

# SAM HARRIS

## THE BLOG

### Rational Mysticism

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Tom Flynn, the editor of *Free Inquiry*, has invited me to contribute four essays to this magazine over the course of the next year. This invitation comes after he wrote a mixed, misleading, and ultimately exasperating review of my book, *The End of Faith*, in these very pages.<sup>[1]</sup> Having accepted his invitation, I now feel a mixture of emotions about which psychological science has precious little to say. In this first essay, I will resist the temptation to rise heroically to the defense of my own book—but I will fail.

If anyone has written a book more critical of religious faith than I have, I'm not aware of it. This is not to say that *The End of Faith* does not have many shortcomings—but appealing religious irrationality is not among them. These claims are not as self-serving in this context as they might first appear. While Flynn is guilty of some surprising misinterpretations of my argument,<sup>[2]</sup> his support for my book was fundamentally eroded by something I did, in fact, do: I used the words spirituality and mysticism affirmatively, in an attempt to put the range of human experience signified by these terms on a rational footing. It seems to me that the difficulty Flynn had with this enterprise is not a problem with my book, or merely with Flynn, but a larger problem with secularism itself.

As a worldview, secularism has defined itself in opposition to the whirling absurdity of religion. Like atheism (with which it is more or less interchangeable), secularism is a negative dispensation. Being secular is not a positive virtue like being reasonable, wise, or loving. To be secular, one need do nothing more than live in perpetual opposition to the unsubstantiated claims of religious dogmatists. Consequently, secularism has negligible appeal to the culture at large (a practical concern) and negligible content (an intellectual concern). There is, in fact, not much to secularism that should be of interest to anyone, apart from the fact that it is all that stands between sensible people like ourselves and the mad hordes of religious imbeciles who have balkanized our world, impeded the progress of science, and now place civilization itself in jeopardy. Criticizing religious irrationality is absolutely essential. But secularism, being nothing more than the totality of such criticism, can lead its practitioners to reject important features of human experience simply because they have been traditionally associated with religious practice.

The final chapter of my book, which gave Flynn the most trouble, is devoted to the subject of meditation. Meditation, in the sense that I use the term, is nothing more than a method of paying extraordinarily close attention to one's moment-to-

moment experience of the world. There is nothing irrational about doing this (and Flynn admits as much). In fact, such a practice constitutes the only rational basis for making detailed (first-person) claims about the nature of human subjectivity. Difficulties arise for secularists like Flynn, however, once we begin speaking about the kinds of experiences that diligent practitioners of meditation are apt to have. It is an empirical fact that sustained meditation can result in a variety of insights that intelligent people regularly find intellectually credible and personally transformative. The problem, however, is that these insights are almost always sought and expressed in a religious context. One such insight is that the feeling we call “I”—the sense that there is a thinker giving rise to our thoughts, an experiencer distinct from the mere flow of experience—can disappear when looked for in a rigorous way. Our conventional sense of “self” is, in fact, nothing more than a cognitive illusion, and dispelling this illusion opens the mind to extraordinary experiences of happiness. This is not a proposition to be accepted on faith; it is an empirical observation, analogous to the discovery of one’s optic blind spots. Most people never notice their blind spots (caused by the transit of the optic nerve through the retina of each eye), but they can be pointed out with a little effort. The absence of a reified self can also be pointed out, though this tends to require considerably more training on the part of both teacher and student. The only “faith” required to get such a project off the ground is the faith of scientific hypothesis. The hypothesis is this: if I use my attention in the prescribed way, it may have a specific, reproducible effect. Needless to say, what happens (or fails to happen) along any path of “spiritual” practice has to be interpreted in light of some conceptual scheme, and everything must remain open to rational discussion. How this discussion proceeds will ultimately be decided by contemplative scientists. As I said in my book, if we ever develop a mature science of the mind, most of our religious texts will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers.

What words should we use to acknowledge the fact that the happiest person on this earth at this moment might have spent the last twenty years living alone in a cave? Any experienced meditator knows that this is a serious possibility. (Indeed, I consider it not only possible, but likely.) What can we say about the fact that the conventional sources of human happiness—association with family and friends, positive engagement with society, diverse experiences of physical pleasure, etc.—might be neither necessary nor sufficient to produce happiness in its most profound forms? This is not New Age mumbo jumbo. What secularists like Flynn tend not to realize is that there are genuine, introspective insights that can be terribly difficult to acquire. The lack of general accessibility does not render such insights at all suspect. The average person could spend the rest of his life trying to determine whether string theory makes any sense (and still fail); this is not a measure of whether string theory is mumbo jumbo. As any serious practitioner of meditation knows, there is something to the claims that have been made by mystics over the ages. And yet, the fact that such claims have always been advanced in the language of one or another religious ideology continues to confound secularists.

Flynn condemns my book simply because I have found no better words than spiritual or mystical to denote this rarefied terrain. <sup>[1]</sup> [3](#) As Flynn concedes, I took great pains to distance myself from the unfortunate associations these terms carry in our culture, deluded as it is by absurd religious certainties. Still, Flynn felt that my caveats were insufficient, and he would have had me employ words like “meditative” or “attentional” to describe the experience of human consciousness shorn of the illusion of the human ego. The problem, however, is that there is a kernel of truth in the grandiosity and otherworldly language of religion. It really is possible to have one’s moment-to-moment perception of the world radically transfigured by “attentional” discipline. Such a transfiguration, being both rare and profoundly positive, may occasionally merit a little poetry.

[Link to Article](#)

# Notes

1. Tom Flynn, "Glimpses of Nirvana," *Free Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (February/March 2005).

- Flynn accuses me of "implicit Zionism" when what I explicitly say is this: Judaism is as intrinsically divisive, as ridiculous in its literalism, and as at odds with the civilizing insights of modernity as any other religion. Jewish settlers, by exercising their "freedom of belief" on contested land, are now one of the principal obstacles to peace in the Middle East. They will be a direct cause of war between Islam and the West should one ever erupt over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While I argue that there is a profound ethical disparity between the ways in which the Israelis and their enemies in the Muslim world currently resort to violence, observing this disparity does not make me "a partisan for Israel." I am simply a partisan for civilization.

Flynn also cites a passage as evidence that I do "not view living without religion as an attainable goal." The passage begins:

Faith enables many of us to endure life's difficulties with an equanimity that would be scarcely conceivable in a world lit only by reason.

However, any reader who consults the text will see that I am talking about the false consolations of religious faith. The passage ends with the following:

But the fact that religious beliefs have a great influence on human life says nothing at all about their validity. For the paranoid, pursued by persecutory delusions, terror of the CIA may have great influence, but this does not mean that his phones are tapped.

- I also took considerable heat from Flynn for a few remarks I made about the nature of consciousness. Most atheists appear to be certain that consciousness is entirely dependent upon (and reducible to) the workings of the brain. In the last chapter of the book, I briefly argue that this certainty is unwarranted. I say this as one who is deeply immersed in the neuroscientific and philosophical literature on consciousness: the truth is that scientists still do not know what the relationship between consciousness and matter is. I am not in the least suggesting that we make a religion out of this uncertainty, or do anything else with it. Needless to say, the mysteriousness of consciousness does nothing to make conventional religious notions about God and paradise any more plausible. Still, consciousness remains a genuine mystery, and anyone who attempts to study it is confronted by serious conceptual and empirical problems.

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