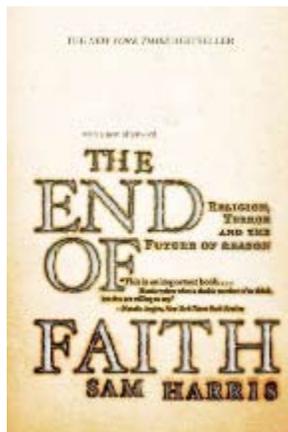
IO: *It's true most people won't accept that a disease is caused by the devil or some kind of possession, but there is a lot of discussion about various ways of addressing health, and people are very passionate about their views.*

SH: When it comes to something like infectious disease, when we figure out AIDS is caused by a virus and there are ways you catch it and ways you don't, then when somebody thinks that AIDS is not caused by a virus, or caused magically, or that the cure for it is to have sex with a virgin (as is believed throughout the developing world), then that kind of ignorant, religious magical thinking becomes an anathema, obviously dangerous. You don't have the right to believe that.

IO: *So do you feel like the way to see change or affect people's opinions about something as personal and deep as religion is to just sort of hammer away?*

SH: Curiosity will kill this thing. Simply asking Mitt Romney over and over again to be specific about what he believes about God and Jesus, and the return of Jesus, and whether he'll come back to Missouri — Mormonism begins to sound so stupid and insane when you get to the specifics that it should be a barrier to holding high office in this country. Obviously not Mormonism alone, but Mormonism has few enough subscribers and it's so recent in its development that it can't hide its goofiness as well as the rest of our religious traditions can.

IO: *You're pretty tireless. Is this religious at all for you — this process of trying to reveal the truth as you see it?*



SH: It feels like an ethical imperative, but it certainly gets boring, and I am trying to get out of the religion bashing business whenever I can.

IO: *I am curious about your own Buddhist practice. A couple of the precepts [moral and ethical teachings of the Buddha] that seem particularly interesting in this kind of debate are, "Do not elevate the self and blame others" and "See the perfection – do not speak of others' errors and faults." How do you work with this?*

SH: That's not really the issue for me because when I look at how misguided some of these belief systems are, and how obviously they are underwriting suffering in this world, it's not really a question of me having to doubt the rightness of my criticism. What I can doubt is whether or not it is good for me personally to be doing this. What kind of mind am I building if I'm spending this amount of time noticing how stupid people are? [And] when I call people stupid, it's a stupidity that I don't feel is distant from me at all. I feel implicated in that stupidity; I just don't feel implicated on this particular point.

There is no chance at all that the Koran is the perfect word of an omniscient being. The chance is zero. It's a terrible book. If you really want to have your beliefs be true and sensible and useful, then don't wake up every morning telling yourself that the Koran is the perfect word of the creator of the universe, or that the genesis is literally true.

IO: *What should you wake up saying?*

SH: Wake up saying you are going to be open to the best evidence and the best argument, and if there's a chance that you're wrong, you want to be the first to know about it. I know you can have spiritual experience without believing bullshit. So then when I see the people who are insisting that you have to believe this bullshit to have a spiritual experience, I know they are wrong. ❖



Bethany Saltman is the managing editor of *InsideOut* and is writing a book called "Sweet Jesus: American Conversion Stories." She has published essays and interviews in magazines such as *The Sun*, *Buddhadharma*, *Killingthebuddha*, and *Geez*. She is a Zen practitioner who has studied with John Daido Loori, Roshi for over 10 years. She lives in Phoenixia with her husband and baby girl.