

A review of
Letter from a Christian Citizen.
By Douglas Wilson.

American Vision, 2007.

The anti-theist blitzkrieg shows no signs of abating, with angry tomes from militant God-haters pouring from the presses. It seems each new month another anti-God book is published, joining the burgeoning ranks of the secularist assault on faith and religion.

And as many have rightly noted, the fundamentalist character of these volumes rivals anything found in the religious camp. These can be some very ugly and nasty pieces of work. One of the leaders of this new militant atheism has been Sam Harris. His 2006 volume, *Letter to a Christian Nation* was an embittered attack on Christianity in particular and religion in general.

It is to that particular volume that Douglas Wilson here responds. The American Christian pastor offers a chapter by chapter interaction with the Harris volume, and makes some very telling points along the way.

Wilson points out that Harris uses an awful lot of “ought” language in his book. That is, he is often claiming that this or that behaviour ought not to be, that certain things (mostly about religion) are wrong and we ought to move away from religion altogether. But it has to be asked, why?

Why, given Harris’s atheism, should certain things be preferred above other things? Where, in other words, does morality come from in a system that is amoral at best? What standard does Harris use to make his moral judgments?

Asks Wilson, “Who has defined this standard? You? Your friends? Is it published somewhere so I can read it? You write as though it exists. Where is it?” It seems Harris and his atheist buddies are really living on the borrowed moral capital of Christianity here.

Since there is no God, no soul and no religious authority that we must submit to, what is the basis of morality for Harris? He says seeking for happiness comprises his version of ethics. But such vague notions of happiness really just amount to the capacity of pleasure or pain which the nervous system can handle. But why are the preferences of one nervous system to be preferred over another? Indeed, “what gives pleasure to certain sub-groups of human nervous systems gives pain to other sub-groups. How are we to sort this out?”

If morality is ultimately subjective and arbitrary, as an evolutionary atheist must argue, then why should anyone submit to it? Why is an imposed secular morality to be preferred to any other?

Wilson also exposes numerous logical inconsistencies of Harris. For example, Harris says he is quite taken by the “utter non-violence” of the Indian religion, Jainism. Jainism says we should

not injure or kill any living creature. Yet evolutionary theory is based on the survival of the fittest – it's a dog eat dog world out there, with nature red in tooth and claw.

Does Harris really see Jainism as morally superior to Christianity? Does he really want us all to wear masks to avoid breathing in and killing insects? And should we abandon antibiotics so as not to kill those poor microbes? Is this really a moral advance on Christianity?, asks Wilson. Moreover, why does Harris condemn Christians for being pro-life, at least in terms of embryonic stem cell research, if Jainism is such an ideal to be followed?

And when Harris says that the most advanced and prosperous nations today are the most secular ones, he is simply being disingenuous. Almost all of these nations are in the position that they are today because of, not in spite of, their Christian past. They became prosperous when they were predominantly under the sway of the Judeo-Christian worldview, and many people are asking how long that prosperity will last, now that the religious foundation has been largely rejected.

Harris is no better when seeking to deal with the problem of evil. He of course rejects the Christian account of it. But how is the atheistic version of events any better? Harris rails against God for allowing hurricanes and tsunamis. But Harris doesn't believe in God. Thus God is not responsible. So who is?

But under the premises of atheism there is no who. Stuff just happens. End of story. If all we have is sky above and dirt below, then Harris has "no right to exhibit the slightest bit of indignation over 'the neglect' that is being shown to these particular end products of mindless evolution. There is no neglect. Nature eats her own and will do so until every last sun has gone out. Deal with it."

Indeed, regarding the calamities of life, there are really just two options: either they have a purpose or they do not. Biblical Christianity does affirm there is purpose and meaning in life, even when we cannot fully discern it, and that one day everything will be put right. But in atheism, there is no rhyme or reason for anything. Crap just happens and that is just the way it goes.

As Wilson demonstrates, Harris is not really a hard core atheist. At best, he is a sentimental theist. He has concern for what happens in this world – which is good – but he has no basis for this concern. He rejects God, but is not willing to live with the consequences of such rejection, as other more consistent atheists have done.

Instead, he is concerned about suffering and evil. But again, why, under his premises? He rejects the notion of a benevolent God, but doesn't realise that with that he had also destroyed the very notion of benevolence itself. "Benevolence is simply a chemical reaction that some organisms experience in their bone box. Other organisms (like the criminal organism that rapes and kills the little girl organism) don't have very much of it. But this is all just time and chance acting on matter."

Harris should simply embrace the ramifications of his atheism, and not keep nibbling on Christian leftovers. The very ideas and concerns of Harris are “nothing but epiphenomena in that curious chemical vat of [his] that we are pleased to call a brain”. More consistent atheists like Holmes could ask, “I wonder if cosmically an idea is any more important than the bowels”. At least he sees the implications of his worldview. Harris doesn’t want to.

And the claim by Harris that he will follow science wherever it leads is simply false. As a philosophical naturalist – a position atheists hold on faith – he has ruled out ahead of time certain things, and will not follow the evidence.

When the disciples were told that the tomb of Jesus was empty, they ran to see if it were so. This was simply an honest appraisal of the evidence. But if one has an *a priori* assumption that such things cannot happen, one will not even bother to examine the evidence. So who is the real scientist here?

The truth is, Harris operates on faith just as much as any believer. “You have faith also – faith that the universe is a closed system and that something like a resurrection is inconceivable. But this is not something you discovered by looking into a microscope. It is a philosophical axiom of yours – it is an article of *faith*.”

And such a closed system is “impervious to any evidence to the contrary”. Atheists have simply decided ahead of time what they will and will not believe. So much for following the evidence wherever it may lead.

In the end, the books by Harris and other atheists are really not worth taking seriously anyhow. Says Wilson, “on your account I am one set of complex chemical reactions secreting something that I falsely believe to be arguments to another set of complex chemical reactions who falsely believes that he is reading them.”

Wilson concludes by agreeing with Harris that religion is really of not much use. But Christ is. The concept of religion is not what is needed. Those who are not well – all of us – need more than concepts. “We need actual *medicine*, not the *idea* of medicine. And this is why we need Christ, not religion”.

The legitimate concerns Harris has are there because God exists, and he is made in God’s image. But the only way his concerns will be adequately dealt with is if he stops pretending that he is the god of the universe, and allows God to be God. But that will take some humility. But it is the only way forward.

At best Harris can only raise some questions and concerns. Wilson in this helpful volume gives us some solid answers.

Bill Muehlenberg's web site is called CultureWatch.

This review was downloaded on January 3, 2012 from the following URL:
<http://www.billmuehlenberg.com/2007/05/31/a-review-of-letter-from-a-christian-citizen-by-douglas-wilson/>,
put into Times New Roman font, and reformatted a little. No text was deleted, added, or
changed in any way.