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### December 28, 2011: Enlisting the Help of Sam Harris

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Title: Enlisting the Help of Sam Harris

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12/28/2011—I've been reading Sam Harris' book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, in which Harris defends the objectivity of values against moral relativism. He is clearly an ally in my work. I called moral relativism the crisis in American Secularism in my book, *Church, State, and the Crisis in American Secularism*. Harris would agree.

Here is how he puts the general issue: "Many people believe that something in the last few centuries of intellectual progress prevents us from speaking in terms of 'moral truth' and, therefore, from making cross-cultural moral judgments—or moral judgments at all. Having discussed this subject in a variety of public forums, I have heard from literally thousands of highly educated men and women that morality is a myth, that statements about human values are without truth conditions (and are, therefore, nonsensical), and that concepts like well-being and misery are so poorly defined, or so susceptible to personal whim and cultural influence, that it is impossible to know anything about them."

So, what is the problem? Harris has a bug about religion. Religious believers are not moral relativists, so one would think, as I do, that they are allies in this fight. But they are not for Harris because they take morality from sources other than their own experience, informed by science Harris claims generally, but he admits that informed by rational thought would be enough.

Harris just won't compare good religion with good nonreligion. All religions I know emphasize experience and encourage the believer to look to the signs of the times, as Jesus says. In Christianity this is called general revelation and it is available to all human beings. In fact, the scientific tradition arose out of the religious commitment that God made the world for humans to understand and in understanding the world we would better know God.

The basic orientation of religion to truth creates a problem for Harris when he quotes Einstein. Harris tries to debunk the Einstein quote—"science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Harris points out in a footnote that this does not mean Einstein believed in God or accepted unjustified belief. True enough. But just look at the quote Harris is forced to use: "[S]cience can only be created by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling...springs from the sphere of religion."

Harris has the nerve to call this aspiration "the primitive urge to understand the universe." But here he exposes his elitism. Religion is the urge to understand the universe. As is science. I doubt science will be better at it. We shall see.

Harris does not examine his own biases. For example, Harris makes several slighting references to stem cell research opposition and abortion to show how unreasonable religion, and the Catholic Church in particular, are. But he admits that the potential as well as actual well-being of conscious creatures is his definition of morality. He does not do crude addition to compare killing one person to the well-being of the many. So, why is it irrational to oppose the killing of human beings at the earliest stages of their lives? Harris' answer is that these beings are not yet "sentient and suffering human beings". But of course by this argument it is less immoral to kill babies than adults, which is ridiculous, as Harris would probably admit (or would admit except for its consequences to his argument).

The word "potential" here is everything. Once a human being is created, that being is valuable as human. Yes, I may have to kill it, as in the unfortunate living undeveloped twin inside a healthy baby that Harris discusses on page 171. But Harris is stuck in principle promoting fetal organ farms. (I don't mean he admits this). This is all the result of Harris' bias against religion. It keeps him from honestly developing his own thinking.