No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic

Rick Wade uses the faulty arguments in Sam Harris' book Letter to a Christian Nation *to show why Christians don't have to be afraid of the new atheists' assault on our faith.*

Getting Started

Sometimes we Christians shy away from books which attack our beliefs because we're afraid we can't answer the objections. That's understandable. Often the authors of such books carry impressive credentials. It's easy to feel intimidated.



Another response which is the opposite of fearful avoidance is haughty dismissal. Sometimes we act as if our position is so obviously true that others can be dismissed as downright stupid and hardly worth bothering with. Even if the opponents' arguments *are* bad, that's no reason to adopt an arrogant attitude. It's especially bad when the dismissive Christian hasn't even bothered to read the book!

A better response, I think, is to use such occasions to grow in understanding and to exercise one's apologetic "muscles" by working at answering the challenges posed. So, for example, when a doctrine is challenged, by studying the subject, we grow in our knowledge of Christian beliefs and (here's the uncomfortable part) we are sometimes corrected in our understanding. Another advantage is preparation for real face-to-face encounters with critics. Responding to arguments in a book means there isn't the pressure of a person staring at you, waiting for an answer (and fully expecting one; critics do have such a high view of us!).

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a*

Christian Nation to give some suggestions about what to look for in such books.{1} I won't try to address every challenge. Others have given more extensive responses.{2}

I titled this essay "No Reason to Fear" for a good reason. The challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

Of course, we can't always answer seemingly good objections, and certainly can't answer them all to the atheist's satisfaction. I'll go further than that. I don't think we *have* to answer every objection. There will always be objections. But it's as intellectually wrong to drop one's convictions because of a few unanswered criticisms as it is to hold to such convictions for no reason at all. Atheists obviously don't abandon their beliefs so easily, and they shouldn't expect us to either.

Fallacious Arguments

If we're going to engage books like *Letter to a Christian Nation* responsibly, we have to be ready to hear some good criticisms of our beliefs or actions. We have to accept the fact that there are some hard things to deal with in our beliefs, especially the problem of evil. We need to admit our inability to give satisfying answers to all objections if we're going to expect that kind of openness from critics. Also, it is often Christians who come under attack rather than Christianity. Harris spends a lot of time here. Christians have done some bad things, and they need to be acknowledged.

More to the point for this article, Christians can sometimes

give bad arguments for what they believe. I'm not suggesting that we have to bow to all the demands of skeptics; there are several theories of the proper use of evidences and logical arguments and personal experience, and some formulations are unreasonable. It *is* to say, however, that we must use good reasoning when we make a case.

The problem with using poor reasoning is that it undermines one's case. That's what we find in Harris's book, and that will be our focus here. When we read a case for a particular belief, we should keep a lookout for such things as questionable assumptions, logical fallacies, and incorrect facts. Harris's book is plagued with fallacious arguments, a surprising turn since he presents his side as being that of reason. So I'm going to spend most of my time on those and mention the other things when appropriate.

Don't let the term "logical fallacies" put you off, like they're things only specialists can understand. It's just another name for poor reasoning. So, for example, if you make the claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and someone responds that you only believe that because you grew up in a Christian nation, you could cry "Foul!" You're making a universal claim; where you're from is irrelevant. If it's true, it's true in India and China and the US and everywhere else, too. This is a kind of fallacy of false cause. No one is a Christian because he lives in a Christian nation. We are Christians because we have believed Jesus' claims that are universal. It also reflects the current mood according to which religions are human constructs, and Christianity is just one such religion among many.

Although fallacious arguments can have *psychological* force (when we don't spot them and they seem correct), they have no *logical* force. Their conclusions should not be believed.

Are We Really So Evil?

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells us 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."{3}Well, *that's* a surprise! Not that Christians have done bad things, but that such acts are *theologically defensible*! Such things are sanctioned by God because He, too, does such things. Harris accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

But Harris is guilty of this picking and choosing himself. He commits the fallacy which is called the *neglect of relevant evidence*. To be fair, he does note that "it is undeniable that many people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings."{4} But he doesn't bother listing them. He gives no space to the great work done by Christians in the fields of medicine, literacy, agriculture, famine relief, etc. He ignores the good work of organizations like Mercy Ships which takes life-changing medical help to people in third world nations in the name of Christ.

Well, he doesn't completely ignore missionary efforts. One of his favorite rants is against the evils perpetrated by missionaries. They waste time preaching about such things as the virgin birth when there is important work to be done. The most memorable accusation is when he charges missionaries who preach against the use of condoms with "genocidal" piety!{5} "Genocidal!" Maybe a little exaggeration there? (And, by the way, while it's true that Christian medical missionaries do present the gospel to people—which they should, since one's eternal life is more important than one's temporal life—I've never heard of any who withhold medical help from people in

need until they first preach a sermon on the virgin birth.)

In another place Harris commits the fallacy called *causal oversimplification*. As he sees it, religion is the cause of conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries. Religion is so unnatural and wrong-headed to atheists, that it becomes an easy target for casting blame.

I'm going to give a bit more space to this charge since it's a very popular one these days.

In 2004, the BBC published what it called a "War Audit" which was conducted to determine how significant religion has been in war, at least in the last century.{6} In the article "God and War: An Audit and an Exploration," authors Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen report that

> at a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

They continue:

> After reviewing historical analyses by a diverse array of specialists, we concluded that there have been few genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars from 1948 to now, often painted in the media and other places as wars over religion, or wars arising from religious differences, have in fact been wars of nationalism, liberation of territory or self-defense.

Regarding Islamic terrorism, the authors write:

> The Islamist fundamentalist terror war is largely about political order in the Arab countries, and the presence of

> US forces in Saudi Arabia. It is not about religious conversion or a clash of religions. Nevertheless, bin Laden claims a religious duty in executing the war. . . .
>
> It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.
>
> We need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars over religion.

The authors—or as they call themselves, compilers—of this article include tables which give death tolls in different categories of wars. The writers say that the tables

> show that the overwhelming majority of wars and the overwhelming majority of the victims of such wars cannot be classified primarily according to religious causes or religious beliefs. There have been horrific examples though where particular communities have been *targeted because of their religious faith* [italics mine], and these atrocities have been perpetrated by the three most 17 vicious and blood-thirsty regimes ever to hold power: Stalin's Russia, Mao's China and Hitler's Germany.

It's interesting that Harris tries so hard to make religion a source of violence when, as this report indicates, it is often the religious who are targeted by violence.{7}

A Few More

Sam Harris's book is titled *Letter to a Christian Nation,* not simply because he's against Christianity. He wants all religion to come to an end. It just happens that Christianity is the most prominent religion in America. Because he lumps all religions together, he can smear Christianity with the evils of Islam by implication.

This is a fallacy. It's called the fallacy of *over-generalization* (or *converse accident*). If evil is done in the name of Islam, and Islam is a religion, then every religion is prone to evil. Thus, what counts against Islam counts against Christianity, too. (If one is reluctant to group Christianity with other religions, then one might see here the fallacy of *faulty comparison*, or what is more commonly called "comparing apples to oranges.")

Another argument Harris presents employs a fallacy we've already discussed, the fallacy of *causal oversimplification.* Harris commits this fallacy when he tells us that "the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity."{8}

The reality of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages cannot be denied. However, Harris's evaluation is simplistic. It is very easy to narrowly focus on the very real anti-Semitism of Christians and ignore other very significant factors. For example, Harris fails to tell us that the Jews were persecuted quite apart from Christianity and even before Christianity came into existence. For example, serious tensions between the Jews and the Greeks of Alexandria in the first century B.C. spilled over into the next century. Things got so bad that Jews were forced to live in one section of the city. Their houses were broken into and looted. Synagogues were burned, and women were dragged to the theater and forced to eat pork. Historian H. I. Bell reports that "men, women, and even children [were] beaten to death, dragged living through the streets, or flung on to improvised bonfires."{9} He also ignores the shift from religious persecution to racial persecution which occurred in the nineteenth century, notably in Russia.

Of course, this doesn't prove that Hitler *didn't* get his anti-Semitism from Christians; but it *does* mean that one should not immediately assume that Christian prejudice is at the root of anti-Semitism. There have been other causes as well. A

significant factor in Hitler's hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.{10}

Although some people already believed in the inferiority of some races, and although Darwinism wasn't Hitler's sole inspiration, Historian Richard Weikart writes, "Darwinism was a central, guiding principle of Nazi ideology, especially of Hitler's own world view." Weikart quotes Richard Evans, a historian at Cambridge University: "The real core of Nazi beliefs lay in the faith Hitler proclaimed in his speech of September 1938 in science—a Nazi view of science—as the basis for action. Science demanded the furtherance of the interests not of God but of the human race, and above all the German race and its future in a world ruled by ineluctable laws of Darwinian competition between races and between individuals." Weikart continues: "This is not a controversial claim by anti-evolutionists, but it is commonly recognized by scholars who study Nazism."{11}

A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

One of the questionable assumptions in *Letter to a Christian Nation* is Sam Harris's assertion that "there is no question that human beings evolved from nonhuman ancestors."{12} Of course, there is indeed a question about this, a question raised by highly educated scientists easily as qualified as Mr. Harris.

It's no wonder, really, that Harris makes such bold statements. He is prevented from allowing the possibility of divine creation by his basic worldview commitments. He admits that he doesn't know why the universe exists, but he's confident there's no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. What evidence or reasons does he give for it? Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are

based solely on the "trinity" of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them.

One of the (potentially!) maddening things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn't really a belief; that there shouldn't even *be* the word "atheism."{13} Although "atheism" has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn't the belief that there is no God; it's simply an absence of belief in God.{14} It's a kind of "default" position, a "zero" belief, where everyone should be until given sufficient reasons to believe in God. Thus, the atheist has nothing to defend or prove.

But really, folks. Who's going to believe that atheists are belief-less about God, that they don't actually believe that there is no God? It's astonishing the effort they put forth in arguing against religious belief if indeed they have no belief at all.

However, we can go back and forth with atheists about whether they truly deny the existence of God, or we can let that stand and simply ask what they *do* believe about ultimate reality, for surely they believe *something*. It's simply false to assume that atheism is some kind of zero belief, that it involves no metaphysical commitments. If one denies God, one must have some other view about ultimate reality. Naturalism is a metaphysical position, and it has serious problems of its own.{15} If Christians are responsible to give good reasons for their belief in Christian theism, naturalistic atheists must give reasons for their naturalism.

Sam Harris speaks as a voice on high, shouting down to us poor, ignorant people who are stuck in our absurd religious beliefs. It's hard to imagine anyone with thoughtful

convictions changing his or her beliefs based on this book. He's preaching to the choir. Now that you have a few tips on what to look for, you might want to take a look at the book, and hear the rest of the "sermon."

Notes

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Douglas Wilson addresses many of Harris's arguments in his *Letter from a Christian Citizen* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007) and Ravi Zacharias does the same in *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
3. Ibid., 22.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid., 33-34.
6. Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, "God And War: An Audit & An Exploration," http://tinyurl.com/a2tpb.
7. For more on this subject, see also Don Closson, "The Causes of War," Probe Ministries, 2008, www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/.
8. Harris, *Letter*, 41.
9. H. I. Bell, "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 31. (1941), pp. 1-18.
10. Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
11. Richard Weikart, "Re-examining the Darwin-Hitler Link," The Discovery Institute, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/02/reexamining_the_darwinhitler_l.html.
12. Harris, Letter, 71.
13. Ibid., 51.
14. See Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, (Temple University Press, 1990), 463.
15. See Norman Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of*

Contemporary Humanism (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), chap. 11.

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