

THE END OF FAITH

by SAM HARRIS

Sam Harris claims his book *"The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason"* (Norton, 2005) is the most anti-religion book ever written. He argues that the dangers posed by religious extremism and the proliferation of means of mass destruction, are so serious that humanity will not survive another 50 years unless we get rid of our delusions. Optimistically, he thinks that we will recognise the danger and take the required action, hence the "end of faith". I'm not so sure.

While the book breaks new ground in exposing the iniquities of religion, to me, his book is not anti-religion enough. It fails to recognise the delusory religious motivations behind the disastrous "war on terror", it fails to recognise the economically debilitating effects that Islam has on Muslim societies, and it fails to mention the problems of oil depletion and global warming, which under the prevailing mood of conflict over fiction-based ideologies, will be impossible to solve. He does however suggest that we must discard both our religious and national allegiances and place our primary identity in global humanity. With this I totally agree.

Harris is certainly at the cutting edge of controversy when he argues that fundamentalism is not the main problem, it is our mass acceptance of moderate religion. Our inability to even comment upon the absurdity of religious beliefs has led to the mass acceptance of confusion and delusion as being normal. This provides the pond in which religious fanatics swim. We have to drain the swamp. All should strive to overcome their unwarranted and unjustified divisive beliefs.

This task may not be as daunting as it seems, as Harris suggests. It could be achieved in a generation if only we stopped indoctrinating children. Rather than instilling ignorance and superstition, education systems should merely teach what we now certainly know about religions - they are false and harmful.

As well as exposing numerous absurdities and moral iniquities of religion, Harris is particularly scathing about Islam. After quoting extensively from the Koran, citing exhortations to violence and hatred towards non-believers, he states: "Islam, more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death" (P.123).

humanists alike is his (quite justified) assertion that religions, the desert ones in particular, are inherently intolerant. Certainty of faith does not admit of dissent. Belief in the "one true religion" is necessarily supremacist. Hence attempts by religionists and some humanists to coddle believers into being tolerant is counterproductive. It simply reinforces the perception that unjustified and even counterfactual faith is desirable.

His chapter on morality highlights the many egregious effects of a religious mind, particularly in relation to "honour killings". He also notes the absurdity of views that simultaneously oppose torture under any circumstances yet condone "collateral damage" in war. What is perceived as most horrific is often not what is most harmful. However his proposed "science of good and evil", neglects, I think, one of the most important observations to be made in this regard. This is that morality is often not a matter of choice between right and wrong but a matter of finding the optimal balance between competing moral principles.

What has been for atheists the most contentious aspect of the book is his discussion of mysticism, spirituality and meditation. Some of the criticism is unjustified, as he has carefully adopted a rational definition of what he chooses to endorse. However his equivocation regarding the physical nature of consciousness does appear uncharacteristic. He endorses the quest for a state of consciousness that does not include the concept of "self", which, it is true, may have a beneficial purpose. Whether it is required in order to provide an alternative to current religious experiences is questionable.

There is at least one statement that Harris makes that is incorrect (see P 225). This is that the contest between religions is zero-sum (i.e. the benefits counterbalance the costs). In fact, the contest is devoid of benefits, hence it is definitely negative-sum.

Elsewhere he is astute: "In the best case, faith leaves otherwise well-intentioned people incapable of thinking rationally; at worst, it is a continuous source of human violence" (P 223), and "because it is taboo to criticize a person's religious beliefs, political debate over questions of public policy ... generally gets framed in terms appropriate to a theocracy" (P 230).

In all, it is a highly forthright and valuable contribution, both in exposing the nature of belief and in highlighting the dire consequences for humanity if current trends are not reversed.

— John L Perkins

Most confronting for moderate religionists and