

Sam Harris - Philosopher, Author and Pod-cast host

Sam Harris was born in Los Angeles, the son of a western film actor father with a Quaker background. His mother who is Jewish but not religious, wrote and produced TV programmes including the long-running series *The Golden Girls*. Sam was raised by his mother from aged two following his parent's divorce. He describes his upbringing as secular, but not atheist. Harris is married with two daughters and lives in Los Angeles.

Sam Harris majored in English at Stanford University while developing his interest in philosophy. Having experimented with the use of psychoactive drugs at Stanford, he became interested in the idea he might achieve spiritual insight without the use of drugs. That led him to India and Nepal where he studied meditation with Buddhist and Hindu teachers - notably Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the most renowned Buddhist masters and Head of the Tibetan Buddhist School.

Harris completed his B.A. degree in Philosophy at Stanford and a Ph.D in cognitive neuroscience at the University of California at Los Angeles. A particular theme in his doctorate research was the use of MRI scanning in the neural basis of belief, disbelief and uncertainty entitled - *The Moral Landscape: How Science Could Determine Human Values*. His publications include works on philosophy, neuroscience and religion and his podcasts have drawn a large audience and have covered many discussions with notable leaders drawn from the great world religions. His criticism of these religious bodies, in particular Islam, has led to Harris joining Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett in the, depending on one's worldview, notable or ignominious title of *The Four Horsemen of Atheism*. He is particularly opposed to dogmatic belief leading to - *pretending to know things one doesn't know is a betrayal of science and yet is the lifeblood of religion*. Although much of Harris' criticism is directed towards Islam - "a bad idea, held for bad reasons, leading to bad behaviour", he is also very critical of the Christian Right in American politics and liberal christianity providing rhetorical cover for fundamentalism.

Harris holds that there is nothing irrational about seeking the states of mind that lie at the core of many religions: compassion, awe, devotion and feelings of oneness are surely among the most valuable experiences a person can have. Yet - *"Everything of value that people can get from religion can be had more honestly, without presuming anything on insufficient evidence. The rest is self-deception, set to music"*.

Podcast to lookout for may be the ones with Jordan Peterson debating the relationship between religious values and scientific fact in defining truth. Harris donates at least 10% of his Waking Up's profits to highly effective charities: effective altruism - a philosophical and social movement using evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit others as much as possible.

Sam Harris is obviously a controversial philosopher, outspoken on faiths that have been adopted and followed by countless numbers of folk around the world; a world with cultures and laws steeped in religious tradition. Undoubtedly he has practiced what he now does not seek to follow. And, if any of the above tempt you to take serious issue with Sam Harris, it may be expedient to remember he is also a martial arts student and practices Brazilian jiu-jitsu.