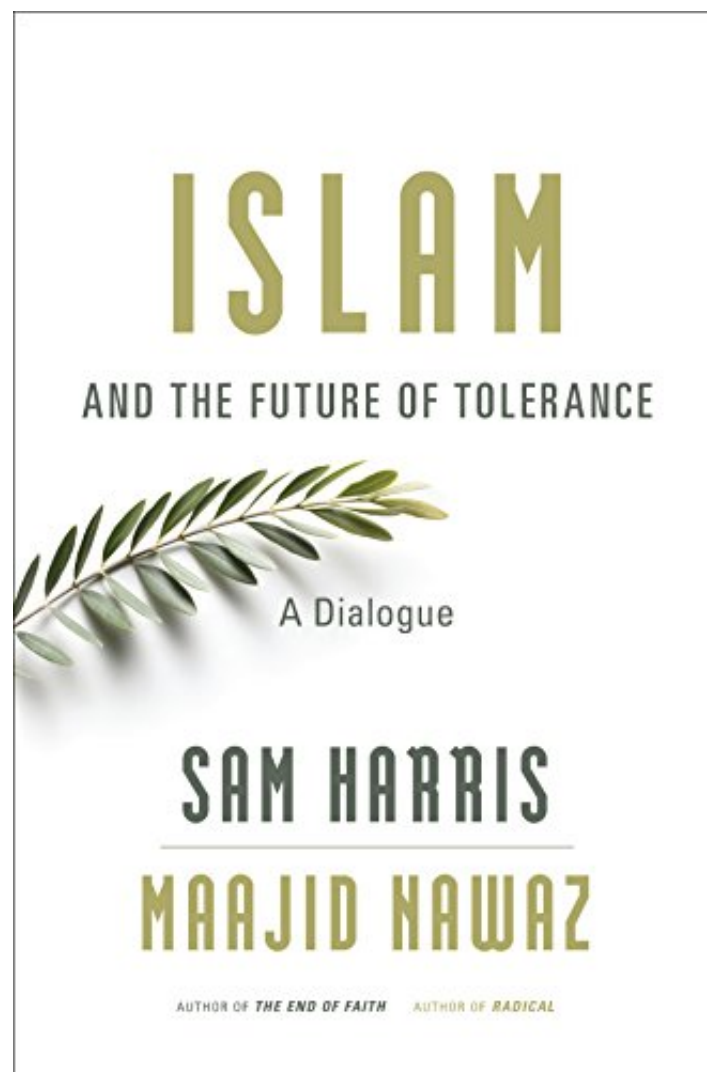


# Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue

by

Sam Harris



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## **Synopsis**

In this dialogue between a famous atheist and a former radical, Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz invite you to join an urgently needed conversation: Is Islam a religion of peace or war? Is it amenable to reform? Why do so many Muslims seem drawn to extremism? The authors demonstrate how two people with very different views can find common ground.















## What people say about this book

Tarik D. LaCour, "Harris and Nawaz are exemplary in this book. Anyone familiar with Sam Harris will know that his claim to fame has been in his criticism of religion and in his indirect founding of the New Atheism which came on the scene after his first book *The End of Faith: Religion Terror and the Future of Reason*. Harris has been particularly critical of Islam, saying that its doctrines are incompatible with the modern world. So, when he sat down with Maajid Nawaz and co-authored *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, those familiar with his work had good reason to be skeptical that there would be much tolerance in the book since his other books have been particularly intolerant. Maajid Nawaz is a completely different guy than Harris. A former Islamist, Nawaz spent several years in Egypt as a prisoner where he had an awakening, politically and spiritually. After being released from prison, he renounced Islamism and became a secular Muslim (a Muslim who does not want Sharia law imposed on the world, but still a believer in the religion). He wrote a memoir, *Radical*, and established a think-tank to counter terrorism known as Quilliam. In short, Nawaz began his life in intolerance, but is now an outspoken proponent of tolerance. Knowing that he would be a more than adequate intellectual opponent for Harris, I thought this had the makings of a good bout, and I was not disappointed. The book begins, and it is in dialogue format throughout, with Harris recalling that he first encountered Nawaz when Nawaz was debating former Muslim and critic of religion Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In the debate, Ali took the side that Islam was a religion of violence, while Nawaz took the side that Islam was a religion of peace. After the debate at a dinner that both authors were at, Harris asked Nawaz if he was being honest when he said he believed that Islam was a religion of peace. Nawaz answered that he was, and that he would be happy to discuss the matter with Harris further at a later time. Nawaz then briefly recaps his story of being an Islamist and then becoming a secular Muslim. He also distinguishes and defines Islam, Islamism, and Jihadism. According to Nawaz, Islam is a religion, and religions are set of ideas so they are neither peaceful nor violent necessarily (though certain interpretations of them can be). Islamism is the desire to impose certain readings or teachings of Islam on society at large. Jihadism is the desire to impose Islamic teachings on society by force. So, all Jihadists are Islamists, but not all Islamists are Jihadists; Nawaz himself was an Islamist but because he never used force to accomplish his aims he was not a jihadist. After clearing up the definitions, Nawaz states that there is no absolute way to interpret scripture, so no one can be absolute about their religion. Since there is no absolutely correct way to interpret scripture, this will lead to pluralism about scripture, which will in turn lead to secularism and humanistic values. If this happens, and it can according to Nawaz, then Islam can find its place as other religions have in a modern, secular world. Harris, who does most of the listening, is not as optimistic as Nawaz about this. He reiterates things he said in other books that it is simply impossible or very unlikely to reform something as long as scripture is respected because while some may reform there will always be those who can say that it is fine for other people to interpret scripture as they choose, some people will choose to interpret it in an Islamist

or Jihadist way, so the problem will always be there. Nawaz agrees that this can be a problem, but recalls the Golden Age of Islam and points out that Islamism and Jihadism are modern phenomena and that the past shows that Muslims can in fact be tolerant. Harris retorts that Islam was imposed and spread from the start by violence, even by the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him). Nawaz does not disagree with this, but points out that there have been eras where Islamism and Jihadism were not significant problems, so it is possible for Muslims to assimilate. The book ends with Harris and Nawaz agreeing that the battle to save the world from Islamism and Jihadism must be fought on multiple fronts. For starters, we cannot be afraid to say, as former U.S. President Barack Obama was, radical Islam. If we are fighting against something, we need to be very clear what it is we are fighting against. Second, we cannot exclude Ex-Muslims and non-Muslims from the fray; we are all in this together. Third, we must all regard pluralism and secularism as the end goals, if everyone can share these values then there is a chance we can win this fight. In the end, this is a war of ideas, and the secularists have better ideas than the Islamists and the Jihadists. The book is well-written and shows thoughtful, informed conversation on both sides. In short, this book is itself a testament of what we are looking for; those of different faiths or no faith at all sharing a seat at the table and talking about their differences openly and clearly with no thought of violence, i.e pluralism and secularism. I do have one criticism of the book, and it is aimed at Nawaz. He states several times that there is no correct reading of scripture, and this is not a view that many religious people will accept. While we may not always agree all the time about a given passage, that does not mean that the passage is therefore meaningless. This is an appeal to mysticism, and the Abrahamic religions in particular shun mysticism (though there Sufism does embrace mysticism). It would be better to say that there are things in religious texts that are not compatible with western society, but that these need to be taken in context of the times and that we need to do careful exegesis in order to get to the bottom of what a text is saying, but it is simply erroneous to say that there is no correct way to read texts, and believing that will not lead to pluralism, secularism, or tolerance. Good argument and a willingness to listen lead to those values. We are going to be dealing with Islam, violence, and the conversation of how to be tolerant for the rest of our lives. Harris and Nawaz' book is a good start in talking about how to have that conversation, and evidence that it can in fact be done. I recommend this book to Muslim, and non-Muslim, because we must solve this problem if the human race wants to live in a tolerant manner."

Alfonso Gilbert, "A Must Read for ALL American Leaders in the Private, Public, and Religious Sectors. Neuroscientist Sam Harris and former radical Islamist Maajid Nawaz engage in an insightful discussion about the current state of Islam. This short book is extremely helpful in understanding a global view of the Muslim world. Sam Harris asks probing questions that we are all asking, and Nawaz is obliged to answer forthrightly and honestly with humility and transparency. Nawaz's responses alone are worth the price of the book. He categorizes the four different levels of Islam and explains the intentions of each: jihadists, Islamism, conservative

(moderate), and liberal Muslims. But Maajid Nawaz also describes his intentions to reform Islam. As a former extremist, he is the founder of the first counter-extremism organization in the world. He is incredibly intelligent and articulate, and as a first-hand participant, Nawaz is on the front lines of understanding the problem of Islam and its 1.6 billion adherents. This is a problem we can't ignore as American's, and one that requires not simply our attention but our participation for the sake of our children and grandchildren. I highly recommend this book to all American leaders in the private, public, and religious sectors."

Anglian Traveller, "A punchy, intelligent & informative dialogue between two smart people. This book is the 128-page transcript of a long-form conversation between Sam Harris and British-born Majid Nawaz, a reformed radical Islamist and now the founding chairman of Quilliam, "a globally active organisation focusing on matters of integration, citizenship & identity, religious freedom, immigration, extremism and terrorism". The result is less an argument between two adversaries pushing their world-view; rather it's two smart insightful guys engaging in an informative and wide-ranging dialogue, genuinely seeking to understand the alarming influence of "Islamism" on the modern world and how to deal with it. Nawaz helpfully clarifies the distinctions between jihadists (globalists like IS or Al Qaida, and regional jihadists like Hamas and Hezbollah); the various types of Islamists (revolutionary or political) who cannot be categorised as jihadists; and the much larger group of conservative moslems worldwide who occasionally sympathise with one or more of the jihadi or Islamist factions but are just as often openly opposed to them. These various groups in certain circumstances intersect and overlap in Venn-diagram fashion, so it is a mistake to think of them all in the same way. Nawaz advocates an Islamic reformation such as that endured by Christianity between the 14th and 17th centuries and an end to the stranglehold of Islamist theocratic dogma, which he sees as anathema to the progressive secular liberal values which increasingly characterise the modern world. Harris argues that this laudable ambition may prove to be idealistic and probably untenable in the face of widespread Islamic dogmatism rooted in scriptural literalism: he makes the point repeatedly (and in different ways) that the jihadists may be essentially more honest in their literalist interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith, that a literal reading of the Koran makes Islam fundamentally unreformable without outright repudiation of its essential tenets of belief, i.e. apostasy. This is a valuable, informative and insightful dialogue between two very smart people about an important subject, a world away from the dumbed-down banter aired in TV and internet debates or the ideologically obsessive "alternative" media which is invariably even worse. Overall: excellent. My only possible gripe would be that the book is too short and the asking price rather high, but on the other hand proofreading and presentation of this smart pocket-sized hardcover volume are first-class."

lewism109, "A Much Needed Dialogue!. Islam and the future of tolerance is an open dialogue and collaboration between Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz, who both discuss the problems of a

subsection of extremists in the name of Islam and provide some eloquent solutions. 128 pages long, both Sam and Maajid suggest excellent points to provide to the debate. Often you'll find in the discussion, both Sam and Maajid will agree on what the other one is saying, providing a much needed progressive dialogue that usually frequently ends up with both sides not agreeing on the middle grounds. As anyone familiar with the recent situations, the topic is taboo or more modestly, controversial. But this book is certainly needed to instigate a much needed discussion between the public, to ensure no misinformation could potentially misguide some people's decisions and thoughts. Finally, this book has made me more open minded to the discussion at hand and hopefully lots more people who are reading the dialogue.”

Eddie Starlink, “Educational and addictive reading. If you want easy one-liner glib answers to today's difficult questions, don't read Sam Harris. For he takes the trouble to analyse difficult questions and to suggest answers not everyone will like. What makes Harris' involvement in this project so impressive is that he is prepared to defer to Nawaz who has the greater and most specific knowledge. I already knew Harris' thoughts on most of these issues but reading Nawaz taught me a lot. I didn't agree with all that Nawaz said. In particular, with one slight exception, I found his suggestion that the literal reading of the Qu'ran is just one of several to involve the kind of disingenuous mental gymnastics that plays into the hands of his opponents. When one has to try so hard to discern reasonableness in a religious text, it should alert one to the implausibility of the premise that the text has a divine author. Even so, Nawaz has a lot to say and is well worth reading. If I had a gripe, it would be that the price tag does not match the slenderness of the volume.”

L Beck, “The Qur'an cannot be questioned, but the Qur'an must be questioned.. Sam Harris is an atheist and a critic of religion who wrote an excellent book, "Letter to a Christian Nation". Maajid Nawaz (so far as I understand) still calls himself a Muslim, but he stands out as one who believes Islam needs a serious reformation. He is an ex-fanatic who left the Jihadist cause and now fights against Islamist extremism, and for liberal democracy. This short book is a discussion between Harris and Nawaz on religious belief in general and the threat from Islamist extremism in particular. It is an excellent read.”

Ebook Tops Reader, “Intelligent, honest discussion. Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz embark on a civilised, honest debate about the religion of Islam without any pre-conceived hatred for the other. This dialogue includes sections where both authors agree with one another and those where the two have disagreements. Neither author misrepresents the other nor do they indulge in ad hominem attacks against the other. It is a dialogue that was thoroughly needed given the current political climate and will, I'm sure, help towards initiating debates and discussions, especially in regions such as the Middle East where these are desperately needed.”



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