RELIGION AS PHANTASMAGORIA: ISLAM IN
THE END OF FAITH

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INTRODUCTION

Ramakrishna, the great nineteenth-century Hindu mystic, reportedly said, “Religion is like a cow. It kicks, but it gives milk too” (quoted in Smith 2003). Ramakrishna’s analogy takes into account religion’s pathological manifestations or ‘kicks,’ while maintaining that, at its core and despite such proclivities, religion is a perennial source of benefit for those in its fold. Sam Harris (2004) could not disagree more. In fact, this sentiment is precisely what he contests in his book. If religion is like a cow, according to Harris (2004, 13–14), its kicks are becoming increasingly dangerous and milk is better found elsewhere: “Our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—antithetical to our survival.” In an age of nuclear weapons, religious violence may set off an unprecedented conflict that threatens humanity as such. Besides the increasingly dire threat that exclusive religious beliefs pose to the world, Harris believes the benefits or ‘milk’ religion provides can be more readily accessed through science. For Harris, religion is an increasingly dangerous anachronism. As such, the course of action is clear: the sacred cow must be slaughtered.

The End of Faith is a vivid, provocative assault on religion and its primary mechanism, faith, which Harris (2004, 65) defines as “unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern.” Not only are faith’s pathologies diagnosed, Harris takes them as evidence of the inherently pathological nature of faith itself. Lest the faithful dismiss Harris as a twenty-first century Marquis de Sade, a sort of antinomian anarchist, it is important to note that Harris not only condemns religion, but correspondingly promotes the rational and scientific pursuit of religion’s fruits, such as sound ethical norms and an understanding of the nature of consciousness and spiritual experience. Harris proposes that it is only religion’s dogmas, myths, and unsubstantiated beliefs that are to be abandoned. The highest values and spiritual insights of traditional religions need not be discarded but simply updated in light of modern,
scientific knowledge; the baby is not to be thrown out with the bathwater (Harris 2004, 43). Indeed, religious leaders such as the Dalai Lama (2005) have made similar arguments regarding religion's need to listen to science (and science's need to listen to religion), and the works of the American philosopher Ken Wilber (2001) attempt just such a synthesis of science and spirituality. However, as I argue in this chapter, Harris's application of science to pursue the meaning of life is, in the case of Islam, abandoned in his analysis of what he opposes.

In the *End of Faith*’s subtitle, Harris places ‘religion’ and ‘terror’ side by side, an association that, in post-9/11 America, readily brings to mind Islam. In making his case against faith, Harris pays particularly close attention to Islam, a faith that he deems to be more dangerous than any other. *The End of Faith*’s fourth chapter is entitled “The Problem with Islam”. This title is telling, as the problem is not simply an offshoot, sect, or political faction of Islam, or even a set of its laws or tenets, but rather the religion itself, in its entirety. The epistemological pitfalls of speaking simply of Islam—a faith as historically, culturally, and doctrinally varied as it is—are many, and Harris succumbs to them with force. This is not to say that generalizations about Islam are of necessity misguided, but Harris is especially simplistic.

Clearly ‘Islam’ is not an ontological entity, a thing that can be located ‘out there’ in the world. However, in spite of this ontological lack, the term ‘Islam’ has real-world implications as a point of reference, or grammar of meaning, shaping social formations, discursive practices, and material culture. As Talal Asad has cogently observed in discussing the West, there is no “integrated Western culture, or a fixed Western identity, or a single Western way of thinking.” However, despite this lack of an essential ‘Westernness,’ Asad maintains that the West is real insofar as “a singular collective identity defines itself in terms of a unique historicity in contrast to all others.” In other words, despite there being no essential, immutable, and static ‘West,’ a collectivity defines itself in terms of the Western history, in distinction to other histories, and hence the term has real-world implications. In sum, broad historical referents such as Islam and the West are not ontologically or essentially real, but real insofar as they inform social action and discourse. Hence, taking into account important anti-essentialist critiques of terms such as the West and Islam, Asad argues that we can still attempt to make reasonable generalizations about such referents: Islam is monotheistic, its primary sources are Arabic; the West includes a Greco-Roman, Hebrew, and European heritage (Asad 1993, 18–19).