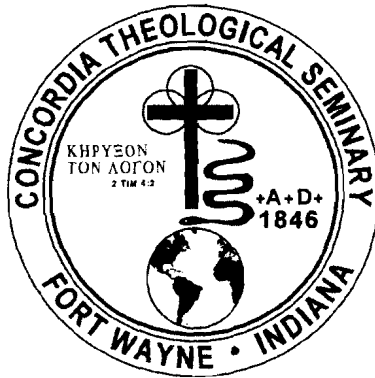


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Theological Observer

Sam Harris and the New Atheism

In *The Twilight of Atheism*, Alister McGrath concluded that modern atheism is either on the verge of slipping into obscurity or in the earliest stages of revival. It is too early to tell, but there are signs that the latter is the case. Consider the popular work of Sam Harris. As a lecturer, essayist, and author of two *New York Times* bestsellers, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), he is out to convince the world that religion is the source of much, if not all, of our political and military strife, and that the only (rational) solution is naturalism and atheistic secularism.

Harris's assault on religion is not theoretical. It is motivated by practical—he would say, ethical—concerns, particularly the rise of religiously-inspired violence. Shortly after September 11, 2001, when he began his writing career, he asserted, "The evil that has finally reached our shores is not merely the evil of terrorism. It is the evil of religious faith at the moment of its political ascendancy." It is not just a resurgent Islam that is the problem for Harris; it is religion generally and more specifically the idea of faith that is the culprit. He thus calls rational people everywhere to stand against "a common enemy," which "is nothing other than faith itself." He contends that rejecting any and all claims of knowledge based on faith—defined as belief in what is not immediately empirically testable—is absolutely necessary if the world's civilizations are to survive. His rationale (clearly influenced by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*) is this: the world's major religions are intrinsically hostile to one another. Because religion is integral to a civilization's culture (and competition between them is a zero-sum game) this puts civilizations at odds with each other.

Thankfully, in the modern age secular interests have rendered the religious culture of most civilizations innocuous. Yet, like the Islamic resurgence begun in the late 1970s, he is convinced that it would not take much to reawaken the religious identities of other civilizations around the world. Take the United States, for example. He contends that our secularism, particularly under the current administration, is but a thin veneer. If it were scratched deep enough, the majority of us would reassert our theology into public affairs. The result would not be pretty, for, according to Harris, the theology that fueled the medieval crusades or now fuels groups like Westboro Baptist Church and the theonomists is the real face of Christianity. The zealotry of religious fundamentalists and the relative ease in which weapons of mass destruction are proliferated is a recipe for catastrophe; unless we realize this, Harris worries, the days of civilization are numbered.

The solution to all this is a radical reorientation of our worldviews. Our conception of reality, Harris argues, cannot be built on faith in the unseen. The notion that one can base what they claim to be true on faith is a relic from the

past, and a dangerous one at that, for when "a man imagines that he need only believe the truth of a proposition, without evidence . . . he becomes capable of anything." Only a universal naturalistic worldview can solve the world's ills. It alone would guarantee that the foreign and domestic policies of the world's nations had no vested theological motives or interests. The resulting atheistic secularism would finally remove "the greatest impediment to our building a global civilization." If the world would just come to its senses, Harris hopes, such a dream could be achieved.

Clearly Sam Harris is no friend of religion. He is rightly worried about the advance of Islam, but is only slightly more tolerant (but still quite ignorant) of Christianity. So why should the pastor or layman keep abreast of his work? For one, he is very popular, and, if Natalie Angier of the *New York Times* is right, he expresses what many people, shocked by 9/11 and mystified by daily reports of ideologically inspired violence, are beginning to think. Moreover, his stated concern for peace and the arguments he employs seem to be the new trend in the thinking of a new and resurgent atheism. Since the publication of his books, more seasoned atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett have even joined ranks with him. What is most troubling, though, is that not only are their books topping the sales charts but their professed concern for world peace, their defiance of fundamentalist expressions of religion, and, of course, their cynicism and skepticism all resonate well with the reading public. This, it seems, will be the new face of unbelief for decades to come.

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Kurt Marquart: Saluting a Fellow Saint

[The following tribute was given during the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in Fort Wayne on January 18, 2007. The Editors]

When Alah Gulab, our contact person in St. Petersburg for The Russian Project, asked about Kurt Marquart last fall, I had the sad duty to tell her that he passed away in September. She had known him only by his passing through to other parts of Russia, but she stated that Dr. Marquart was one of the most exceptional persons she had ever known. He fascinated all of us. This was as true for those who saw him as a defender of the Lutheran faith as it was for those who disagreed with him. He was and will remain unforgettable.

His intellectual capacity was expansive. He was at home in the German and Russian languages. He knew Estonian and taught French. Though he was not a native English speaker, his range of vocabulary and expression placed him in the highest percentile of those who have command of the language. His

expertise was theology, but he was also at home in the worlds of history and science. Kurt came as close to being that ideal Renaissance man as is now possible. He used his scientific knowledge to defend the unborn and dispute the foundations of evolution. He had a love for apologetics in defense of the Christian proclamation.

His journeys took him from Estonia to Austria, then to New York, then Texas where he met his wife Barbara, then to Australia, and from there to Fort Wayne where he served thirty-one years with us. He not only authored a dogmatical treatise on the church but he also taught the church across the globe. Especially important was his foundational work among the young Lutheran church in Haiti, whom he supported with his intellectual and financial gifts. Kurt was as much at home with those of high academic and intellectual achievements as he was with those who were rich in faith but poor as measured by relative poverty. Theological commitment and missionary zeal lived within him in the perfect harmony intended by Christ's great commission.

Yes, he will be remembered for many things, but our church will remember him for his courage in the promotion and defense of our Lutheran confession that he demonstrated in the lecture halls of our seminary as well as in presentations to clergy and laity throughout the United States and the rest of the world. He was the longest serving member in the history of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, and it is unlikely that his record will ever be matched. Shortly before Dr. Robert Preus died, he was given a standard evaluation form used to grade the performance of professors who had served during his administration. These documents have since been destroyed, but I do remember that one professor received straight tens before Preus scratched out the ten next to that professor's teaching abilities in the classroom and replaced it with a nine. Kurt received all tens with no erasures.

Barbara and the other members of his family will treasure their own memories of him, but the rest of us have a claim on him as a member of that family which we call the church. The ministers here today bid farewell to one who was their brother in the preaching of the gospel. His students bid him farewell as their father in Christ. We all salute him as a fellow saint who has attained the glory to which we all strive.

David P. Scaer