



A Litany of Protests

Letter To A Christian Nation

by Sam Harris

Alfred A. Knopf NY

This little book, along with Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchen's *God is Not Great*, caused quite a stir when it was released in the United States.

All three books are vehemently opposed to religion, especially in its extreme conservative and fundamentalist forms. And this in a country that is overtly very religious. The chances of any candidate for the American Presidency declaring himself or herself an agnostic or atheist are virtually negligible. Time magazine estimates that 30% of Americans believe in an authoritarian God who will punish mankind for its sins. According to Harris 53% of the population are creationists opposed to evolution and 44% expect Jesus will return to judge mankind "sometime in the next 50 years". He writes, "Our nation now appears, as at no other time in her history, like a lumbering, bellicose dim-witted giant".

The book is largely a litany of protests against the extremes and excesses of religion, for example:

- The Bible and its teachings are muddled and self-contradictory and contain episodes of violence like stoning and sexual slavery.
- Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tortured and killed people in the name of God for centuries. Harris gives examples, including the Inquisition and the Crusades.
- The Religious Right is opposed to Stem Cell research and the use of HIV vaccine to treat Aids. The sufferings caused by sexual disease are largely ignored.
- Belief in God does not ensure a nation's health. In the Southern and Midwestern States of America — the bible-belt — homicide, teenage pregnancy and infant mortality is high. (Secular N.Z. probably conforms to European norms.)
- Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans in spite of all the prayers offered up to save it. Other examples are quoted, e.g. the Holocaust, showing that God is neither omnipotent nor omniscient.
- Religion is a divisive force, Harris cites the conflict in Northern Ireland (Catholics v Protestants), Shi-ites v Sunnis in Iraq, Muslims v Christians, and others. He sees religion as a barrier to building a global civilization.



Whatever the merits of Harris' case, my main criticism of the book is that, like Dawkins, Harris directs his fire mostly against the ravers, the ranters and the extremists on the Religious Right.

Religion needs to be seen in the round and not just on its tatty edges.

As Lloyd Geering reminds us, religion was once the superglue that held society together, it gave people a shared view of reality, a purpose to live for, rituals to observe, values to live by. Now the old religion has lost its viscosity, its stickiness, and the world looks and waits for a new religion for the new global age. There are signs that this new religion is already emerging on a world-wide scale.

Whereas traditional religion has previously been captive to the church, the synagogue, the mosque and the temple and largely the preserve of these institutions, this is no longer the case. Religion in all its colours is now diffused right through all sectors of society - in art, in music (including modern popular songwriters like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen), in poetry (e.g. Joy Cowley), on television and on the internet. Elements of religion like wonder, awe and transcendence are plainly visible at All Black Test matches where celebrities render stirring versions of the National Anthem and our rugged heroes bond before facing a daunting foe. The crowd's expectancy mirrors the faithful waiting for the Second Coming. Some church congregations are evolving into smaller groupings which are more open, more participatory, and more secular in the sense that current events are discussed and debated in addition to pondering the Big Questions of Life. Church buildings are being leased to community support groups, e.g. St Stephens, Napier, a sign that the institutional fetters are slowly losing their grip and that religion is now gradually becoming public property. Many will argue that this is how it should be. The focus of the new global religion will not be the Father God above but Planet Earth below in all its mystery and wonder and on whom our very life depends. That is where God, however understood, is present and leaves his indelible mark.

Harris and his colleagues can rest assured that religion is here to stay.

Alan M Goss, Napier

“I Reject The Christianity that Sam Harris Rejects”

This is a comment by John Shelby Spong on Sam Harris' writing. It came via an Internet discussion list but was otherwise unattributed:

“I think Sam Harris has a great deal to say to America and I am pleased that he is writing. People need to hear the criticism of an honest atheist who is not afraid to speak his mind about what Christianity has come to mean to him.

I reject the Christianity that Sam Harris rejects. The big difference is that I am aware of another and quite different Christianity, but Sam Harris does not appear to be. When I wrote *A New Christianity for a New World*, I tried to spell out what that different Christianity might look like. I believe it makes for a far greater and richer dialogue to engage the criticism of Sam Harris than to do what so many Christians seem to me to do, namely to search the Scriptures to find a way to give biblical authority to their latest prejudice.”