

Chapter Thirty-two

RELIGION II

*To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived,
This is to have succeeded.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

AP **Sam Harris and *The End of Faith***

While in certain limited ways I agreed with what Michael Lerner said on the CNN book channel in his talk about religious tolerance, I also noticed that he did not adequately address the underlying *causes* of some of the serious, dangerous, and destructive origins of the toxic right-wing power-consciousness he otherwise analyzed and discussed so eloquently.

Those causes are relevant not only to contemporary Bushie-evangelicals, but seem to lie deep in the blind faith that peoples all over the world have placed in their scriptures, which are regarded as holy, infallible, and beyond the scope of evidentiary validation or rational discourse. Hence, we have dogmatic Christian fundamentalism, Islamic jihads, warring Hindus & Buddhists and other equally zealous faith-based religions generating endless so-called "religious" wars throughout history, right down to our present era. This observation brings up one of the writers you and I talked about this evening: Sam Harris.

Harris explores that vitally important question — regarding the causes of militant, even murderous faith-based violence (such as the Church's medieval Inquisition and

its butcherings during the Crusades, for example, or the 9/11 Trade Center bombings, or literal-minded Islamic zealots torturing six-year-old children for political reasons).

In my view, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* is a strongly worded, well researched, and profoundly relevant work decrying the lunacy of religion in general, orthodox Christianity and fundamentalist Islam in particular. It's for serious, dedicated people who feel that this subject is all-important in our chaotic and increasingly violent era. I'm not the only one who supports Harris.

Peter Singer, professor of bioethics at Princeton, said of the book, "At last we have a book that focuses on the common thread that links Islamic terrorism with the irrationality of all religious faith. *The End of Faith* will challenge not only Muslims but Hindus, Jews, and Christians as well."

The book jacket says, quite accurately —

"In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris delivers a startling analysis of the clash between reason and religion in the modern world. He offers a vivid historical tour of our willingness to suspend reason in favor of religious beliefs — even when these beliefs inspire the worst of human atrocities.

"Harris argues that in the presence of weapons of mass destruction we cannot expect to survive our religious differences indefinitely. Most controversially, he argues that *'moderation' in religion poses considerable dangers of its own, as the accommodation we have made to religious faith in our society now blinds us to the role that faith plays in perpetuating human conflict.* (Italics mine)

"While warning against the encroachment of organized religion into world politics, Harris draws on insights from neuroscience, philosophy, and Eastern mysticism to

deliver a call for a truly modern foundation for ethics and spirituality that is both secular and humanistic."

As I mentioned, I discovered *The End of Faith* through a New York Times book review a few years ago, back in September of 2004, as I recall. You might want to check the review out and read it in its entirety. It fits well with Michael Lerner, rather like the complementary flip side of a single coin — the liberal, compassionate, tolerant Lerner AND the no-nonsense (and often outraged) Harris. Unfortunately the title of the review was conceived by the *NY Times* editors, not by reviewer Natalie Angier or author Harris. It says "Against Toleration." It should have been, "In Defense of Reason." Here's the site. If you're interested in the subject, definitely check it out —

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/05/books/review/05ANGIERL.html?ex=1141707600&en=346d3c033115f27f&ei=5070>

AS We're On Our Own, and Do The Best We Can

I know you are deeply into Christian thinking, with its Bible and Saviors and various rituals and beliefs. Alas I do not share those perspectives, although I remain your caring friend.

I guess the simplest thing I can say is that I don't recognize authorities, but only freedom and responsibility, so I obviously can't say a lot about sainthood without getting into trouble with churches, notions of external/objective value systems based on sacrifice, self-denial, emotional suppression, and other forms of ecclesiastically sanctioned psycho-spiritual self-abnegation. Nor can I say anything about the various kinds of commandments, codes of socially conditioned moralities, politics, patriotism, institutional religions, etc., all of which stifle individuality,

create fear, guilt, dependence, blind ignorance and slavery, while perpetuating pathological inner and outer divisions that lead only to individual and political conflict and destruction.

In a brief e-mail such as this, I guess I can say only that we all do the best we can with whatever we have. Some people learn how to love, others don't. And we all have to go our own way. There are no saviors. Belief only suppresses doubt and spiritually blinds us. We are forever on our own.

When we look deep within, and come to see, know and understand ourselves, we release well-springs of all-encompassing compassion that embrace the whole of existence from the smallest gnat to the nearest puppy to the greatest tree to all other sentient beings to the furthest galaxy.

Understanding, awareness and insight begin and traverse and end, not in fulfilling prescribed modes of socially valued moral conduct or in suffering masochistically for ideals or gods of any sort, but in the development, evolution and unfolding of Unity Consciousness. All conduct that flows from Unity Consciousness is by definition empathic, kind, loving, compassionate.

But as you see, this leads into all sorts of ramifications, so let me come back to the compassionate viewpoint that we all do the best we can with whatever we have. I then continue toodling on down the road, creating my own path, even when it gets lonely, wishing all others well in their journey too, including you, lovely one.

Here is a passage from one of Emerson's essays that addresses some of the qualities of a well-lived life (I don't recall which essay). He seems to be closest to the nature-connection you are experiencing now. I think you will enjoy his insights.

To laugh often and love much;
To win the respect of intelligent persons

and the affection of children;
To earn the approbation of honest citizens
and endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty;
To find the best in others;
To give of one's self;
To leave the world a bit better,
 whether by a healthy child,
 a garden patch,
 a redeemed social condition;
To have played and laughed with enthusiasm and exaltation;
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. . .
This is to have succeeded.

SL **Meaning: Love Without Dogma**

Meaning is tricky. The church God is the greatest lie of all. It once served ignorant, childish peoples as an attempt to explain some of reality's mysteries. Today, it is simply an ignorant religious holdover from a now-irrelevant past, dangerous in the extreme (as we see so clearly every day on the nightly news).

Once you drop this "God" lie, you also drop dozens of lies that follow from it, including the notion of church-decreed "sin," the notions of "heaven" and "hell," and the notion that whoever belongs to "our" religion is "good," while whoever is outside of it is "bad." This kind of freedom-from-God is double-edged: on the one hand, exhilarating; on the other, frightening because the old supportive lies are gone. Those kinds of lies are but consolations to keep you enslaved to the church and its social mores. But once you liberate yourself, well! — fresh air, an open sky, freedom, choice, independence, dignity!

The only authentic meaning we have comes, not from external ecclesiastical sources (Gods, scriptures, priests and the like), but from within: sitting by the pond and merging with the extraordinary life forms around you is deeply religious. More accurately it is religiousness, without institutional affiliation. I like to think of it as authentic spirituality. You are not a Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, or Jew, but a universal citizen who finds love, beauty, understanding, empathy and compassion within yourself, and you share it with all life forms around you — your loved ones, friends, strangers, plants, our little animal friends, and existence itself.

This nonideological atmosphere of love-without-dogma is the salvation available to each and every one of us. It is meaning that we create ourselves. No need to carry doubts and fears about the lack of outmoded superstitions. Dispense with them altogether. Once one sees through those superstitions, there is no going back. You are liberated. You feel free and courageous and creative. Realize that THIS is IT, and eternal existence becomes glorious. Jump into everyday with a sense of rejoicing, a sense of gratitude, and, above all, a great love of the precious, magnificently beautiful mystery of the whole of existence. As Ram Dass and many others express it: Be Here Now!

This does not mean moods stop phasing in and out. It means that you do not have to find yourself helplessly tossed around by them like a cork on a wave. Even as you feel moods and their shiftings, you can see them as personal, passing clouds within a much greater, deeper, eternal context. Personal pains and pleasures come and go, but this great, beautiful mystery remains.

We are rather like fish in the ocean. We have needs and feelings, while at the same time we are surrounded by transpersonal contextual waters that enliven and sustain us. So often we can't see and recognize the water, precisely because we are IN it. Step back a moment — and suddenly you DO see it, recognize it, and understand that you are not separate from existence, but an integral part of it.

This recognition can fill you with awe, wonder, and joy. Bring those qualities into daily life, and things instantly feel better.

JS Belief Cannot Dispel Doubt

As for the statement your son M made about me — "He makes me mad sometimes" — keep in mind that he was clinging to fundamentalist Christian belief systems that did not eliminate his fears and doubts, but only repressed them. They remained there, underneath his denials, causing him considerable anxiety. Anything that suggested he might be free of his fears and doubts by dropping his cherished beliefs and coming to experience God/Spirit/Tao/Existence directly — his *own* Godliness — caused him significant discomfort, which, in turn, flared into anger, not at himself for his ignorance or the superstitions he embraced, but at me.

I disturbed his slumbers when I sent him the letters I include in the *Letters to a Friend in Jail* book that I recently mailed to you. That made him angry, a common reaction among people who embrace outmoded mytho-magical belief systems based on gods, goddesses, heavens, hells, unnatural miracles, saviors, etc. Their doubts remain just underneath the surface of their suppressive but fragile beliefs. When the system and its superstitions are questioned, the doubts surface — hence anger. If there were no doubts, there would be no anger, would there?

You ask what I meant by "clean slate." Well, I originally thought M was unpolluted by Christian fundamentalism. That's what I meant by "clean slate." When I learned otherwise, I felt disappointed that Christian fanatics had hypnotized him to the point of brain-rot, so he didn't have a "clean slate." That made it difficult to work with him in the letters, because before any fresh air could penetrate his mind and heart, his perceptual windows desperately needed to be washed. Unfortunately, the Christian disease had set in already, and it went deeper than his AIDS.

His own yearning for security in the face of death made him feel profoundly insecure. His own desire to have a "soul" and a "savior" and a "heaven" where he would be "immortal" generated terrible fears, doubts, questions, all of which he could have freed himself from had he seen the wisdom of the views and processes I offered him. He couldn't, of course, and so he felt I was the one making him "mad," rather than his own repressed doubts and fears. It proved impossible to reach him, which, ultimately, was okay. He died not knowing the difference, which was certainly his prerogative.

It's a shame that he never came to know the bliss, the joy, the light that I was trying to help him discover *within himself*. To experience THAT light, the perceptual windows (the inner "slate") must be clean. That is the sense in which I used the image. It meant having to remove layers of conditioned thoughts and beliefs that prevent clear perception (not add more thoughts, more beliefs, more mental/spiritual smoke, the way that Christianity and other orthodox pre-rational mytho-magical religions do).

The result was sad, in my view, but understandable. Millions of fearful people have embraced superstitions about "God" and various "saviors." I extended a helping hand. M promptly bit it. And so he died in utter ignorance. His loss, not mine. I still feel sorry for him.

At the same time, however, there is another way to look at it. I chose to offer my wisdom and help, hoping he might grow and flower into a new place. That's okay. He chose to decline. That's okay, too. And that's the way it was — so what? This happens between people all the time. If we see and accept things on this level, frustration disappears, does it not? Just seeing things clearly, without taking sides for or against, does wonders for accurate perception and peace of mind.

SL **Leap Out of Religion, Step Up To Reason**

. . . . You don't want to lose a friend, but neither do you want a friendship based upon inhibition or deceit. As you point out, there doesn't seem to be any point in attending her Free Church again. Once you know what's going on, suffering further pain in the name of “tolerance” and “open-minded” liberal curiosity proves to be little more than masochism.

You might gently point out some of the inconsistencies that exist between religious faith and the wealth of scientific evidence that has accrued since the Bible was written, or mention that such-and-such an article articulates well something you were discussing with her a day or two ago.

Another thing you might do is leave a few good books lying around where she will see them, and perhaps inquire about them. I don't know if you have looked into Osho's writings yet, but there's an excellent compilation that distills three of his volumes into one easily readable work entitled, *Zen: The Path of Paradox*. I heartily recommend it for you. It is one of the most sane, insightful books I've ever read. Very positive, uplifting, thought-provoking and spiritually nourishing. It's in major book stores and should be on Amazon.

Also you might want to purchase a book I've been reading for a while now. It's a strongly worded, well researched, and profoundly relevant book decrying the lunacy of religion in general, orthodox Christianity and fundamentalist Islam in particular. It's for serious, dedicated people who feel that this subject is all-important in our dangerous, chaotic era. It's entitled *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, by a fellow named Sam Harris.

The magnificent music and paintings that have emerged from ecclesiastical contexts are undeniable in their beauty, power and glory. They celebrated the views and

values of their time in humanity's evolutionary development, and endure forever. We can appreciate them as long as we live.

At the same time, the divinity you feel in your heart is human energy, just like the “rushing winds” and “strange forces” that your friend, A, imagines, and just like the horrific injustices that exist everywhere in the world. Divinity and injustice are all human and *only* human. The beauty, the energy, the grace and the horrors we see and feel are not manifestations of some detached, supernatural Creator. They are profoundly natural and profoundly human.

Even as we create magnificent art out of our universal spiritual realizations, so we create unimaginable misery out of our fear-based, power-hungry egoism. If all human beings were to awaken out of their hypnotized stupor and discover their inherent divinity, this reeling earth would be transformed into a paradise of harmony, love, mutual assistance, creativity and international peace.

Now, more than ever before, we need to leap up and out of religious prisons, and step up to reason. That leap, in turn, liberates us to stand tall on reason's shoulders and stretch still higher, expanding our psyches into the compassionate, all-embracing domain of Higher Consciousness that Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Krishnamurti, Osho and dozens of others have revealed to us down through the ages.

It's available to everybody, not just one or two. The journey, as always, starts with you and me.

SL Religious Conditioning Goes Deep

By all means feel free to forward to your evangelical friend whatever philosophical/religious/political discussions of mine you wish. I would be careful, however. If A can understand and relate positively to what I say, then great; she'll appreciate the points of view and you as well. If, however, she reads the material and feels threatened, you run the risk of alienating a friend.

As I've indicated along the way, it's a rare occasion when a person shifts perspectives from conditioned values and fear-based attitudes. Religious conditioning goes deep (as does parental conditioning and general societal conditioning). That's why the Catholic Church as always said, "Give us your children until they are seven years old, and they will remain ours forever."

For most people, dogma rules. It is not rational. It is not affirmative, developmental, or open to new ideas. Most people simply do not, cannot, and will not change and grow. If you show them something that challenges the ideology they cling to, they will *not* see the light and exclaim, "Ah-ha!" and then alter their views accordingly. To the contrary, they may well trash the writing and you along with it. And so I urge you to be careful in this matter.

Sometimes a friend (such as A) may be unenlightened when it comes to matters of religious, political, or psycho-spiritual matters, but nevertheless have a heart of gold, an empathic presence, a loving nature. They can be intellectually regressive to a degree, and yet still be wonderfully kindhearted. They may not be able to follow you into the more advanced realms of reasoning, but they can be tremendously caring and responsive to you and your needs. I would urge you to talk about these matters only with like-minded people, or people who are questioning their conditioning and seeking new, more meaningful values and perspectives. I don't think A is one of those people.

I know you know this already. Just thought I'd include it in this context.

. . . . Interestingly enough, some of Sonia's friends may be upset with her for not remaining strictly within the pre-modern alternative medicine zone and "curing" her thyroid cancer that way.

If there were a problem, I might suggest that we import a half-dozen Australian aboriginals, having them bring with them a handful of sacred red earth from Alice Springs and mixing it with sacred yellow earth from L.A.'s Topanga Canyon Indian tribal land, to be mixed together and placed as a poultice upon Sonia's throat while five dusty natives stand in a circle around her and play their didgeridoos. We could also import five Navajos from Arizona to chant over the cancer in her neck, and hire a Catholic priest to exorcise demons from her body. We might send over to France and import a leeching doctor as well. All together, surely they could have cured her just as well or better than Dr. Berke, Head of the UCLA Department of Head and Neck Surgery.

Hmmm.

These friends of hers, good-hearted well-meaning people one and all, love Sonia dearly. However, they suffer from certain convictions based on naïveté, ignorance, and seriously misguided philosophical and quasi-religious convictions.

They fail to realize that in every knowledge domain — such as astronomy, mathematics, geography, chemistry, physics, language, the arts, medicine, etc. — research and development has increased knowledge, techniques, and the powers of human accomplishment a thousand-fold. That is true in every knowledge domain *except* religion, which has remained moribund and rigidly locked in non-evidentiary faith-based dogma that predates the flowering of reason in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The anti-rational, anti-medical, anti-modernity stance whether Christian or Pagan, staunchly refuses to acknowledge rationality and scientific development as positive, evolutionary, and profoundly beneficial domains of human growth and technical advancement. The anti-rational stance moves right UP TO reason, then calls reason (and science) nasty names, and quickly scuttles back to pre-modern, pre-scientific, pre-rational methodologies such as leeches, power words, sage smudging, magic, etc.

This regressive stance either refuses to acknowledge, or willfully rejects, the simple fact that medicine in all of its modern forms constitutes evolutionary expansions of knowledge that have their roots in exactly the same hopes, dreams, and desires of pre-modern shamans, medicine men and women, high priestesses, and other individuals who did everything they could to help sick people get well. If some Native American had placed a poultice on Sonia's neck, fed her a few mulberry leaves, and prayed loudly to the gods over her while beating drums and singing sacred chants, might Sonia have lived? No. She would have died. Simple as that. . . .

I hasten to add that none of Sonia's friends has actually said anything to me or her about any of this. One of them happened to tell me that some of them have been criticizing a different friend of theirs and ours, a very bright woman of Native American lineage, who periodically has been traveling down to L.A. to treat her newly diagnosed multiple sclerosis with chemotherapy. It troubles me to think those same friends might be condemning Sonia for the exactly same reasons. [Turns out, none did.]

I simply wish they would understand: the way to wholeness is not developing *up to* the point of reason, then calling reason “the bad guy” and retreating back to the comforting arms of unconscious nature. The way to wholeness is up *TO and THROUGH* reason, stepping from reason and its profoundly beneficial knowledge

domains on *up and into* Higher Consciousness. As Wilber points out time and again, each level of development includes its junior levels and transcends them, adding new dimensions of knowledge, insight, and pragmatic capabilities. The ancient sorcerer-magician in medieval Europe would surely stand amazed and awed at what his descendants have accomplished since his time — and would be the first to join them: “Teach me everything you know!”

Anyway, this happened to be on my mind today. Although I feel disturbed by the views some of our friends hold, I also know each and every one of these good folks love Sonia. They are very much like adult children, you know? Intelligent, good-hearted, childlike people living in a modern world. The only escape they find from their fears of these chaotic times lies in a retreat to simpler times, with simpler methodologies in virtually every area of life — back to nature, quietude, clean living, simple fare.

They cannot help themselves, for they simply do not know what they are doing. In their frightened yearning for control in the midst of modernity’s chaos, they regress to narcissism, pure and simple: me-me-me. The world is me. I can decide my fate. There is no such thing as luck or accident. Everything has a meaning. It was meant to be. I can decide what I want to be, and then do it. I am free. I am me. Think positive thoughts. Chant with the Indians. Step outside of modernity, return to a romantic past where people were good to each other (when in fact, cannibalism, slavery, the Inquisition, and military genocide were as common as dirt). Yatta-yatta-yatta.

Will talk with you soon,

L