

# AN ATHEIST MANIFESTO

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Dec. 7, 2005

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: AT A TIME WHEN FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGION HAS AN UNPARALLELED INFLUENCE IN THE HIGHEST GOVERNMENT LEVELS IN THE UNITED STATES, AND RELIGION-BASED TERROR DOMINATES THE WORLD STAGE, SAM HARRIS ARGUES THAT PROGRESSIVE TOLERANCE OF FAITH-BASED UNREASON IS AS GREAT A MENACE AS RELIGION ITSELF. HARRIS, A PHILOSOPHY*

*GRADUATE OF STANFORD WHO HAS STUDIED EASTERN AND WESTERN RELIGIONS, WON THE 2004 PEN AWARD FOR NONFICTION FOR THE END OF FAITH, WHICH POWERFULLY EXAMINES AND EXPLODES THE ABSURDITIES OF ORGANIZED RELIGION. TRUTHDIG ASKED HARRIS TO WRITE A CHARTER DOCUMENT FOR HIS THESIS THAT BELIEF IN GOD, AND APPEASEMENT OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS OF ALL FAITHS BY MODERATES, HAS BEEN AND CONTINUES TO BE THE GREATEST THREAT TO WORLD PEACE AND A SUSTAINED ASSAULT ON REASON.*

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## **An Atheist Manifesto**

Somewhere in the world a man has abducted a little girl. Soon he will rape, torture and kill her. If an atrocity of this kind is not occurring at precisely this moment, it will happen in a few hours, or days at most. Such is the confidence we can draw from the statistical laws that govern the lives of 6 billion human beings. The same statistics also suggest that this girl's parents believe at this very moment that an all-powerful and all-loving God is watching over them and their family. Are they right to believe this? Is it good that they believe this?

No.

The entirety of atheism is contained in this response. Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply a refusal to deny the obvious. Unfortunately, we live in

a world in which the obvious is overlooked as a matter of principle. The obvious must be observed and re-observed and argued for. This is a thankless job. It carries with it an aura of petulance and insensitivity. It is, moreover, a job that the atheist does not want.

It is worth noting that no one ever needs to identify himself as a non-astrologer or a non-alchemist. Consequently, we do not have words for people who deny the validity of these pseudo-disciplines. Likewise, atheism is a term that should not even exist. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make when in the presence of religious dogma. The atheist is merely a person who believes that the 260 million Americans (87% of the population) who claim to **never doubt the existence of God** should be obliged to present evidence for his existence and, indeed, for his benevolence, given the relentless destruction of innocent human beings we witness in the world each day. Only the atheist appreciates just how uncanny our situation is: Most of us believe in a God that is every bit as specious as the gods of Mount Olympus; no person, whatever his or her qualifications, can seek public office in the United States without pretending to be certain that such a God exists; and much of what passes for public policy in our country conforms to religious taboos and superstitions appropriate to a medieval theocracy. Our circumstance is abject, indefensible and terrifying. It would be hilarious if the stakes were not so high.

We live in a world where all things, good and bad, are finally destroyed by change. Parents lose their children and children their parents. Husbands and wives are separated in an instant, never to meet again. Friends part company in haste, without knowing that it will be for the last time. This life, when surveyed with a broad glance, presents little more than a vast spectacle of loss. Most people in this world, however, imagine that there is a cure for this. If we live rightly—not necessarily ethically, but within the framework of certain ancient beliefs and stereotyped behaviors—we will get everything we want after we die. When our bodies finally fail us, we just shed our corporeal ballast and travel to a land where we are reunited with everyone we loved while alive. Of course, overly rational people and other rabble will be kept out of this happy place, and those who suspended their disbelief while alive will be free to enjoy themselves for all eternity.

We live in a world of unimaginable surprises--from the fusion energy that lights the sun to the genetic and evolutionary consequences of this lights dancing for eons upon the Earth--and yet Paradise conforms to our most superficial concerns with all the fidelity of a Caribbean cruise. This is wondrously strange. If one didn't know better, one would think that man, in his fear of losing all that he loves, had created heaven, along with its gatekeeper God, in his own image.

Consider the destruction that Hurricane Katrina leveled on New Orleans. More than a thousand people died, tens of thousands lost all their earthly possessions, and nearly a million were displaced. It is safe to say that almost every person living in New Orleans at the moment Katrina struck believed in an omnipotent, omniscient and compassionate God. But what was God doing while a hurricane laid waste to their city? Surely he heard the prayers of those elderly men and women who fled the rising waters for the safety of their attics, only to be slowly drowned there. These were people of faith. These were good men and women who had prayed throughout their lives. Only the atheist has the courage to admit the obvious: These poor people died talking to an imaginary friend.

Of course, there had been ample warning that a storm of biblical proportions would strike New Orleans, and the human response to the ensuing disaster was tragically inept. But it was inept only by the light of science. Advance warning of Katrina's path was wrested from mute Nature by meteorological calculations and satellite imagery. God told no one of his plans. Had the residents of New Orleans been content to rely on the beneficence of the Lord, they wouldn't have known that a killer hurricane was bearing down upon them until they felt the first gusts of wind on their faces. Nevertheless, a poll conducted by The Washington Post found that 80% of Katrina's survivors claim that the event has only strengthened their faith in God.

As Hurricane Katrina was devouring New Orleans, nearly a thousand Shiite pilgrims were trampled to death on a bridge in Iraq. There can be no doubt that these pilgrims believed mightily in the God of the Koran: Their lives were organized around the indisputable fact of his existence; their women walked veiled before him; their men regularly murdered one another over rival interpretations of his word. It would be remarkable if a single survivor of this tragedy lost his faith. More likely, the survivors imagine that they were spared through God's grace.

Only the atheist recognizes the boundless narcissism and self-deceit of the saved. Only the atheist realizes how morally objectionable it is for survivors of a catastrophe to believe themselves spared by a loving God while this same God drowned infants in their cribs. Because he refuses to cloak the reality of the world's suffering in a cloying fantasy of eternal life, the atheist feels in his bones just how precious life is--and, indeed, how unfortunate it is that millions of human beings suffer the most harrowing abridgements of their happiness for no good reason at all.

One wonders just how vast and gratuitous a catastrophe would have to be to shake the world's faith. The [Holocaust](#) did not do it. Neither did the [genocide in Rwanda](#), even with machete-wielding priests among the perpetrators. Five hundred million people died of [smallpox](#) in the 20th Century, many of them infants. God's ways are, indeed, inscrutable. It seems that any fact, no matter how infelicitous, can be rendered compatible with religious faith. In matters of faith, we have kicked ourselves loose of the Earth.

Of course, people of faith regularly assure one another that God is not responsible for human suffering. But how else can we understand the claim that God is both omniscient and omnipotent? There is no other way, and it is time for sane human beings to own up to this. This is the age-old problem of [theodicy](#), of course, and we should consider it solved. If God exists, either he can do nothing to stop the most egregious calamities or he does not care to. God, therefore, is either impotent or evil. Pious readers will now execute the following pirouette: God cannot be judged by merely human standards of morality. But, of course, human standards of morality are precisely what the faithful use to establish God's goodness in the first place. And any God who could concern himself with something as trivial as gay marriage, or the name by which he is addressed in prayer, is not as inscrutable as all that. If he exists, the God of Abraham is not merely unworthy of the immensity of creation; he is unworthy even of man.

There is another possibility, of course, and it is both the most reasonable and least odious: The biblical God is a fiction. As [Richard Dawkins](#) has observed, we are all atheists with respect to Zeus and Thor. Only the atheist has realized that the biblical god is no different.

Consequently, only the atheist is compassionate enough to take the profundity of the world's suffering at face value. It is terrible that we all die and lose everything we love; it is doubly terrible that so many human beings suffer needlessly while alive. That so much of this suffering can be directly attributed to religion--to religious hatreds, religious wars, religious delusions and religious diversions of scarce resources--is what makes atheism a moral and intellectual necessity. It is a necessity, however, that places the atheist at the margins of society. The atheist, by merely being in touch with reality, appears shamefully out of touch with the fantasy life of his neighbors.

## **The Nature of Belief**

According to several recent polls, 22% of Americans are certain that Jesus will return to Earth sometime in the next 50 years. Another 22% believe that he will probably do so. This is likely the same 44% who go to church once a week or more, who believe that God literally promised the land of Israel to the Jews and who want to stop teaching our children about the **biological fact** of evolution. As President Bush is well aware, believers of this sort constitute the most cohesive and motivated segment of the American electorate. Consequently, their views and prejudices now influence almost every decision of national importance. Political liberals seem to have drawn the wrong lesson from these developments and are now **thumbing Scripture**, wondering how best to ingratiate themselves to the legions of men and women in our country who vote largely on the basis of religious dogma. More than 50% of Americans have a "negative" or "highly negative" view of people who do not believe in God; 70% think it important for presidential candidates to be "strongly religious." Unreason is now ascendant in the United States--in our schools, in our courts and in each branch of the federal government. Only 28% of Americans believe in evolution; 68% believe in Satan. Ignorance in this degree, concentrated in both the head and belly of a lumbering superpower, is now a problem for the entire world.

Although it is easy enough for smart people to criticize religious fundamentalism, something called "religious moderation" still enjoys immense prestige in our society, even in the ivory tower. This is ironic, as fundamentalists tend to make a more principled use of their brains than "moderates" do. While fundamentalists justify their religious beliefs with extraordinarily poor evidence and arguments, at least they make an attempt at rational justification. Moderates, on the other hand, generally do nothing more than cite the good consequences of religious belief. Rather than say that they believe in God because certain biblical prophecies have come true, moderates will say that they believe in God because this belief "gives their lives meaning." When a tsunami killed a few hundred thousand people on the day after Christmas, fundamentalists readily interpreted this cataclysm as evidence of **God's wrath**. As it turns out, God was sending humanity another oblique message about the evils of abortion, idolatry and homosexuality. While morally obscene, this interpretation of events is actually reasonable, given certain (ludicrous) assumptions. Moderates, on the other hand, refuse to draw any conclusions whatsoever about God from his works. God remains a perfect mystery, a mere source of consolation that is compatible with the most desolating evil. In the face of disasters like the Asian tsunami, liberal piety is apt to produce the **most unctuous and stupefying nonsense imaginable**. And yet, men and women of goodwill naturally prefer such vacuities to the odious moralizing and prophesizing of true

believers. Between catastrophes, it is surely a virtue of liberal theology that it emphasizes mercy over wrath. It is worth noting, however, that it is human mercy on display--not God's--when the bloated bodies of the dead are pulled from the sea. On days when thousands of children are simultaneously torn from their mothers' arms and casually drowned, liberal theology must stand revealed for what it is--the sheerest of mortal pretenses. Even the theology of wrath has more intellectual merit. If God exists, his will is not inscrutable. The only thing inscrutable in these terrible events is that so many neurologically healthy men and women can believe the unbelievable and think this the height of moral wisdom.

It is perfectly absurd for religious moderates to suggest that a rational human being can believe in God simply because this belief makes him happy, relieves his fear of death or gives his life meaning. The absurdity becomes obvious the moment we swap the notion of God for some other consoling proposition: Imagine, for instance, that a man wants to believe that there is a diamond buried somewhere in his yard that is the size of a refrigerator. No doubt it would feel uncommonly good to believe this. Just imagine what would happen if he then followed the example of religious moderates and maintained this belief along pragmatic lines: When asked why he thinks that there is a diamond in his yard that is thousands of times larger than any yet discovered, he says things like, "This belief gives my life meaning," or "My family and I enjoy digging for it on Sundays," or "I wouldn't want to live in a universe where there wasn't a diamond buried in my backyard that is the size of a refrigerator." Clearly these responses are inadequate. But they are worse than that. They are the responses of a madman or an idiot.

Here we can see why [Pascal's wager](#), [Kierkegaard's leap of faith](#) and other epistemological Ponzi schemes won't do. To believe that God exists is to believe that one stands in some relation to his existence such that his existence is itself the reason for one's belief. There must be some causal connection, or an appearance thereof, between the fact in question and a person's acceptance of it. In this way, we can see that religious beliefs, to be beliefs about the way the world is, must be as evidentiary in spirit as any other. For all their sins against reason, religious fundamentalists understand this; moderates--almost by definition--do not.

The incompatibility of reason and faith has been a self-evident feature of human cognition and public discourse for centuries. Either a person has good reasons for what he strongly believes or he does not. People of all creeds naturally recognize the primacy of reasons and resort to reasoning and evidence wherever they possibly can. When rational inquiry supports the creed it is always championed; when it poses a threat, it is derided; sometimes in the same sentence. Only when the evidence for a religious doctrine is thin or nonexistent, or there is compelling evidence against it, do its adherents invoke "faith." Otherwise, they simply cite the reasons for their beliefs (e.g. "the New Testament confirms Old Testament prophecy," "I saw the face of Jesus in a window," "We prayed, and our daughter's cancer went into remission"). Such reasons are generally inadequate, but they are better than no reasons at all. Faith is nothing more than the license religious people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail. In a world that has been shattered by mutually incompatible religious beliefs, in a nation that is growing increasingly beholden to Iron Age conceptions of God, the end of history and the immortality of the soul, this lazy partitioning of our discourse into matters of reason and matters of faith is now unconscionable.

## Faith and the Good Society

People of faith regularly claim that atheism is responsible for some of the most appalling crimes of the 20th century. Although it is true that the regimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were irreligious to varying degrees, they were not especially rational. In fact, their public pronouncements were little more than litanies of delusion--delusions about race, economics, national identity, the march of history or the moral dangers of intellectualism. In many respects, religion was directly culpable even here. Consider the Holocaust: The anti-Semitism that built the Nazi crematoria brick by brick was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity. For centuries, religious Germans had viewed the Jews as the worst species of heretics and attributed every societal ill to their continued presence among the faithful. While the hatred of Jews in Germany expressed itself in a predominately secular way, the religious demonization of the Jews of Europe continued. (The Vatican itself perpetuated the [blood libel](#) in its newspapers as late as 1914.)

Auschwitz, the gulag and the killing fields are not examples of what happens when people become too critical of unjustified beliefs; to the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of not thinking critically enough about specific secular ideologies. Needless to say, a rational argument against religious faith is not an argument for the blind embrace of atheism as a dogma. The problem that the atheist exposes is none other than the problem of dogma itself--of which every religion has more than its fair share. There is no society in recorded history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

While most Americans believe that getting rid of religion is an impossible goal, much of the developed world has already accomplished it. Any account of a "[god gene](#)" that causes the majority of Americans to helplessly organize their lives around ancient works of religious fiction must explain why so many inhabitants of other First World societies apparently lack such a gene. The level of atheism throughout the rest of the developed world refutes any argument that religion is somehow a moral necessity. Countries like Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on Earth. According to the United Nations' [Human Development Report \(2005\)](#) they are also the healthiest, as indicated by measures of life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate and infant mortality. Conversely, the 50 nations now ranked lowest in terms of human development are unwaveringly religious. [Other analyses](#) paint the same picture: The United States is unique among wealthy democracies in its level of religious literalism and opposition to evolutionary theory; it is also [uniquely beleaguered](#) by high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, STD infection and infant mortality. The same comparison holds true within the United States itself: Southern and Midwestern states, characterized by the highest levels of religious superstition and hostility to evolutionary theory, are especially plagued by the above indicators of societal dysfunction, while the comparatively secular states of the Northeast conform to European norms. Of course, correlational data of this sort do not resolve questions of causality--belief in God may lead to societal dysfunction; societal dysfunction may foster a belief in God; each factor may enable the other; or both may spring from some deeper source of mischief. Leaving aside the issue of cause and effect, these facts prove that atheism is perfectly compatible with the basic

aspirations of a civil society; they also prove, conclusively, that religious faith does nothing to ensure a society's health.

Countries with high levels of atheism also are the most charitable in terms of giving **foreign aid** to the developing world. The dubious link between Christian literalism and Christian values is also belied by other indices of charity. Consider the **ratio in salaries** between top-tier CEOs and their average employee: in Britain it is 24 to 1; France 15 to 1; Sweden 13 to 1; in the United States, where 83% of the population believes that Jesus literally rose from the dead, it is 475 to 1. Many a camel, it would seem, expects to squeeze easily through the eye of a needle.

### **Religion as a Source of Violence**

One of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the 21st century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns--about ethics, spiritual experience and the inevitability of human suffering--in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord religious faith. Incompatible religious doctrines have balkanized our world into separate moral communities--Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc.--and these divisions have become a continuous source of human conflict. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews versus Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians versus Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians versus Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants versus Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims versus Hindus), Sudan (Muslims versus Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims versus Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims versus Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists versus Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims versus Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite versus Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians versus Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis versus Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. In these places religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in the last 10 years.

In a world riven by ignorance, only the atheist refuses to deny the obvious: Religious faith promotes human violence to an astonishing degree. Religion inspires violence in at least two senses: (1) People often kill other human beings because they believe that the creator of the universe wants them to do it (the inevitable psychopathic corollary being that the act will ensure them an eternity of happiness after death). Examples of this sort of behavior are practically innumerable, jihadist suicide bombing being the most prominent. (2) Larger numbers of people are inclined toward religious conflict simply because their religion constitutes the core of their moral identities. One of the enduring pathologies of human culture is the tendency to raise children to fear and demonize other human beings on the basis of religion. Many religious conflicts that seem driven by terrestrial concerns, therefore, are religious in origin. (Just ask the Irish.)

These facts notwithstanding, religious moderates tend to imagine that human conflict is always reducible to a lack of education, to poverty or to political grievances. This is one of the many delusions of liberal piety. To dispel it, we need only reflect on the fact that the [Sept. 11 hijackers](#) were college educated and middle class and had no discernable history of political oppression. They did, however, spend an inordinate amount of time at their local mosque talking about the depravity of infidels and about the pleasures that await martyrs in Paradise. How many more architects and mechanical engineers must hit the wall at 400 miles an hour before we admit to ourselves that jihadist violence is not a matter of education, poverty or politics? The truth, astonishingly enough, is this: A person can be so well educated that he can build a nuclear bomb while still believing that he will get 72 virgins in Paradise. Such is the ease with which the human mind can be partitioned by faith, and such is the degree to which our intellectual discourse still patiently accommodates religious delusion. Only the atheist has observed what should now be obvious to every thinking human being: If we want to uproot the causes of religious violence we must uproot the false certainties of religion.

Why is religion such a potent source of human violence?

- Our religions are intrinsically incompatible with one another. Either Jesus rose from the dead and will be returning to Earth like a [superhero](#) or not; either the [Koran](#) is the infallible word of God or it isn't. Every religion makes explicit claims about the way the world is, and the sheer profusion of these incompatible claims creates an enduring basis for conflict.
- There is no other sphere of discourse in which human beings so fully articulate their differences from one another, or cast these differences in terms of everlasting rewards and punishments. Religion is the one endeavor in which us-them thinking achieves a transcendent significance. If a person really believes that calling God by the right name can spell the difference between eternal happiness and eternal suffering, then it becomes quite reasonable to treat heretics and unbelievers rather badly. It may even be reasonable to kill them. If a person thinks there is something that another person can say to his children that could put their souls in jeopardy for all eternity, then the heretic next door is actually far more dangerous than the child molester. The stakes of our religious differences are immeasurably higher than those born of mere tribalism, racism or politics.
- Religious faith is a conversation-stopper. Religion is only area of our discourse in which people are systematically protected from the demand to give evidence in defense of their strongly held beliefs. And yet these beliefs often determine what they live for, what they will die for, and--all too often--what they will kill for. This is a problem, because when the stakes are high, human beings have a simple choice between conversation and violence. Only a fundamental willingness to be reasonable--to have our beliefs about the world revised by new evidence and new arguments--can guarantee that we will keep talking to one another. Certainty without evidence is necessarily divisive and dehumanizing. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas.

It seems profoundly unlikely that we will heal the divisions in our world simply by multiplying the opportunities for interfaith dialogue. The endgame for civilization cannot be mutual tolerance of patent irrationality. While all parties to liberal religious discourse have



agreed to tread lightly over those points where their worldviews would otherwise collide, these very points remain perpetual sources of conflict for their coreligionists. Political correctness, therefore, does not offer an enduring basis for human cooperation. If religious war is ever to become unthinkable for us, in the way that slavery and cannibalism seem poised to, it will be a matter of our having dispensed with the dogma of faith.

When we have reasons for what we believe, we have no need of faith; when we have no reasons, or bad ones, we have lost our connection to the world and to one another. Atheism is nothing more than a commitment to the most basic standard of intellectual honesty: One's convictions should be proportional to one's evidence. Pretending to be certain when one isn't--indeed, pretending to be certain about propositions for which no evidence is even conceivable--is both an intellectual and a moral failing. Only the atheist has realized this. The atheist is simply a person who has perceived the lies of religion and refused to make them his own.