

# “Atheism du Jour”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

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Atheism has become chic. In itself, this might be a helpful thing, after all faith, like every other system, strengthens itself by intelligent challenge. But too much of the contemporary attack on religion is just that — an attack fueled by grievance and not by careful consideration.

Instead of a grappling with faith, recent books by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, and to a lesser extent by Daniel Dennett, are two-fisted, clumsy attacks. The recent Los Angeles Times editorial by Harris, "God's Dupes," is illustrative. Its tone is incredulity, and its fuel is venom. Contending with the question of God and of faith more successfully than Harris manages to do requires unraveling fundamental misconceptions.

## **Faith Is Opposed to Reason**

To say that faith is against reason, "self-deception, set to music," is like saying that green is against length — it is a category mistake. Faith is not arrived at the way you arrive at a vaccine.

Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman writes "Many scientists do believe in both science and God, the God of revelation, in a perfectly consistent way" and more than 40 percent of people who hold doctorates in science state that they attend houses of worship weekly, there is something a bit smug about Harris' sweeping claims that faith is unreasonable or unscientific.

All of us cherish certain unprovable beliefs. Life is worthwhile. Kindness is to be promoted. Hatred is bad.

Are they self-deceptions? No — they are fundamental affirmations that permit us to live meaningful lives.

I cannot "prove" God, nor can I imagine in what such a proof would consist. Yet belief is no less central to my life than the conviction that life is worth cherishing and promoting. Do we then retort, "Aha, he favors life against reason!" Not unless one wishes to argue like Harris.

## **Religion Causes War**

The most genocidal regimes in human history have been those that were explicitly atheistic: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and Mao's China. We might more persuasively argue that the lack of religion brings destruction.

People believe things, and people join groups. Both of those eminently human tendencies will promote division. From soccer fans to partisans of nationalism, there are those who are able to keep their allegiances in perspective, and those who run roughshod over the rights of others.

Something is usually added to the brew before religion becomes seriously divisive. Most of the time, it is a dispute over land or political power that provides the incendiary spark.

The slaughter of the Tutsis in Rwanda was not a product of religious division but ethnic strife. The greatest convulsion in our nation's history, the Civil War, had partisans of the same faith on both sides. The division was geographical and ideological. Shall we then lobby to eliminate geography?

Religion is part of the fabric of history and community. To unravel it and isolate it as the cause of human passions and cruelty is foolish. Moreover, in losing religion, we lose more than its antagonists may have considered.

Religion is the source of some of the greatest art, music and literature in the world. In rejecting religion, we are also rejecting the largest share of the patrimony of our cultural history.

What does one make, moreover, of the charitable works of religion? Why do polls consistently show that religious people are more likely to give to charities, to do volunteer work, to feed the hungry, house the homeless, provide succor to the lonely and lost?

The ideals that Harris says we could easily arrive at without religion (now that religion has already given them to us) are not valuable as ideals simply lying on a page. They have to be realized in people's lives. There is no vehicle for the realization of ideals that has the power of faith.

To write, as he does, "compassion is deeper than religion," is to ignore the historic role religion has played in promoting compassion. "Love your

neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18)" is the principle taught us in the Torah by the God whom Harris, in accents as adolescent as they are inaccurate, calls a "jealous, genocidal, priggish and self-contradictory tyrant."

### **Moderates Provide "Cover" for Radicals**

This is the most disingenuous and dangerous claim of all. We can be sure that there is no argument less likely to touch radicals than the sneering, dismissive denials of Harris, Dennett and Dawkins. If they wish to change religion, hating it is a poor strategy. In what argument does suggesting the weak mindedness of your opponent move them to reconsider their views?

Moderates in any faith are the only ones with a chance of changing those who have been radicalized, precisely because we understand the tradition and speak the language. Who is going to succeed in reinterpreting Scripture — a secularist or a believer with a gentle view?

As someone whom Harris would classify as a "moderate," and therefore dangerous, I think the depth of my conviction is the best chance we have to appeal to those who see the tradition in more radical ways. I engage in dialogue with Jews, Christians and Muslims who also want to be true to the sources of their faith that counsel embrace of each other — not agreement, but embrace. These people are the ones working to create faiths that promote coexistence, kindness and all the ideals that sprang, despite what some may think, from the very heart of religious traditions.

The most literal or extreme reading of a tradition is not more "true." When science discovers more about the world, we call it progress. Why then, when people of faith do the same, would Harris see it as a betrayal or watering down of faith? Intellectual growth is not a "cover" or a betrayal of faith. Rather it is an affirmation of the spiritual, as well as the intellectual potential of human beings.

Fanaticism is not limited to faith. Fanaticism of any variety is an unwillingness to lend one's opponent dignity, worthiness and seriousness.

Atheism that seeks truth invites dialogue; fire and brimstone atheism does not.