Sam Harris and the End of Faith: A Critique

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The End of Faith by Sam Harris, *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, and *god is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens are a trio of books written over a four year period (2004-2007) that seek to argue against, among other things, the existence of God, as well as to raise questions concerning the viability or even constructive relevancy of spiritual faith in today's world ... or, in the collective opinion of the three authors, any world at all. Although each of the aforementioned books goes about addressing such challenges in their own inimitable style , there also is a great deal of overlap among the three books with respect to the kinds of philosophical orientation, arguments, and criticisms that are given expression in the three books.

For example, all three of the aforementioned individuals do not believe in the existence of God. Indeed, their respective books are all variations on one, underlying theme – namely, attempting to demonstrate, at least to their own satisfaction and to the satisfaction of those who agree with them on such matters, that anyone who believes in the idea of a Divine Being is guilty of having abandoned reason.

The End of Faith was the first of the foregoing three books to be published. Moreover, both Professor Dawkins and Mr. Hitchens cite Sam Harris as being something of a kindred spirit -- if one might be permitted to use such a term in the current context ... in relation to the, broadly

speaking, religious issues with which each of these authors are concerned.

Although I have read all three books and, although there are specific themes within the books written by both Professor Dawkins and Mr. Hitchens that I might address at some later point in time, presently, I have decided to restrict my current focus to the aforementioned book by Sam Harris. Despite limiting my critical attention in this manner, I believe that much of the discussion that follows carries many problematic implications for the works of both Mr. Hitchens and Professor Dawkins.

Before proceeding with my commentary concerning the book by Sam Harris, there are a couple of points that might be made in passing with respect to the other two works mentioned earlier. First, the title for Christopher Hitchens' book -- that is, *god is not Great* -- is, in my opinion, something of a misnomer.

After having read his work I am quite willing to concede there are a number of points that he makes in his book with which I find myself in agreement. Nevertheless, despite my willingness to make such an admission, Mr. Hitchens' real disagreement is not with God, per se, since, after all, Mr. Hitchens does not believe in God's existence, but, rather, Mr. Hitchens' beef is with people who have corrupted their souls through their self-serving and mistaken ideas about Divinity and, in the process, have become very destructive

forces in the world. Consequently, a more appropriate title for Mr. Hitchens' book might have been: *People are not Great* – something that, in all too many cases, many of us might sadly acknowledge to be a true statement.

Secondly, the title for Professor Dawkins' book -- that is, *The God Delusion* -- is a very catchy one whose possible meanings run in a number of directions. Of course, Professor Dawkins' primary meaning in relation to the book's title is that people who believe in God are delusional.

As is the case with the book by Christopher Hitchens, I find that Professor Dawkins has a great many valid points to make during the course of the latter's book. Once again, however, as is true with respect to the book by Mr. Hitchens, Professor Dawkins wants to claim that anyone who believes in the existence of God is delusional, when, at most, all his book shows is that, yes, unfortunately, it is true that some individuals seem to have delusional ideas when it comes to the issue of God. In fact, I strongly suspect there are quite a few people who believe in God's existence who would tacitly agree with Professor Dawkins on this issue even if they might never admit as much openly.

The foregoing considerations notwithstanding, there is at least one central flaw in the structural character of the argument being put forth by Professor Dawkins, and this problem is also present in the other two books as well. More specifically, the structural form of one of the main

arguments being advanced in Professor Dawkins' book is akin to the structural character of the following sort of scenario.

One visits a mental hospital, takes notes on the delusional character exhibited by various inmates who reside in the asylum in relation to the idea of Divinity -- including, perhaps, some of the attending physicians and psychologists -- and, then, one proceeds to write a book claiming that not only do the people residing in the mental hospital harbor many delusions concerning the existence of God, but, as well, all human beings who live beyond the walls of the asylum are, therefore, also delusional with respect to their beliefs concerning God. The latter conclusion does not necessarily follow from the data that actually was gathered at the mental hospital.

However, even if such a conclusion contained some element of truth, one might have to treat this sort of conclusion with a degree of caution. After all, such a conclusion could carry some rather troubling implications with respect to the possible delusional status of the person conducting the research given that the individual in question is seeking to claim that the data collected in the mental hospital is applicable to everyone both within as well as outside of the asylum.

Similarly, when Professor Dawkins seeks to make the transition from, on the one hand: issuing a claim with which many people (both believers and non-believers) might agree -- namely, that

some individuals who believe in the existence of God, are quite delusional with respect to nature of such beliefs -- to, on the other hand: concluding that 'consequently, everyone who believes in the existence of God is necessarily delusional', he is making an unwarranted inferential jump. Furthermore, Professor Dawkins seems to fail to appreciate the ironic potential inherent in his book's title with respect to the possible delusional character of his own ideas about God's existence that are given expression through his book.

In the opening pages of his book: *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris states in the first chapter – entitled 'Reason in Exile' – that:

"Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior."

Like many other facets of Mr. Harris' book, the perspective being given expression in the foregoing quote is overly simplistic in a self-serving way. The term "self-serving" is used because one of the central purposes of Mr. Harris' book is to put forth a series of arguments that purportedly show (although this is implied rather than directly stated) how, apparently, only people like Mr. Harris -- individuals who have allegedly immunized

themselves from the virulent plague of faith -- know and understand how to correctly reason their way through life in a manner that is entirely untainted by faith-based irrationality, and, apparently, only people like Mr. Harris are capable of developing systems of thought that will properly resolve -- as much as this might be possible -- the problems faced by humankind.

Unfortunately, Mr. Harris sets about constructing arguments that he believes prove the veracity of his position by restricting the idea of 'reason' to reflect only what he <u>believes</u> the nature of reason to be. And it is instructive in this regard that nowhere in his book does Mr. Harris ever demonstrate that what he believes reason to be gives expression to an objective, unbiased, rigorously empirical, non-arbitrary, and indisputably defensible way of doing things ... except, perhaps, among those who think and believe as he does.

Returning to the foregoing quote -- namely, "Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior" -- this statement cannot withstand close examination even though there is a degree of truth contained in what is said. More specifically, it is not beliefs, per se, that necessarily either define one's vision of the world nor, strictly speaking, do beliefs always dictate behavior.

For instance, what defines one's vision of the world is a function of not only one's ideas about how beliefs play off against one another in specific

circumstances, but, as well, one's vision is a function of the interaction of such things as: uncertainty, anxiety, fear, hope, one's sense of identity, motivation, interests, conditioning, temperament, personal history, likes, dislikes, and so on -- none of which are necessarily beliefs per se but, rather, are forces that shape and influence what and how we believe. We might develop beliefs about all these forces, but these forces that are in play are not necessarily coextensive with the beliefs one might have with respect to them … as we often discover when those kinds of forces stubbornly refuse to act in compliance with our beliefs … such as when we believe, for example, that dieting, exercise, or not smoking are good for us and, then, come face to face with an array of forces that run counter to whatever our beliefs might be.

Even when an individual is successful in the foregoing sorts of endeavors, the will power or commitment that helps lead to success in those cases is not a belief, per se, but some other kind of force that factors in to how one lives his, her, or their life. In short, for many different reasons, we do not always act in accordance with our beliefs.

In addition, Harris tends to give the impression that everyone is clear about what he or she does and does not believe. This is not always the case.

Instead many people spend much of their lives trying to figure out exactly what they do believe about any given issue. Indeed, individuals might

fluctuate among a variety of possibilities concerning such matters at different junctures in their lives as they evaluate life experiences, or individuals might do things without any clear sense of what beliefs are operative within those actions but, instead, are pulled here and there by appetites, emotions, desires, needs, and the like without giving a great deal of thought to what beliefs should govern those processes.

Moreover, even after arriving at an understanding of the dynamics of one's own belief system, one might, or might not, act on that belief – indeed, many of us do not act on things that we believe because, for instance, we might lack the courage to act on those beliefs, or we might lack the personal character to give expression to what we believe, or we might fear the consequences that acting on one's beliefs might have upon one's family, or we might be in conflict with respect to which of several alternative belief possibilities should be put in motion, or we might come to the conclusion that one should be patient about a given matter rather than act on a specific belief even though part of us might be inclined to act on a given belief rather than wait.

Of course, someone like Mr. Harris might try to argue that if a person operates in accordance with patience, this is because that individual believes in the importance and value of patience. However, deciding when to be patient or where to be patient or how to be patient is not necessarily a function of

a determinate set of beliefs as it might be an expression of how subtle existential, experiential currents play off against one another within phenomenology ... a dynamic in which beliefs might only constitute one of the many interacting currents. How one comes to be committed to the quality of patience might have more to do with the development of wisdom or the accumulation of experience that does not necessarily consist of a collection of beliefs but, rather, gives expression to a certain kind of resonance with life.

We might do what we do because it feels like the right or appropriate thing to do. If someone were to ask us which belief makes us feel this way, there might not be any belief at the heart of that feeling.

One's understanding of things might not be the result of belief -- although this could be the case -- but, instead, one's understanding might be the result of how one is hermeneutically linked with existence, and one might not be able to reduce any of this hermeneutical, existential phenomenology down to beliefs -- reasoned or otherwise. Wisdom, insight, feelings, experience, and understanding are not necessarily reducible to beliefs or reason.

Shortly after the foregoing excerpt from Mr. Harris' book, one finds:

"A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one

group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion." [page 12]

Once again, over-simplification rules the day as Mr. Harris unpacks his beliefs and ideas about the way things are alleged to be. Perhaps, if one only glances at history or the pages of a newspaper, then, one might come away with a superficial impression that religion is the root of all evil. However, if one actually takes the time to investigate the problems that divide human beings or unite them in slaughter of one another, then one might not be able to point to religion, per se, but, rather, one comes to glimpse some of the forces – like: ignorance, greed, selfishness, fear, a sense of inferiority or a sense of superiority, a desire for control, patriotism, as well as anger, hatred and contempt for the alien 'other' -- that are the real culprits underlying divisions and slaughter.

The spin masters and propagandists who orchestrate the divisions and slaughter for their own sense of personal aggrandizement, control, power, and pilfering of resources might seek to manipulate people through selective, distorted, or invented theological interpretations of spirituality in order to induce citizens to serve, extend, and defend the vested interests of the leaders in the name of religion. However, behind most human divisions and slaughter, one does not tend to discover any sincere form of spiritual intent but,

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instead, one tends to encounter a cacophony of all too human desires and weaknesses that have little, or nothing, to do with any sense of true spirituality.

In fact, many aspects of Mr. Harris' manner of arguing in his book, *The End of Faith*, are disturbingly reminiscent of the same kind of demagoguery that is used by political and military leaders who seek to whip up destructive emotions, division, and enmity among people so that at atmosphere of negativity might be generated and channeled to be directed against the object of dislike and revulsion that people like Mr. Harris seek to convince those of 'genteel civility' to rise up against and smite down – socially, politically, legally, emotionally, and, if necessary, physically.

Mr. Harris claims on page 13 of his book that:

"Our situation is this: most of the people in this world believe that the Creator of the universe has written a book. We have the misfortune of having many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility."
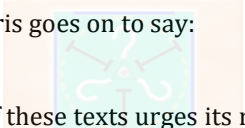
To begin with -- and leaving aside, for the moment, the issue of whether the Creator only sent one book of guidance rather than many such books -- one needs to draw a distinction between what, on the one hand, actually might have been sent in the way of spiritual guidance and how, on the other hand, people might have interpreted what had

been sent. If person A tells something to person B and, then, B passes along to person C B's beliefs about what person A allegedly said, and it turns out that either person C misunderstood what person B said or person B misunderstood what person A said, then, why blame person A for the fiasco that transpires due to the mistakes of either person B and/or person C?

Yet, in effect, Mr. Harris seems to be arguing in a manner that is very similar to the foregoing scenario. Rather than try to ascertain what might have been meant by -- or the intention of -- this or that book of Divine revelation, Mr. Harris wants to start his critique with people's interpretation of that message or intent, and, he never appears to consider the possibility that he is dealing with and, in a sense, has become like individuals -- such as person B above – who busies himself, herself, or themselves with propagating a message to others that totally distorts what was originally said, meant, or intended.

Mr. Harris goes on to say:

"Each of these texts urges its readers to adopt a variety of beliefs and practices, some of which are benign, many of which are not. All are in perverse agreement on one point of fundamental importance, however: "respect" for other faiths or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses. While all faiths have been touched, here and there, by the spirit of ecumenicalism, the

central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed."

Although Mr. Harris is directing the foregoing comments at different religious traditions, he might want to reflect on various portions of his own book and consider the message of intolerance that it appears to carry with respect to everything religious with which he disagrees. He seems to have little, or no, "respect" for the views of a multiplicity of believers from different spiritual traditions because he seems to show little evidence of truly trying to come to understand, for example, that not all Christians, Jews, or Muslims endorse the idea of intolerance toward those who believe differently from them.

Apparently, Mr. Harris is too preoccupied with trying to lump together everything religious in one putrid pile as he seeks to point out how different spiritual traditions are -- to borrow his own phrase -- "repositories of error". In short, Mr. Harris really doesn't appear to be doing anything very much different than what he is accusing various proponents of different religious faiths of doing -- namely, being intolerant, disrespectful, and hurling epithets at anyone who is 'other' or who resides beyond his horizons of belief and practice.

One could agree with Mr. Harris that there is far too much intolerance that is propagated

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through the invented theologies of self-appointed religious leaders of various religious traditions. However, stipulating to such a point does not automatically force one to accept the idea that either God – or those who believe in God -- endorses and approves the idea of intolerance.

This leads to a crucial, pivotal set of questions at the heart of each and every spiritual tradition -- whether theistic or non-theistic in nature. Some of these questions are: Why and how have we come to be? What is our potential? How might we go about fulfilling that potential? Who are we in essence? How should we treat others and interact with the rest of Being? What are the viable relationships among information, understanding, wisdom, and truth? What degrees of freedom do we have with respect to such matters?

The way in which I seek to answer the foregoing questions is entirely independent of how other people might be inclined to address those issues and vice versa. I can consider what the latter individuals have to say, or I can reject it, but nothing necessitates that I have to be intolerant toward them or disrespect them in order for me to pursue the central issues of being human.

To have freedom of choice means that I have the capacity to accept, reject, reflect upon, modify, critique, explore, test, and question what others say or do. However, I can do all of these things without having to be intolerant of, or disrespectful toward, the ones whose ideas and actions I am considering

… in fact, harboring intolerance of, and disrespect for, the views and lifestyles of others often proves to be counterproductive because those attitudes not only tend to skew and bias the process of seeking to find solutions to the questions that form the heart of Being, but, as well, those attitudes take away precious time, energy and resources from what should be the focus of my existential inquiries.

God has not instructed me that being intolerant and disrespectful is the raison d'être of my existence. I do not believe any authentic spiritual tradition teaches that intolerance or disrespect is central or even peripheral to the purpose and nature of Being.

Does this mean I cannot or should not enter into exploratory discussions with others about the foregoing sorts of matters in the hopes of generating better approximations of truth and/or justice? No, none of the foregoing comments is meant to suggest that I should disengage from those interactive ventures, but there is an etiquette to such exchanges, and in this regard, hostile arguments, diatribes, vitriolic debates, propaganda, undue influence, and/or ego-driven debates are not part of that etiquette.

I learned the aforementioned principles of tolerance and respect through my spiritual guide. Those principles were not only reflected in what he said but, more importantly, they were given expression through what he did, especially during

an abundance of very difficult and stressful circumstances that I witnessed.

My spiritual guide was a Sufi master or shaykh operating out of the Islamic spiritual tradition. However, there are others whom I have met and/or whose works I have read who operate out of other spiritual traditions -- traditions that might carry different names -- but that, in essence, teach and give practical expression to the same kind of spiritual etiquette as did my teacher.

These mentors of the soul explore and apply the qualities of: love, patience, forgiveness, integrity, nobility, humility, tolerance, gratitude, compassion, empathy, equanimity, kindness, charity, friendship, sincerity, courage, equitability, self-sacrifice, magnanimity, diligence, and honesty. Intolerance and disrespect are an anathema to all of the foregoing principles ... taken individually or collectively.

Consequently, on the one hand, I understand Mr. Harris' frustration and concerns in relation to issues involving the promulgations and actions of the theologians or proponents of religious intolerance and disrespect. My spiritual guide experienced many of these same frustrations and concerns both from within the Muslim community, as well as from outside the Muslim community, and, as a result, he sought to counsel interested parties -- like myself -- about the problems that tend to arise out of that kind of destructive atmosphere.

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On the other hand, because I have experienced, first hand, the fact there are those who are committed to spiritual traditions who do not at all fit within the scope of Mr. Harris' criticism, I am inclined to believe that Mr. Harris often uses the wrong kind of instrument in his book to get at what he believes to be problematic. More specifically, he frequently uses the verbal equivalent of a dull chainsaw when a sharpened scalpel might be more appropriate.

On page 14 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"We can no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom or in the literal truth of the book of Revelation, or any of the other fantastical notions that have lurked in the minds of the faithful for millennia – because our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that these developments mark the terminal phase of our credulity. Words like "God" and "Allah" must go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal" or they will unmake our world. "

One would like to know what the empirical basis is for the idea that billions of our neighbors who believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom are now armed with "chemical, biological and nuclear weapons."

One also wonders about which "billions of our neighbors" Mr. Harris has in mind or what proof he has that they believe in the "metaphysics of martyrdom" and the literal truth of a book of Revelation, or other "fantastical notions"? To begin with, Mr. Harris seems to share the same misunderstanding about the metaphysics of martyrdom as do some of the people he seeks to criticize because martyrdom has never been about killing others but, instead, martyrdom always has been about the willingness to sacrifice one's own life in the service of truth and justice in an attempt to constructively contribute to everyone … whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

Returning to the previous quote of Mr. Harris, what "fantastical notions" does Mr. Harris have in mind and what is his proof that those notions are fantastical? How many of the billions of people to whom he is alluding has Mr. Harris interviewed, and since Mr. Harris doesn't read Arabic, then, what exactly does he mean by the "literal truth" of Revelation? In fact, what would anyone mean by such a statement because for every book of revelation there might a variety of possible deep understandings that are entailed by, or inherent in, or expressed through, the surface structure of the 'revealed word'.

For instance, let's consider an example from English – namely, "Mary had a little lamb." What is the literal meaning of such a simple sentence?

It could mean that Mary once owned or possessed a lamb as a pet. Or, it might mean that Mary was hungry, and, therefore, she ate some of the lamb that had been cooked for a meal.

Alternatively, the foregoing five word sentence could be referring to some sort of genetic trans-species experiment in which Mary gave birth to a lamb. Or, perhaps, the sentence at issue refers to someone's way of describing the cute little, affectionate, well-behaved human baby to which Mary had given birth.

There is no one meaning that automatically can be assigned to the sentence: 'Mary had a little lamb.' Consequently, one cannot necessarily identify what the "literal" meaning of that sentence is because there often are multiple ways to understand or interpret a great many sentences.

If someone utters the foregoing sentence, one would have to grasp the intent of the individual who is giving expression to the sentence in order to have a proper understanding of what is being said. Similarly, in order to understand the meaning of a given facet of revelation, one would have to develop insight into, or acquire an appreciation for, the nature of the intention through which that aspect of revelation had emerged.

Let's approach Mr. Harris' previous statement (stated on page 19) from another direction. Britain, France, Israel, India, China, North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, and the United States all possess nuclear weapons. The United States is the only country, so

far, which has unleashed nuclear terror on the world.

The anthrax that was released in the United States in the Fall of 2001 was made in a U.S. military lab. Unlike the weapons of mass destruction that were alleged by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell, and Rice to be in Iraq but were never found, weapons of mass destruction -- nuclear, biological, and chemical -- do exist in the United States, and in the case of anthrax has been used against its own people.

Alternatively, there is much speculation but very little hard evidence capable of demonstrating that Iran is well on its way to establishing a nuclear program. At best, the current situation is ambiguous because the nuclear fuels that are being refined and the centrifuges that are being built are capable of being used for peaceful purposes, but, under the appropriate circumstances, could become part of a weapons program. I have no idea what the intentions of the leaders of Iran might be in this respect, and I would not be in favor of Iran developing nuclear weapons if that were the intentions of Iran's leaders.

On the other hand, the United States sponsored, subsidized and conducted a coup d'état of a democratically elected government with respect to Iran back in 1953, and, then, helped to keep their chosen Peacock in power while he ran a brutal dictatorship with the help of a rigorously cruel and oppressive secret police that the United

States helped to train. In addition, the United States not only encouraged Saddam Hussein to attack Iran and gave military support to Iraq through much of the 1980s to continue these assaults, but, as well, the United States supplied Iraq with both biological and chemical weapons, and, then, knowingly looked the other way when those weapons were turned against both Iranians and Iraqis.

So, if the Iranians are seeking to develop nuclear weapons -- something that if true is, I believe, a mistake -- one should not forget the role America has played in helping to create an atmosphere of fear in which people who have been historically traumatized by the United States and its surrogates on a number of occasions might be tempted to take foolhardy and ill-advised steps because of their fears -- real and imagined -- concerning what they believe, based on past events, the United States or its surrogates might try to do to Iran in the future. Already American corporations, politicians, and news media which have vested interests to promote and protect have been rattling sabers with respect to attacking Iran on the mere suspicion that the latter country might be seeking ways to defend itself against, among others, the United States -- a country that has proven its considerable hostility toward the sovereignty of Iran long before the hostage crisis during Jimmy Carter's administration ever took place.

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Does any of the American-orchestrated provocations against Iran justify the possible -- but, as yet, unproven -- development of nuclear weapons or any other form of terror with which Iran might, or might not, be involved? The answer is no, but let us not be naïve and ignore the role that the United States government and military has had in terrorizing people in many parts of the world, including the Middle East, and by doing so has played a considerable part to help create a situation that is fraught with danger for everybody on Earth.

If the current Iranian leadership is intent on developing nuclear weapons, then, yes, this would bring additional stress and toxicity to an already problematic world. If this were to occur, then, many people in the world would have further reason to fear the destructive possibilities already inherent in a very problematic situation.

If Iran should be induced to stop doing whatever it might be doing, then perhaps the United States should be induced to stop doing whatever it is doing in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the world to help instill fear in various countries. Unfortunately, it is a whole lot easier to bully a small country than to try to civilize a powerful country suffering from bouts of megalomania that are quite capable of turning on anyone who gets in the way of its delusions concerning its assumed role in the scheme of things.

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It is the United States, not the Muslim world, that has more than 700 military bases in approximately 130 countries throughout the world, including a number of those bases in Iraq in order to maintain its empire and quite irrespective of whether, or not, the people in the countries where those bases are located like it. It is the United States, not the Muslim world, that spends trillions of dollars on manufacturing weapons of war, both exotic and conventional. It is the United States -- not the Muslim world -- that has thousands of nuclear weapons in its arsenals and already has used several of these against another country. It is the United States, not the Muslim world, that is the world's biggest profiteer in the sale of military weapons. It is the United States, not the Muslim world, that has given Israel billions of dollars in aid even as Israel has continued to act in violation of international law and numerous United Nations resolutions for nearly 50 years through its occupation of Palestine, its annexation of territory through military means, its building of illegal settlements in occupied territories, and its building of a wall of partition through Palestine and the occupied territories. It is the United States, not the Muslim world, that, in the modern era, has sought to overthrow countries like Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Chile … killing, maiming, and displacing millions of people in the process.

Iran might, or might not, be a source of some anxiety and fear concerning its future capacity to

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destabilize the world. However, the United States government is already -- in the here and now -- a source of considerable anxiety as well as fear concerning its on-going role in destabilizing, invading, corrupting, and destroying peoples who oppose its wishes or those of its corporate sponsors.

Perhaps, contrary to what Sam Harris argues, it is not words such as "God" or "Allah" that need to go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal", but, rather, it is words such as "democracy" and "capitalism" that need to be rehabilitated, especially <u>when</u> these ideas are imposed on people in a corrupted form with little, or no, thought given to the destruction that the deviant, irresponsible forms of these ideas might bring to people that, supposedly, are to be "liberated" through such ideas. Understood and applied judiciously and with wisdom, democracy and capitalism have the potential to be great forces of constructive good, but when they are wielded about by those who are intoxicated with their own sense of acquisitiveness and power, these forces also have the capacity to lay waste to freedoms, rights, constitutions, communities, the Earth, and the human soul ... and we see the evidence of this everywhere in the world.

On page 16 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris maintains that:

"In places where scholars can still be stoned to death for doubting the veracity of the Koran [the]

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notion of a "loving concordat" between faith and reason would be perfectly delusional."

I disagree with Mr. Harris with respect to the foregoing. This is so for several reasons.

However much I might disagree with some alleged scholar [and Mr. Harris is rather vague about what it actually means to be a scholar] who had doubts about the veracity of the Qur'an, I recognize that the condition of "doubt" concerning matters of faith is very much part of the human condition. Some people enter into the state of doubt and never re-emerge, becoming trapped in mazes of questions and unknowns. Other individuals wrestle with doubt and not only survive the struggle but flourish as a result of the challenges that doubt brings.

Contrary to what Mr. Harris claims in the foregoing, the people who are delusional are not the individuals who seek to reconcile faith and reason in some productive manner despite the existence of a climate of unreasoned and ignorant hostility concerning that sort of project of reconciliation. The delusional people are those who believe that stoning someone is the best way to deal with the person who has doubts about where the truth lies in any given matter.

Oftentimes, people kill others out of fear … fear of what the other signifies or means in the context of the lives of those who are of the belief that

stoning someone is the solution of choice for dealing with such difficulties. For example, someone comes along and puts forth arguments as to why she or he doubts, say, the veracity of the Qur'an.

If a person wants to stone another individual for stating or promoting such a belief, what is the motivation underlying this sort of inclination? There are a variety of possibilities.

Perhaps the individuals who are inclined to kill the doubter do not wish to be confronted with a variety of questions that they cannot adequately answer in their own minds and hearts concerning the nature of the Qur'an. Rather than recognize the problems of doubt that are present in their minds and hearts, it appears easier for those people to just throw stones and break the human mirror that is reflecting back to them the private concerns, worries, and uncertainties of the stone throwers in these matters.

Perhaps the individuals who are inclined to kill the doubter lack the understanding, insight, wisdom, or other tools of faith (such as patience, friendship, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and the like) that would permit them to engage the doubter in constructive rather than destructive ways. Under these sorts of circumstance, killing the doubter might just be an indirect admission of their own incompetence and inability with respect to the matter of faith and, thus, becomes a tragedy both

for the one stoned, as well as for the ones who do the stoning.

Perhaps the individuals who are inclined to kill the doubter fail to appreciate that people come in all varieties of temperaments, understandings, abilities, weaknesses, interests, and purposes in matters of faith and doubt. The former might be anxious about the fact that everyone is not built to deal with matters of faith in the way in which they do, and, so, ignorance kills.

Perhaps the individuals who are inclined to stone the doubter lack insight and wisdom into the nature of reality and just don't get it that killing a person who has doubts denies that individual the right and freedom to continue the struggle that is at the heart of human existence. Whatever the problem might be with respect to the one who doubts, those who wish to kill the doubter compound the matter by interfering with that individual's hermeneutical and epistemological relationship with Being … how presumptuous and arrogant to believe that they have such a right.

Perhaps the individuals who are inclined to stone the doubter never were given a chance (or took the chance) in life to think for themselves. They might have suffered brain-death or heart-death (in the spiritual sense) from a very early age, and, therefore, don't know any better than to stone what they don't understand or what they fear. Blind obedience to some theology is all they know.

On the other hand, perhaps in some of these people who might have suffered spiritual death in their own lives but who remain to walk the Earth as the living dead, there is some small part of them which recognizes that someone -- namely, the doubter -- is exploring issues that the ones who are inclined to stone doubters never were willing to investigate and there might be some trace of resentment or anger that fuels the stoning ... to strike out at that individual who might be struggling with faith and who might, or might not, be doing a very good job with the struggle but who still is alive enough to exercise some degree of choice in the matter ... something that the ones who stone might have left behind many years ago.

Some individuals might be inclined to stone someone who is a doubter because the former believe that such an action is what others expect of them, just as some are inclined to kill innocents because they believe, according to others, that such actions are their patriotic duty, and in both cases these individuals do what they do out of fear of how others would react to them if they were not to do what is expected of them by others. In such instances, they stone or kill others not out of faith but out of a desire for self-preservation because they feel trapped in someone else's delusion.

Perhaps some people are inclined to stone those individuals who have doubts about the Qur'an because the former believe they are merely following what they have been told are the

prescriptions that are in the Qur'an, or they are just following what they have been told is the counsel of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in those sorts of matters. I don't know of any place in the Qur'an where is says that one should kill those who have doubts about the veracity of the Qur'an, although one is counseled that if one does decide to engage those who have doubts, then one should do so artfully and with wisdom. Moreover, although the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are used by many individuals in an attempt to justify why they believe they have the right to impose their views on others -- and stoning someone is certainly an imposition -- those would-be stoners appear to conveniently forget that the Qur'an specifically indicates that there can be no compulsion in matters of Deen or spirituality ... the very issue with which doubters are struggling.

Somewhat ironically, I find that quite a few of Sam Harris' pronouncements in *The End of Faith* appear to bear some of the same temperamental characteristics as the people against whom he rails -- for example, those who are inclined to stone anyone who does not believe as they do or who have doubts about the veracity of the hermeneutical position of the would-be stoners. In most places, the stones that Mr. Harris seeks to throw are in the form of words or ideas, but there is no doubt in my mind that he wishes to kill -- at least in a metaphorical sense -- some of those who think differently than he does, and, more

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ominously, there are other places in his book where the desire to stone seems to be far less metaphorical and much more literal ... and I will talk about these latter possibilities later in the commentary.

Later on page 16, Mr. Harris claims:

"The idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained – as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of cross-pollination among them. Whatever their imagined source, the doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those which, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago; for there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his famous throne or Poseidon churning the seas."

On the next page, Mr. Harris concludes by saying:
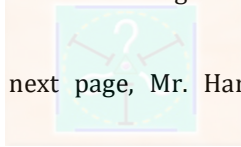
"How is it that, in this one area of our lives, we have convinced ourselves that our beliefs about the world can float entirely free of reason and evidence?"

One of the many problems with Mr. Harris' book, *The End of Faith*, is that although he often appeals, in a generic sense, to the idea of reason and evidence, nonetheless, as has previously been noted in this commentary, he never actually provides the details of what, precisely, he means by reason, nor does he provide any rigorous account of what should be accepted, and why, as being bona fide expressions of the rules of evidence in the matter of evaluating this or that position. By reading his book, one, of course, does come to understand how he believes that what he says is rational, reasonable, and based on evidential considerations while the positions of those with whom he disagrees are often referred to as being irrational, unreasonable, and lacking in evidential support, nevertheless, in all too many cases all a reader has to go on is Mr. Harris' declarative assertion that this is so -- which is rather self-serving and circular in nature.

Mr. Harris introduces the idea of cross-pollination to explain the similarities in beliefs and practices among various religious traditions. However, he does not seem to have considered the possibility that such similarities might be present because they constitute multiple manifestations of an underlying reality to which different spiritual communities have been exposed and about which they might have come to speak in similar ways.

In other words, one need not discount the idea that some kinds of cross-pollination might go on

with respect to various spiritual traditions as individuals in one spiritual community develop modes of discourse that might be borrowed, to a greater or lesser degree, by other spiritual communities grappling with similar experiences. Nonetheless, the foregoing concession does not necessarily mean that different spiritual communities aren't attempting to make individual identifying references in relation to separate but similar experiences and engagements of Being.

For example, let us suppose that Mr. Harris and I were both to see the same beautiful sunset, and let us further suppose that Mr. Harris artfully, poetically, or philosophically described the experience of seeing the sunset, and, then, I subsequently borrowed and used his description to try to give expression to the experience when speaking to others and, perhaps, embellished what he said with my own feelings and way of saying things.

Given the foregoing set of circumstances, one can acknowledge that some manner of cross-pollination is going on. However, concession does not alter the fact that both Mr. Harris and I have had an experiential link to same underlying reality that exists independently of the descriptions that might have arisen in response to the foregoing sort of experience.

Mr. Harris claims that "doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those that, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of

mythology millennia ago; for there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his famous throne or Poseidon churning the seas." Nonetheless, one still might ask what the criteria of tenability are?

What is Mr. Harris counting as evidence to justify his belief that "there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his famous throne"? Why must the belief that one has concerning Yahweh or Satan be literal, and what does a belief in the "literal existence" of Yahweh and Satan even mean -- literal in what sense? Why do some ideas -- for example, that of gods -- get thrown on the scrap heap of ideas, whereas other ideas -- for instance, that of God -- stand the test of time and continue to exercise such an influence on the lives of so many?

Is the idea of 'God' merely baseless mythology, or is there something real being given expression through that idea which transcends the possibility of mere mythology? Mr. Harris contends that the idea of God is no more tenable than the idea of Zeus or Poseidon.

However, Mr. Harris' argument in this respect is largely an elaboration of his own belief about things concerning the question of the existence of a Divine Being. What is meant by 'tenability', 'reason', and 'evidence' are all functions of his belief system.

Now, naturally, most of us, if not all of us, are caught up in the same dilemma as Mr. Harris -- namely, trying to find some point of epistemological leverage that is independent of our beliefs about the nature of reality. Nonetheless, this is a separate issue from the question of whether, or not, there is a Divine Being Who has an ontological status independent of our beliefs about that status.

The former epistemological issues might suffer from any number of problems. Yet, none of those problems necessarily demonstrates there could not be a God that exists beyond our ratiocinative capacities to reason our way to the reality of that Being.

Mr. Harris might not like to admit it, and the proponents of faith might not like to admit it, but reason, by itself, might not be capable of conclusively demonstrating the veracity of the position of either believers or unbelievers. However, viewed from within the familiar and comforting confines of the logic, evidential rules, and rational discourse of their respective paradigms, then, it often becomes all too easy to forget that we engage Being through conceptual filters that both disclose and distort various levels of reality, and we are not always able to differentiate which is which.

I am not proposing, nor am I proponent of, relativism. I am certain that reality has whatever properties, potentials, degrees of freedom, and qualities it has, but I also acknowledge the

possibility that I might never come to know and understand what the nature of Being is, or I might only come to understand certain, limited facets of that reality.

I also am willing to acknowledge the possibility, if not great probability, that there are those who have deeper insights into the nature of reality than I do. I might be right or wrong with respect to whom I believe these people to be.

I am willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of some of Sam Harris' concerns with respect to how various individuals go about giving expression to their ideas of faith. At the same time, I am of the belief that some of Mr. Harris' arguments are not as well-reasoned, as evidentially based, or as tenable as he might suppose them to be.

While I agree with Mr. Harris that some people have convinced themselves that their "beliefs about the world can float entirely free of reason and evidence" (and this is true both in relation to certain approaches to religion, as well as with respect to many non-religious approaches to politics, philosophy, education, law and economics), nonetheless, I and others whom I know who are interested in spirituality or whose writings I have read but who are from different faith traditions than me still make concerted efforts not to be among the kinds of individuals to whom Mr. Harris is alluding. However, although we believe in reason and we believe in evidence, nonetheless, on occasion, we might approach those

matters differently than does Mr. Harris, and this fact, in and of itself, says nothing about who – if anyone -- might be right and who might be wrong in our respective forms of exercising reason or evidence or in our respective ways of characterizing reason or evidence or in our respective modes of critically examining our respective uses of reason and evidence.

On pages 17-18, Mr. Harris begins his critique of religious moderates by saying:

"Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their cannons in the interests of living in the modern world. … In America, religious moderation is further enforced by the fact that most Christians and Jews do not read the Bible in its entirety and consequently have no idea just how vigorously the God of Abraham wants heresy expunged."

He develops his perspective by citing a passage from Deuteronomy concerning God's alleged guidance concerning the treatment of anyone, even a member of one's own family, who tries to induce one to believe in something other than Yahweh. Part of the passage that Mr. Harris quotes is as follows:

"… you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must show him no pity; you must not

spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God ...."
[Deuteronomy 13: 7-11]

Like Mr. Harris, at various junctures in my life I have spent considerable time studying different philosophical and spiritual traditions. One of the topics I studied and that overlaps both issues of philosophy and spirituality is the discipline of hermeneutics that, loosely speaking, focuses on trying to understand how human beings come to understand any given theme, question, topic, problem, text, experience, or issue.

There are many theories of hermeneutics, and I am not trying to advocate one such theory as being superior to any other approach that deals with the areas that are addressed by hermeneutics. However, some of the problems that need to be considered by any theory of hermeneutics concern the issue of translation that comes into play when we are trying to understand the meaning being communicated by some other author or speaker. Naturally, this is very relevant when it comes to considering the possible meanings of any 'guidance' that is alleged to have been transmitted to human beings from a Divine Being.

Even in the case of human beings seeking to communicate with one another, there are many

problems that arise concerning intention, purpose, meaning, and scope in relation to the one who is trying to convey some understanding to us. Those kinds of problems are multiplied when one does not have ready access to the original author or speaker and, as a result, one has to try to piece together possible meanings and intentions on the basis of different ways of engaging a given text or by augmenting those readings by this or that historical document or set of events.

Is what someone is saying meant to be universal in scope or is it meant to apply only to a particular situation? Have we properly understood the meanings of the words being used as well as the intentions underlying those meanings?

Are the words meant to be taken literally or are they metaphorical or could they be both? Are there nuances and subtleties entailed by the words that transcend the literal sense of the words being used?

Are the words meant to induce us to act in certain ways, or are they intended to provide food for reflection and contemplation? To what extent are the words that are written or spoken at one juncture to be modulated or set aside by words that are written or spoken at other junctures?

To what extent can we be sure that the words we might be reading or hearing about actually were said by a given individual, rather than doctored by someone else who is seeking to introduce problems of one sort or another into the process of

translating and understanding? To what extent is that which is being translated -- especially if from another language -- a reflection of the original author or a reflection of the capabilities and interests of the individual doing the translating?

Did 'Yahveh' actually communicate the words of Deuteronomy that have been cited above or did someone else, for unknown reasons, introduce those words into the sacred texts? Were errors made in the transcribing of the original text from one generation to the next?

For whom were the words intended? Were the words intended as universal prescriptions or were they intended for a specific, historical situation. Is the translation into English accurate?

Are there nuances and subtleties of the original language that have been missed in the English translation? Are the words intended to be taken literally or metaphorically? Is there a mystical dimension to the original that is absent from a literal reading of the original text?

Mr. Harris explores none of the foregoing possibilities in his book: *The End of Faith*. Rather, he appears to approach the whole matter with a preconceived agenda in mind and uses those passages as evidence in support of his preconceived notion of things.

Until one can answer the foregoing questions with any degree of reliability and certainty, then, neither Mr. Harris, nor those within the Christian

or Jewish traditions have a demonstrated right to impose their ideas in this regard on anyone ... notwithstanding their wish to interpret the original, sacred text in ways that they claim serve as justification for invented theologies concerning their ideas about the intention, purpose, scope and nature of those "Divine communications" or that they claim serve as presumed justification for harshly treating anyone who disagrees with their theological renderings of God's alleged meanings concerning one's relationship with Yahveh. Presumption is not the same phenomenological state as knowing is.

In fact, even the term 'Yahweh' introduces distortion into the proceedings. The Hebraic equivalent of the letters YHVH (without any vowels, and this is known as a tetragrammaton) is found in Hebrew texts as a linguistic stand-in, of sorts, for the actual name of the Divine reality because that name was considered to be too sacred to be pronounced. People from other religious traditions tend to by-pass the spiritual metaphysics surrounding this issue and simply use the term 'Yahveh' as the alleged name of the reality from which spiritual guidance arises.

Many people suppose that when they name something, then, they understand what has been named. From the Jewish perspective since God is beyond human understanding, there is no way of naming that reality that does not lead to limitations in, and problems with, human understanding

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concerning the nature of that reality. Names like: Melech (King), Hashem (the Name), Adonai ('Lord'), and Elohim (the God of Life), are used as ways of referring to certain dimensions of the ultimate reality while avoiding actually naming or trying to pronounce that ultimate reality.

Consequently, if problems like the foregoing arise with respect to even the issue of naming or referring to Divine Reality -- problems to which Mr. Harris never alludes or mentions -- then, what makes Mr. Harris think that he has got things right with respect to what that all-encompassing reality might have communicated to humankind through Moses (peace be upon him) in the form of a sacred text. Mr. Harris asks none of the right questions in this regard. He pursues none of the necessary hermeneutical issues with respect to the texts that he cites. Consequently, he is very, very premature in his attempts to use the passage from Deuteronomy that he 'quotes' as evidence for the position that he is attempting to put forth in his book.

On page 19 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris claims:

"Religious moderation springs from the fact that even the least educated person among us simply knows more about certain matters than anyone did two thousand years ago – and much of this knowledge is incompatible with scripture."

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Although the structure of Mr. Harris' argument is not spelled out, one suspects he might mean something along the following lines: namely, because those who are religious moderates supposedly recognize how inadequately religion stacks up against the knowledge of the 21ˢᵗ century, one has no choice but to back off from literal readings of scripture and try to cut one's losses by abandoning scripture where necessary and advocate only those aspects of scripture that might be reconcilable with the facts of modern life and science. One wonders what the empirical basis is for the foregoing argument.

I know of no scientific study that proves that at the heart of religious moderation is the fact that Mr. Harris cites in the foregoing quote. I believe one might be able to construct a much more tenable argument by positing that religious moderation arises from an entirely different mode of hermeneutical engagement in relation to spiritual issues than does the literalist paradigm that Mr. Harris uses as his straw man argument.

Even in relation to literalist approaches to, say, scripture [and I am not trying to defend such literalist approaches], what is the nature of all the knowledge to which Mr. Harris alludes that is allegedly "incompatible with scripture"? Does scripture necessarily deny quantum physics, electronics, mathematics, biological science,

modern medicine, or the possibility of the internal combustion engine?

Mr. Harris cites one lone issue in this regard. More specifically, he states on page 19 that:

"Having learned about the known distance between objects in our universe, most of us (about half of us actually) find the idea that the whole works was created six thousand years ago (with light from distant stars already in transit toward the earth) impossible to take seriously. Such concessions to modernity do not in the least suggest that faith is compatible with reason, or that our religious traditions are in principle open to new learning; it is just that the utility of ignoring (or "reinterpreting") certain articles of faith is now overwhelming."

Apparently, Mr. Harris is a little confused about things. Whether one accepts the Bible, in part or in full, or one rejects the Bible, partly or wholly, nowhere does the Bible say that the universe was created 6,000 years ago. The 6,000 year figure is related to an estimate made by Bishop Usher (sometimes spelled 'Ussher') in 1650 based on calculations he performed with respect to the genealogies given in Genesis after making certain assumptions about, among other things, the length of life for various generations of individuals, as well as by making assumptions concerning whether

anyone's genealogy was missing from the list, or whether the genealogies given were correct or when, precisely, those genealogies might have begun.

One needs to draw a distinction between a given scripture and the manner in which that scripture is interpreted or used by this or that individual. The latter is not necessarily reflective of the former even if there might be certain points of commonality here and there between that which is being interpreted and the understanding of the one who is doing the interpreting.

Even the issue of what is meant by the idea of a 'day' is not specified in the Old Testament. People have imposed their own interpretations on this term.

While it might be true that the faith of some individuals is incompatible with reason, Mr. Harris has not shown that faith, in general, is incompatible with reason. The previous assertion would remain the case even if Mr. Harris were to have precisely defined what is meant by 'faith', 'reason' or 'compatible' anywhere in his book … something that he has not done, and this certainly remains so in light of the poorly argued example that Mr. Harris has given and that was noted above.

The word "reinterpreting" is used parenthetically in Mr. Harris' foregoing claim. Given the context in which that term appears within his book, the parenthetical expression seems intended to serve as something of a gibe in relation to any

person of faith who decides to re-evaluate a situation and, in the process, arrives at a new understanding of her or his sense of faith. In point of fact, reinterpreting life due to changes in data is something that everyone does, including scientists and philosophers.

In a sense, Mr. Harris seems to want to criticize people of faith no matter what they do. On the one hand, Mr. Harris wants to claim that "religious traditions are in principle" not "open to new learning". On the other hand, he simultaneously appears to want to suggest that when people of faith engage in the process of "reinterpreting" data as new evidence is uncovered, then, this is merely a "utility of ignoring" or reinterpreting" evidence in an effort to salvage something from a situation that science and reason supposedly have shown to be in conflict with faith.

Thus, when a person of faith engages in the process of 'reinterpreting' evidence, Mr. Harris does not seem to want to interpret this as evidence of being open to new learning, or new possibilities, or new paradigms. Apparently, he believes that it is merely an exercise in rationalization. However, when scientists or philosophers engage in the process of reinterpreting their theories or hypotheses in the light of new data, then, supposedly, this demonstrates their capacity to be open to new learning. Seemingly, Mr. Harris' manner of setting up the scales of evaluation

concerning these matters is somewhat imbalanced and biased.

Early on page 20 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris claims:

"If we better understood the workings of the human brain, we would undoubtedly discover lawful connections between our states of consciousness, our modes of conduct, and the various ways we use our attention. What makes one person happier than another? Why is love more conducive to happiness than hate? ... Is the ego an illusion ...? Is there life after death? These are ultimately questions for a mature science of the mind. If we ever develop such a science, most of our religious texts will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers."

To begin with, I'm not exactly sure how the issue of 'is there life after death' gives expression to a question "for a mature science of the mind" -- unless, of course, one is presupposing one's conclusion by harboring a belief that the idea of "life after death" is nothing more than a fantasy or illusion or false belief ... cognitive states generated through an improperly functioning neurochemistry. Is this possible? Yes, it is.

Nevertheless, Mr. Harris and the other neuroscientists with whom he is currently studying are a long, long way from demonstrating that such

is the case. Neuroscience is light years away from showing, if it ever can, that mind is nothing more than an epiphenomenon of biological functioning and/or that mind is entirely explicable in terms of the dynamics of the latter.

Presently, neuroscience does not know what consciousness is or how it arises. Currently, neuroscience does not know what logic and reason are or how they arise.

At the present time, neuroscience does not know how language, understanding, insight, genius, or creativity is possible. I make the foregoing statement not as someone who is completely ignorant about what is going on in neuroscience but as someone who has taught courses on psychology, including units on brain functioning and neurochemistry, as well as someone who has read about these matters for years.

Has science discovered many things about consciousness, logic, reason, understanding, creativity, language, and so on? Yes, it has.

Has science established many lawful connections among states of consciousness, modes of conduct, and attention? Yes, it has.

Is science likely to discover more about cognitive processes and lawful relationships among such cognitive processes in the future? Yes, this is very likely.

However, none of the foregoing concessions is tantamount to demonstrating, showing, or proving

that mind is nothing more than a dynamic set of mutually modulating neurobiochemical and neurophysiological events. None of what has been discovered in neuroscience shows that happiness, love, a sense of self, or life after death are nothing more than, and entirely dependent on, brain states ... even if one were to accept the idea that neurochemistry might have shaping and modulating effects upon one's mood, sense of identity, capacity to love, or in relation to one's beliefs about the idea of life after death.

Mr. Harris is of the opinion that if human beings succeed in developing a mature science of mind, then, "most of our religious texts will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers." Aside from the fact that Mr. Harris has yet to discuss mysticism or mystics in his book, and aside from the fact that the conditional portion of his statement [namely, 'if we are ever successful in developing a mature science of mind'] is predicated on the coming into being of something that is a very "iffy" possibility -- as long as one stipulates that such a science must be rooted in some form of reductionistic materialism -- and aside from the fact that even if a mature science of mind were to arise, we really don't have any idea of what it might look like, one wonders why Mr. Harris would argue that under such conditions, religious texts will prove to be of no more practical value to mystics than they are to astronomers.

Mr. Harris doesn't specify what religious texts he has in mind, but I am not familiar with any religious texts that deny the importance of consciousness, awareness, attention, understanding, insight, wisdom, happiness, love, the ego, and so on. Furthermore, I am not sure why Mr. Harris would automatically assume that when a given religious text advocates, for example, the pursuit and development of: patience, tolerance, forgiveness, honesty, sincerity, integrity, compassion, humility, being charitable, judiciousness, courage, struggling for the truth, or other similar qualities, that, suddenly, neuroscience is going to be able to demonstrate that none of these qualities has any practical value. In addition, I am not exactly sure how whatever a mature science of mind might discover about the human condition that such a science will be able to demonstrate that one automatically can preclude practices involving, say, fasting, seclusion, prayer, chanting, giving thanks, service to the community, and so on as being of little, or no, practical value to an individual who is a mystic.

Maybe a mature science of mind might discover that fasting, prayer, seclusion, and chanting have certain effects on the brain's biochemistry that help individuals become more inclined toward being positively and constructively motivated, attentive, or engaged with respect to life, as well as being more amenable to being happier, more loving, and having a deeper sense of 'self'. Maybe a mature science of mind might

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demonstrate there is a complementary relationship between brain functioning and those aspects of mind that touch upon, and are touched by, such brain functioning but that might exist independently from physical processes.

The fact of the matter is this: Mr. Harris has absolutely no idea what a mature science of mind might be like. He is just speculating in a way that he believes lends support to his position without providing any evidence to back up his assertions.

On page 20 of *The End Of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"The problem that religious moderation poses for all of us is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism. We cannot say that fundamentalists are crazy, because they are merely practicing their freedom of belief; we cannot even say they are mistaken in religious terms because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivaled. All we can say, as religious moderates, is that we don't like the personal and social costs that a full embrace of scripture imposes on us."

I must be missing something here because I'm not at all clear about why it is that so-called "religious moderation" does not "permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism." I'm also a little unclear why one must be pushed

into the sorts of extremes toward which Mr. Harris wishes to maneuver people through his manner of framing a given question or problem.

Contrary to Mr. Harris' way of stating things, I don't have to refer to the advocates of "religious literalism" as being "crazy" if I disagree with their perspective. Moreover, I can defend their right to believe whatever they like without necessarily feeling compelled to concede that such people have the right to impose their way of life on me or anyone else.

In addition, Mr. Harris' contention that "one cannot even say that they are mistaken in religious terms because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivaled" is not tenable. Mr. Harris' foregoing contention is incorrect for a number of reasons.

To be sure, there are many individuals who could be categorized as coming under the rubric of "religious literalism" and who have memorized vast portions of the Bible. Nonetheless, memorization does not necessarily presuppose a correct understanding of that which has been memorized.

The fact that someone can issue forth Biblical quotes for every occasion says nothing at all about the appropriateness or relevancy of those assertions. All one can be sure of is that the individual who utters the quotes has a good memory and that they are committed to a certain understanding of the Bible that in their minds they consider to be correct.

What prevents one from saying that any or all of that kind of an understanding is mistaken? What prevents one from putting forth arguments that might demonstrate the errors and mistakes in such a manner of understanding?

Bart D. Ehrman did precisely this in his book *Misquoting Jesus*. Ironically, Dr. Ehrman originally started out from a perspective of "religious literalism", and, yet, over a number of years of rigorous research into an array of subjects, he reevaluated his earlier approach to faith and came to a position which argued that there are many possible sources of mistakes and errors in the understanding advocated by "religious literalism".

On page 21 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris goes on to claim:

"Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance – and it has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism. The texts themselves are unequivocal; they are perfect in all their parts. By their light, religious moderation appears to be nothing more than an unwillingness to fully submit to God's law. By failing to live up to the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally. Unless the core dogmas of faith are called into question – i.e., that we know there is a God and that we know what he wants from us – religious

moderation will do nothing to lead us out of the wilderness."

I'm still waiting for something from Mr. Harris that substantiates his claim that "religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance." One suspects that, perhaps, one of the reasons why Mr. Harris appears so insistent on pushing the "religious literalism" angle is because without it, much of what Mr. Harris has to say with respect to religion is full of emptiness, signifying not much of anything.

Indeed, and rather surprisingly, Mr. Harris appears to be a closet 'religious literalist' because he seems to be dead set against permitting any sort of hermeneutical engagement of religious scripture that is other than "literalist" in nature ... at least as he wishes that term to be understood. One wonders why Mr. Harris appears so intent on arguing that the 'literalist' approach to religious scripture is the only one that is permissible.

Why should one accept Mr. Harris' claim that religious moderation – whatever that means – "has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism"? What are the criteria that are to be used in determining such "bona fides"?

What are the methods for determining those criteria? How should one go about evaluating the process of methodologically engaging such criteria?

What does Mr. Harris mean by the phrase "religious terms". Moreover, why should anyone feel inclined to accept his hermeneutical rendering of those terms?

According to Mr. Harris, "the texts themselves are unequivocal; they are perfect in all their parts." However, until one knows what was originally communicated to, say, Moses (peace be upon him) or Jesus (peace be upon him), and until one engages the original languages (for example, Hebrew and Aramaic) in all of their nuances, dimensions, or levels, and until one gains insight into the intentions and purposes of the One Who is communicating those texts, and until one can ascertain that one has grasped such intentions or purposes correctly, and until one has determined whether or not there have been any modifications of those texts and, if so, what those alterations involve, then, one is not in any position to make statements about what those texts mean unequivocally or what it even means to suggest that they are "perfect in all their parts".

Mr. Harris maintains that "by failing to live up to the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally." Nowhere in his book, *The End Of Faith*, does Mr. Harris demonstrate why and how "the letter of the texts" constitutes the standard against which all things ought to be measured, nor does Mr. Harris prove or demonstrate anywhere in his book that religious

moderates have remained silent with respect to any of the irrationalities that might arise in conjunction with those who insist on a literalist approach to engaging religion.

Consider the following possibility. If one is commanded in one part of something that is considered a sacred text to defeat those who oppose one, but one is commanded in another part of that same presumed sacred text to love those who oppose one, then, what should one do?

Why should one automatically assume that killing one's enemies should take precedence over loving one's enemies? What would be the argument favoring killing over loving? What are the operative principles here and why?

What precludes the possibility that one might try to reconcile the two commandments by seeking to vanquish one's enemies by loving them? And, if one chooses to use love to vanquish one's enemies, how is this betraying the sacred text or how is it betraying reason? How -- contrary to what Mr. Harris supposes -- would that sort of choice not be an expression of submitting fully to the Divine scheme of things?

As much of the foregoing commentary illustrates -- albeit briefly -- Mr. Harris continually busies himself during the course of his book, *The End of Faith*, with proposing a variety of false dilemmas, oversimplifications, and 'straw man' arguments. His book is continually engaged in problematically framing various arguments in ways

that he believes will irrevocably lead readers into the sort of philosophical cul-de-sac that he seeks to fashion concerning issues of faith and reason, but his attempts at framing things in a manner that is deferential to his modality of understanding are infused with many arbitrary assumptions and presumptions, as well as with numerous logical errors, unanswered questions, and untenable conclusions.

On page 23 of his book, Mr. Harris argues:

"… every human being comes to desire genuine knowledge about the world. This has always posed a special problem for religion because every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which it has no evidence. In fact, every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even conceivable. This put the "leap" in Kierkegaard's leap of faith."

What does Mr. Harris mean by "genuine knowledge"? Without ever being very precise in the manner he goes about things with respect to this issue, Mr. Harris' perspective concerning the idea of knowledge is that in order for something to be considered genuine in the sense that he means, then that something must comply with either the principles of materialistic, physical science and/or that something must be expressible through principles of logic and reason.

During the course of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris never defines logic or reason, nor does he defensibly explain and/or demonstrate why genuine knowledge must be a function of materialistic, physical science. Mr. Harris frames the situation according to his likes and dislikes, without ever really delving into any rigorous or critical detail about the characteristics, principles, theories, qualities, and properties he is using to frame his discussion. Throughout his discussion, he directs the reader's attention only toward what Mr. Harris' frame permits a reader to consider in a manner that must satisfy the properties and rules of that framing process.

Mr. Harris never asks questions such as: What is logic and what makes it possible, or what is reason and what makes it possible, or what is understanding and what makes it possible, or what is memory and what makes it possible, or what is awareness and what makes it possible, or what is intelligence and what makes it possible, or what is insight and what makes it possible, or what proof is there that there is nothing more to reality than some form of material stuff however complexly this might be arranged, or why should one expect to ever discover anything more than variations on materialistic themes if materialistic presuppositions and methods are all one is willing to use? Mr. Harris doesn't raise the foregoing sorts of questions because he can't answer them and, instead, he wishes to frame the discussion in a way that suggests that these sorts of questions have

little, or no, bearing on the claims he seeks to make concerning what is and is not genuine knowledge.

Modern science presupposes logic, reason, consciousness, intelligence, insight, creativity, invention, and understanding but can explain none of those terms in a manner with which everyone can agree. Modern science, at least as presently conceived, has little, if anything, of universally demonstrable value to say about morality, justice, ultimate purpose, spirituality, community, and/or essential identity, and, yet, those issues are of much more pressing concern to the vast majority of human beings than are the sorts of questions with which science preoccupies itself ... however important the latter kind of inquiry might be for certain dimensions of human existence.

In his book *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris deals with the idea of 'evidence' only in a prefabricated manner. For him, what counts as evidence is what he says counts as evidence according to the paradigm out of which he operates. The fact that he can point to others who operate out of the same paradigm proves nothing except the fact that there are those who share some of the same ideas about things as he does.

What should count as evidence for the existence of God? We are faced with something akin to 'the glass is half full or the glass is half empty" sort of scenario.

The perceptual filters through which one engages experience tends to determine what any

given individual considers to count as evidence. Mr. Harris is inclined to critically elaborate upon the perceptual filters employed by people of faith, while leaving unexamined his own perceptual filters … in fact, he apparently would like to leave the reader with the impression that Mr. Harris perceptions are rooted in non-arbitrary, unbiased, presuppositionless, totally objective, and value-free processes that enables him to see reality in the way reality really is.

In his own manner, Mr. Harris is a man of faith and has taken his own version of Kierkegaard's leap to which he referred in the earlier quote, except the things in which he has faith exclude the idea of God or Divinity. Mr. Harris has faith that science, reason, and logic – as he understands these things – will lead him to truth and genuine knowledge about the ultimate nature of things. Moreover, he has faith that 'people of faith' – the ones whose faith his faith rejects – have no access to either truth or genuine knowledge.

However, Mr. Harris can't prove any of the foregoing beliefs. He counts certain things as evidence in support of his faith, and he rejects certain things as capable of counting as evidence for the faith of others, but he neither can prove the correctness of his way of defining the idea of evidence, nor can he disprove the way in which other people define the idea of evidence with respect to their own faith.

Do any of the foregoing admissions necessarily make truth and reality a relative thing? Not at all!

Someone's faith might, or might not, accurately reflect the nature of truth or reality. The fact that someone has faith does not, in and of itself, necessarily make the content of that in which one has faith congruent with, or correspond to, or a reflection of what the nature of reality actually is.

As much as Mr. Harris might dislike the following claim, the fact of the matter is that he shares something in common with the people of faith to whom he has been critically opposed throughout his book. More specifically, those who share Mr. Harris' brand of faith as well as those who advocate a faith that involves the idea of a Deity, each believe that reality has a certain nature which gives expression to some possibilities while not giving expression to other possibilities.

Both sides of this argument believe there is a truth to things. They just have different faith approaches to trying to understand what the nature of that truth involves.

On the other hand, there is a significant, potential difference between the foregoing approaches to faith, broadly conceived, that are alluded to above. People of religious faith can make a place in their faith for the possibilities of science, but Mr. Harris has no place in his faith for the possibility of God.

Although, sadly, not all people of religious faith are willing to entertain the possibility that science has the potential for revealing important truths about the nature of certain dimensions of the reality that Divinity has made possible, nonetheless, there need not be any inherent contradiction between science and spiritual faith. Problems tend to arise in this regard when those who have certain vested interests in various theologies of science clash with those who have certain vested interests in theologies of spirituality.

No person of faith – whether science-based or spiritually-based – should ever be afraid of discovering the truth. Unfortunately, what people of faith on both sides of the issue actually fear is that the truth – whatever that turns out to be -- might not support the particular theology of faith -- whether scientific or spiritual in nature -- to which they already have committed themselves.

Mr. Harris is an advocate for a theology of science that rejects the idea of God. This theology informs his faith with respect to the process of science. Through that faith he has prejudged the ontological and epistemological nature of reality despite the fact there is much we do not know and despite the fact there is much that has not, yet, been established in indisputable ways concerning that same reality.

Mr. Harris, I believe, would like his readers to believe that the 'there is no God idea' is a

conclusion which is based on positive evidence in support of his position. This is not so.

Mr. Harris' entire position appears to consist in trying to point out what he believes are errors in the logic of various people of spiritual faith. He seems to suppose that by doing this he somehow has demonstrated that God does not exist, and, therefore, he does not appear to consider the possibility that even if one were inclined to accept his arguments concerning the weakness of a given individual's argument about spiritual faith -- and as the foregoing 60 pages of comments indicate, I am not always inclined to give Mr. Harris a pass on those arguments – nonetheless, one can deduce nothing from Mr. Harris' criticisms of various individuals with respect to the existence of God issue.

Mr. Harris is constructing an inductive argument. He, in effect, is saying: look at human beings A, B, C, D, E, F ... Z, they all are committing logical, empirical, scientific, and rational errors ... therefore, there is no God.

Even if one were inclined to agree with Mr. Harris on every anti-religious theme about which he argues in *The End of Faith* -- and I am not so inclined, although not everything Mr. Harris says in certain instances is necessarily wrong -- neither God's existence nor God's nature is predicated on what people do or do not believe concerning the matter. Everything that any human being has ever said or ever will say about God could be filled with

error, logical mistakes, questionable evidential considerations, irrationality, and more, but none of this, in and of itself, says anything about the existence or nonexistence of Divinity.

God either is real or God isn't real. If God is real, then, God's nature either is as some people understand things, or God's nature does not reflect those people's way of understanding things.

What is the nature of Mr. Harris' proof that God does not exist? He has none.

He looks at fallible human beings and seeks to treat whatever might be problematic with the understanding of those individuals concerning the existence and nature of Divinity as evidence that God does not exist. Yet, the former has nothing to do with the latter.

Mr. Harris has no evidence to offer concerning the existence or non-existence of God that is independent of the people he criticizes and wishes to count as evidence against the possibility of God's existence. There is no set of scientific or philosophical data to which Mr. Harris can point and claim that such data indisputably proves God does not exist. Everything that Mr. Harris puts forth in this respect can be shown to be nothing more than an expression of his own faith system concerning the matter.

People of religious faith cannot prove God's existence to Mr. Harris' satisfaction. Mr. Harris

cannot prove the nonexistence of God to the satisfaction of people of religious faith.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with considerable uncertainty, but Mr. Harris does not shy away from seeking to portray his faith system as if it were totally logical, rational, completely empirical, non-arbitrary, verifiable, and true despite the fact that he cannot demonstrate this to the satisfaction of anyone except those who already think as he does or those who can be induced to accept Mr. Harris' way of framing the discussion.

Mr. Harris proposes the following thought experiment in *The End of Faith*:

"Imagine that six billion of us wake up tomorrow morning in a state of utter ignorance and confusion. Our books and computers are still here, but we can't make heads or tails of their contents. We have even forgotten how to drive our cars and brush our teeth. What knowledge would we want to reclaim first. Well, there's that business about growing food and building shelter that we would want to get reacquainted with. We would want to relearn how to use and repair many of our machines. Learning to understand spoken and written language would also be a top priority, given that these skills are necessary for acquiring most others. When in this process of reclaiming our humanity will it be important to know that Jesus was born of a virgin? Or that he was resurrected?

And, how would we relearn these truths, if they are indeed true?"

As usual, Mr. Harris both oversimplifies matters as well as frames his thought experiment in a way that serves his purposes instead of opening up the issue to any sort of genuine discussion. For example, let us suppose human beings do decide that growing food and building shelters should be at the top of the list of things about which they need to gain knowledge in order to regain their humanity.

There is a litany of questions that Mr. Harris has not asked in his thought experiment. For example, what is the nature of the humanity that we supposedly are seeking to regain through such activities?

To what extent does that sense of humanity depend only on having food and shelter? Does it matter what kinds of food are grown or what kinds of shelters are built or what impact that growing and building will have on the environment?

How is humanity to decide the issue of who owns the land that the food is to be grown on or that the shelters are to be built upon? Who gets to decide who is to do the labor for these tasks and what compensation, if any, such individuals should receive for performing that labor?

Where will people get the wherewithal for such ventures, and will credit be extended for those who

do not have such wherewithal? Who will extend this credit and at what costs, and what justifies such costs?

Will the food be grown for everyone or only for those who can pay for it? What resources will be used in the growing and the building, and who gets to decide that this is how resources ought to be used?

What happens if people become proprietary about the owning of land for the food and shelter? Who will adjudicate such matters and with what authority or justification? What should be done if people decide to use force to settle these issues?

How should conflicts be handled or resolved? Is there a place in any of this for qualities and principles of: patience, humility, honesty, integrity, magnanimity, sincerity, nobility, tolerance, love, friendship, forgiveness, forbearance, equanimity, and charitableness? How are those principles and qualities to be understood and to be acquired?

With respect to the machines that are to be used and repaired, what impact will their use and repair have on humankind and the environment? Who gets to decide what machines are to be used or where or when and by whom and for what purposes?

Are these machines to be used only for the benefit of the few or for the benefit of everyone? How does one measure and evaluate the notion of 'benefit'?

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If we are to learn how to understand spoken and written language, which theory of hermeneutics concerning that understanding should one learn? Should language be used to deceive, mislead, manipulate, exploit, propagandize, or misinform other individuals?

 Who gets to set the standards of evaluating the uses to which language is put? Who gets to set the language curriculum?

Should people be compelled to learn such a curriculum? What about conditions governed by: hatred, anger, contempt, jealousy, pride, selfishness, arrogance, or a desire to control others? Will spoken and written language be used to help humanity learn to master such conditions?

How should an individual's time and energy be spent? Should an individual only be allowed to use that time to grow food, or build shelters, or use and repair machines, or learn spoken and written languages for the purposes and in the manner that people like Mr. Harris set?

Whatever one thinks about the idea of the importance of growing food or building shelters, one cannot treat these issues in isolation from asking fundamental questions about: what the nature and purpose of life are, or what it means to be a human being, or how human beings should determine the moral, social, political, economic, ecological, legal, and spiritual terms of how we go about the processes of growing food or building shelters or using machines or learning of language.

Secular thinkers and spiritual thinkers each have addressed the forgoing kinds of issues in their respective ways. In addition, the two approaches have recognized that one cannot engage Mr. Harris' thought experiment without asking a lot more questions than Mr. Harris suggests is the case.

One could agree with Mr. Harris that making efforts to ascertain knowledge concerning the status of Jesus' virgin birth, or issues involving the resurrection, might not necessarily have the highest priority as one sets about seeking to reclaim one's humanity. On the other hand, if an individual were to develop a relationship of faith concerning such matters (e.g., virgin birth, resurrection, and so on) and this hermeneutical orientation proved of value to the individual as she, he, or they went about attempting to constructively engage the many questions that revolve about issues of food, shelter, technology, and learning language, then, how is Mr. Harris to argue that one cannot or should not do such things? Mr. Harris might find it hard to believe, but many human beings can actually chew gum and walk at the same time.

As one goes about addressing the issues associated with the growing of food or the building of shelters, or the using of machines, or the learning of language, experiences happen; thoughts are thought; beliefs are developed; needs are assessed; judgments are made; actions are undertaken; results are evaluated. Faith arises in conjunction

with one's hermeneutical engagement of the dynamic interaction among: experience, thought, belief, needs, judgments, actions and evaluations, and, over time, this sort of engagement generates a sense of confidence with respect to how one understands all of these things might be metaphysically, ontologically, and epistemologically held together, as well as the extent to which one feels that all of this accurately reflects the way reality makes those things be possible.

This is what faith is: a sense of things in which one has confidence but that can't be proven to the satisfaction of others but that, nonetheless, helps guide one through the day. Spiritual/religious people operate through this sort of faith, but so do secularists, scientists, agnostics, and atheists.

Some theological ideas – whether scientific, philosophical or spiritual -- might be less helpful in this process than others. Individuals make their own decision in such matters.

Truth and reality will be the final arbiter in all of this. Moreover, this will be the case irrespective of whether one agrees with that process of arbitration or not.

Mr. Harris has faith in a certain idea. More specifically, Mr. Harris has faith in the idea that truth and reality are functions of a universe that is physical, material, and biological in nature.

Furthermore, he is willing to acknowledge, I am sure, that while there might be much about the nature of this physical, material and biological universe that is not, yet, known, nonetheless, given enough time, resources, and effort, everything in the universe is capable, at least in principle, of becoming known and understood by human beings. People of religious faith are committed to the idea that there are dimensions to reality that transcend and are independent of physical, material, and biological realities, and, possibly, committed as well to the idea that human beings might not be able to grasp the truth and reality of all that is or that makes Being possible.

Mr. Harris believes he can prove that his manner of faith is superior to the faith of the religious people he seeks to criticize. This is the purpose and nature of his book *The End of Faith*, but what he means by faith is the sort of faith that others have, not the sort of faith out of which he operates.

Just as there are different species of philosophical, scientific, and secular faith [some more tenable and some less tenable], so too there are different species of religious and spiritual faith [some more tenable and some less tenable]. However, Mr. Harris appears to be unwilling to accept such a state of affairs.

He wishes to treat every species of religious or spiritual faith as the same ... equally defective ... equally irrational ... equally illogical ... equally

problematic. He criticizes one's individual's view and supposes, without demonstration, that the particular can be universally applied to all species of religious or spiritual faith.

This would be like saying that because scientist A is wrong about such and such a point, therefore, all scientists must be wrong. Or, it would be like saying that because, for example, one believed that John Locke was wrong about such and such a point, then, Kant and Hegel must also have been wrong with respect to whatever they might have said irrespective of whether one's criticism of Locke was at all relevant to either of the perspectives of Kant or Hegel.

I feel relatively confident that Mr. Harris would reject the logical form of the foregoing sort of an argument in relation to scientists or philosophers. Therefore, why he would accept this sort of argument in the case of spiritual and religious matters is likely to have more than a little to do with the agenda that he has set for himself in his book and, consequently, serves as a source of bias in the way he filters issues and frames his discussion in that book.

On page 25 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"Our past is not sacred for being past, and there is much that is behind us that we are struggling to keep behind us, and to which, it is to be hoped, we

could never return with a clear conscience: the divine right of kings, feudalism, the caste system, slavery, political execution, forced castration, vivisection, bearbaiting, honorable duels, chastity belts, trial by ordeal, child labor, human and animal sacrifice, the stoning of heretics, cannibalism, sodomy laws, taboos against contraception, human radiation experiments – the list is nearly endless, and if it were extended indefinitely, the proportion of abuses for which religion could be found directly responsible is likely to remain undiminished."

One could agree with most of the topics that Mr. Harris itemizes in the foregoing quotation without necessarily feeling compelled to agree with his contention that a considerable proportion of the abuses that have been listed -- as well as all those that could have been listed but were not -- can be placed at the door of religion. There are problems that are inherent in Mr. Harris' position in this regard.

For instance, consider the following. Mr. Harris does not believe there are any authentic spiritual traditions that have arisen as a result of contact between humanity and a Being Who transcends humanity. Consequently, he is of the opinion that all religious perspectives are equally delusional.

He cannot prove that what he is asserting is true. However, he does have faith that what he claims is correct.

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Let's, for the moment, accept Mr. Harris' claim. In other words, let us accept the idea that all religious concepts concerning Divinity and Divine communications are false, and let us further accept the idea that anyone who espouses religious ideas is fully delusional about that in which she or he has faith.

If one were to stipulate to the truth of such a perspective, then, in effect, one would be agreeing with the idea that all of the abuses that appear on the foregoing dirty laundry list cited by Mr. Harris, along with many others that have not been listed, are all due to human beings. God did not do these things because, given Mr. Harris' perspective, God does not exist.

Human beings committed those abuses. Moreover, human beings, being human, tried to disown responsibility for those abuses by claiming that they were commanded by, and under obligation to, God concerning the performance of those actions.

So, in reality, what Mr. Harris seems to have a problem with are those individuals who invent theologies that they seek to use as justification for abusing other human beings. If this is the case, then, it might come as a surprise to Mr. Harris -- and I am sure there are individuals from other spiritual traditions who might agree with me on this point -- but I don't have a problem with the spirit of the perspective being put forth by Mr. Harris at this juncture since I, too, have a problem

with those individuals who invent theologies through which they seek to justify their abuse, control, exploitation, manipulation, killing of, or cruelty toward, other human beings or the rest of the universe.

One of the areas where Mr. Harris and I differ concerns the issue of whether, or not, there is any Divine Being and whether, or not, there has been any form of contact between that Divine Being and humankind. Mr. Harris has faith there is no such Being and, therefore, there could not have been any contact between such an imaginary Being and humankind. I have faith that not only does such a Being exist but there has been, and continues to be, contact between that Being and humankind.

Given the foregoing, I take exception with Mr. Harris' tendency to lump together all species of spiritual discourse. Despite the fact that Mr. Harris does not have faith in such a Being or in such contact, he should at least be cognizant of the fact that, even when looked at from his perspective, my 'delusion' concerning such a Being and such contact entails an approach that might be devoid of many of the sorts of abuses with which he wishes to take issue in the aforementioned quoted list.

Furthermore, even though Mr. Harris is likely to consider the following to be but another aspect of my spiritual delusion, I believe a distinction must be made (one that was stated earlier) between what is expressed as Divine communication and people's interpretation of that communication. For

example, let's suppose that there is a form of communication -- which is referred to as, say, the Qur'an -- and let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that some human wrote that book and that it was not communicated to human beings from a Divine Being. Even stipulating to all of this, I could still argue that one needs to draw a distinction between what the author of the communication might have meant or intended with respect to that text and what other individuals are seeking to impose on that text by using this or that mode of hermeneutical engagement.

Naturally, trying to get to the "truth" of things in relation to the foregoing scenario is a difficult struggle that is fraught with a variety of problems, and this remains true even if one were to consider the matter only from a perspective of human to human communications. However, even though Mr. Harris considers all religious communications to be purely human inventions and constructions, he still needs to address the following issue: My engagement of the Qur'an tends to involve significant differences from the views of those whom he wishes to lump together as people of religious faith, and I feel confident in saying that there are other individuals who engage their holy books or sacred communications in ways that also involve significant differences from the kind of perspective that Mr. Harris is criticizing.

Some individuals from among the latter proponents of religious faith might wish to argue

that the aforementioned quote from Mr. Harris concerning the laundry list of abuses were, in fact, Divine commandments and religious obligations that one was duty-bound to observe. I, on the other hand, would disagree with such a perspective and am of the opinion that irrespective of what one believed to be the ultimate source of that communication -- human or Divine -- the individuals who were, and are, trying to justify those abuses have got things wrong in relation to the Qur'an.

Unfortunately, Mr. Harris' position in this respect lacks discernment, as well as lacks a capacity to differentiate among various species of spiritual faith. Apparently, he fails to understand that not all modalities of religious and spiritual faith are the same, and, as a result, fails to make some very important distinctions that are of central relevance to the kinds of issues and topics that are being addressed in his book.

Thus, when Mr. Harris says on page 26 of his book that: "Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past," and, then, he proceeds to list a plethora of geographical locations where violence has erupted, followed by the charge that: "In these places religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in the last ten years", Mr. Harris is distorting the actual character of what has, and is, transpiring. In all the places that Mr. Harris cites, it is not religion, per se, but people and their self-

serving theologies have have explicitly caused the deaths of millions of people.

The term "religion" is ambiguous. It is capable of referring to many possible understandings. Academicians even have trouble defining what the term means and whether, or not, one needs to believe in a Deity in order for one to be said to be a proponent of some religion or other.

If a person considers himself or herself religious or spiritual, believes in pacifism and/or non-violence, and puts that belief into action, then, just how has religion caused the slaughter and genocide in the places listed by Mr. Harris? Unfortunately, Mr. Harris' position seems to require that all religion be labeled as 'evil' if he is to have any hope of being successful with respect to convincing readers that 'faith' must end -- which, after all, is one of the central premises of his book.

On page 28 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris stipulates:

"I will argue that insofar as a person is observant of the doctrine of Islam -- that is, insofar as he really believes -- he will pose a problem for us. Indeed, it has grown rather obvious that the liabilities of the Muslim faith are by no means confined to the beliefs of Muslim extremists."

A short while later he follows up on the foregoing assertion with:

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"To see that our problem is with Islam itself, and not merely with "terrorism", we need only ask ourselves why Muslim terrorists do what they do. Why would someone as conspicuously devoid of personal grievances or psychological dysfunction as Osama bin Laden -- who is neither poor, uneducated, delusional, nor a poor victim of Western aggression -- devote himself to cave-dwelling machinations with the intention of killing innumerable men, women, and children he has never met? The answer is that men like bin Laden actually believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran."

Mr. Harris skews his discussion in a self-serving manner through the way in which he wishes to frame the nature of that discussion. More specifically, Mr. Harris insists on dictating to Muslims not only in relation to how he insists that Islam be understood but, as well, in relation to how Muslims, according to Mr. Harris, must go about believing in the sort of Islam that he wishes to foist upon them.

What does it mean to be observant of Islam? This consists of a number of simple practices and beliefs, none of which serve as evidence for that which Mr. Harris is trying to argue.

To be an observant Muslim, one needs to give attestation to the idea that there is no reality but

Divinity and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is one of the messengers of God (that is, he has been given one of the books of revelation). In addition, one makes efforts to pray five times a day, fast during the month of Ramazan, give charity if one satisfies certain conditions of material and financial wherewithal, and, if physically and financially able to do so, perform the rites of Hajj, or pilgrimage, at the appointed time at least once in one's lifetime. In addition, one is required: to believe in God's oneness and in the Prophetic mission of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him); to believe in the angels; to believe in all of the Prophets who have been sent; to believe in all of the books of revelation that have been sent [including that which has been sent to Jesus (peace be upon him), Moses (peace be upon him), David (peace be upon him), and Abraham (peace be upon him)]; to believe in a Day of Judgment during which everyone will be held accountable for their deeds or misdeeds that took place while on Earth, and, finally, to believe that God is the sole determiner of good and evil.

Mr. Harris might consider all of the foregoing ideas, practices, values, principles, and beliefs to be nothing more than fanciful, delusional myths, but there is nothing in any of it that serves as evidence for what he is claiming. In other words, there is nothing in any of the foregoing practices and beliefs that necessarily requires a Muslim to kill other human beings, or to terrorize other human beings, or to oppress other human beings, or to behave

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cruelly toward other human beings, or to control other human beings.

To be sure, there have been innumerable Muslim theologians down through the ages who have sought to try to convince people that in order to truly believe in, and act upon, any of the foregoing basic practices and beliefs that one must do so in the way that has been prescribed by theologians or one cannot really consider oneself to be a Muslim. However, there is nothing in any of the basic beliefs and practices of Islam that have been outlined earlier that indicates that a Muslim must pay attention to theologians who make those sorts of claims.

A Muslim's responsibility is in relation to God. A Muslim's responsibility is not a function of what this or that theologian might say.

According to Mr. Harris, the reason why individuals such as bin Laden are willing to terrorize and kill innocent people is because the former really believe in what they say they believe -- namely, the literal truth of the Qur'an. What requires a Muslim to engage the Qur'an in a literal way, and what does one even mean by the literal truth of the Qur'an?

The Qur'an consists of over 6000 verses. These verses touch upon many topics, issues, problems, and questions. Among other things, those verses explore themes of: patience, equitability, honesty, integrity, humility, love, compassion, forgiveness, charitableness, knowledge, balance, peace,

harmony, tolerance, courage, truth, gratitude, remembrance, sincerity, faith, certainty, doubt, purification, awareness, contemplation, observation, reflection, piety, and steadfastness. What would it mean to speak of the literal truth in relation to those themes?

The foregoing themes all give expression to principles, not rules. Consequently, there is no one way and there is no literal way, per se, for an individual to be patient, or equitable, or loving, or compassionate, or tolerant.

People come in differently shaped packages of: ability, strengths, weakness, intelligence, talent, history, temperament, interests, motivation, purpose, and understanding. One individual's manner of exhibiting, say, charitableness or forgiveness might not be the same as another individual's approach to the same issue even as what both of these individuals do might be recognizable by others as instances of being charitable or forgiving.

There are some 500-plus verses in the Qur'an that specify certain courses of action when it comes to issues such as: dietary restrictions, marriage, divorce, zakat (charity), fasting, prayer, contracts, punishment, and war. Oftentimes, some people (whether theologians or individuals such as Mr. Harris) like to fasten on to these specific verses and give them priority over everything else that is in the Qur'an.

These individuals seem to be of the opinion that the specific and concrete should trump or take precedence over the general and universal. Indeed, this predilection for the specific over the general has been a persistent cornerstone of many theological approaches to engaging the Qur'an.

However, the foregoing mode of engaging the Qur'an through a lens of specificity gives expression to a certain kind of hermeneutical orientation with respect to the Qur'an. That is, such a perspective constitutes a theory about how some given individual believes the Qur'an should be understood, and, unfortunately, all too many people seem to confuse their own ideas about things in this regard … as if the latter were Divine edict that could be imposed on everyone else.

As such, one cannot necessarily say that the Qur'an is commanding people to adhere to the specific and forget about the general or to marginalize the general and assign to it a lesser status than the specific and concrete. When someone seeks to argue that one must give priority to the specific over the general, that person cannot point to any verse of the Qur'an that says this must be the case -- that is, one must give priority to the specific over the general, and, therefore, this is how one must proceed in any and all instances with respect to understanding the Qur'an.

Furthermore, there is nothing in the Qur'an that stipulates that whenever something specific is said, then this should become a universal principle

of guidance for all times, circumstances, and peoples no matter what differences might exist between the context during which revelation originally occurred and subsequent contexts. People are making an assumption when they seek to extrapolate from some instance of specific guidance that is given through the Qur'an to subsequent history, and the assumption that such individuals are supposing is true is that God intended such specific guidance to be applied in relation to all later times and peoples.

General Quranic principles of guidance concerning qualities such as love, tolerance, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, humility, gratitude, charitableness, and so on always have relevance to the human condition and the problems in which the human condition are entangled. Specific, concrete guidance might have relevance only with respect to the context for which it was given and intended.

When general principles rub up against specific injunctions, perhaps in a manner that appears to be contradictory or conflicting with each other, should one follow the general guidance or the specific guidance and why? To say that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did certain, specific things in a concrete set of circumstance, and cited a Quranic verse that was specific in nature as justification for his decision is not, in and of itself, sufficient to justify later generations seeking to do something of a similar nature.

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Later leaders and authorities -- irrespective of whether they have arrived at that position of leadership through legitimate or illegitimate means -- are not the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). They do not have his understanding and knowledge.

Later leaders and authorities do not share precisely the same kind of relationship with Divinity as did the Prophet. Later leaders and authorities do not necessarily know what the nature of the Prophet's understanding or intention was in any given set of concrete circumstances or why he decided a case in the way he did or what his insight into the particular verse was that he might have cited.

One is enjoined in the Qur'an to obey those who have been placed in authority over one, but the literal meaning of this injunction is somewhat ambiguous. It doesn't specify what is meant by the idea of someone 'being placed in authority over one'. In addition, the injunction in question doesn't discuss the difference between usurped authority and legitimate authority or whether the injunction would still stand if someone had gained authority over others through impermissible or problematic means.

The Qur'an also enjoins individuals to obey their parents. However, even here, if one's parents seek to lead one away from Islam, one is not required to obey them although one is still required to accomplish this parting of the ways in as artful a

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manner as possible because that conflict does not give one license to treat one's parents with disrespect, contempt, or hatred.

Consequently, even if someone were to arrive at a position of authority over others through legitimate means and, yet, such an individual pursued policies that sought to lead people away from Islam, then, the people are no more obligated to obey those individuals than is one obligated to obey one's parents if the latter were to counsel one to pursue a course of action that might lead one to abandon Islam. This principle extends to the pronouncements of jurists, theologians and so-called religious scholars.

Thus, once again, one needs to ask the following questions. What does Mr. Harris mean by the literal truth of the Qur'an, and even if one were able to ascertain what this means, why should anyone be obligated to follow or be forced to follow that literal meaning rather than, perhaps, a more nuanced understanding of things that arose out of permitting the entire guidance of the Qur'an to inform and modulate one's actions in any given instance rather than just this or that verse?

Mr. Harris wants to place Muslims in a straightjacket of his own special construction. He wants to insist that Muslims must adhere to what Mr. Harris considers Islam to be, and if and when Muslims do not do this, then, he charges them with failing to adhere to what the Qur'an requires in the

way of his self-serving manner of construing the guidance of the Qur'an.

In other words, and this is rather ironic, Mr. Harris is demanding of Muslims precisely what people like bin Laden are demanding of Muslims. Each of these individuals seeks to argue that Muslims must act in concert with what Mr. Harris and bin Laden claim Islam to be -- a simplistic, literalist, skewed, presumptuous, limited and limiting rendering of sacred texts -- or, according to people like Mr. Harris and bin Laden, those people have no right to consider themselves Muslim.

On page 29 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris asks and answers the following question: "Why did nineteen well-educated, middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed they would go straight to paradise for doing so."

The 19 individuals to whom Mr. Harris is alluding are, of course, the individuals who allegedly were at the heart of the September 11, 2001 tragedies. There are several points to be made in this regard.

First of all, nowhere in the Qur'an does it stipulate that the reward for killing anyone – innocent or otherwise – is paradise. Martyrdom is not about killing others but is, rather, about one's willingness to sacrifice one's own life for the sake of Islam.

Murder is murder. There is no way to rationalize the killing of innocent people, and it is a travesty to the idea of martyrdom for anyone to suggest that the intention of sacrificing one's own life serves to justify murdering other individuals.

Well-educated, middle class individuals -- whether from Saudi Arabia or America -- are induced to murder other human beings on behalf of vested authorities through tactics of propaganda, manipulation, deception, prevarication, exploitation, disinformation, coercion, and/or undue influence. In some circles within the Muslim world there are those who seek to justify -- untenably -- officially sanctioned murder of innocents through the concepts of martyrdom and jihad. In some circles within the West, there are those who seek to justify -- untenably -- officially sanctioned murder of innocents through the concepts of democracy, progress, or a 'war on terror'.

The other point that needs to be made in conjunction with the 19 individuals to whom Mr. Harris alludes must be juxtaposed next to the subtitle to his book *The End of Faith* -- namely, 'Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason.' Throughout his book, Mr. Harris praises the idea of reason and the importance of reason and the value of reason, and, yet, he completely fails to apply reason or evidence or rigor to the issue of 9/11.

I have already commented extensively about the issue of 9/11 elsewhere [for example, see my

The Essence of September 11th, 2nd Edition as well as *Framing 9/11, 3rd Edition*], and, therefore, I am not going to go into a great deal of detail with respect to the following observations. Nonetheless, certain challenges need to be raised with respect to Mr. Harris' take on 9/11.

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in 'rigorous reasoned detail' (and by this term I mean documented evidence), why relevant testimony from: William Rodriguez, Colleen Rowley, Kenneth Williams, Sibel Edmonds, Indira Singh, Robert Wright, David Schippers, April Gallop, many of the first-responders in New York City on 9/11, and the participants in Able Danger were not included in *The 9/11 Commission Report*? I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail what entitles NIST [the National Institute of Standards and Technology] to ignore laws of physics such as the laws for the conservation of momentum and for the conservation of angular momentum with respect to its explanation concerning what supposedly led to the collapse of either Building 7 or Towers 1 and 2 of the World Trade complex on 9/11.

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail how Flight 77, which allegedly struck the Pentagon on the first floor, was able to overcome both ground effect forces as well as wing vortex issues when, normally speaking, a plane the size of Flight 77 that *The Pentagon Performance Report* claimed was flying at 500-plus miles an

hour could not have gotten within 65 feet of the ground due to the aforementioned aerodynamic forces? I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail why the considerable forensic and eye-witness evidence in support of the possibility of controlled demolition and/or some other set of non-natural forces -- other than crashed airplanes and ensuing fires -- was not explored in relation to the collapse of the World Trade buildings either by *The 9/11 Commission Report*, the FEMA report, or the NIST report.

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail how the two trade towers collapsed when the central premise of the "official" (i.e., NIST-based) explanation of the collapse of those buildings -- namely, the failure of the floor assemblies pulled in the perimeter columns, leading to structural instabilities, which, in turn led to collapse -- has been proven to be false by Underwriters Laboratories that tested floor assembly units comparable to those in the trade towers and determined they would not have failed under conditions existing on 9/11. I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail how Pentagon personnel who were seasoned veterans said that they smelled cordite [an indication of the presence of munitions] and not jet fuel following the explosions at the Pentagon.

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail why none of the names of the alleged hijackers appeared on any of the flight

manifests for the planes supposedly involved in the events of 9/11 and, as well, why none of the names of the alleged hijackers appeared on the official autopsy report for the bodies allegedly recovered at the Pentagon even though remains from all of the other passengers who supposedly were on Flight 77 were recorded, and, yet, the FBI was able to come up with names and pictures of the alleged 19 within a very short time after 9/11?

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail why the damage done to the Ring-C wall of the Pentagon is not at all consistent with the sort of damage that would have been caused by a commercial jet plane along with ensuing fires. I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail how the people who perpetrated 9/11 were able to gain access to the security codes – which are changed daily -- for not only Air Force One, but other facets of government security as well.

I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail why none of the flight recorder units for any of the four commercial airplanes involved in the events of 9/11 have been made public, or why -- with one possible exception -- none of the videotapes from any of the business or Pentagon security cameras have been released to the public. I would like Mr. Harris to explain in rigorous, reasoned detail why one should not accept the fact that the sole videotape that has been released and supposedly depicts a jet plane

crashing into the Pentagon on 9/11 and that has been analyzed by Pierre Bunel, a French military explosives expert, suggests the fact that the videotape depicts a munitions explosion of some kind (probably delivered in conjunction with a missile of one kind or another) and does not depict what would result from the crash of a commercial jet that involved a jet fuel fire.

I could go on in the foregoing manner for hundreds of pages -- and I have in other venues. However, there is no point in doing so since I do not believe Mr. Harris is capable of answering any of the foregoing challenges, let alone new ones, in a rigorous and reasoned manner that will be capable of vindicating the 'official story' concerning 9/11. In fact, I believe -- and let Mr. Harris write his own book on this matter to prove me wrong -- that Mr. Harris has the opinion he does with respect to the events of 9/11 because he hasn't closely looked at the available evidence, and because he has not exercised much critical reflection with respect to those events, and because he has not employed much in the way of rational thought in relation to any aspect of the events leading up to, during, and following 9/11.

Somebody sought to terrorize America and the rest of the world on September 11, 2001. Given the mass of available evidence, I do not believe Mr. Harris or anyone else can plausibly demonstrate that even if the 19 alleged hijackers could be proven to have been involved in those tragic events

[and I do not consider the unexamined testimony of several alleged co-conspirators who were water-boarded by the U.S. government in order to obtain such testimony to constitute very reliable or credible data], there is too much in the way of outstanding problems, unanswered questions, inconsistencies, as well as a diverse array of testimony and forensic evidence indicating that even if one could prove that the 19 indicated individuals were somehow involved with 9/11, nevertheless, they were being aided and abetted by others within – and, perhaps, outside -- the United States ... others who continue to remain at large.

Mr. Harris seems quite willing to condemn the whole Muslim world for the actions of what is, at most, a very, very small number of individuals. Moreover, he is willing to do this on the basis not of reasoned arguments but, apparently, on the basis of what he has been led to believe by others concerning the events of 9/11 -- whether these 'others' are journalists and news commentators who themselves have not exercised due diligence with respect to 9/11, or whether these 'others' are so-called scientists who have issued reports concerning 9/11 that are based on little more than junk science, or whether these 'others' are government appointed individuals almost all of whom have conflicts of interest concerning the events of 9/11 when considered in the context of the task of providing an objective, unbiased, impartial, and thorough analysis with respect to the issues surrounding 9/11.

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In short, Mr. Harris wishes to lecture others about their alleged failures to apply reason according to the manner in which he defines and uses it. However, when it comes to the need for him to apply the same standards of reason to his own life with respect to so many issues – including Islam and 9/11 – his position appears to be one of 'do as I say, not as I do'.

On page 30 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"To be sure, hatred is an eminently human emotion, and it is obvious that many Muslim extremists feel it. But faith is still the mother of hatred here, as it is wherever people define their moral identities in religious terms."

Contrary to what Mr. Harris claims in the foregoing quote, faith, per se, is not the mother of hatred. One might agree with Mr. Harris that certain modalities of faith appear to be so permeated with hatred that it is difficult to know which came first, the hatred or the faith, but those cases are peculiar to the pathology of those specific situations and carry no ramifications whatsoever for the nature and character of faith in general.

One can define one's identity in religious or spiritual terms, and in contradistinction to what Mr. Harris argues, there is nothing about this which demands that I must hate other people -- and this is

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so irrespective of whether they do or do not share my modality of belief and faith. In fact, as I understand things -- and I believe this is central to the authentic teachings of Christianity, Judaism, and many other spiritual traditions -- a central precept of true Islamic faith requires that the individual must seek to struggle against the possibility of allowing hatred to undermine one's spiritual condition, identity, or actions.

Mr. Harris seems to want to accrue to himself the prerogative to define and characterize the nature of faith in any way he pleases, and, yet, even according to the standards that Mr. Harris claims to hold dear -- namely, reason and evidence -- he is not justified in doing so. Empirically and rationally speaking, there are millions of people who subscribe to a form of faith that is not rooted in hatred, does not advocate hatred, and seeks to vanquish the remnants of hatred from one's internal and external life.

At times, many of Mr. Harris' proclamations concerning faith and religion assume the form of an argument by fiat in which he simply declares his 'truths' without any supporting evidence or well-reasoned arguments to demonstrate the truth of what he says except among those who share his biases. At other times, Mr. Harris' proclamations concerning faith and religion assume the form of an argument in which he cites specific problematic cases and attempts to project those problems onto whatever general category might be the object of

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his criticism -- which, in the present case, is faith and religion.

In neither instance is there much of value in what Mr. Harris has to say. In fact, there actually is a potential for a great deal of destructiveness inherent in what Mr. Harris is saying because he seems to be very intent on taking whatever measures he deems necessary -- even if these are completely lacking in reason or evidence -- to vilify Muslims, Islam, and various other people of religious faith ... quite independently of whatever such individuals might actually believe or do.

Mr. Harris seems to want to argue that he is opposed to the sort of hatred being spewed forth by certain individuals who espouse a species of faith that, due to whatever set of forces and choices, is saturated with the quality of hatred. Yet, given the manner in which he often irrationally rails away at faith and religion -- and, most of his book's arguments in this regard are problematically constructed and flawed in a variety of ways ... some of which have been pointed out in the foregoing pages of commentary -- one has considerable difficulty resisting the inclination to conclude that there is a sense in which Mr. Harris appears, in a concerted way, to be trying to whip up enmity toward Islam, Muslims, and other people of religious faith throughout many facets of his book, and one wonders how this makes him any different than the 'people of faith' he seeks to criticize and in relation to which he seems to be saying: 'my way of

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faith (i.e., his way of thinking about things) is so much better than their way of faith.'

On page 31, Mr. Harris says:

"... people of faith tend to argue that it is not faith itself but man's baser nature that inspires such violence. But, I take it to be self-evident that ordinary people cannot be moved to burn genial old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran, or celebrate the violent deaths of their children, unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe. Because most religions offer no valid mechanisms by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors."

Mr. Harris is quite wrong in almost everything he says in the foregoing quote. Of course, ordinary people can "be moved to burn old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran" because this is the same kind of thing that is done before every war when existing powers seek to whip up an appropriate state of hysteria in the general public via the media, as well as through educational systems, so that whoever is the enemy de jour can be demonized and made ready for annihilation by the glorious armed forces of one's homeland.

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Not only can ordinary people be moved to burn old scholars, but ordinary people can be moved to napalm innocent civilians in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and ordinary people can be moved to drop cluster bombs in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and wherever else this is deemed to be appropriate so that little children can come along pick up the unexploded ordinances and be blown apart.

Of course ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars, just as ordinary people can be moved to kill millions of civilians during World Wars I and II, and during the Korean War, and during Vietnam, and during the first and second Gulf Wars, and during the various phases of the wars in the Balkans, as well as in Rwanda or Darfur or South Africa. Of course ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars, just as ordinary people can be moved to destroy Iraq's infrastructure, not once but several times, so that children can die of starvation, disease, and from 'smart bombs' that turn out not to be so smart after all.

Of course ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars, just as ordinary people were moved to commit genocide against Native peoples. Of course ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars, just as ordinary people can be moved to burn, hang, rape, beat, and torture a people because of their skin color. Of course ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars, just as ordinary people can be moved to commit atrocities against their fellow countrymen during civil wars.

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There have been a number of studies that have been conducted in conjunction with World War II, Vietnam, and the Gulf War with respect to people's readiness to kill or harm other human beings. Not surprisingly, these studies found that the majority of people, on their own, really have no interest in harming other human beings.

They have to be induced to do this. They have to undergo a process of indoctrination and propaganda so that they will comply with the directive to kill other human beings -- not necessarily because of religious faith but because they are told that killing and destroying a given people is one's patriotic duty in order that the vested material and financial interests of the power elite might be protected.

Moreover, Mr. Harris is equally wrong when he claims that ordinary people cannot be moved to celebrate the violent deaths of their children. This sort of thing is done every Memorial Day and every Veterans Day. Parades are held, flags are waved, people cheer and clap, speeches are given about the glories of sacrificing one's life for one's Fatherland or Motherland or Homeland or out of patriotism.

One thing about which Mr. Harris is partially correct in the foregoing quote is that ordinary people can't be moved to do horrible things "unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe". However, a "religious faith" that has gone horribly wrong is not the only sort of improbable belief concerning the nature of the

universe that is capable of bringing about such a state of affairs. Improbable beliefs concerning the efficacy and correctness of various kinds of economic systems (including both communism and capitalism), or improbable beliefs concerning the correctness of various kinds of political systems (including the sort of system that is republican in name only), or improbable beliefs about the correctness of various kinds of eugenic philosophies, or improbable beliefs concerning the exclusively materialistic and physical nature of the universe are all fully capable of moving ordinary people to do harm to other human beings who think or believe differently from the former individuals.

In the foregoing quote Mr. Harris argues that "because most religions offer no valid mechanisms by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors." Mr. Harris seems to be absolving the individual from having any responsibility, on his or her own authority as a human being, to observe, explore, investigate, reflect, critique, test, understand, and make evaluations concerning what other people are saying about the character of certain 'core beliefs' -- irrespective of whether these core beliefs involve religion, economics, political systems, philosophy, or science.

I am condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of my predecessors only if I abdicate or cede my moral, intellectual, and existential authority to those individuals. Spiritual faith does not condemn me to be an idol worshiper of my predecessors unless I permit myself to be governed by something other than a sincere faith that is always engaged in a rigorous process of inquiry, questioning, reflecting, struggling, contemplating, meditating, and re-evaluating my own understanding as well as the understanding of others concerning this or that issue.

Sincere faith is dynamic and creative. Sincere faith is not static and sterile.

Sincere faith can be modified as one gains new insights and understanding concerning one's relationship with Being. Sincere faith is tested every day in the crucible of life as one seeks to make sense of, and to be able to effectively deal with, the many difficulties, problems, questions, possibilities, and horrors that are given expression through lived existence.

Ordinary people can be moved to burn old scholars -- as they can be moved to commit all of the other atrocities that have gone on, both with respect to recorded or unrecorded events, throughout history -- because those people actually do not possess any kind of sincere faith. What people have who can be moved to do terrible things is a toxic belief system, and more often than not, those people live within a context that has various

kinds of social institutions, military professionals, educational systems, media outlets, vested economic and political interests, and a power elite who are all too willing to help individuals develop, become committed to, and disappear into the depths of those sorts of toxic belief systems.

As is the case with respect to much else that Mr. Harris writes within his book, *The End of Faith*, he has a penchant for oversimplifying matters and, in the process, he is inclined to be very reductionistic in those oversimplifications. For Mr. Harris, the villain is always religious faith because this is what his own brand of philosophical, political, economic, and rationalistic faith demands that he conclude.

In reality, the villain is toxic belief systems. A toxic belief system is any system of beliefs that operates in accordance with problematic systems of inquiry that lead one to claim one has a right to harm other human beings because those individuals believe differently than an adherent to a given toxic belief system does.

A toxic belief system is any system of beliefs that claims the adherents of such a system are justified in torturing, terrorizing, exploiting, killing, maiming, manipulating, depriving, experimenting upon, deceiving, destroying, or harming other human beings for any reason whatsoever. A toxic belief system is any system of beliefs that seeks to deny basic human rights to other human beings.

All toxic belief systems are rooted in a pathological form of faith. However, not all species of faith are either necessarily pathological in nature, nor are all species of faith necessarily generators of toxic belief systems.

When understood from this perspective of toxic belief systems, there is a great deal of truth in what Mr. Harris says in his book. However, when Mr. Harris seeks to insist that his ideas about all species of faith are correct -- and the irony of the matter is that Mr. Harris seems to have little insight into the dynamics of sincere faith despite having written a book that purports to be all about those phenomena -- then, Mr. Harris comes perilously close to giving expression to a toxic system of beliefs himself.

On page 32 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris gives several translated passages from the Qur'an – namely:

"Prophet make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home, an evil fate." (Koran 9:73)

"Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that God is with the righteous." (Koran 9:123)

Mr. Harris follows up on the foregoing quotes by saying:

"The reality that the West currently enjoys far more wealth and temporal power than any nation under Islam is viewed by devout Muslims as a diabolical perversity, and this situation will always stand as an open invitation for jihad, insofar as a person is Muslim -- that is, insofar as he believes that Islam constitutes the only viable path to God and that the Koran enunciates it perfectly -- he will feel contempt for any man or woman who doubts the truth of his beliefs. What is more, he will feel that the eternal happiness of his children is put in peril by the mere presence of such unbelievers in the world."

Let's start with the Quranic verses. In the first translated passage, the Prophet is enjoined to make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and do so in a rigorous manner. What does any of this mean?

Who is to be considered an unbeliever and who is considered to be a hypocrite? How does one go about deciding this -- especially in view of the fact that the Qur'an enjoins one to accept Christians and Jews as being people of the book, and, in addition, in light of the fact that the Qur'an indicates there have been many Prophets who have been appointed for purposes of spiritual guidance, and, yet, not all of these individuals have been identified by God in the Qur'an, so, one might want to exercise

some caution with respect to whomever one is claiming to be an unbeliever?

What is the nature of the war that is to be made with respect to the foregoing sorts of individuals? What does it mean to deal rigorously with those individuals?

Is the injunction being given to the Prophet meant to be a universal proscription or was it something that was intended to be limited to a particular time, place, and set of circumstances? Mr. Harris investigates none of these issues because, apparently, doing so would interfere with what he is trying to accomplish in his book … namely – putting it succinctly -- to skew and frame the discussion of faith in a negative manner.

In the roughly ten years of war that occurred after the Prophet had been given Divine permission for Muslims to defend themselves against those who sought to destroy the Prophet as well as the small Muslim community, some 300-plus people (this includes both sides) lost their lives as a result of the hostilities that occurred during the aforementioned ten year period. Moreover, during the first thirteen years of Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) spiritual mission, no such permission had been given, despite the fact that many unbelievers and hypocrites lived in Mecca and the surrounding areas.

Furthermore, part of the etiquette of war observed by the Muslims at that time was done in accordance with the following limits: one could not

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kill children, women, old people, or non-combatants; one could not destroy the means of livelihood of those against whom one was fighting; one could not fight against those with whom one had signed a treaty as long as those people abided by the conditions of the treaty, and it made no difference whether, or not, those people were Muslim. In addition, the only kinds of war that the Prophet and Muslims were permitted to fight were defensive wars ... that is, wars to defend the community against armed attacks.

The foregoing comments also have relevance to the second Quranic passage cited by Mr. Harris concerning the injunction for believers to make war on the infidels among them. For example, which believers are being addressed?

Is reference being made to all believers who will exist until the end of time, or is reference being made to only a specific group of believers -- perhaps either the ones who were present at the time of the manifestation of that particular portion of revelation or the ones who lived during the times of the Prophet? How does one determine the answer to such a question?

There are two other points that bear upon these issues. First, the two Quranic passages that Mr. Harris cites come from Surah Tauba or Repentance. This is the only surah of the Qur'an that does not begin with: "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful", and, as a result, maybe this absence modulates, in various directions, the

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manner in which the two given verses are to be understood.

Secondly, many Sufis have commented on the idea that waging war on the infidels near one is intended to refer to the need of each individual to wage war against the infidel -- the ego or false self or nafs -- within, and the passage is not necessarily intended to be an injunction to wage war against other individuals. From the foregoing perspective, there is an infidel within each of us, and we should each busy ourselves with struggling against that infidel, and if we sincerely are engaged in such a struggle, one is unlikely to have much time or energy left over to wage war against anyone else or become obsessed with the issue of who it is that actually can be considered to be an infidel.

Mr. Harris makes the same mistake as do many would-be Muslim fundamentalists and literalists. He assumes he knows who is being alluded to as an infidel or as an unbeliever when these terms appear in the Qur'an.

I have faith that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) understood the nature and character of the Quranic references that Mr. Harris cites. I have no faith that either Mr. Harris or Muslim fundamentalists understand what is being indicated through the Qur'an in this respect.

Contrary to what Mr. Harris claims, the fact that "the West currently enjoys far more wealth and temporal power than any nation under Islam" is not seen as a "diabolical perversity" because

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people in the West are considered to be 'sinners and infidels'. In fact, unfortunately, all too many Muslims are seeking to garner the same kind of wealth and power for themselves.

God gives to whomsoever and whatsoever Divinity pleases. On the other hand, an individual might find their way to what God gives through either just or unjust means.

If there is anything of diabolical perversity about the sort of wealth and power to which Mr. Harris alludes in the foregoing quote, this is likely to have more to do with the oppressive, exploitive, unjust, and destructive means through which that power and wealth might have been obtained -- and this is as true for the Saudi royal family or other Muslim dictators as it is for the corporate oligarchs of the West. When matters of power and wealth are involved, Muslims are every bit as capable of committing sin in relation to the accumulation of that wealth and power as are non-Muslims when either group of individuals seeks those things through impermissible means.

Just as it does not profit a person to gain the whole world but lose one's soul in the process, so too, there is much truth to the words attributed to Jesus (peace be upon him) in the New Testament when he is reported to have said: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to pass into heaven." Anyone of sincere faith takes seriously the issue of doing

justice to all concerned when it comes to, among other things, matters of power and wealth.

As noted earlier, Mr. Harris claims that "insofar as he believes that Islam constitutes the only viable path to God and that the Koran enunciates it perfectly -- he will feel contempt for any man or woman who doubts the truth of his beliefs."

Islam means submission. To what is one to submit? One is to submit to the truth.

What is the truth? This is an interesting, complex, subtle, and difficult question.

A lifetime does not provide sufficient opportunity to exhaust the truth, let alone enable one to understand and apply it exactingly and fully. In fact, this is precisely why one needs some species of sincere faith in order to assist one in life given that almost all of us do not understand everything we need to know in order to encompass the full truth.

Sincere faith lies somewhere between complete ignorance and full knowledge. Sincere faith is a bridge, of sorts, between what is known and what we feel or sense or intuit or make judgments about how what is known is connected to all that is not known.

To say, as Mr. Harris does, that someone "believes that Islam constitutes the only viable path to God" is really nothing more than a tautology. If God exists, then, God exists in accordance with whatever is true concerning the nature of that

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existence. If God exists and if one is to find a path to God, then, that path must give expression to the truth of things concerning the relationship of human beings to God. The truth of the path must reflect the truth of God's nature. One needs truth to find truth.

In other words, submission to truth is the only viable path to the truth. Duh!

Now, where does this leave us? If, in accordance with Mr. Harris' aforementioned manner of framing things, someone believes that the Qur'an enunciates what Islam is in a perfect manner, to what does this commit one? How is one to understand the nature of the perfect manner in which the Qur'an enunciates the truth of Islam? Well, presumably, the truth must lead us to such an understanding.

This is where, among other things, one might come to Robert Frost's famous starting point of his poem 'The Road Not Taken' when "two roads diverged in a yellow wood". Human beings must choose the road that is to be taken and the road that is not to be taken.

This choice can be made through toxic belief systems or it can be selected through sincere faith. Only time will disclose the differences that will arise as a result of the choices made in conjunction both with respect to the roads taken and not taken, and, indeed, this choice is made each and every second of our lives.

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Will we choose truth, or will we choose toxicity? Everybody might have an opinion about which is which, but only truth knows the reality of the situation.

Everything rests on the choices we make ... on the roads we choose to take and on the roads that are not taken. Why would any person of sincere faith feel contempt for other human beings who are faced with such overwhelmingly important choices but who might go about things differently in relation to the roads chosen and not chosen? One might as well have contempt for the human condition.

Alternatively, why would anyone of sincere faith have contempt for someone who might have taken the wrong road and ended up in a toxic dump of beliefs? All one needs to do is remember the many times in which one might have chosen to go down a given road only to realize that a mistake had been made with respect to the original choice, and, as a result, one needs another opportunity to choose again and go down a different road. If one wishes to have contempt for the mistakes others might have made with respect to the road taken or not taken, then, to be consistent one should have contempt for the many times one has taken a wrong road in one's own life ... the one that has made all the difference but in problematic ways.

In either event, empathy and compassion are better responses to someone's taking a wrong road than is contempt. Contempt has a destructive

tendency to cut people off from one another, whereas empathy and compassion link people together. Contempt undermines community, whereas empathy and compassion enhance community.

Truth is not one thing or one way or one path. Truth is indefinitely, if not infinitely great, and truth is multifaceted, multidimensional, and non-linear in character.

Moreover, there is a sense in which, like Rome, all roads might lead to truth ... although not necessarily the full and complete truth. On the other hand, who among us can convincingly claim that he or she possesses the full and complete truth?

Contrary to what Mr. Harris claims, a person of sincere faith -- whether Muslim or non-Muslim -- need not have contempt for anyone who doubts the truth of that faith. The fact of the matter is, the doubt someone else harbors concerning another person's faith doesn't necessarily say anything more about the situation except that someone has doubts about someone else's faith.

One can choose to listen, or not, to those doubts. One can choose to reflect upon, or not reflect on, those doubts. One can consider those doubts relevant, or not, to the character of one's faith. One can revise one's understanding, or not, in accordance with those doubts.

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If the person who has doubts about some other individual's faith is correct in the character of those doubts, then, the former individual might be benefiting the person who carries a mistaken sense of faith if the latter person pays attention to what is being said. If the person who has doubts about some other person's faith is incorrect in the character of those doubts, then, the doubts are irrelevant to everything except the individual who harbors them -- although there could be problematic ramifications if the person with such doubts tries to interfere in the lives of others who hold a faith about which the individual has doubts.

Is the person voicing doubts correct or incorrect with respect to the nature of their doubts? This brings us back to choice and the roads taken and not taken.

Are there some Muslims whose species of faith is accurately described by what Mr. Harris is saying in his foregoing remarks? I'm sure there are, but I also know that I have met some Muslims, along with individuals from other faith traditions, who do not at all fit in to the way in which Mr. Harris is seeking to frame things.

Finally, Mr. Harris claims in the quote with which this present discussion began that any Muslim "will feel that the eternal happiness of his children is put in peril by the mere presence of such unbelievers in the world." Mr. Harris gives too much power and credit to the "unbelievers" of the world.

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Islam teaches that decisions concerning someone's 'eternal happiness' rest with God. An unbeliever cannot imperil someone's eternal happiness unless God permits an individual to become so imperiled.

Moreover, each person of sincere, spiritual faith has his or her own responsibilities in this matter. If an individual cedes her or his moral and intellectual authority to anyone else -- whether these other individuals are believers or unbelievers in some broad sense of these terms -- this is when people tend to become entangled in difficulty.

Unbelief is not a contagious virus that infects one whether one wishes this to be the case or not. Unbelief, like belief, is a choice.

The mere presence of unbelief does not make someone an unbeliever. One has to actively choose to come under the sphere of influence of that kind of a belief system.

If someone who is not a believer comes along and says that prayer, fasting, charity, chanting, spiritual purification, and pilgrimage have no value, or that individual says that God, angels, revelation, prophets, heaven and hell are nothing more than childish myths, and, in response to all of this, one stops observing and believing in Islam, then, why shouldn't the latter individual accept responsibility for whatever ensues from the choice that has been made to cede one's moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority to the former sort of individual. Naturally, the person who seeks to sway another individual

away from the latter's species of faith has his or her own responsibility in this matter, but I think the person who has ceded her or his spiritual authority to another individual should stop placing all the blame on the unbeliever and take a look in the mirror in order to identify who the real culprit is in that situation.

If the Muslim world is having problems with the presence of unbelief in its midst, then, perhaps the Muslim world should take a look in the mirror and try to figure out where it has gone wrong with respect to its understanding of what it professes concerning the nature of Islam and the Qur'an. Without wishing to say that countries do not have the right to defend themselves against imperialistic, colonialist, or militaristic adventures into their lands, nevertheless, the real problems and challenges that confront the Muslim world have nothing to do with the presence or absence of unbelievers in its midst but, rather, has to do with the manner in which all too many Muslims have ceded away their moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority to an array of religious scholars, theologians, imams, muftis, and political leaders who have taken them far away from what Islam actually enjoins one to pursue – namely, the truth.

On page 33 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris asserts:

"Anyone who says that the doctrines of Islam have "nothing to do with terrorism" and our

airwaves are filled with apologists for Islam making this claim -- is just playing a game with words."

If someone talks about quantum mechanics and in the process commits errors with respect to what is said, and if, then, someone comes along who actually knows something about quantum mechanics and corrects the mistakes of the first individual, this does not make the second individual an apologist for quantum mechanics. So too, when someone like Mr. Harris comes along and makes pronouncements concerning Islam or religious faith, and these pronouncements provide unmistakable evidence that Mr. Harris knows little, or nothing, about either the actual nature of Islam or religious faith, and, then, someone who actually knows something about Islam and religious faith comes along and corrects the mistakes being committed by people such as Mr. Harris, the person doing the correcting is not an apologist for Islam but, rather, is someone who is calling Mr. Harris on his ignorance about those matters.

Mr. Harris follows up the foregoing quote with a translation of a Quranic passage in an attempt to support his claims:

"The believers who stay at home -- apart from those that suffer from a grave impediment -- are not the equal of those who fight for the cause of God with their goods and their persons. God has

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given those that fight with their goods and their persons a higher rank than those who stay at home. God has promised all a good reward; but far richer is the recompense of those who fight for Him ... He that leaves his dwelling to fight for God and His apostle and is then overtaken by death shall be rewarded by God. ... The unbelievers are your inveterate enemies. (Koran, 4:95-101.) "

As some Sufis might say, we are all guilty of kufur. That is, in differing ways and to varying extents, we all give expression to unbelief.

A kafir, or unbeliever, is someone who hides the truth -- either from others and/or from himself or herself or themselves. Since there are very, very few of us who are realized beings and, therefore, are in a position, possibly, to understand the full nature of the truth according to our inherent capacity to do so, then, in one way or another, we all are constantly hiding different facets of truth from ourselves and from others.

The Quranic passage that Mr. Harris cites here mentions the term "fight". Mr. Harris wishes to understand this term exclusively in terms of killing and waging armed conflict, and he, like many Muslim theologians, is insistent that all Muslims understand things as he does.

What does it mean to fight or struggle in the way or cause of Allah? In addition, what is that cause or way for which one is to fight or struggle?

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The Quranic passage that Mr. Harris cites does not give specific answers to either of these questions. What it does say is that those who do make efforts in the way or cause of Allah are not the same as those who do not make those efforts.

On what basis does Mr. Harris justify his narrow understanding of what fight or struggle might mean in relation to the Quranic passage at issue? In point of fact, Mr. Harris can't justify his interpretation, but he does what many Muslim theologians do with respect to this same passage … Mr. Harris demands that everyone understand this passage in the way that he has.

Can one suppose the cause of Allah is only to kill or oppress or wage armed conflict? What evidence does Mr. Harris have to support his position?

Does the cause of Allah have nothing to do with love, compassion, forgiveness, patience, repentance, honesty, charitableness, tolerance, mercy, nobility, courage, purification, wisdom, understanding, self-realization, remembrance, gratitude, dependence, piety, and so on? Can Mr. Harris prove that none of these qualities have anything to do with the cause of Allah? Can Mr. Harris demonstrate that those qualities are irrelevant to what it means to struggle in the way of or for the cause of Allah?

If I use my money and possessions to feed the hungry and care for the sick, I am fighting in the cause of Allah. If I am engaged in public service and

I use my money, talents, time, and energy to advance the rights of human beings, I am fighting and struggling in the cause of Allah. If I die while engaged in any of these projects of mercy, then, I have died while fighting for the cause of Allah.

The one who is playing games with words is not the individual who is trying to point out the mistakes in Mr. Harris' proclamations about things Islamic. Rather, the player of word games here is Mr. Harris.

He takes words -- words that he doesn't even understand in their original Arabic context. Then, he imposes on those words whatever might be consistent with the agenda that he is pushing through his hermeneutical manner of engaging those words. The logic is really circular and completely self-absorbed.

Mr. Harris wants Islam to be unrepentantly war-like, so, this is how he frames his understanding of the term "fight" or "struggle". He, then, finishes his Quranic exegesis of the foregoing passage by stating: "The unbelievers are your inveterate enemies", and, from this, apparently, one is supposed to conclude that it is a religious duty for Muslims to wage unending armed, murderous conflict against those unbelievers.

If I choose to struggle against the foregoing kind of unbelief through the use of scholarship or discussion or essays or podcasts or websites or books or talks, then, according to Mr. Harris I am only kidding myself about what God demands of

me. Why do I not understand the Quranic passages Mr. Harris cites in the way Mr. Harris demands that I must?

Mr. Harris cannot admit to the sort of possibilities that are being outlined above because were he to acknowledge their existence as credible alternatives to his forced understanding of things with respect to what it means to fight or struggle in the cause or way of Allah, then, the whole argument that he has so carefully been struggling to frame and construct in deceptive and subtle ways within the pages of his book, *The End of Faith*, tends to fall apart. If someone doesn't engage Islam in the manner that Mr. Harris expects -- indeed, demands -- of them, then, those individuals (which according to Mr. Harris, are just playing word games), and they really don't correctly understand their faith.

In effect, Mr. Harris wants to frame things in such a way that no matter what anyone says about these issues, Mr. Harris is always right, and, as a result, the central premise of his book concerning the destructive nature of faith is vindicated. Obviously, to say the least, the foregoing sort of attitude is rather self-serving on the part of Mr. Harris.

Such a position is not one of well-constructed rational arguments. Rather, his position is one of oppressive fiats and truths by proclamation, and as is the case with so many Muslim fundamentalists, Mr. Harris tends to resist listening to the sound of

anyone's voice but his own and those who sound like him.

Anyone, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who seeks to hide truth from people and/or themselves is an unbeliever precisely to the extent that he or she is entangled in a process of deception and manipulation concerning the truth. Sincere science is opposed to the foregoing sort of unbelief.

Sincere philosophy is opposed to that kind of unbelief. Sincere journalism is opposed to such unbelief.

Sincere governance is opposed to unbelief. Sincere faith is opposed to the foregoing sense of unbelief.

'Unbelievers' in the sense in which the term is used in the Qur'an are the inveterate enemies of everyone -- not just sincere Muslims. Every human being needs to struggle against the unbelievers assault on preventing truth from becoming known, but this manner of struggle or fighting need not be reduced or limited to, or understood exclusively in terms of, armed conflict ... although there might be occasions when that, too, becomes necessary.

There are many ways to fight and struggle in the cause or way of Allah. Furthermore, the way and cause of Allah is nothing apart from the truth of things -- whatever that turns out to be.

Unfortunately, and this is so for many reasons, seeking to trod the path of truth is, indeed, a road

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less traveled. But, nonetheless, it is a road that, once taken, makes all the difference.

On page 39 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris maintains:

"As we will see in the last chapter of this book, there is little doubt that a certain range of human experience can be appropriately described as "spiritual" or "mystical" -- experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identities as "selves" and escape our current understanding of the mind and brain. But nothing about these experiences justifies arrogant and exclusionary claims about the unique sanctity of any text. There is no reason that our ability to sustain ourselves emotionally and spiritually cannot evolve with technology, politics, and the rest of culture."

The last chapter of his book is entitled 'Experiments in Consciousness'. During that chapter he becomes an advocate for, among other things a Buddhist-oriented approach to engaging consciousness.

In my opinion, there is nothing, ipso facto, necessarily problematic with any of this, for not only is it possible that 'the Buddha' might have been one of the Prophets to whom the Qur'an alludes when it indicates that Muslims during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon

him) were only informed about some of the Prophets who had been entrusted with a Divine mission among humankind. Moreover, I have studied a little about Buddhism and during my period of research concerning Buddhism, I came across much in the way of wise teachings, insights, and spiritual understanding that resonates with the teachings of the Qur'an.

The Buddhist aspect of things is really neither here nor there as far as what I want to say at this juncture of things. I mention it only in passing to help place things in context.

A lot of people consider what they believe to be the nature of Buddhism to be appealing because it doesn't appear to have anything to do with a Divine Being. However, I find Buddhism in this respect to be more akin to the Jewish tetragrammaton touched upon briefly earlier in this commentary than I find Buddhism to be akin to constituting what might be termed a 'Godless' religion.

More specifically, in the matter at issue and as has previously been noted, the idea of a tetragrammaton involves four Hebraic letters – whose English equivalents are YHVH, and that contains no vowels -- which serves as a linguistic stand in, for a reality whose sacred nature cannot and should not be understood to be capable of being encompassed by words. Similarly, Buddhists are resistant to the idea of using a word like "God" in a manner that they deem to be a misleading manner of referring to that which is infinitely rich

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and nuanced and, as such, is capable of exceeding whatever words might be used to descriptively refer or allude to that infinite richness of Being.

In both cases, sacredness transcends language. The Jewish spiritual tradition has one way of engaging that sacredness, and the Buddhist spiritual tradition has another way of engaging the issue of Being's sacred and infinitely rich nature.

The foregoing approaches to Being are both different from one another, even as they resonate with one another. Both might be viable and correct ways of engaging the issue of the sacredness of Being.

One can agree with Mr. Harris when he says that there is nothing about spirituality or mysticism that "justifies arrogant and exclusionary claims about the unique sanctity of any text." However, what is problematic with what Mr. Harris says in this regard is the implication -- if not outright proclamation -- of his position concerning the idea that there are no spiritual texts that possess any sanctity whatsoever.

Mr. Harris points to the hermeneutical mistakes of this or that religious fundamentalist, and, then, he jumps to the unwarranted conclusion that the text in question -- for example, the Qur'an -- cannot be sacred because look at the mistakes and problems in which those individuals are seeking to entangle us. A text is one thing. People's understanding of that text mgiht be quite another matter.

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Anyone who believes that the Qur'an can be circumscribed by words or can be rendered fully explicable through some form of linguistic exegesis does not understand the nature of the Qur'an. There is an infinite richness to the quality of the Qur'an that gives expression to a sacredness that resonates with the Jewish idea of the tetragrammaton YHVH, and resonates with the Buddhist notion of an emptiness that is full, and resonates with the teachings of Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta when the latter speak of neti, neti -- neither this nor that.

Mr. Harris claims "there is no reason that our ability to sustain ourselves emotionally and spiritually cannot evolve with technology, politics, and the rest of culture." However, since Mr. Harris does not actually demonstrate in clear, rigorous and defensible terms what it means to truly sustain ourselves emotionally and spiritually, and since Mr. Harris does not put forth the sort of reasoned presentation that would be capable of persuading many except those who already shared his hermeneutical perspective on those matters, one actually does not understand what he means when he claims there is no reason why spirituality cannot evolve along with technology, politics and the rest of culture.

What does he mean by "evolve"? What does he mean by "sustain"?

Why be satisfied with sustaining ourselves emotionally and spiritually? Why not explore the

idea of what it means to flourish emotionally and spiritually?

What, precisely, does Mr. Harris mean by "politics"? Whose version of politics?

With what purposes, methods, and values is politics to be conducted? Who is to govern and in accordance with what principles?

How is technology to be used, and who gets to determine this? What does he mean by culture?

How and why must spirituality evolve in a manner that is consistent with technology, politics or culture? What is his understanding of consistency, and why should anyone accept what he has to say on the matter?

Mr. Harris doesn't provide much of value in *The End of Faith* that might be considered to constitute well-constructed, reasoned arguments with respect to any of the foregoing questions. I am sure there are those who feel that what he has done in his book is bold and brilliant, but this might be little more than a choir finding what a preacher says to be of interest.

In an earlier quotation from his book, Mr. Harris maintained: "there is little doubt that a certain range of human experience can be appropriately described as "spiritual" or "mystical" -- experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identities as "selves" and escape our current understanding of the mind and brain." There are

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lots of things that people might find meaningful (e.g., patriotism, winning an athletic championship, being a member of a political or philosophical movement, becoming a father or mother, tapping into the creative realm) that might surpass one's narrow sense of self, as well as escape our current understanding of the mind and brain, but those possibilities do not, in and of themselves, necessarily make them spiritual or mystical.

There are lots of things involving heightened emotion (e.g., being part of a crowd at an athletic event or at a concert or at a rave) that might surpass a person's normal sense of self and, therefore, escape our current understanding of the mind and brain, but this does not, in and of itself, make those heightened emotional experiences spiritual and mystical.

Mr. Harris is characterizing the ideas of 'spirituality' and 'mysticism' as a function of the way in which he believes concerning existence in the universe. He wants to eliminate the idea of a Divine Being from the discussion, and he wants to eliminate the idea of sacred texts and Divine revelation from the discussion, and he wants to eliminate the idea of faith from the discussion, and he wants to make everything a function of what he considers to be rational and evidential. In addition, he wants to make spirituality and mysticism something that will comply with his ideas concerning the nature of evolutionary progress --

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whatever that means -- with respect to technology, politics and culture.

Once Mr. Harris has framed the discussion to his liking, with what are we left? We are left with Mr. Harris' arbitrary assumptions, presuppositions, stipulated definitions, beliefs, and biases concerning the nature of things.

The minute one permits the idea of a Divine Being into the discussion, or the minute one permits the possibility of Divine revelation and sacred texts into the discussion, or the minute one permits a species of spiritual faith that is capable of intelligently engaging Being in a way that is different from reason -- even though these two forces might interact with one another at varying junctures -- then, much of what Mr. Harris has to say in *The End of Faith* is, at the very least, of questionable value or relevance to much of anything except to Mr. Harris' species of faith concerning the nature of things. Mr. Harris wants to reduce spirituality and mysticism down to being functions of the brain and reason, as well as to make spirituality and mysticism amenable to what Mr. Harris -- and others like him -- wants to consider to be progressive evolutionary forces.

While one could agree with Mr. Harris that human beings should make room for the possibility of changing their understanding concerning the character of truth in any given situation whenever critical reflection, insight, and wisdom indicate this to be an appropriate step to take, nevertheless, to

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suppose that truth should be limited to, or limited by, human understanding is quite another matter. Throughout his book, Mr. Harris seeks to eliminate from consideration the possibility there could be any Divine Being or sacred text that could serve as a standard against which Mr. Harris' pronouncements concerning faith, spirituality, and mysticism might be measured, evaluated or judged, and this is the reason why Mr. Harris is so adamant, insistent, and vociferous in his attempts within his book, *The End of Faith*, to wipe out any and all traces of Divinity, sacred texts, and spiritual faith from the discussion.

Mr. Harris is not content with just pointing out the errors committed by people of this or that species of faith -- errors with which one might agree even if one did not understand the nature of the error being committed in the way in which Mr. Harris does. Mr. Harris is not content with arguing that there are species of religious faith that give expression to toxic belief systems -- an argument with which one might agree even if one does not fully accept Mr. Harris' way of going about such an argument.

No, instead, Mr. Harris wants to use the mistakes that some individuals make with respect to their species of faith, as well as cite the toxic belief systems to which some species of spiritual faith give rise, to both count as sufficient evidence and reasons as to why vanquishing all species of spiritual faith and all talk of sacred texts and all

mention of a Divine Being is not merely justified, but the rational, evolutionarily progressive thing to do. In the process, Mr. Harris has lost sight of what it means to exercise critical reasoning as a venue through which to go about identifying the structural character of a given argument's errors and weaknesses -- especially in relation to his own mode of exercising reason, belief, and faith.

On page 46 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"Many Muslims ... are convinced that God takes an active interest in women's clothing. While it might seem harmless enough, the amount of suffering that this incredible idea has caused is astonishing. The rioting in Nigeria over the 2002 Miss World Pageant claimed over two hundred lives; innocent men and women were butchered with machetes or burned alive simply to keep that troubled place free of women in bikinis. Earlier in the year, the religious police in Mecca prevented paramedics and firefighters from rescuing scores of teenage girls trapped in a burning building. Why, because the girls were not wearing the traditional head covering that Koranic law requires. Fourteen girls died in the fire; fifty were injured. Should Muslims really be free to believe that the Creator of the Universe is concerned with hemlines?"

People -- whether Muslims or not -- should be free to believe whatever they like. This is the freedom of choice that God has given to human beings.

What is troubling in the foregoing quote, and it is a theme that is repeated -- both implicitly and explicitly -- elsewhere in *The End of Faith* -- is an underlying tone that tends to cast Mr. Harris in a shadowy light in which he appears to be advocating something that is not all that different from what might issue forth from the mentality of the religious police in Mecca -- namely, the right to impose on people what people can and cannot believe or do.

One could agree with the disgust and outrage that Mr. Harris obviously feels concerning the manner in which rioters conducted themselves in Nigeria in relation to the Miss World Pageant. One also could agree with the sense of incredulity that Mr. Harris evidently experienced in conjunction with the utter oppressive, cruel stupidity of the religious police in Mecca when they judged that head coverings were more important than human life.

However, what proof does Mr. Harris have that God approved of the actions of the rioters in Nigeria or approved of the actions of the religious police in Mecca? What proof does Mr. Harris have that God told the people in Nigeria to riot or that God told the religious police in Mecca to let the girls die because they weren't wearing head coverings?

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Of course, the foregoing questions are difficult for Mr. Harris because he doesn't believe in God. However, even if one were to grant, for the sake of argument, Mr. Harris' contention that there is no God, where does it say in the Qur'an that whenever there is bikini contest one is entitled to butcher people or burn people alive or riot? Even if one were to grant Mr. Harris' claim that there is no God -- which I am not inclined to do -- where does it say in the Qur'an that whenever there is a fire and if girls/women are involved who are not wearing proper head covering, then, those girls/women should be permitted to perish.

The rioters in Nigeria and the religious police in Mecca have not only taken it upon themselves to be the sole arbiters in the meaning of the Qur'an, but they have arrogated to themselves, as well, the right to impose such meanings on whomsoever they please. Mr. Harris appears to wish to do this as well because he seems to want to be the arbiter of what the Qur'an can and can't mean, and he wants to force this understanding on everyone so that his arguments will make sense. Just as the rioters in Nigeria and the religious police in Mecca will not permit anyone to have an understanding of the Qur'an that is different from theirs, so too, Mr. Harris will not permit anyone to have an understanding of the Qur'an different from the one that he wishes to foist on everyone.

The Qur'an indicates that God has counseled both men and women to dress with a sense of

propriety. However, if people do not do this, then, the Qur'an offers no specific guidance concerning how breaches of this propriety should be handled. But what is certain is that nothing is said in the Qur'an to even hint at the possibility that an appropriate way of dealing with those situations is to riot, butcher people, burn people, or let young girls expire in a burning building.

People make these choices on their own, according to their understanding of things. The Qur'an has nothing to do with those choices.

People often tend to confuse their own theologies and toxic systems of belief with the actual guidance of the Qur'an. What is truly unfortunate is when people like Mr. Harris insist that no understandings of the Qur'an except what comes via the way of toxic and pathological beliefs systems or theologies should be admitted into consideration, because by insisting on this, Mr. Harris is just helping to perpetuate the problem in order to advance his own self-serving philosophical agenda.

On pages 109-110 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:
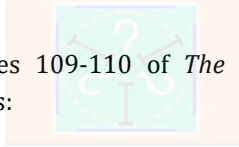
"We are at war with Islam. ... We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the Hadith which recounts the sayings and actions of the Prophet."

Technically speaking, the United States cannot be at war with anyone unless Congress has issued a declaration of war. No such declaration of war has been issued by Congress, so whatever it is that is being directed at Islam, it is not a Congressional declaration of war.

I believe it is true that Mr. Harris has declared war on Islam. Or, to be more precise, Mr. Harris has declared war on what he takes Islam to be, and like the most oppressive and unreasonable of Muslim theologians, Mr. Harris insists that everyone must understand Islam and the Qur'an as he does.

In the foregoing quote, Mr. Harris has made reference to the body of Hadith literature. Consequently, it only seems appropriate to mention the fact that during the latter part of his life, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ordered that all collections of Hadith that were being gathered by various Muslims during the lifetime of the Prophet should be destroyed. Moreover, once this edict had been given -- and there actually were a number of times that this directive was issued -- there is nothing in the Hadith literature demonstrating that the Prophet had ever changed his mind about the matter. The Prophet wanted there to be no confusion in anyone's mind and heart about the difference between, on the one hand, what revelation gave expression to in the way of Divine guidance and, and on the other hand, what the Prophet might

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have done or said in any given set of circumstances or conditions as a particular situational application of such Divine guidance.

Historical circumstances change. Conditions change. Societies change. Technological capabilities change.

The specific nature of the problems that confront the people of one temporal period might differ significantly from the specific nature of the problems that challenge another people in another timeframe, despite the existence of superficial similarities between the two historical periods. The needs of people change with changing circumstances and conditions.

What might be possible and necessary when considering the dynamics of 6 billion people could give expression to a very different sort of scenario than when one considers how to approach things in a context of less than 50,000 people such as existed during the early days of Islam. What might have been necessary when the Muslim community was small and under threat from all sides, including from within, is not necessarily what must or should be done now that more than 1 billion Muslims live in the world across many diverse cultures and histories.

Those Muslim theologians and jurists who claim to know what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) understood or intended in any given instance of recorded action or utterance cannot prove their claims – although they certainly do

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present arguments in order to try to give the illusion of such knowledge. However, there is nothing in what they argue that justifies imposing their ideas about those matters on others.

Certain forms of Muslim law have become like a many-headed hydra that threaten the peace and security not only of people like Mr. Harris, but the peace and security of many Muslims as well. These species of Muslim law give expression to toxic belief systems that pollute the fabric of both community and spirituality.

However, none of these systems of Muslim law constitute Islam. Moreover, the people who develop those systems are not Prophets, nor are they God, nor are they necessarily approved agents of Divinity -- although many of these 'creators' attempt to give the impression that what they are saying and doing comes with the full approval of Divinity.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with reading the Hadiths and culling that literature in search of the sort of guidance, counsel, insight, wisdom, direction, example, or inspiration that might help a person in the context of his or her own, individual life to engage various difficulties, problems, questions, or issues. However, there is something necessarily wrong with reading the literature of Hadiths in order to find ideas that can be imposed on other individuals according to one's likes and dislikes -- and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is my warrant for saying the

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foregoing by virtue of his directive to destroy all collections of Hadith.

In effect, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was seeking to take steps to head off what eventually transpired despite his efforts to stem the tide, so to speak, in this respect. In other words, eventually, a time came following the passing away of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when people used their own sense of understanding, or lack thereof, to overturn a specific directive of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and, in the process let loose a problem upon both the Muslim world, as well as the non-Muslim world, by giving credence to the idea of establishing collections of Hadith that would come to be used in exactly the way that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was seeking to forestall and with respect to which he was, by the Grace of Allah, successful in accomplishing for several hundred years until later individuals decided that they knew better than the Prophet about the dangers inherent in developing and releasing those collections of purported sayings to the public.

Unfortunately, Mr. Harris does not help his own cause due to the way in which he insists on proceeding with respect to Islam. What Mr. Harris claims the Qur'an prescribes to Muslims is, in fact, not what the Qur'an prescribes to Muslims.

Just as some Muslim theologians and legalists have imposed their own ideas onto the Qur'an and

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the life of the Prophet, so too, Mr. Harris is also guilty of a similar error. Mr. Harris invents Islam in the image of his own biased understanding of things, and, then, declares war on that which he, himself, has constructed.

His sleight of hand in this regard is that he wants the readers of *The End of Faith* to accept his invention as the 'real' revealed truth concerning Islam. Moreover, he doesn't want anyone to critically penetrate the conceptual curtain that he seeks to use to hide the fact that Mr. Harris, in his role as the Wizard of Islam, is the only one who is pulling all the levers and ringing all the bells with respect to the show that he is putting on for public consumption in the form of his book.

Mr. Harris wants his readers to join him in his glorious, noble project of war. He wants his readers to declare war on Islam and Muslims just as he has done.

He wants his readers to declare war on spiritual faith just as he has done. He wants his readers to declare war on the idea of sacred texts just as he has done.

The only problem with Mr. Harris' glorious project is that virtually everything that he has to say about Islam, revelation, sacred texts, the Qur'an, and faith is a total figment of the seemingly fertile, but ultimately sterile, system of toxic imagination that Mr. Harris is trying to pass off as Islam, spiritual faith, sacred texts, and religious duty. Mr. Harris misinforms and misleads his

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readers in the same way that many Muslim theologians and many Muslim legalists misinform and mislead their audiences -- indeed, they all use precisely the same tactic: namely, to insist that everyone must accept their interpretation of things as being the only valid approach to understanding Islam and faith.

On page 113 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris states:

"In the Muslim perception, conversion to Islam is a benefit to the convert and a merit to those who convert him."

I would like to know which Muslims have the audacity to suppose that they, rather than God, bring anyone to Islam. Even the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not have the power or capacity to convert anyone to Islam. This is entirely a matter between an individual soul and the Creator of that soul, and for Mr. Harris to suggest otherwise is a small indication of how little he understands about the nature of Islam and faith.

To be sure, there are those Muslim theologians who swagger about with the belief that what they say, do, or write brings people to Islam. It doesn't, and it never has.

So, in effect, Mr. Harris has permitted himself to come under the sphere of influence of those kinds of Muslims who don't even understand their

own spiritual tradition. And, then, he is foolish enough to try to claim that what he is writing is an accurate reflection of what Islam actually teaches.

A short while later on page 113, Mr. Harris claims:

"In Islamic law, conversion from Islam is apostasy -- a capital offense for both the one who is misled and the one who misleads him. On this question, the law is clear and unequivocal. If a Muslim renounces Islam, even if a new convert reverts to his previous faith, the penalty is death."

Throughout *The End of Faith* Mr. Harris likes to play these little "gotcha" games. However, ultimately, he is engaging in those past times only with his own problematic understanding of Islam, spirituality, sacred texts, and faith.

First of all, there is no such thing as Islamic law in the sense of a system of political and legal precepts that must be imposed on people in order to regulate society. This is the case despite the misunderstanding of many Muslim legalists, theologians, muftis, imams, and religious scholars concerning this issue.

The Qur'an is a book on which to reflect and contemplate. The Qur'an is a book of good-tidings and warnings.

The Qur'an is a reminder. The Qur'an is a book of guidance, wisdom, insight, understanding, discernment, and knowledge.

The Qur'an is not a book of religious law. In fact, I know of no place in the Qur'an where it refers to itself as a book of religious law.

Various Muslims might seek to create legal systems based on this or that facet of the Qur'an. However, this is their doing and not what the Qur'an has necessarily directed those people to do.

There is, on the other hand, something called Muslim law. Nevertheless, one would be both presumptuous and arrogant to try to claim that Muslim law not only constitutes the best way to engage the Qur'an, but, as well, it is a way that must be imposed on everyone despite the fact that the Qur'an clearly says there can be no compulsion in matters of deen or religion.

The Qur'an does not exist for the purpose of permitting people to generate systems of legal rulings, Rather, the Qur'an exists to help people struggle toward realizing the purpose for which they have been created ... to fulfill the potential of their fitra -- their primordial spiritual capacity -- and there is no legal system that is capable of doing this.

One cannot legally force people to be good and, then, claim that this has anything to do with spirituality or faith or the engagement of Divine guidance. One cannot legally force people to make

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moral decisions and call this spirituality, and even if one did do this, those moral decisions are not likely to carry any spiritual value because the individual would have been compelled to be "good" or "moral" rather than having arrived at such spiritual stations through his or her own struggles and efforts.

One cannot legally force someone who first became Muslim and, then decided, for whatever reason, to become a non-Muslim, to have faith in Islam. If the threat of death is the only thing keeping that person from renouncing his or her faith, then, what kind of faith is this?

Well, someone might wish to argue, although the death penalty might not help the apostate to believe in Islam, nonetheless, that penalty will protect the faith of other Muslims from apostasy. However, what kind of a faith is it that is influenced by what others might do, or not do, with respect to the matter of commitment to Islam? Faith should be a function of one's relation to God and not a function of what this or that imam, theologian, or person in the street says or does concerning Islam.

There might be any number of Muslim theologians and legalists who believe that the death penalty is an appropriate way of handling the issue of apostasy. However, I am rather unclear about what it means to be an apostate, and, furthermore, to the best of my recollection, nowhere does the Qur'an indicate that execution is the penalty for apostasy although the Qur'an does sound warnings

concerning what might await those individuals in the world to come.

In any event, if an individual were so disgusted, frustrated, outraged, and upset by the stupid, cruel, and inconsiderate ways in which all too many Muslims carry on with respect to life (for example, in relation to, say, suicide bombings, honor killings, genital mutilation of women, Taliban-like and al-Qaeda-like oppressive political systems, and so on) and, as a result, the person who was reflecting on those matters decided that she or he did not want to be part of this kind of system any more if that is what so many Muslims consider Islam to be, and, consequently, such an individual: discontinued reading the Qur'an, stopped saying ritual prayers, refused to fast any more during the month of Ramazan, did not give zakat or charity, and, yet, such an individual continued to believe in God in his or her own fashion, can one say that the individual is an apostate? Or, even if the foregoing sort of person totally renounced his faith in the existence of God because of doubts that arose due to wondering how a loving God permits people who call themselves Muslim to behave in cruel, oppressive, and barbaric ways, how could anyone condemn that person to death without feeling some sense of responsibility for having assisted the individual to reach such a condition because of one's failure to stop or, at least, speak out against, those who betray Islam through activities involving honor killings or female genital mutilation or suicide bombing?

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In addition, what would the criteria be for determining what constitutes an apostate and who gets to establish what those criteria should be? Who should be given the authority to evaluate any particular case, and what is the justification for ceding authority to such an individual? Who has the spiritual wisdom to understand the dynamics of those situations with sufficient depth, insight, and certainty that they could, without the slightest hesitation and in full truth, say they knew God was demanding that such a person must die?

If so-called Islamic law is unequivocal on the matter that not only the person who leaves Islam but those who induced the person to leave Islam must face the punishment of capital punishment, then, one might have to execute a good number of Muslims on the face of the Earth due to the manner in which their shabby ways of observing Islam might have played a role in helping to induce or convince someone to become an apostate. Under those circumstances, perhaps, the jurists should start with executing the rioters in Nigeria in relation to the Miss World Pageant, and, then, the court administrators might want to take steps to execute the religious police in Mecca, and, then, those jurists could go in search of the people who induced suicide bombers to kill innocent people, and, then, the courts could go after all those who countenanced and did nothing to stop the commission of honor killings and genital mutilation, and, then, finally, when all the foregoing individuals were executed for helping to induce

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someone to become an apostate, the legal jurists could begin doing themselves in for helping to contribute to the apostate's sense of disgust and revulsion due to the arrogant belief of those legalists that they possessed either the spiritual wisdom or authority to go around executing people because certain individuals were having difficulty swallowing what various people were trying to attribute to the teachings of the Qur'an.

Would anyone be safe from that kind of a witch hunt? Would any of us be legitimately free of responsibility for -- in however small a way due to our individual, as well as collective, weaknesses and imperfections -- having assisted such an individual to stumble to a decision to distance himself or herself due to what they saw all too many Muslims were proclaiming in the name of Islam?

What might have transpired on a few occasions with respect to the issue of apostasy during the times of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) carries no necessary precedent for how we must conduct ourselves today with respect to the same issue. The stresses, pressures, distractions, temptations, abilities, needs, role models, supports (or lack of them), and confusions that exist today are very different from the stresses, abilities, and so on which existed among Muslims during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

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Many Muslims like to proudly point to Islam as being the fastest growing spiritual tradition on Earth. Whatever the truth of such an assertion might, or might not, be, I also know about many people who are leaving Islam due to, among other things, precisely the sort of aforementioned issues of cruel, barbaric, hypocritical, and oppressive treatment toward other human beings on the part of all too many Muslims who have ceded their moral, spiritual and intellectual authority to so-called religious scholars and legalists who are claiming that suicide bombing, honor killings, genital mutilation, and Taliban-like, theologically-driven, oppressive government is perfectly consistent with what is taught in the Qur'an.

Or, let's look at this matter from another direction. If I do not engage Islam in the same way that a Muslim theologian or legalist engages Islam, does this make either of us apostates? Where are we going to draw the line, and on what basis, with respect to the issue of apostasy?

If a person does not admit to being an apostate, but some discerning soul believes that he or she can infer from the former person's behavior or appearance whether, or not, such an individual is an apostate -- for example, if a given person doesn't have a beard or doesn't wear a head covering -- should we consider this evidence of apostasy? Why are we even wasting time on such an issue when so many people -- both Muslim and non-Muslim -- are

homeless, unemployed, hungry, traumatized, in need of medical attention, and oppressed?

Whatever the realities of apostasy might be, it pales as an issue compared to the many other serious challenges and problems facing humankind. Muslim religious leaders need to learn, among other things, how to prioritize the resources of the Muslim community better than presently is the case, and quite frankly, the issue of apostasy seems to be a matter that carries few, if any, benefits with respect to the problems surrounding the allocation of those resources -- especially when one considers all the other constructive ways in which those resources might be utilized.

On the other hand, people like Mr. Harris might want to begin considering prioritizing their own time in a more constructive fashion by applying their considerable skills and intellect to something besides seeking to depict Islam in a manner that is intended to serve their agenda for declaring war on Islam, Muslims, and faith. In reality, Mr. Harris is not much better in this respect than are the Muslim theologians who have preoccupied themselves with whether someone's faith concerning Islam is sufficiently pure enough to withstand a charge of apostasy, while Mr. Harris spends his time concocting false allegations concerning how Muslims and other people of spiritual faith should, in effect, be charged with apostasy in relation to Mr. Harris' species of faith involving rationality and secularism.

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On page 112 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris notes:

"Those looking for ways to leaven the intrinsic militancy of Islam have observed that there are a few lines in the Koran that seem to speak directly against indiscriminate violence. Those who wage jihad are enjoined not to attack first (Koran 2:190) since "God does not love aggressors." But this injunction restrains no one. Given the long history of conflict between Islam and the West, almost any act of violence against infidels can now be plausibly construed as an action in defense of faith."

The only "intrinsic militancy" that can be associated with Islam is that which people like Mr. Harris fabricate through the manner in which they frame their arguments -- arguments that the discussion throughout my current commentary has pointed out tend to be filled with error, misunderstanding, distortion, ignorance, and bias. Mr. Harris states things in a misleading way when he says there are only a few lines in the Qur'an that "seem to speak directly against indiscriminate violence". Indeed, among other things, his use of the term "seem" is a way of casting doubt on what is said in the Qur'an without introducing any evidence to validate the use of that term

In point of fact, there are quite a few verses in the Qur'an that counsel human beings to be

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equitable in their dealings with one another and to not transgress boundaries of propriety and, in point of fact, indiscriminate violence constitutes both a violation of equitability and a transgression of boundaries of propriety. Unfortunately, there are all too many individuals who are literalists and, as a result, those individuals appear to have difficulty grasping the way in which a principle concerning, say, equitability actually encompasses a lot of things -- including the issue of indiscriminate violence -- that are not specifically mentioned and, therefore, is quite unlike a rule that needs to specify everything that is to be included in the rule.

However, let's just stick to the part of the Quranic verse that Mr. Harris does cite. Even when he mentions the Quranic injunction against indiscriminate violence he continues to seek to frame his argument by dismissing what the Qur'an has to say with respect to the issue of not being the first to attack anyone and of not being an aggressor by claiming that such injunctions restrain no one.

One wonders what the evidential basis is for Mr. Harris' foregoing assertion. What data can he point to which demonstrates that among the more than one billion Muslims on the face of the Earth that the injunction in question constrains no one?

For starters, the injunction certainly constrains me, and I am a Muslim. So, it is obvious that Mr. Harris' statement is factually incorrect as it stands.

Mr. Harris also misrepresents issues when he claims there has been a "long history of conflict

between Islam and the West". Islam is neither a person nor a community nor a government. It is a methodology for helping individuals to realize their spiritual potential as individuals. So, just how has Islam had a history of conflict with the West?

As has been pointed out previously on a number of occasions, Islam is one thing, and people's understanding of Islam is quite another matter. Both many Muslims and non-Muslims (e.g., Mr. Harris) have sought to arbitrarily impose their own agendas, interests, and biases onto Islam, and such people -- both in the Muslim world and the West -- have used those problematic hermeneutical renderings of Islam to provoke conflicts with whomever they considered to be standing in the way of what they wanted to acquire, control, or accomplish ... just as Mr. Harris is doing now through his book *The End of Faith*.

Mr. Harris introduces further distortion and misrepresentation into the discussion when he argues that because of the alleged long history of conflict between Islam and the West, "almost any act of violence against infidels can now be plausibly construed as an action in defense of faith." Among other things, Mr. Harris has failed to stipulate what the criteria are for determining what constitutes the conditions of 'plausibility', or who it is that has advanced those conditions and with what justification.

In addition Mr. Harris glosses over the whole issue of what constitutes an "infidel". The manner

in which Mr. Harris frames his argument is intended to give the impression that both Islam and Muslims consider everybody in the West to be infidels, and, therefore, there can never be peace between Muslims and the West, but this is a way of framing things that cannot be substantiated -- either with respect to the issue of what constitutes being an infidel or in relation to the claim that "almost any act of violence can now be plausibly construed as an action in defense of faith."

Christians and Jews are not infidels. The Qur'an makes this very clear in any number of verses, and this remains so even if there are beliefs and practices to which the Qur'an refers and to which some Christians and Jews are committed that are different from some of the beliefs and practices to which Muslims are committed.

Furthermore, there are other spiritual faith traditions that, despite the fact they might not be specifically mentioned in the Qur'an, this, in and of itself, does not automatically qualify the followers of those faith traditions to be considered as infidels. Unfortunately, Mr. Harris tries to give the impression that in Islam anyone who does not act and believe in precisely the way that this or that Muslim does is, by definition, an infidel, and this is just not the case, and, indeed, Mr. Harris is simply being an irresponsible provocateur when he tries to create those kinds of misleading and error-ridden impressions.

On pages 118 through 122 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris cites translated verse after translated verse of the Qur'an in an effort to shore up his claims concerning what a terrible spiritual tradition he is alleging Islam to be in his book. However, when one reads down through those verses, one persistent theme runs through them -- namely, they are a series of warnings that are being issued to Muslims with respect to situations, actions, conditions, individuals, and beliefs about which a person should exercise caution lest a Muslim fall prey to the many problems and consequences that ensue from loss of faith, understanding, and discernment.

One, of course, is free to pay heed, or not pay heed, to those warnings. Time will bring the evidence that will disclose whatever the nature of the truth is which is being given expression through those verses.

However, shortly after listing the five pages of Quranic verses Mr. Harris goes on to say:

"I cannot judge the quality of the Arabic; perhaps it is sublime. But, the book's contents are not. On almost every page, the Koran instructs observant Muslims to despise non-believers."

Actually, the Qur'an does none of what Mr. Harris erroneously claims it does. Among the many Quranic verses contained in the five pages of verses

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that Mr. Harris cites, not one of those verses instructs or encourages Muslims to despise, hate, ridicule, judge, or show contempt for, non-believers. Instead, Muslims are being counseled in those verses to reflect on the following: if they do not want to experience the problematic consequences that might be in store – whether in this life or the life to come -- for those who reject Divine guidance, then, listen and pay attention to what is being said in the Qur'an.

The Quranic verses that Mr. Harris cites do not counsel Muslims with respect to how they should act toward non-believers. Rather, Muslims are being counseled in relation to how and why they should be concerned with becoming actively engaged with putting their own individual spiritual houses in order.

On pages 124 through 126 of *The End of Faith*, Mr. Harris provides an overview about -- along with a brief analysis of -- a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center with respect to the issue of suicide bombing. One of the questions asked of the participants contained the following: "Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified."

Mr. Harris breaks the Pew survey data down in an effort to show that when one asks whether suicide bombing is 'ever justifiable' one gets more survey participants who are willing to answer in

the affirmative than if one just asks whether, or not, suicide bombing is justifiable.

He points out that a majority of the survey participants in Lebanon, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Jordan, Bangladesh, and Mali indicated they agreed with the possibility that there might be some set of circumstances in which suicide bombing might be justifiable, whereas a majority of participants in Senegal, Ghana, Indonesia, Uganda, and Turkey indicated there would never be any circumstances in which suicide bombing was justifiable. In most cases, the countries where a majority of the people polled indicated there might be circumstances in which suicide bombing was justified, there were sizable portions of the polling sample who disagreed with that possibility.

The number of people in Pakistan who agreed with or disagreed with the idea that there could be circumstances in which they believed that suicide bombing would be justifiable was split at about 38% each. There were a sizable number of individuals who refused to answer the question ... some 23%.

What exactly does it mean to say that one could conceive of circumstances in which suicide bombing was justified? The question is highly hypothetical, and, as a result, one really has no idea of what is going through a person's mind when she or he answers that kind of a question in the affirmative. Among other things, we have no idea how plausible or realistic any of the scenarios are

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that might run through a person's mind when responding in the affirmative to that sort of question.

Suppose, for example, a person thought to himself, herself, or themselves that suicide bombing would be justifiable when Hell freezes over, and, then proceeded to answer the question in the affirmative. To what has the individual actually committed himself or herself?

One could even raise questions in relation to those hypothetical musings about what a person might actually do with respect to some set of circumstances in which an individual believed that suicide bombing might be justifiable. For instance, let us assume that some such set of contingent conditions were, suddenly, to become a reality, would that individual necessarily go ahead and become a suicide bomber?

Lots of people say many things about doing violence to others. Only a very small percentage of people voicing thosse threats ever carry through on what they have said.

Mr. Harris does not further break down the Pew survey data -- assuming those kinds of data were even collected by the Pew researchers -- with respect to such things as gender differences, if any, when responding to various survey questions. Moreover, nothing is said about whether there were any differences among adherents who subscribe to different approaches to Islam -- such as Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, and so on.

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Somewhat ironically, when one takes a look at the countries that participated in the Pew survey and to which Mr. Harris refers in his book, most of them do not have a problem with suicide bombing. So, one is faced with something of an oddity in which people claim they are in support of suicide bombing, but they do not do so in their own countries. Such an oddity tends to raise questions concerning the meaning of that research, and, more importantly, the sort of irresponsible conclusions that Mr. Harris is anxious to draw from the Pew research.

Another factor that is not explored during Mr. Harris' discussion of the Pew survey data is whether the researchers made any attempt to find out whether the respondents were merely nominal Muslims or whether Muslim respondents actually sought to live in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Furthermore, with respect to the latter group, it might prove instructive to determine how many of them had arrived at their opinions on the issue of suicide bombing based on their own reading of the Qur'an and how many of those opinions simply reflected what some ignorant religious leader was telling them was justifiable during Friday sermons.

To illustrate the relevancy of the foregoing considerations, one might wish to reflect, for a moment, on some polling that has been done in conjunction with people who are regular viewers of Fox news in the United States. Some five or six

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years after 9/11 and despite the many public revelations that have been brought forth by journalists, former intelligence officers, and other investigators indicating how neither Saddam Hussein nor Iraq had anything to do with the events of 9/11, nevertheless, one survey indicated that a sizable majority of Fox news watchers are still convinced of the link between Iraq and 9/11 and believe this "fact" justified attacking Iraq and killing tens of thousands of innocent Iraqis.

Use of techniques of undue influence with respect to the shaping of people's opinions about things can and does occur in Muslim countries. On the other hand, those same techniques of undue influence also are used in America, and the above noted poll concerning viewers of Fox news is but one piece of evidence concerning the truth of what is being said here.

Consequently, when one analyzes survey data, one has to ask questions about the sorts of factors that might be shaping and influencing the answer of a respondent. Mr. Harris didn't do this, and I am not certain that the original Pew research did either, and, therefore, the significance of the polling data is indeterminate in any number of ways.

Some questions that need to be asked concerning the manner in which the survey research was conducted are the following. Were the questions written or verbal? Did the pollsters contact the participants in person or through the mail or by phone or at a center?

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Were the researchers Muslim? If questions were asked of participants in person, were the ones asking the questions men or women?

In what language were the questions asked? Were other people present, beside the researchers and the respondent, when the questions were asked and answered?

At what time of day were the questions asked? How busy were the respondents when they were asked the questions?

How long did participants have to respond? Where were the questions asked (e.g., At home; outside a mosque; at their place of business; in a community center.)?

What factors were most influential with respect to any given respondent giving the answers they did? Were there on-going events in the country that might have shaped a person's response? Were the results replicated and consistent over time?

All of the foregoing considerations and quite a few others are important things to know when analyzing survey data. Without that sort of information, one might get a response from a person, but one might not truly understand to what a participant's response is actually giving expression.

Even the manner in which a question is phrased might lead to very different results. For example, the Pew research cited by Mr. Harris

began with: "Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam", and, then, the question goes on to mention there are others who do not agree with that perspective. If one switched the order of alternatives around, it is possible that one might come up with different results although if there was an order effect, it is hard to know whether it would be significant, minor, or altogether negligible.

Furthermore, as is the case with almost all survey research a great deal depends on how questions are asked. Thus, one wonders what the results of the Pew survey would have been if the participants had been asked any of the following questions instead of the one -- noted above -- that was asked. For example, where in the Qur'an does it say that suicide bombing is ever justified?

One might, then, follow up with the following question: Where in the Qur'an does it say that the reward for martyrdom is 70 virgins (and, in fact, nowhere in the Qur'an is such a reward mentioned but, rather, the term "virgin" is an interpretation that arbitrarily has been imposed on a certain verse of the Qur'an in order to seduce impressionable young males to serve someone else's agenda)?

Or, how about this possibility: Where in the Qur'an does it say that the killing of innocent people or the killing of women, children, old people and non-combatants is ever justified? Or, what if

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Pew researchers were to ask the following question: if there were peaceable ways of settling conflict, would you choose such ways in preference to violence?

Or, maybe the Pew people should have asked: Do you believe that blinding, maiming, crippling, murdering, dismembering, crushing and traumatizing women, children, and other innocents is a good thing to do? Or, perhaps, the following question should have been asked: Can you cite even one instance where suicide bombing can be shown to have been the primary reason for the establishing of peace, harmony, and the cessation of violence?

Or, maybe, even more telling would be a question such as: if a participant in the survey were asked today to become a suicide bomber, would that participant be willing to kill and injure innocent people right now? Finally, how about this question: If you knew that people like Mr. Harris were trying to gather evidence that would justify using a first strike nuclear option to wipe out millions of Muslims -- irrespective of how those individuals thought about the issue of suicide bombing -- would you be answering this question in the same way?

Mr. Harris claims that:

"We now live in a world in which Muslims have been scientifically polled" concerning the issue of suicide bombing.

As is true of almost everything else Mr. Harris says, his foregoing quote is both incorrect and misleading. The only scientific part of the survey to which Mr. Harris refers is the fact that statistical tools were used to compile and characterize the data that arose through the survey, and just because statistical tools were applied to data doesn't necessarily meant that those tools were used correctly or that such usage was devoid of error.

The questions that were asked during the survey were not even remotely scientific but, rather, were framed in a way that actually manipulates and forces participants to respond in accordance with the predilections of the researchers. Even more importantly, and as has long been demonstrated with respect to survey research, what people claim they support and what they actually would be willing to do if given the opportunity to, say, be a suicide bomber themselves, does not necessarily coincide with their earlier pronouncements.

To be sure, many of the participants in the Pew research were likely to have been more than a little angry and emotional concerning the ways in which the United States -- either directly and/or through surrogates -- has militarily attacked Muslims in,

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among other places, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Somalia, Libya, the Balkans, Palestine, and Tunisia, killing hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of innocent people in the process -- many of whom were women, children, and non-combatants.

If a survey researcher punched a potential respondent in the mouth, and, then, asked the individual if she or he felt violence toward researchers would ever be justified, one might get answers very much like what the Pew researchers obtained. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean the participant would actually do violence to the researcher in question.

Feelings of being transgressed against do not always translate into violent actions. Indeed, one of the functions of faith is to help resist the tendency to act just because we have emotional feelings about a situation.

Halfway through his analysis of the Pew research data concerning suicide bombing, Mr. Harris states on page 125 that:

"If you do not find those numbers sufficiently disturbing consider that places like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Iraq and the Palestinian territories were not included in the survey. Had they been, it is safe to say that Lebanon would have lost their place at the top of the list several times over."

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Typical of Mr. Harris, he likes to jump to conclusions without actually doing the research necessary to be in a position to know what the empirical data is. One might also raise another question in relation to Mr. Harris' foregoing contention: that is, why weren't the countries he mentioned included in the Pew survey research, and what about countries such as Malaysia, or even countries like Britain, France, Canada, or the United States where sizable numbers of Muslims live?

Moreover, while we are on the topic of surveys and the United States, if Mr. Harris wants to speak about disturbing numbers, he and others should reflect on several, relatively recent surveys conducted in the United States. For example, based on the results of a May, 2006 poll conducted by Zogby, it is estimated that 70 million <u>voting-age</u> citizens of the United States do not accept the 9/11 Commission's version of what transpired before, during, and after September 11th, 2001. 45% of the Zogby sample felt there should be a new investigation into the events of 9/11.

A Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll conducted in August of 2006 asked a different set of questions from the aforementioned Zogby poll in relation to 9/11 but came up with somewhat similar results indicating that approximately 36% of the American people reject the findings of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. In addition, over a third of the respondents to this latter survey indicated that

they harbored deeper anxieties concerning the possibility that unknown individuals from within the U.S. government, military, intelligence community, and/or corporate worlds might have actively betrayed all Americans by having had some form of complicity with respect to the events that unfolded on 9/11.

Mr. Harris loves to cite survey statistics and wag his finger at the Muslim world. Yet, he doesn't even seem to know what is going on in his own country or understand how what is taking place in the United States might have a very direct and considerable causal connection concerning that which is going on elsewhere in the world.

The horror toward which Mr. Harris wishes to manipulate his reading audience is summed up in the following quote on page 128 of *The End of Faith*:

"What will we do if an Islamist regime, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, ever acquires long-range nuclear weapons? If history is any guide, we will not be sure about where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and, so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them. In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival might be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime – as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day – but it might be

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the only course of action available to us given what Islamists believe."

It is hard to know where to begin with such irresponsible foolishness. I suppose one could begin with the following facts: It is the United States that invented nuclear weapons and, then, permitted the technology associated with those weapon systems to proliferate to other countries; it is the United States that actually has used those weapons on innocent civilians who lived in a country that had no nuclear program; it is the United States that has built thousands of nuclear warheads and insists on spending trillions of dollars on maintaining them, replacing them, and developing new generations of those nuclear systems along with many other exotic forms of weaponry.

While I would not be in favor of misguided Muslims -- or even rightly guided Muslims -- gaining access to nuclear weapons capabilities, similarly I am not in favor of misguided or rightly guided Americans having access to those weapons either. Misguided Muslims want nuclear weapon capabilities because misguided Americans already possess those capabilities and have a proven track record of being willing to use those weapons against innocent civilians -- so why shouldn't misguided Muslims (irrespective of how wrong they might be with respect to what they claim Islam to be about) have a justifiable fear of the monstrous

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potential for destruction that the United States already has shown it is willing to unleash on the world ... not hypothetically but in actuality?

The United States has helped to create the mess in which the world finds itself. Furthermore, the United States refuses to take responsibility for its sins of commission and omission in relation to its considerable assistance in the formation and perpetuation of such an international mess. Instead, the United States would rather talk about how this country or that country is seeking to destabilize the international state of affairs -- when, in point of fact, the United States has been destabilizing those same state of affairs for more than half a century through its military, political, and economic policies. If the United States wants other countries to stop acting in what are considered to be irresponsible ways, then, the United States must cease and desist with respect to its own actions of irresponsibility -- which are many.

Mr. Harris claims that if "history is any guide, we will not be sure about where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and, so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them." To what history is Mr. Harris referring that is supposedly guiding us with respect to being unable to determine where those offending weapons are located or what their state of readiness is?

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Is he referring to the infamous non-existent weapons of mass destruction that were "possessed" by Saddam Hussein? Is he referring to the forged documents involving Niger yellow cake that was to be used in the development of non-existent nuclear weapons programs? Or, is he referring to the failed United States intelligence concerning the nuclear capabilities of Pakistan, India, and Israel?

Moreover, although one might wish to raise questions about the legal and moral propriety of what the Israeli air force did in relation to the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq in 1981, the fact of the matter is that the Israeli's were able to use conventional weapons to accomplish their goal. Consequently, the logic of Mr. Harris' argument escapes me not only in relation to his claim that conventional weapons could not be used to target those systems, but the logic of his alleged argument also escapes me as to why he believes the United States would be morally or legally justified to attack a country that was seeking to defend itself against a country -- namely, the United States -- that has been pursuing a consistent course of aggressive belligerence concerning many parts of the Muslim world for a great many years now.

Mr. Harris acknowledges the terrible loss of innocent lives that would occur if the United States were to make a first nuclear strike against some country about which we didn't even know if they had nuclear weapons [and if you don't know where those weapons are located or what their state of

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readiness is, then, how does one know those weapons even exist at all?]. However, despite conceding that such an act would be a crime, nonetheless, he merrily skips along to his conclusion that such an act would be "the only course of action available to us given what Islamists believe."

Firstly, if by the term "Islamist" Mr. Harris is alluding to the way any given Muslim's faith relates to Islam, then, I believe the previous pages of commentary indicate, in rather stark terms, that Mr. Harris has an extremely limited, skewed, error-ridden, and biased understanding of what those individuals might actually believe. He defines Islam from the perspective of his own faith system and, then, insists that what he claims Muslims believe is what they believe, and, this simply is not true.

Are there some set of Muslims who believe things in the way that Mr. Harris depicts in *The End of Faith*? Yes, I am sure there are, but Mr. Harris fails to demonstrate how the mistaken beliefs of those individuals have anything to do with what is actually taught in Islam, and he also fails to demonstrate what numbers we are actually talking about with respect to people who do not just talk about suicide bombing but who are actually prepared to follow through on what they say.

Secondly, and in contrast to what Mr. Harris claims in the foregoing quote, there is not just one course of action to take (i.e., a first-strike nuclear holocaust against Muslims). Rather, there are many

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alternative courses of action to take in an effort to head off the sort of hypothetical nuclear scenario to which Mr. Harris is alluding.

For example, the United States could enter into serious discussions to eliminate all nuclear weapons, including its own. The United States could dismantle its 700 military bases around the world that serve as threats to defenseless people in many parts of the world.

The United States could stop being the world's biggest seller and supplier of military weapons -- weapons that are used to oppress people and destabilize regions around the world. The United States could insist that Israel stop violating international law and a variety of resolutions of the United Nation.

The United States could stop kowtowing to multinational corporations and, instead, hold those companies accountable for the manner in which they exploit, corrupt, and destabilize countries and governments around the world. The United States could stop invading and overthrowing Muslim governments when those governments have not attacked the United States or its people.

In addition to the foregoing steps, people like Mr. Harris could stop their demagoguery in relation to their misunderstandings, biases, errors, confusions, and ignorance concerning Islam. What Mr. Harris is attempting to do through books like *The End of Faith* is to whip up hysteria, hatred, and fear concerning Muslims, Islam, or anyone who is

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committed to a spiritual faith that is different from the species of rationalistic and secularist faith being espoused by Mr. Harris.

In this respect, Mr. Harris' actions are virtually, if not entirely, indistinguishable from the actions of various Muslim theologians or religious scholars who, out of a sense of misplaced self-importance, seek to use their own form of demagoguery to induce Muslims to become consumed with hatred, enmity, hostility, and blood-lust with respect to Americans. Those so-called Muslim leaders should be ashamed of themselves and so should Mr. Harris and those who share his faith in spewing these sorts of toxic belief systems.

The irony that resides at the core of books like *The End of Faith* -- along with books such as *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, and *god is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens -- is that while each of the authors of these books purports to be a rationalist, all too frequently, reason seems to be absent from their respective modes of thinking. At least this appears to be so when considered in the context of issues concerning God's existence.