

*Letter from a
Christian Citizen*

Douglas Wilson

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For my wife

FOREWORD

BY GARY DEMAR

ILKE FREE BOOKS. So I was excited when I opened a package that contained a book that I had not ordered. Apparently, I'm on someone's list of notables, because Alfred A. Knopf thought I should have a copy of Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*. And since I had received an unsolicited copy, surely there were others who were equally blessed with a free copy. I can't believe that anyone at Knopf thought I would be persuaded by it, so I'm assuming that an enterprising marketer saw it as a way to get some free publicity. It worked! And we are grateful.

There's little that's new in *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It's the old atheism wrapped in a new package. The same tired arguments that have been answered convincingly by any number of Christian writers over the centuries have been

trotted out again in the vain hope that atheism will find a new audience.

Sam Harris wants to assure us that atheists aren't monsters. He's somewhat miffed that "atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural."¹ Harris is here to tell Christians, and anyone else who will listen to him, that these mischaracterizations are not true. This is why he feels compelled to remind his critics that "atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society."² Because of this, he continues, "it seems important to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse."

The first myth Harris wants to dispel is that "atheists believe life is meaningless." He argues that "atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious. Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived." Of course, he is arguing in a circle. How does he know when life is being really and fully lived unless he first assumes life is meaningful, the very thing he must prove as a self-avowed materialist? And how does a

materialist who believes in the random origin of the universe account for meaning among the “things” that an impersonal conglomeration of atoms spontaneously brought into existence? As a letter writer to a *Time* magazine article that dealt with the brain and mind put it, “I’m not sure I’ll ever have the same degree of self-respect now that I know I’m just an illusion created by 100 billion jabbering neurons.”³ I suspect that any number of people—Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, to name a few—conceptualized that they were living life to the fullest, believing that life would be more meaningful if certain people didn’t share it with them.

I won’t question his claim that he *believes* life is meaningful, but as an atheist Harris must account for the meaningfulness of life given the naturalistic presuppositions he shares with other prominent atheists. Faith doesn’t count given naturalistic assumptions. Consider, for example, the opening comments of John Gribbin in his book *The Scientists*:

The most important thing that science has taught us about our place in the

Universe is that we are not special. . . . [B]iologists tried and failed to find any evidence for a special ‘life force’ that distinguishes living matter from non-living matter, concluding that life is just a rather complicated form of chemistry. . . . For human life turned out to be no different from any other kind of life on Earth. As the work of Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace established in the nineteenth century, all you need to make human beings out of amoebas is the process of evolution by natural selection, and plenty of time.⁴

According to Gribbin, at the biological level, science has not been able to distinguish between a human and a hammer. Both can only be studied in terms of their chemical makeup. So then, the burden of proof is on Harris and all atheists to account for “meaning” given the materialistic assumptions of Gribbin and atheists like Richard Dawkins:

In the universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people

*are going to get hurt, and other people are going to get lucky; and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, and we dance to its music.*⁵

I've brought Dawkins into the discussion because Harris puts *The God Delusion* as the first recommended book in his Ten Books list. Since, according to Gribbin and Dawkins, humans are composed of “complicated chemistry” that “neither knows nor cares,” then logic leads to the inevitable conclusion that humans themselves should “neither know nor care.” Life, therefore, given naturalistic assumptions, is by definition meaningless.

In his religious ode to evolution, *River Out of Eden*, Richard Dawkins relates how “the British newspapers all carried a terrible story about a bus full of children from a Roman Catholic school that crashed for no obvious

reason, with wholesale loss of life.” He reports that a priest responded to the tragedy by stating, “But the horror of the crash, to a Christian, confirms the fact that we live in a world of real values: positive and negative. If the universe was just electrons, there would be no problem of evil or suffering.”⁶ Dawkins offered the following response: “On the contrary, if the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies like the crashing of this bus are exactly what we should expect, along with meaningless good fortune.”⁷

How can Dawkins refer to the bus crash as “terrible” and tragic? Was he referring to the death of the children or the destruction of the bus? In Dawkins’ view, there is no difference between the chemical entities, one consisting of electrical impulses passing through meat and bones (the children) and the other of electrical charges surging through generators and wiring (the bus).

Of course, like most of the rest of us, Dawkins does not live consistently with his own belief that Darwin’s natural selection is “blind, unconscious, automatic,” and with “no purpose in mind.”⁸ This keeps him from being

the monster he ought to be if he was a faithful practitioner of the Darwinism he promotes and defends.

We are thankful that the reason most atheists aren't monsters is that they are not consistent with their atheistic assumptions. There were enough who were that made the twentieth century the most bloody in history. Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898) describes the atheist's dilemma by pointing out that a person's starting point leads to an inevitable conclusion:

To borrow [Thomas] Carlyle's rough phrasing: "If mine is a pig's destiny, why may I not hold this 'pig philosophy'?" Again, if I am but an animal refined by evolution, I am entitled to live an animal life. Why not? The leaders in this and the sensualistic philosophy may themselves be restrained by their habits of mental culture, social discretion and personal refinement (for which they are indebted to reflex Christian influences); but the herd of common mortals are not

cultured and refined, and in them the doctrine will bear its deadly fruit.⁹

Because Christianity had so impacted nineteenth-century society, as it still does today to the benefit of all (including atheists), the ethical and cultural effects of Darwinism were at first minimal. In time, however, as consistency began to be demanded of the new naturalistic worldview, the evolutionary dogma impacted the world in ominous ways. Today's non-monster atheists like Harris and Dawkins have been caught in the matrix of a Christian worldview that they cannot escape. If they ever do, they will join the ranks of Monsters, Inc., who were consistent with their atheistic presuppositions and unleashed untold hardship on the twentieth century.

When confronted with the charge that “atheism is responsible for the greatest crimes in human history,” Mr. Harris dodges the accusation by claiming that atheist regimes like fascism and communism “are too much like religions.” He’s closer to the truth than he realizes. The ideological engine of atheism is evolution, and by the declaration of its own practitioners,

it's a religion, as evolutionary apologist Michael Ruse makes very clear: "Evolution is a religion. This was true of evolution in the beginning, and it is true of evolution still today."¹⁰ Ruse is not alone in his admission that evolution is a materialistic religion founded on metaphysical assumptions. "The distinguished biologist Lynn Margulis has rather scathingly referred to new-Darwinism as 'a minor twentieth century religious sect within the sprawling religious persuasion of Anglo-Saxon biology.' Stuart Kauffman observes that 'natural selection' has become so central an explanatory force in neo-Darwinism that 'we might as well capitalise [it] as though it were the new deity.'"¹¹

When Dawkins was asked, "What do you believe that you cannot prove?" he admitted the following: "I believe, but I cannot prove, that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all 'design' anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection."¹² Dawkins, and those who follow his naturalistic creed, have faith in an impersonal cosmos that is the product of a faith-committed impersonal concept that has no inherent moral brake.

The atrocities of Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler reveal in stark detail how despotic and cruel the impersonal worldview of naturalism can be if followed consistently. It is no accident that Communism and Nazism claimed Darwin as their patron saint. Darwin's approach to origins found an enthusiastic adherent in Karl Marx and his communist successors. Marx wrote to Friedrich Engels in 1866 that Darwin's *Origin of Species* "is the book which contains the basis in natural history for our view."¹³ There are no absolutes, man is nothing, and the State is everything. For Communism, the advancement of the State is the march of god on earth. Communism ensures this through raw power, the Gulag, and the "necessary" extinction of millions to bring the "ideals" of Communism to the masses.¹⁴

The scientific racism of Nazi Germany killed forty million and attempted genocide against Europe's Jews. The scientific socialism of the Communist countries killed a hundred million (and still counting) people around the globe. As the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky

has noted, people in the West routinely invoke the Spanish Inquisition as an example of religious horror. And they are right to do so. But the Inquisition, in the course of three centuries, and after legal procedures of a sort, killed fewer people—probably around three thousand—than the Soviet Union killed on an average day.¹⁵

Douglas Wilson has taken the operating assumptions of Sam Harris seriously and has shown what life would be like if the world were consistent with atheistic assumptions. He deals a final blow to Harris by pointing out that the morality he values is borrowed moral capital. What he knows of right and wrong does not flower from atheistic roots.

Letter From a Christian Citizen will prove to be a painful exercise for any atheist since it exposes the raw nerve of materialism—the desire for a moral worldview that cannot be accounted for given naturalistic assumptions. “We make men without chests and we expect of them virtue and enterprise,” C. S. Lewis writes. “We laugh at honor and we

are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”¹⁶ We strip men and women of the certainty that they are created in the image of God, and we are surprised when they act like the beasts of the field.

NOTES

¹Sam Harris, “Atheists surely aren’t monsters,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (December 28, 2006), A21. All the quotations from Harris in the Foreword are from this article.

²I’m not sure if Harris means by this comment that theists are neither intelligent nor scientifically minded. If this is his intention, then he needs a short course in the history of science. Science developed within the context of a Christian worldview. See Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994); R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972); Eugene M. Klaaren, *Religious Origins of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977); Stanley L. Jaki, *The Origin of Science and the Science of Its Origin* (South Bend, IN: Regnery/Gateway, Inc., 1978); Stanley L. Jaki, *The Savior of Science* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1988).

³Gregory Dobbins, “Letters,” *Time* (February 12, 2007), 18.

⁴John Gribbin, *The Scientists: A History of Science Told through the Lives of its Greatest Inventors* (New York: Random House, [2002] 2006), xvii, ix.

⁵Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: HarperCollins/BasicBooks, 1995), 133.

⁶Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 132.

⁷Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, 132.

⁸Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 5.

⁹Robert L. Dabney, “The Influences of False Philosophies upon Character and Conduct,” in *Discourses* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Pub., 1979), 4:574.

¹⁰Michael Ruse, “Saving Darwinism from the Darwinians,” *National Post* (May 13, 2000), B3.

¹¹Philip J. Sampson, *6 Modern Myths About Christianity and Western Civilization* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 62.

¹²“God (or Not), Physics and, of Course, Love: Scientists Take a Leap,” *The New York Times* (January 4, 2005). Quoted in Robert Royal, *The God that Did Not Fail: How Religion Built and Sustains the West* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), xii.

¹³R. L. Meek, ed., *Marx and Engels on Malthus* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), 171. Quoted in Michael Pitman, *Adam and Evolution* (London, England: Rider & Company, 1984), 24.

¹⁴Mark Kramer, ed., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Lloyd Billingsly, *The Generation that Knew Not Josef: A Critique of Marxism and the Religious Left* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985).

¹⁵Royal, *The God that Did Not Fail*, xvii.

¹⁶C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, [1947] 1972), 35.

Letter From a Christian Citizen:

A REPLY TO SAM HARRIS

Dear Mr. Harris

I WOULD LOVE TO begin by saying something like “Greetings in the Lord,” but I have no idea what your background is or whether you have ever been baptized. And so, not to presume, let me begin simply by greeting you warmly in a general fashion and thanking you for setting your thoughts down so plainly. I would also hope that I might raise some equally clear questions about what you have written.

On the first page of your small book, you begin by discussing some of the reaction you got to your first book, *The End of Faith*. You say that the “most hostile” responses came to you from Christians. “The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ’s love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism” (vii). You suggest the possibility that this might just be attributable to human nature,

but you don't think so. You go on to suggest that "such hatred" draws "considerable support from the Bible." You say your reason for saying this is that the "most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse" (vii).

I think I know why you began your book this way. I have been in evangelical Christian circles my entire life, and one of the *standard* concerns that many Christians have is presenting "a bad testimony" to nonbelievers. Of course this doesn't prevent some Christians from presenting that bad testimony anyway, oblivious to all surrounding concerns. But your opening is guaranteed to cause many Christian readers to lament the fact that a number of professing Christians have sought to clobber you for Christ through their hostility. And then when you didn't respond favorably to "the treatment," these sorts of people have another chapter and verse handy that can explain *that*.

You opened your book this way because you knew (quite accurately) that Christians generally would be upset by it, would be put on the defensive, would be sorrowful over what some have done to you in the name of Christ,

and so on. I know, and you clearly know, that Christians can behave badly in this way, and you also knew that a lot of other Christians would be ashamed of this undeniable fact. And you are right: We are ashamed of this kind of thing. Like you, I've had first-had experience. When my son (a Christian) published an article showing how the Shroud of Turin could easily have been produced with medieval “off-the-shelf” technology,¹ he got lots of mail—from professing Christians—with all sorts of variants of “go to hell” or “I hope you rot in hell.”

The Christian Church has a problem with this kind of person in our midst. We are embarrassed by it, believing it to be inconsistent with what Christ taught and what we profess to believe. Attributing it to human nature doesn't cut it with us because we believe that Christ came to transform human nature. You knew this about us and started out very shrewdly. You knew that we would disapprove of this kind of thing, just as you do.

But *that*, actually, was the surprising thing: you disapproved of that kind of hateful behavior too. You used a number of words

that clearly portrayed that disapproval: *hostile, murderously, disturbed, hatred*. I could not get to your second page without encountering a cluster of indignant moral judgments, and I am genuinely curious as to what you could possibly offer as the basis for these judgments. Pick the nastiest letter you got from the nastiest Christian out there. As a pastor, I know what *I* would say to him about it because I can appeal to the Bible. But what could *you* say to him? He is just doing his thing. Two hundred years from now, when both you and he have returned to the soil, what difference will it make? There is no judgment, no standard, no law that overarches the two of you. When this nasty Christian dies, you don't even have the satisfaction of knowing that he will finally discover the error of his ways. He will discover nothing of the kind. You believe his eyes will close and that will be that. The material universe will not give everyone thirty minutes after death to readjust their thoughts on the subject before they pass into final oblivion. So why, on your terms, should he have written you a nice letter? *I* think he should have, but then again, I'm the pastor guy.

In different ways this same issue is going to come up again and again as I respond to different portions of your book. You want Christians to quit behaving in certain ways. But why? You want them to write nice letters to atheist authors, and you want them to stop turning America into a big, dumb theocracy. But *why*? If there is no God, what could *possibly* be wrong with theocracies? They provide high entertainment value, and they give everybody involved in them a sense of dignity and high moral purpose. They get to wear ecclesiastical robes, march in impressive processions to burn intransigent people at the stake, believing they are better than everybody else and that God likes them. Further, the material universe doesn't care about any of this foolishness, not even a little bit. So what's wrong with having a little bit of fun at the expense of other bits of protoplasm? Hitler, Ronald Reagan, Pol Pot, Mother Teresa, Mao, Nancy Pelosi, Stalin, Ted Haggard, and the Grand Inquisitor are all just part of a gaudy and very temporary show. Sometimes the Northern lights put on a show in the sky. Sometimes people put on a show on the ground. Then the sun goes out and it

turns out nobody cares. Given your premises, this is the way it has to be.

But I find it really curious that you clearly do care what happens to our nation. “The primary purpose of the book is to arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right” (viii). Again, you are using words like *should be*. Not only do you have an *ought* going here, you have one that you are clearly willing to impose on others who differ with you (which can be seen in your goal of “arming” secularists). But what is the difference between an imposed morality, an imposed religion, or an imposed secular *ought*? Why is your imposition to be preferred to any other?

Although your book is small, the goal is certainly ambitious. “In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, I have set out to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms” (ix). In order to demolish something intellectually, you have to have a standard for thought and reason and I presume you will reveal this standard later in your book so we will be able

to discuss it. But you also want to demolish the moral pretensions of the Christian faith. This could have two meanings. You might mean to show that Christianity does not live up to its own professed standard, in which case you are simply joining a long covenant tradition which includes the prophet Amos and John the Baptist. I could not really object to this because it is what I try to do every Sunday in the pulpit. But you appear to mean something else. You seem to be saying that there is a standard which Christianity does not acknowledge even though it is authoritative over Christians anyway, and that Christianity is in rebellion against this standard. I want to continue to ask you for the source of this standard. Who has defined this standard? You? Your friends? Is it published somewhere so I can read it? You write as though it exists. Where is it?

You say, “In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, however, I engage Christianity at its most divisive, injurious, and retrograde” (ix). So Christianity is divisive, compared to what standard for unity? Who promulgated this standard? Why do we have to submit to it?

Christianity is injurious, you say, but I would want to inquire why it is bad to be injurious. What standard do you appeal to here? And *retrograde* means that we are sliding backwards in some sense. What slope are we sliding down? Why are we not allowed to slide down it? I am not trying to be cute here. I think these are the central questions in this discussion. Okay, so I am part of a *divisive*, *injurious* and *retrograde* movement. Is that bad?

At the conclusion of your “Note to the Reader,” you make an opening move in what I suppose is part of your larger strategy of demolishing the “intellectual pretensions of Christianity.” You begin by noting that the intellectual pretensions of the Christian faith are certainly widespread. “If our worldview were put to a vote, notions of ‘intelligent design’ would defeat the science of biology by nearly three to one” (x). I do not share the same faith you apparently do in the abilities of pollsters to measure this sort of thing, but let us grant this as at least a distinct possibility. You believe that the pervasiveness of certain Christian doctrines constitutes “a moral and intellectual emergency” (xii). You speak in

terms of “us and them,” so allow me to do the same thing for a moment. You all have had nearly complete control of the education establishment for over a century and a half. You have the accrediting agencies, you have the government schools, and you have the vast majority of colleges and universities. You *are* the educational establishment. And yet your complaint here reminds me of the indignant father who said, “I taught him everything I know and he’s *still* stupid!” At what point should a committed secularist take responsibility for the state of education in America? Perhaps the problem is not in the students?

But there is more to this argument. It is quite true that I do not regard the widespread acceptance of intelligent design as indicating stupidity, apathy, or worse. I believe God created the world, and His intelligence is on display in riotous ways in everything I look at every day. But given the current climate, this conviction is certainly easy to *mock*— “This means that despite a full century of scientific insights attesting to the antiquity of the earth, more than half of our neighbors believe that the entire cosmos was created six thousand years

ago. This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue” (x-xi). But notice what you are doing here: the Sumerians *invented* glue? Glue didn’t just happen? Why couldn’t it just appear the same way the sexuality of moss did and the eyeballs that see in color and the superbly engineered ankle and the majesty of the great white sharks all did? *Glue* is so complicated that it needed to be invented?

You say that our nation is a “dim-witted giant” (xi). You say that we combine “great power and great stupidity” (xi). To bring this installment to a close, let me just give you a friendly caution. This sort of thing is probably red meat to many of the folks buying your books. But if you are really concerned about delivering the nation from the “clutches” of Christians, I am afraid that underestimating the intelligence and education of your foes will probably not help you at all in the long run.

A Trout in the Punchbowl

In your first argument (3-7), you begin the discussion with agreement. That agreement may seem minimal to some, but I actually be-