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Title "Days of Miracle and Wonder": The Faith of Sam Harris and the End of Religion

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Reference *FARMS Review* 20/1 (2008): 147–73.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), by Sam Harris.

"Days of Miracle and Wonder": The Faith of Sam Harris and the End of Religion

Gregory L. Smith

Review of Sam Harris. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. 336 pp., with index. $13.95.

These are the days of miracle and wonder
And don't cry baby, don't cry. . . .[1]

Sam Harris is frightened. And, as he would tell us, people who are frightened often do or say things that are not rational (pp. 38–39).

Harris's attack on "faith" and the Abrahamic religions began on 12 September 2001 in the midst of "collective grief and stupefaction," and it shows (p. 323). He describes how he and his fiancée visited France but "had decided to avoid obvious terrorist targets while traveling." "First on our list of such places," reports Harris, "was the American embassy in Paris. Paris is home to the largest Muslim population in the Western world." The embassy was "the last place we would have willingly visited while in France" (p. 55). Whatever else might be said about this bit of self-revelation, it is assuredly not rational. Harris has the same lifetime risk of being struck by a meteor as being killed by a terrorist.[2] Having lived in Paris, I can assure him that bands of

1. Paul Simon, "The Boy in the Bubble," *Graceland* (Warner Bros., 1986).

2. This example is from John Mueller, "Is There Still a Terrorist Threat?: The Myth of the Omnipresent Enemy," *Foreign Affairs* 85/5 (September/October 2006): 8, who notes that the lifetime risk of an American being harmed by terrorism is about 1:80,000. Harris assumes a far greater risk every time he enters a motor vehicle.

the Muslims he so distrusts are a far greater risk in the warrens of Marseilles or in the public housing projects of the Paris *banlieue* than are terrorists on Place de la Concorde. Harris is, however, frightened for himself and his civilization. He is at war with a terrorist enemy—his consequent assault savors of scorched earth, not precision bombing. This approach might destroy the enemy he fears, but whether anything worth saving would remain is another matter.

Harris's account begins, as polemics often do, with dehumanization of the enemy and an emphasis on the magnitude of the threat about which Something Must Be Done. In Harris's case, this is couched in an evocative account of a suicide bomber who straps nails, ball bearings, and rat poison to himself before detonating a bomb on a commuter bus. Horrible as this is, Harris saves the worst for last: "Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy—you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy—to guess the young man's religion?" (pp. 11–12).

"The Bomb in the Baby Carriage"

Despite Harris's confidence, this exercise may not be as trivially obvious as he assumes. At present, in the public mind, suicide bombing is widely associated with Muslim fundamentalism. A rational approach to this question, however, would seem to demand that we actually consider the evidence behind our collective gut reaction.

Harvard's Alberto Abadie analyzed domestic and international terrorism and concluded that "countries with intermediate levels of political freedom are shown to be more prone to terrorism than countries with high levels of political freedom or countries with highly authoritarian regimes. . . . [Thus] transitions from an authoritarian regime to a democracy may be accompanied by temporary increases in terrorism."[3] Abadie notes that this explains the past prevalence of terrorism in Spain and Russia, locations for which Harris's trivially

3. Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," October 2004, National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. W10859, p. 3; available at Social Science Research Network, http://ssrn.com/abstract=611366 (accessed August 2008). This quotation also appears in an updated version of this paper published in *American Economic Review* 96/2 (May 2006): 51.

easy guess about the religion (or even religiosity) of terrorists is probably wrong. We must ask if being Muslim is simply a matter of historical contingency—those areas with nonresponsive governments, poor law enforcement, and significant political grievances tend (at present) to contain Muslims.

Harris might retort that religion still drives such conflicts. Again, Abadie's data argue otherwise, since "only the measure of linguistic fractionalization shows a significant association with terrorism." When income, degree of political freedom, and linguistic fractionalization are adjusted for, "ethnic and religious fractionalization are *not* significantly associated with terrorist risk."[4] Education and a larger proportion of males aged 15–24 likewise had no impact on rates of terrorist activity.[5]

If terrorism is not affected by religious differences, perhaps the specific choice of suicide bombing is? Harris makes much of the "apocalyptic" strain in Islam and the other Abrahamic religions, arguing that this makes them willing—even eager—to turn to suicide bombing because of their beliefs about the afterlife (see pp. 31–33, 38–39, 123–34, 223). But Robert Pape's widely reported research calls this tidy assumption into question. In his analysis of 188 suicide attacks conducted from 1980 to 2001, Pape found that while acts of terrorism declined from the 1980s (e.g., 666 in 1987) to the twenty-first century (e.g., 348 acts in 2001), suicide terrorism increased markedly.[6] Indeed, suicide terrorism was rare before the 1980s—yet surely Islam held much the same eschatology during the preceding one and a half millennia. And given that the purported rewards for martyrdom are the same whether one kills a few or a thousand infidels, Harris cannot argue that the availability of weapons of mass destruction has suddenly made suicide terrorism attractive to Muslims. Clearly there is more to the story than he sets out.

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4. Abadie, "Roots of Terrorism," 6, emphasis added.

5. Abadie, "Roots of Terrorism," 7 n. 10.

6. Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97/3 (August 2003): 343. Pape's thesis has been expanded into a full-length book: Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005).

Harris seems to realize that his theory is on shaky ground. Having assured his readers that one could "almost bet your life" on a suicide bomber being a Muslim, he then caches a remarkable admission in an endnote:

> Some readers may object that the bomber in question is most likely to be a member of the Liberations Tigers of Tamil Eelam—the Sri Lankan separatist organization that has perpetuated more acts of suicidal terrorism than any other group. Indeed, the "Tamil Tigers" are often offered as a counter-example to any claim that suicidal terrorism is a product of religion. But to describe the Tamil Tigers as "secular"—as R. A. Pape . . . and others have—is misleading. (p. 229 n. 2)

This would seem to be an important point—the Tamil Tigers are responsible for more suicide bombing than anyone else—and yet Harris inserts this inconvenient fact in a footnote. He likewise objects to labeling them as "secular," though, as Pape notes, they are more than secular: they are Marxist/Leninist with a secular agenda.[7] Pape likewise points out that even a third of Muslim terrorist attacks express secular aims.[8] How does Harris justify his reading? "While the motivations of the Tigers are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death" (p. 229 n. 2).

The Tigers want a Tamil state; this is an avowedly secular goal—one not merely "not explicitly religious." Harris gives us no evidence for the purportedly Hindu quality of the Tigers' ideology or the "many improbable things" that he (in a display of "faith") assures us they "undoubtedly believe":

> The cult of martyr worship that they have nurtured for decades has many of the features of religiosity that one would expect in people who give their lives so easily for a cause. Secular Westerners often underestimate the degree to which certain

7. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 343.
8. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 343.

> cultures, steeped as they are in otherworldliness, look upon death with less alarm than seems strictly rational. I was once traveling in India when the government rescheduled the exams for students who were preparing to enter the civil service: what appeared to me to be the least of bureaucratic inconveniences precipitated a wave of teenage *self-immolations* in protest. Hindus, even those whose preoccupations appear to be basically secular, often harbor potent religious beliefs. (p. 229 n. 2, emphasis in original)

Harris's argument, then, seems to break down syllogistically as follows:

> A. Some Hindus in India have some crazy beliefs about the afterlife and are not afraid to kill themselves (not others) over trivial matters because of them.
> B. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka are nominally Hindu.
> Conclusion: Therefore, despite their Marxist/Leninist ideology (which awaits no afterlife at all), and despite their avowedly secular aims, the Tamil Tigers have crazy beliefs about the afterlife that make them willing (or cause them) to use suicide terrorism.

At the least, this is not ironclad reasoning. This is the first—but not last—instance of Harris's tendency to label *anything* that he considers irrational as "religious," from Islam to Maoism.[9] "Religion" becomes an epithet for whatever Harris feels is "unjustified belief."

Despite Harris's hand waving, Pape has not been rebutted. Far from being acts based on irrationality, "suicide terrorism follows a strategic logic. . . . The vast majority of suicide terrorist attacks are not isolated or random acts by individual fanatics," which might be expected if religious beliefs were the driving force. After all, one group of dead heretics is surely as good as another if a reward in the afterlife is your motivation. Instead, suicide attacks form "part of a larger campaign . . . to achieve a

9. Harris describes Stalin and Mao (who "paid lip service to rationality, [but] communism was little more than a political religion . . . both cultic and irrational") and Germans' "abject (and *religious*) loyalty to Hitler" (pp. 79, 100, emphasis in original).

specific political goal."[10] Other analyses point out that suicide bombers' decisions need not be irrational, and "it is possible to explain such acts in rational choice terms, and that, while such acts are indeed extreme, they are merely an extreme example of a general class of behavior in which all of us engage."[11]

Furthermore, the goals sought by suicide bombers are decidedly secular, firmly anchored in the here and now: "Suicide terrorism is specifically designed to coerce modern democracies to make significant concessions to national self-determination. . . . *Every* suicide terrorist campaign from 1980 to 2001 has been waged by terrorist groups whose main goal has been to establish or maintain self-determination for their community's homeland by compelling an enemy to withdraw." Pape notes further that suicide terrorism is on the rise for the prosaic reason that terrorists have learned that it pays dividends that are secular, not eschatological.[12] Suicide attacks killed thirteen people on average (not counting the 9/11 attacks), while nonsuicide terrorism killed less than one person per attack.[13] Suicide terrorists made significant gains for their cause in 50 percent of cases, while conventional states' attempts to coerce others succeed only about a third of the time.[14] This is a strategic logic that needs no scriptural exegesis.

Harris might insist that the suicide bomber's actions reflect his own religious beliefs and needs, but Ronald Wintrobe's analysis argues that the suicide bomber "intensifies his participation in group activities. . . . He gives up some of his own values and substitutes the values of the group for them. . . . Such trades imply that a person is more and more giving up his identity for that of the group . . . and losing the capacity to make decisions based on values other than those of the leader." Thus the leaders' frankly *secular* goals become increasingly

10. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 344.

11. Ronald Wintrobe, "Can Suicide Bombers Be Rational?" (5 November 2001; revised 15 May 2002, 5 January 2003), 2, http://cas.uchicago.edu/workshops/cpolit/papers/suicide.pdf (accessed 9 May 2008).

12. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 2, 351–55, emphasis added.

13. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 346.

14. Pape, "Suicide Terrorism," 351.

important and may reach a point where "rational suicide for the group is possible."[15]

Wintrobe notes that "religious 'exchange' would appear to provide a simple explanation of the events of 9/11. Religion promises an afterlife, so the individual, to the extent that he is convinced by this, may not be making a sacrifice at all in martyring himself."[16] This is Harris's argument distilled to its essentials. "However," cautions Wintrobe,

> neither the desire for social cohesion nor religiosity are sufficient conditions for terrorist activity. Indeed, many deeply religious people are obviously among the *least* likely candidates for this role. . . . What differentiates the [terrorist] from these others? A high level of social cohesion may make the individual member of a group ready to sacrifice himself, but the leader of the group or some other individual with whom one identifies still has to order the individual to commit terrorist acts. . . .
>
> In short, in these failed [Muslim] states one expects to see pockets of extreme social cohesion, with charismatic leaders subject to no central control providing solidarity and social services, educating their members that their problems are caused by an external enemy and demanding that they take radical actions against that enemy to help their fellows.[17]

It goes without saying that such a dynamic is possible for both theists and atheists.

"Boy in the Bubble": Error, Contradiction, and Misapprehension

The Abrahamic religions, for Harris, are particularly insidious because of the premium they place on "faith." Faith, in his view, is nothing but a decision to believe in spite of a lack of evidence, or even against evidence. "It should go without saying," huffs Harris, "that these rival belief systems are all equally uncontaminated by evidence"

15. Wintrobe, "Can Suicide Bombers Be Rational?" 3.
16. Wintrobe, "Can Suicide Bombers Be Rational?" 26.
17. Wintrobe, "Can Suicide Bombers Be Rational?" 36, 38, emphasis in original.

(p. 15). But Harris does not leave it without saying, and the utter lack of evidence for any claim made by any Abrahamic religion is a constant refrain, as if repetition could substitute for the presentation of actual evidence.[18] Harris might well claim the evidence is equivocal or unpersuasive or conflicting. But he overreaches: do believers really advance no evidence whatever for their beliefs?

Harris may dispute whether the evidence adduced by theists is, in fact, adequate, but to argue that Christians do not seek and value such evidence is nonsense. For example, St. Justin Martyr held that "reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honor and love only what is true, declining to follow traditional opinions."[19] The *Catholic Encyclopedia* declares that

> the evidence upon which we assent to this Divine truth must also be itself Divine, and there must be as close a relation between that truth and the evidence upon which it comes to us as there is between the coloured object and the light; the former is a necessary condition for the exercise of our visual faculty, the latter is the cause of our actual vision. But no one but God can reveal God; in other words, God is His own evidence.[20]

Anglican theologian W. H. Griffith-Thomas insists that faith "affects the whole of man's nature. It commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence," includes "the certainty of evidence," and is "not blind, but intelligent."[21]

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18. See, for example, Harris, *End of Faith*, 16, 19, 23, 25, 48, 62, 65, 66, 67, 72, 76, 221.

19. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* II, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 163. Many more examples from Christian thinkers are conveniently collected online at http://christthetao.homestead.com/articles/FaithandReason.pdf (accessed 18 March 2008).

20. Hugh T. Pope, "Faith," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1909), 753.

21. W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles* (London: Longmans, Green, 1930), xviii–xix; cited in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 86, 171.

"Every religion," complains Harris, "preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even *conceivable*" (p. 23, emphasis in original). This represents a spectacular failure of the imagination. The Abrahamic religions are all *revealed*—that is, they argue for direct divine communication via theophany or angelic messengers, at least in principle. Surely it is at least *conceivable* that an angel could appear or that God could unequivocally reveal himself.

I wonder if Harris has ever even spoken to an articulate believer. "Ignorance is the true coinage of this [religious] realm—'Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed' (John 20:29)" (p. 65). Ironically for Harris, this statement by the risen Christ is preceded by most of the disciples handling his resurrected body, and it is followed by the claim that "many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples[;] . . . these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:30, 31). The New Testament author, then, does not advocate belief that is not based on evidence. He provides, rather, eyewitness testimony of Christ and signs as a basis for belief. One may choose to discount such evidence, but to claim that no evidence is offered, or that the type of evidence (eye-witness testimony) is illegitimate, is arbitrary if not absurd.

Harris's advocacy of Eastern spiritual disciplines betrays a double standard. While dismissive of the entire Western religious tradition, he is deeply enamored of Buddhist meditation, which he believes is "supported by a wealth of evidence," can "uncover genuine facts about the world," and can be "personally transformative" (p. 40).

Harris insists that "to be ruled by ideas for which you have no evidence (and which therefore cannot be justified in conversation with other human beings) is generally a sign that something is seriously wrong with your mind" (p. 72). He is again insisting that Christians, Jews, and Muslims have no evidence for their beliefs—but by this standard he cannot justify many of *his*. After all, he cannot prove to another human being that he has thoughts or that he acts on thoughts or beliefs. Our own thoughts and experiences are not public knowledge. Such trite positivism ought to have died out years ago.

Theistic private experiences, inspirations, intuitions, revelations—these cannot be "justified" publicly, and so Harris dismisses them. Yet he insists in the next breath that "intuition" is a valid, even vital faculty for ethics and that this "is no less true in science" (p. 183). How can Harris's intuition about ethics be publicly confirmed? Unless I share the intuition, we are at an impasse.[22] Why are intuitions about moral behavior and science valuable, even vital, but intuition about God illegitimate?

Likewise, Harris seems to grant other Buddhist ideas a free pass. "The place of consciousness in the natural world is very much an open question," he assures us, and "the domain of our subjectivity constitutes a proper (and essential) sphere of investigation into the nature of the universe: as some facts will be discovered only in consciousness, in first-person terms, or not discovered at all" (pp. 208–9). A theist might well say the same thing about the existence of God or the expression of God's will. Such things are not to be discovered by syllogism or a randomized controlled trial, but simply in the first-person encounter with God within one's inner self. Theists *have* said such things about God, repeatedly, so it is no surprise that Harris goes to great lengths to caricature the Western tradition as consisting solely of those who either embrace or ignore the idiocies written in their holy books, the inerrant word of God (pp. 17–18). There are doubtless some who fit that description, but this does not exhaust the richness and variety of the Abrahamic tradition.

Eventually Harris insists that "spiritual intuitions," despite their internal, subjective nature, can be studied rigorously among practitioners. One needs only substitute "divine revelations" into his argument:

> As in any other field, [divine revelations] are amenable to inter-subjective consensus, and refutation. Just as mathematicians can enjoy mutually intelligible dialogue on abstract ideas (though they will not always agree about what is intuitively "obvious"), just as athletes can communicate effectively about the pleasures of sport, mystics can consensually eluci-

22. I take up Harris's treatment of ethics in the following section.

> date the data of their sphere. Thus, genuine [revelation] can be "objective"—in the only normative sense of this word that is worth retaining—in that it need not be contaminated by dogma. As a phenomenon to be studied, spiritual experience [i.e., revelation] is no more refractory than dreams, emotions, perceptual illusions, or, indeed, thoughts themselves. (p. 220)

One can only offer a hearty "Amen, brother!" Those who have had such experiences have no difficulty communicating with others about them and managing to compare notes, as a visit to any Latter-day Saint testimony meeting can demonstrate. This is not to say (as with the mathematicians) that each will agree on every point. As Joseph Smith always warned, true revelation will properly make us wary of dogma and creeds, which restrict rather than expand revelatory possibilities.[23]

But with respect to the Western tradition, Harris is in the posture of the innumerate dunce who complains that all the mathematicians' talk of calculus and manifold spaces is mere gobbledygook. What serves as evidence for them—often quite profound and compelling evidence—moves him not at all. He is like a couch potato who has never known a runner's high and so cannot understand why some people would jog to the store when they have a Hummer in the driveway.

"This Is the Long Distance Call": Mysticism and Revelation

"Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not," insists Harris. This is a dubious claim, without serious qualification or special pleading, since a key aspect of mysticism is its ineffability.[24] Mystical texts will tell you *how* to achieve such states, but they can say little about *content*.

23. "I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things; but the creeds set up stakes, and say, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further;' which I cannot subscribe to." Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Brigham H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 6:57. See also *History of the Church*, 5:215.

24. See Hugh Nibley, "Prophets and Mystics," in *The World and the Prophets*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 102–3.

"The mystic has reasons for what he believes," Harris insists, "and these reasons are empirical" (p. 221). So, as we will see, do many who believe in divine revelation. While Harris's attack is focused on all Western theists, he raises issues that are particularly germane to a Latter-day Saint audience. I will now consider these issues in some detail.

Harris's attitude represents one pole of an increasingly common attack from secularists against theism generally and the Church of Jesus Christ in particular. Harris's view strikes me as the minority stance since he believes that real truths of value can be derived from mysticism. Far more common is the claim, as voiced by one tediously verbose critic, that

> recent scientific studies show that spiritual experience is "real" in the sense that while a person perceives herself to be having a spiritual experience the brain does things that are consistent with what neurologists would expect to produce profoundly moving mental states (see Andrew Newberg et al., "Why God Won't Go Away").[25]

For a secularist, scientistic critic, believers' religious experiences don't tell us anything about reality outside of the person experiencing them, and we can thus dismiss any claim that the Latter-day Saints' revelatory experience says something about "truth." "You had an experience," the critic can condescend, "and the experience was 'real,' but it didn't mean anything larger since other religions can make the same sorts of claims."

Neuroradiologist Andrew Newberg and colleagues have used functional brain imaging to study a variety of meditating subjects:

> [Our] experiment with Tibetan meditators and Franciscan nuns showed that the events they considered spiritual were, in fact, associated with observable neurological activity. In a reductionist sense, this could support the argument that religious experience is only imagined neurologically, that God is

25. Bob McCue, "Notes for Van Hale's Radio Show," e-mail posting, 5 September 2004 (copy in author's possession).

> physically "all in your mind." But, a full understanding of the way in which brain and mind assemble and experience reality suggests a very different view.[26]

Critics in Harris's mold, who embrace meditation as a window into important truths, and the more reductionistic critics who argue that spiritual experiences mean nothing at all both have little to say about the phenomenon of revelation in the Church of Jesus Christ. This broader issue is worthy of consideration.

Phenomenon or Epiphenomenon?

A neuroimaging team might study a patient who reports that he is "seeing" an apple. The team could demonstrate that certain areas in the occipital cortex light up in a predictable pattern whenever the patient reports "seeing" an apple. The skeptics would have us believe that because this reported sensation can be detected on a PET scan, there is no such thing as literal vision and no literal apple! This is counterintuitive at best. Without knowing whether an apple was, in fact, in front of the patient's open eyes during the scan, there would be no way to tell from the radiology data whether the apple existed or not. For spiritual matters, it is impossible to crack open the scanner and spot the apple (or its absence).

Put simply, all cognition must cause brain level changes. Everything we think, feel, experience, or sense must induce a change at the level of the neurons. Is it any surprise that similar experiences will provoke similar areas of the brain to behave in similar ways, since we know that the brain is anatomically specialized for a variety of functions? Whether such brain changes are *all* that is happening is, of course, the intriguing question. Newberg makes this point repeatedly.[27]

So the key question remains: Are brain changes the "phenomenon" (i.e., the whole of the experience, a "hallucination" of an apple), or are they an "epiphenomenon" (i.e., caused by something outside of the brain:

26. Andrew Newberg, Eugene G. D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 36.

27. For example, see Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 36–37.

light traveling from an apple, striking the retina, and influencing the neurons)? There's no way to tell, by this—or any—set of experiments.[28] Newberg argues that the changes wrought by spiritual experiences are every bit as "real" as those from standard sensory phenomena.

Spirits in a Material World?

Functional brain studies might cause problems for religious traditions that believe "spirit" is an ineffable class of existence quite separate from the physical universe. The materialistic changes seen on a brain scan might suggest that something quite prosaic and physical is going on, rather than the person is receiving some numinous message for which only the human spirit is "tuned." Such an argument, however, completely falls apart in a Latter-day Saint worldview. Indeed, Latter-day Saints might find it strange if there were *not* such physical changes associated with spiritual experiences: "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes" (Doctrine and Covenants 131:7). Thus for the Saints there is no radical spirit/matter dichotomy. Spirit *is* matter, though less easily detected by mortal eyes. If a spiritual experience is to have an effect upon a mortal being, it would not be surprising to find detectable physical changes in the gross "nonspiritual" matter that we *can* study. We won't detect the actor, necessarily, but we *might* expect to see the effect of the action. Nancey Murphy, of Fuller Theological Seminary, understands this: "If we recognize the brain does all the things that we [traditionally] attributed to the soul, then God must have some way of interacting with human brains."[29] For Latter-day Saints, brain and spirit/soul *are* the same type of thing (matter), so this is no surprise at all.

28. "At this point in our research, science had brought us as far as it could, and we were left with two mutually exclusive possibilities: either spiritual experience is nothing more than a neurological construct created by and contained within the brain, or the state of absolute union that the mystics describe does in fact exist and the mind has developed the capacity to perceive it. Science offers no clear way to resolve this question." Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 147.

29. Cited in Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1999), 65.

Are All "Spiritual" Experiences Equivalent?

Secular critics often assume, if only tacitly, that studies on Eastern mystics and Franciscan nuns are somehow applicable to Latter-day Saint revelatory experiences. To my knowledge, no studies have been done on Latter-day Saint members who claim to be receiving revelation. Just because some patients may hallucinate about apples does not mean that true sightings of true apples (or true oranges!) cannot also occur.[30]

Note the description of one meditating test subject:

> Whatever Robert calls this deeper consciousness, he claims that when it emerges during those moments of meditation when he is most completely absorbed in looking inward, he suddenly understands that his inner self is not an isolated entity, but that he is inextricably connected to all of creation. Yet when he tries to put this intensely personal insight into words he finds himself falling back on familiar clichés that have been employed for centuries to express the elusive nature of spiritual experience. "There's a sense of timelessness and infinity," he might say. "It feels like I am part of everyone and everything in existence."[31]

This description is typical of the mystical traditions found in the Eastern religions beloved by Harris, and it has some parallels to those of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Pigeonholing such a widespread tradition is always risky, but I will chance it. In general, mysticism seeks a direct, unmediated experience of and union with the world or the divine through spiritual discipline. The description offered to

30. This is not to claim that Franciscan or Buddhist experiences are mere fictions. I am simply pointing out that one type of "spiritual hallucination" would not rule out "true spiritual" experiences any more than visual hallucinations rule out true vision. "A false ghost," wrote Chesterton, "disproves the reality of ghosts exactly as much as a forged banknote disproves the existence of the Bank of England—if anything, it proves its existence." Gilbert K. Chesterton, "IX—Authority and the Adventurer," *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1908); available online at http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/orthodoxy/ch9.html (accessed 17 September 2008).

31. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 2.

Newberg is typical: "It feels like I am part of everyone and everything in existence."

Newberg goes to great lengths to describe mystical states, which can be sought by theists *and* atheists:[32]

> Mystical experience . . . is nothing more or less than an uplifting sense of genuine spiritual union with something larger than the self. . . . Mystical states are often characterized by strong, contradictory emotions. . . . Time and space are perceived as nonexistent, and normal rational thought processes give way to more intuitive ways of understanding. The mystic frequently experiences intimations of the presence of the sacred or the holy, and often claims to have seen into the most essential meaning of things, resulting in a rapturous state that has been described as "an interior illumination of reality that results in ultimate freedom."[33]

This is, however, far from the Latter-day Saint revelatory tradition in general and also from my own experience. The Saints view God as an embodied individual with whom one may communicate directly. Rather than looking in, one is speaking out. Rather than seeking union with the Divine or dissolving one's own duality, one is seeking two-way communication with It as a (lesser) partner. Such revelation is *always* twofold, involving emotional content coupled with rational information and insight. Terryl Givens has aptly labeled this concept "dialogic revelation."[34] In one of the earliest Latter-day Saint articulations of the process, the Lord told Oliver Cowdery, "You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind" (D&C 9:7–8).

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32. Andrew B. Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, in *Born to Believe: God, Science, and the Origin of Ordinary and Extraordinary Beliefs* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 215–45, describe experiments on an atheist who meditates on the idea of "God."

33. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 101.

34. See the discussion in Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 209–39.

Critics of the Church of Jesus Christ often insist that Latter-day Saint revelation is exclusively or primarily emotional, something that might be "felt by simply watching a Hollywood movie," but this is a fundamental misrepresentation.[35] The united witness of mind and heart is key in Latter-day Saint doctrine. A Latter-day Saint revelatory experience has as much—or more—intellectual content as it does emotions of peace or joy: "If you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" (D&C 6:22–23). Notice that information is spoken to the "mind" and the peace then follows. And the solution for later doubts or concerns is not reliance on "a feeling," but an admonition to recall specific information communicated earlier.

Character of the Mystical Experience

I well remember a university class on medieval Judaism in which I had my first encounter with mysticism. I was (and still am) struck by the utter novelty and strangeness of those religious ideas. This isn't to say that I doubt the reports of the mystics; I just have no religious point of reference for identifying with them. Who is the Mormon equivalent of St. John of the Cross? Where are the Latter-day Saint manuals of spiritual discipline? What is the Mormon *Ein Sof*?

Newberg also indicates that "transcendent" moments with music may derive from the same neurochemistry.[36] As a lifelong audiophile, I do know something about those experiences, whether engendered by Bach or the Beatles, and can see the parallels to the Jewish mystics' concepts. But they are not like revelation. To better appreciate this difference between mysticism and revelation, consider Newberg's report

35. This characterization comes from an anti-Mormon DVD, *Search for the Truth: Jesus Christ/Joseph Smith*, placed anonymously at thousands of homes across the United States and Canada beginning on 27 March 2007. See http://en.fairmormon.org/Search_for_the_Truth_DVD (accessed 19 March 2008).

36. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 77–80.

on the demands of the mystical experience that he and his colleagues seek to neuroimage:

> Virtually all mystical traditions identify some sense of union with the absolute as the ultimate spiritual goal. Correspondingly, nearly all those traditions have developed rigorous systems of training and initiation, designed to help the devoted reach that rarefied state.[37]

The authors here verify what Harris claims—that this is not an easy thing to learn and that it takes time, practice, and special techniques that are targeted at achieving the mystical experience.[38] Zen Buddhists used "*koans* . . . to loosen the grip of the conscious mind." Kabbalists "performed complicated mental manipulations of numbers and images to reach the same end" and "aimed . . . to annihilate the ego. . . . To this end, they used meditation, controlled breathing, and other contemplative techniques to silence the mind." Christian mystics "relied upon intense contemplative prayer, fasting, silence, and various forms of mortification to free their minds from mundane matters" and "believe[d] that God could only be known by a mind that has been cleansed of all distracting thoughts and images." Islamic (Sufi) mystics aim for "*ʾfana*, or annihilation," via "a combination of fasting, sleepless vigils, chanting, and contemplation, all intended to induce altered states."[39]

While such devotion and effort is impressive, I just cannot draw any parallels here to the Latter-day Saint revelatory experience as I have lived it or been taught it. Contrast the disciplines of the mystics with the Latter-day Saint approach, in which prospective converts are asked to receive the Book of Mormon with faith in Christ and then "ask God." For Latter-day Saint revelation, there are no physical ges-

37. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 103.

38. "Mysticism, to be viable, requires *explicit* instructions, which need suffer no more ambiguity or artifice in their exposition than we find in a manual for operating a lawn mower." Harris, *End of Faith*, 217, emphasis in original. "Like any skill that requires refinements in perception or cognition, the task of recognizing consciousness prior to the subject/object dichotomy can be facilitated by an expert." Harris, *End of Faith*, 218.

39. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 103–5.

tures aside from kneeling and bowing the head (and even these are not essential). There are no candles, altered lighting, controlled breathing, or focus on images of God or the Void. There is no music or special preparations. Prayers are extemporaneous and unscripted. There is no "vain repetition," no iteration of meaningless or rote phrases. There are no sessions with spiritual trainers.

In fact, fasting is the only common element, and proselytes are not generally exposed to this Latter-day Saint practice until after their baptism—most new members report revelation without resorting to a fast. Furthermore, I suspect that missing two meals a month has little to do with the prolonged, frequent fasts and mortification to which the mystics subject themselves.

Even more important to my mind than the vast differences in technique is the gulf between the mystical and Latter-day Saint revelatory end product. Newberg repeatedly emphasizes that "all [mystical traditions] are based on a common insight: The first step in attaining mystical union is to quiet the conscious mind and free the spirit from the limiting passions and delusions of the ego,"[40] with one ultimately experiencing union with the transcendent. Rabbi Eleazar is quoted to bring the point home: "If you consider yourself as 'something,' and pray to Him for your needs, God cannot clothe Himself in you. God is infinite and cannot be held in any kind of vessel that has not dissolved itself into No-thing."[41]

Joseph Smith, of course, got himself in enormous trouble for claiming revelation that did not conform to the mystical pattern. He did not, as mysticism scholar Evelyn Underhill said of the mystics, "persist . . . [in saying] that God in his absolute Reality is unknowable—is dark—to man's intellect."[42] (Note again that the intellect plays a key role in Latter-day Saint revelation.)

In contrast to mystical experiences, the revelation enjoined upon every Latter-day Saint member, and upon which I base my continued

40. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 103.

41. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 104.

42. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 347–48, quoted in Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 76.

membership in the church, is a conversation. It is a discussion. There is no effort to dissolve oneself into the Infinite or to become absorbed in God or Christ. Rather, such revelation is a simple, even matter-of-fact, act of discourse. There is no sense of space and time being nonexistent. It does not require great preparation. It need not always be initiated on the petitioner's end. Far from disposing of them, this practice puts my needs or ego all too uncomfortably front and center, whether I want them there or not.

To be sure, many members will talk about how they "felt" when they prayed. It is to fundamentally misunderstand these experiences, however, if we assume (as critics often do) that this talk of "feeling" means simply—or only or primarily—"emotion." We are stymied, in a sense, because we have no good word for what happens that does not also have other secular connotations that the critic could also misinterpret if he chose. Hugh Nibley's description is apt:

> [The critic] cannot conceive how anyone could possibly acquire knowledge by any method other than his. He cannot believe that any man has experienced anything which he has not experienced. . . . "I have never seen a vision," says the [skeptic], "therefore Joseph Smith never had one. I *have* seen dreams [or had unitary brain experiences or mystical insight], therefore I will allow him that."[43]

Despite what I will not say about such experiences, I can at least say this: one of the most significant products of such experiences is their ability to transform my behavior and character. I am too familiar with the experience of trying mightily to alter some behavior, thought, or fault and not succeeding. But if I engage in a few moments of dialogic revelation, fundamental, deep-rooted parts of my nature that have resisted my best efforts can be altered for the long term. Is there emotion with this? Of course, but that emotion is partly a reaction to what has happened; it is not simply the happening itself. If a wealthy benefactor walked up and handed me a million dollars, I would doubtless have a few stirrings of happiness—but I would hardly then pre-

43. Nibley, "Prophets and Scholars," in Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, 31.

sume that there never was any money to begin with. When Christ can remake a lifetime of error in me, I think I am more suited than the critic to decide if this is merely neurons firing in the dark.

Harris argues that "almost every problem we have can be ascribed to the fact that human beings are utterly beguiled by their feelings of separateness" and insists that "a spirituality that undermined such dualism, through the mere contemplation of consciousness, could not help but improve our situation" (p. 214). This may be, but the same separateness and isolation from self and others can also be countered by the revelatory tradition, which has the advantage of being focused on an external reality of God's law and love rather than being an inward reflection on mere subjectivity. If we wish to heal our relationships with other humans, I would argue that there can be a substantial and beneficial difference between an interpersonal relationship of love with the divine and merely "recognizing consciousness prior to the subject/object dichotomy" (p. 218). The former models what we must achieve with others; the latter does not. Revelation tells us about facts outside and superior to ourselves; mysticism can at best only show us things about ourselves. Both are potentially valuable, but they are not equivalent. A Latter-day Saint revelatory experience is far removed from mysticism's personal dissolution into a Nirvana with little information communicated except an inarticulate connectedness, where one merely "pay[s] extraordinarily close attention to his moment-by-moment experience of the world" (pp. 234–35).

Critics generally want to persuade us that Latter-day Saints and, say, devotees of Buddhist meditation

(a) would have similar neuroimaging results, and hence
(b) are experiencing "the same thing," which
(c) certainly has no relationship to an outer reality.

But such a critic has no data to establish (a). The vast differences in intent, technique, and reported content for Latter-day Saint experiences suggest caution in assuming (b), while (c) is not the conclusion of those who conducted the studies, and this either/or decision cannot be settled by science anyway.

"Baby with the Baboon Heart": A Science of Ethics?

I conclude with the most disturbing part of Harris's analysis. His appeal to Eastern mysticism constitutes a fairly pedestrian attack on religion. The recommendations that Harris makes, however, are troubling.

Of Hebrews 11:1, Harris claims that "read in the right way, this passage seems to render faith entirely self-justifying: perhaps the very fact that one believes in something which has not yet come to pass ('things hoped for') or for which one has no evidence ('things not seen') constitutes evidence for its actuality ('assurance')" (p. 64). Such a reading is, as we have seen, the "right way" only because it provides a caricature of Christian belief that Harris can then brush aside.

Harris himself provides an excellent example of exactly the type of faith he disparages. "Faith is nothing more than a willingness to await the evidence," he sniffs (p. 66). This isn't the case, but if it is, Harris certainly manifests plenty of "faith":

> 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? Why do we generally prefer beauty to ugliness and order to chaos? . . . Is the ego an illusion, and, if so, what implications does this have for human life? 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. (p. 20, emphasis added)

There is no evidence that science will *ever* be able to address these issues. But Harris is quite comfortable, even confident, that if he waits for the evidence to arrive, it will: "Science will not remain mute on spiritual and ethical questions for long" (p. 43). He even advocates closer attention to "a body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phenomena, much of which has been ignored by mainstream science"

(p. 41). So Harris, while dismissing the entire Abrahamic tradition, thinks ESP has not been looked at closely enough? Were a theist to suggest that "mainstream science" is simply ignoring valid data on the reality of God, he would be laughed out of court.

Harris's "faith" reaches its apogee when he advocates "a science of good and evil" (pp. 170–203). He points out that if one discards a "rule-making God," then moral statements like "Murder is wrong" do not "seem . . . anchored to the facts of this world in the way that statements about planets or molecules appear to be" (p. 170). However, he is confident—even faith-filled—that science can save us: "A rational approach to ethics becomes possible once we realize that questions of right and wrong are really questions about the happiness and suffering of sentient creatures. If we are in a position to affect the happiness or suffering of others, we have ethical responsibilities toward them" (pp. 170–71). But is this really obvious? I readily grant Harris's conclusion: we *do* have an ethical duty to ameliorate and avoid unnecessary suffering. But my conclusion is based on a theistic worldview. This does not, contrary to Harris's assertion, derive simply from God "making rules." Instead it reflects the very nature of reality. God merely informs us about the facts of the universe: we will be happier, and we will maximize our potential as beings in his image, if we work, as he does, to maximize human happiness.

While I applaud Harris's conclusion, it certainly does not follow inevitably from science or anything else. What if I am *not* made happier by seeking to remove suffering? What if I prefer, rather, to *cause* suffering or to remain indifferent to it? There are such people in the world: and if there is no overarching moral reality—if we really are just bags of self-aware meat—why *should* I waste my short span of existence before oblivion by doing that which makes me unhappy?

Harris's answer is that we rely on "moral intuition," "a term that we simply cannot do without, because it denotes the most basic constituent of our faculty of understanding. While this is true in matters of ethics, it is no less true in science" (pp. 182–83). And, the theist

could add, in matters of belief in God.[44] But if Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot are truly happier exercising tyranny and slaughtering millions, and *their* moral intuition tells them this is proper, how can they be gainsaid?

"We simply do not need religious ideas to motivate us to live ethical lives," argues Harris (p. 172). And I agree. There are many moral atheists, some of whom are more moral than many theists. But a moral atheist is moral *in spite* of the logical consequences of her epistemology, not because of them. In a Latter-day Saint framework, it is not surprising that many, even most, atheists would follow a clear moral compass, for "the Spirit of Christ is given to *every* man, that he may know good from evil" (Moroni 7:16, emphasis added).

Harris then goes on to argue that free will (what the Saints know as moral agency) is an illusion since "either our wills are determined by prior causes, and we are not responsible for them, or they are the product of chance, and we are not responsible for them" (p. 263). If this is so, then what moral authority can ethics have at all? If my will is beyond my control, why castigate me for violations of a moral code, however derived? Harris is, needless to say, guilty of a false dichotomy. Joseph Smith provides a third option: being eternally self-existent, we have no prior cause *and* are also not due to chance.[45] It is strange that Harris indicts terrorists and religious believers for immoral behavior that he claims is not freely chosen. If we intuit anything about our choices, it is that they *seem* free, and we really do have the sense that what we decide truly matters. In so vital a matter for ethics, surely our intuitions ought to carry significant weight.

The most disturbing thing about Harris's "faith," however, is not his naïve scientific triumphalism—his scientism. Rather, this moral

44. For an argument along these lines for the rationality of belief in God, see Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief," in *The Experience of Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 275–90.

45. "We say that God was self—existant [*sic*] who told you so? It's correct enough but how did it get into your heads—who told you that man did not exist upon the same principle." Joseph Smith, as reported by William Clayton, 7 April 1844; quoted in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 359.

muddle is disquieting because of where Harris's fear of terrorism and religious believers leads him: "I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss" (p. 15).

It is not, then, amoral *actions* that ought to be opposed—it is religious beliefs themselves. The *very idea* that every person has a right to his or her own opinions about God is too dangerous for Harris. One suspects he has not thought carefully about what might happen to people like him—indeed what *has* happened—if a theistic majority reached a similar conclusion about *his* beliefs or thoughts. Harris has already detailed the Inquisition in exquisite detail, but such things apparently don't bother him if *he* is on the side of Torquemada in defense of Civilization and Reason (pp. 80–87). His crusading zeal is not reserved for violent fanatics, for they are only a symptom of a greater problem:

> The *greatest problem* confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because *their beliefs* provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed. (p. 45, emphasis added)

Thus those who justify violence and terror with faith are not the real problem, but those who *do not* justify violence and terror. Harris's intuition may make this self-evident, but the logic escapes me. "Religious moderation still represents a failure to criticize the unreasonable (and dangerous) certainty of others" (p. 39). So religious moderates by definition never criticize fundamentalists? Nonsense.

"Dying in the Corner of the Sky"

Harris is frightened, and certain of his own rectitude. This leads him to exactly where he claims it leads religious extremists: "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people

for believing them" (pp. 52–53). Once again, for Harris it is not the *action* that counts; it is the very fact of holding a *belief* or *opinion*. Some beliefs or opinions are worthy of death because of what people *might* do. There are "terrible consequences that have arisen, *logically and inevitably*, out of Christian faith" (p. 106, emphasis added). For Harris contingency plays no role, and there is no poor exercise of free will—which doesn't exist anyway. Christianity and its doctrines lead inexorably—inevitably—to historical tragedy. One wonders if he has read Marx.

It follows, then, that the rational observer (read Harris) can intuit the ultimate and inevitable consequences of religious belief. What sort of response is warranted? Harris argues that torture is morally permissible, even required, so he is not afraid to get his hands dirty (pp. 192–99). In a particularly chilling passage, he compares believers to a plague worthy of quarantine or eradication:

> Given the link between belief and action, it is clear that we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene. . . . Do we "tolerate" these [false] beliefs [about disease spread]? Not if they put our own health in jeopardy. . . . It is not difficult to imagine a culture whose beliefs relative to epidemiology [the control of disease] could systematically impose unacceptable risks on the rest of us. There is little doubt that we would ultimately quarantine, invade, or otherwise subjugate such a society. (pp. 46, 233)

Once again, Harris wants to launch a preemptive strike on beliefs. This rhetoric is uncomfortably close to the "Jewish bacillus" that infected the German body politic.[46] And the dragnet will be wide. "We have a problem with Christianity and Judaism as well [as Islam]. It is time we recognized that *all* reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility

46. *David John Cawdell Irving v. Penguin Books Limited*, http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/people/i/irving.david/libel.suit/transcripts/day004.15 (accessed 17 September 2008).

of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself" (p. 131, emphasis added). His own words provide a rebuke to his species of fundamentalism:

> As a man believes, so he will act. Believe that you are the member of a chosen people [the scientifically and morally enlightened], awash in the salacious exports of an evil [religiously tolerant] culture that is turning your children away from God [reason], believe that you will be rewarded with an eternity of unimaginable delights [believe this is the only hope for preservation of your civilization] by dealing death to these infidels [religious fanatics and their religiously moderate enablers]—and flying a plane into a building [torture or extermination of people of faith, regardless of whether they have *done* anything] is scarcely more than a matter of being asked to do it. It follows, then, that certain beliefs are *intrinsically* dangerous. (p. 44, emphasis in original)

Would Harris act on his theories? I hope not. But, by his logic, he will. Or someone else will.

The frightening thing is not that Harris can drape such concepts with the banner of reason or that he is oblivious to the self-contradiction in his stance. That is nothing new. The frightening thing is that so many have praised his book and that so few evangelizing atheists have decried the totalitarian stream that runs through it.

Embracing Christianity or Western theism is not yet a thought-crime. But if Harris has his way, it apparently will be. All for the greater good—*Deus vult!*