

A CRITIQUE OF FAITH

by John Hospers

1. Religious faith

I devote the opening section of this essay to a brief summary of Sam Harris' (2004) book *The End of Faith*, with some deletions and a few additions of my own.

When I say to you, a trusted friend, "I have faith in you," I am relying on past experience of your character and disposition to make a statement about my present attitude toward you. Many professions of faith, however, are not of this kind: they express a present attitude which has little or no basis in fact.

When we read, for example, that water has been turned into wine, or that a person already dead has come back to life, we have no such basis in our past experience; indeed, what is alleged is something contrary to our experience of how the world works; it is "pure faith" in the absence of any evidence to sustain the belief. Many of the ancient Greeks believed that there were numerous gods—Zeus on Mt. Olympus ruling the earth, Poseidon ruling the seas, Pluto ruling the underworld, and do on. There were many forms of polytheism, as well as various forms of monotheism such as belief in the Old Testament god Yahweh. There is no empirical evidence that would enable us to determine which of them, if any, is true; belief in them is entirely a matter of faith. We have only the words in a supposedly sacred text. (We have independent evidence for the existence of Jesus, but not of Noah or Moses or Abraham.)

Not only have we no way to verify any of these beliefs, but there is an added problem: many of them contradict one another, so these beliefs cannot all be true. Zeus cannot be king of the gods if Zoroaster also is; nor can there be one and only one god if there are also numerous gods. If a belief is true, another belief that contradicts it cannot also be true. It is Aristotle's *Law of Non-contradiction* that holds true, regardless of the field of discourse in which we are engaged.

Even within the same religious text, there are alleged truths that contradict one another. The god of the Old Testament is seen and heard: he talks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening. But God, we are also told, is eternal and invisible. The infant Jesus was taken into Egypt, but (according to another Gospel) was not taken into Egypt. God is the author of all things, and thus also of evil, but he is, we are also told, not the author of evil; Satan is.

How can people believe these mutually contradictory statements?

(1) Sometimes, I think, the belief rests on some ambiguity: it is true if you take it in one sense but not if you take it in another: Jesus was a man who was born in Bethlehem of Judea and died like the rest of us, but also he was God who existed “from all eternity” and “before the foundation of the world”. This certainly seems like a contradiction, but some theologians have attempted to work out ways in which it is not. (2) Most believers, however, fail to notice these discrepancies because they don’t really bother to *read* the passages in question.

They mouth the lines as part of a religious liturgy, but the repetition of the words has been almost automatic: they do not think them through or try to connect them with other passages with which they are at odds.

Nor do they try to relate them to their everyday experience, as they do when talking about themselves or what goes on in their familiar world. They believe, at least they do not doubt, that (perhaps in their own lifetime) Jesus will return to earth “on the clouds of heaven” to bring “the legions of the saved” into eternal paradise with him. Yet if they were actually to see a robed figure appearing to them out of the sky and swooping earthward, they would probably be as surprised as anyone else. They do not doubt, either, that the resurrection of Jesus was genuine: they do not cite, as their preachers do, numerous religious authorities who proclaim to them that Jesus’ resurrection is just as certainly true as the existence of the church they are now in; they don’t think about these religious authorities, they just believe on faith that after death they will live again.

What is it that prompts people to entertain such beliefs and continue to hold them throughout a lifetime even in the face of contrary experience? Some say it is hope, grounded in the promises of Scripture; others, that it is hope entertained in desperation; for others, it is to believe something you know darned well isn’t so. For most part, believes Harris, it is the psychological difficulty or inability to face reality, the fact that “this is it” and death ends our mortal existence. People find life unbearable without belief in a hereafter, particularly when life has not dealt kindly with them and they have nothing to live for in the here and now. The parents’ six-year-old daughter has just died of a fatal disease and they desperately want to see her again; what buoys them up is the faith that they will one day be with her again.

At this point I could wish that the author had been more explicit about what the content of their belief is supposed to be: the parents believe they will see their daughter again, be with her, and love her. But for how long will it be? Presumably forever? If the parents will not see her until they reach heaven in sixty years, will she still be the same small daughter at that time? That is how the grieving parents imagine it: they do not imagine her as a grown woman and certainly not as an old woman some years later (and certainly

not as one who in the course of time dies). It's 'their little girl, *now*'—years later they might not feel so strongly about it any more. Also, would she still look the same as she did here—surely not as she did when ravaged by the disease? Would she still have those fits of coughing or sneezing as she used to, or that little limp, and the inability to digest certain foods? Or would she have no defects whatever, not even the peculiarities of personality which irritated some people and endeared her to others? Surely the parents would imagine her as having the characteristics they liked or approved of (not quite the same thing!). And would she coexist in heaven alongside a younger sister who had not yet been born when this one died? And what would their relations be with each other? Would warmth, familiarity, a bit of strangeness, and perhaps common faith be in such a relationship?

One could speculate forever about how such things should be imagined, or exactly what there would be to imagine. (Harris does not venture so far.) In any case, the grieving parents don't try to imagine the future situation (happiness with their daughter in heaven) in any specific detail. It is enough that they see her again (For how long; forever? Might they not tire of it eventually)?

Never mind such details as to how such things are possible, or apparent obstacles like the *Law of Non-contradiction*, which they have never heard of anyway. Their primary wish is to be happy again, which they find impossible without her. It would seem that in such a situation one doesn't adjust one's feelings to the facts (don't we all think we should?) but one adjusts the facts to one's feelings—a recipe for psychological disaster from a Randian perspective.

2. Faith and morality

The above is a summary and critique of a world-view based on faith, which Harris presents in *The End of Faith*. The author, however, also delves somewhat summarily into moral philosophy, or at any rate into moral pronouncements. What apparently unites these pronouncements is the view, shared by most people at least in the West, that pain and suffering are evil and should be avoided unless such pain and suffering lead to greater happiness or fulfillment. He repeatedly condemns the Crusades and the Inquisition as the wanton infliction of suffering. Also condemned are a large number of Biblical commands and prohibitions: "What, after all, is the punishment for taking the Lord's name in vain? It happens to be death (Leviticus 24:16). What is the punishment for working on the Sabbath? Also death (Exodus 31:15). What is the punishment for cursing one's father and mother? Death again (Exodus 21:17). What is the punishment for adultery? You're catching on (Leviticus 20:10)." (page 115)

Moreover, the details of such punishment are often spelled out, though modern believers have only a limited visualization of them. “If your brother, the son of your father or of your mother, or the souse whom you embrace, or your most intimate friend, tries to secretly seduce you, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ unknown to you or your ancestors before you, gods of the peoples surrounding you, whether near you or far away, anywhere throughout the world, you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must show him no pity, you must not spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death, since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God (Deuteronomy 13:7-11)” (page 18)

Most people today, however, do not read such passages, or even know that they exist. They are somewhat embarrassed if they have to come across them, but if they are committed to believing that the entire Bible is the Word of God, they dare not openly reject such passages—since they are apparently “stuck with them,” they simply ignore them or “pay them no heed.” But they cannot reject them outright if their eternal salvation depends on acceptance of the entire Bible.

The author does condemn torture and killing in all its forms (including capital punishment), including the Nazi, Soviet, and Chinese communist regimes. But the main target of his condemnation is none of these, but current Islamo-fascism as manifested especially in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Fundamentalist Muslims differ from their Soviet predecessors in at least one important respect: the Soviets were deterred by the fear of nuclear annihilation. Today’s Islamo-fascists not deterrable by threats of death: by killing unbelievers they are promised a blissful hereafter for themselves.

Pacifism, says Harris, is an unwillingness to die, combined with a willingness to let others die at the pleasure of the world’s thugs. Islamo-fascists exhibit, by contrast, a willingness to die, combined with a commitment to making every unbeliever die. Such is the ultimate result of accepting religious views based solely on faith.

Harris reserves the term “moderate Christians” for believers in Christianity who don’t take their faith very seriously. “Moderate Muslims”, however many of them there are, don’t take theirs seriously either. The fate of the world in the twenty-first century, he concludes, may hinge on how many moderate Muslims there will be in the coming years.

I must say that I find that conclusion extremely plausible.