



WORTH
A READ

a shifting world

Among writers, there are many ways to change the world. Be they earnest, irreverent or plainly practical, they all have one thing in common: some things are not working the way they are and we need to shift the way we see things.

WORDS: JONATHON HANKS



JONATHON HANKS IS THE FOUNDING PARTNER OF INCITE SUSTAINABILITY, SENIOR ASSOCIATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE PROGRAMME FOR INDUSTRY AND A VISITING SENIOR LECTURER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN'S GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS. HE IS AN ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF MIND SHIFT.

Book review 1

50 facts that should change the world

Jessica Williams

In this recently published book, BBC journalist Jessica Williams provides 50 facts that she believes are "...capable of changing the way that we think – and when it comes to changing the world, that's the most important step we can take".

This is the third – and most significantly revised – edition of her book, the first of which came out in 2004. Each of the 50 statistics that Williams presents is accompanied by a short essay of about five pages that provides the context

to each statistic, outlines the nature of the problem and suggests some solutions for addressing the issue at hand. Described by *The Guardian* as "a research handbook for the No Logo generation", the book includes a list of references for each statistic, as well as a short glossary of relevant campaigning organisations.

Most of the facts raised in her book share the common theme of inequality:

- "Every cow in the European Union is subsidised to the tune of \$2.50 a day, while one billion people around the world have to live on less than \$1 a day."
 - "The world contains 27 million slaves."
 - "China has 44 million missing women."
- But not all the issues seem to have an obvious call for action. How should we respond, for instance, to being told that Brazil has more Avon ladies than

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members of the army? Should we be worried? As for the fact that “a third of Americans believe that aliens have landed in earth”, this would seem a lot less harmful than some of the other peculiar beliefs that many Americans seem to share.

The intention in publishing this book is clear: convinced that individual actions can make a real difference, Williams seeks to change the world by encouraging greater engagement and action by those who read it. Political commentator and environmental journalist, George Monbiot, has suggested that the one thing the global climate change movement is missing, is sufficient “movement”. Hopefully books such as this will act as an inspiration to move.

Book review 2

The end of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason Sam Harris

While critiques of religion are certainly not new, the debate about the potentially negative impacts of faith-based religion has received renewed prominence recently with the publication of three best-sellers on the subject: Sam Harris's *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and The Future of Reason*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

Although these books differ in style and focus, they share the common thesis that religious faith is based on an absurd abrogation of reason and a mutual intolerance of other beliefs, with profoundly destructive social consequences. In the context of growing religious fundamentalism and the increased ability to cause significant harm through modern weaponry, the writers call for a conceptual revolution in which faith-based religion is consigned to the “graveyard of bad ideas”.

A philosopher and neuroscientist,

Book review 3

The Business Guide to Sustainability: Practical Strategies and Tools for Organizations

Darcy Hitchcock and Marsha Willard

Described as a no-nonsense guide on how to ‘green’ your office or business, this book undertakes to deliver practical sustainability strategies for all organisational types in the public and private sector.

Organised by sector (manufacturing, services, and government) and function (top management, marketing and PR, purchasing, facilities, human resources, finance and accounting, and health and safety), the book provides a ‘how to’ manual of useful tools and self-assessments. The focus is very much on the environmental aspect of sustainable development, and is thus of less immediate value to those seeking to address some of the predominantly social concerns that we face in this country.

With its emphasis on providing “easy-to-use checklists, self-assessments and planning tools”, the book is aimed squarely at the operational practitioner level. While it has a particular focus on the ‘value protection’ aspects of sustainability, rather than the more exciting and more strategic opportunities for ‘value creation’, it nevertheless adds value in providing some practical guidance to sustainability practitioners. The book is likely to be of greatest value as a reference source to those who are new to implementing environmental management practices in smaller organisations.

BOOKS FEATURED



- ▶ 50 facts that should change the world – Jessica Williams
- ▶ The end of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason – Sam Harris
- ▶ The Business Guide to Sustainability: Practical Strategies and Tools for Organizations – Darcy Hitchcock and Marsha Willard

Harris, who wrote the first of these three best-sellers, started to write his book the day after the September 11 attacks. The book opens with a short account of a suicide bombing that provides the platform for Harris to launch his blistering critique of the irrationality and intolerance of religious belief that, he suggests, is “leading us, inexorably, to kill one another”. Harris makes a compelling case that we should challenge the special status that religion seems to enjoy – as a subject only to be discussed in extremely polite terms – and suggests that we can no longer afford the luxury of political correctness, arguing that it is time to be more active in exposing and opposing the “life-destroying gibberish” of faith-based religion.

In a spirited attack on religious moderates, he suggests that the greatest problem confronting civilisation is not merely religious extremism but “rather it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself... The very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us to the abyss”.

After reviewing some of the darker sides of the history of faith, including the brutal intolerance of the Spanish Inquisition, Harris provides an uncompromising and potentially controversial critique of Islam. Quoting extensively from the Koran, he suggests that on almost every page the Koran instructs Muslims to despise non-believers, and in so doing clearly prepares the ground for religious conflict. He provides a similarly damning critique of the extent to which religious ideas determine US government policies, citing exam-

ples of statements and decisions by US political leaders that he contends “should be terrifying to anyone who expects that reason will prevail in the inner sanctums of power in the West.” These examples range from former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay’s remarkable statement that attributes the Columbine school attacks to the fact that US schools teach the theory of evolution, to the decision by President Bush to cut off funding to any overseas planning group that provides information on abortion.

In his final chapter, Harris provides what may seem by some to be a surprisingly sympathetic approach to spirituality. Quoting from Eastern mystics and citing developments in modern neuroscience, he reviews the nature of consciousness and our sense of self, arguing that Buddhist meditation practices offer valuable insights. But this does not imply any concession to the supernatural: “Mysticism is a rational enterprise, religion is not”.

Richard Dawkins has suggested that *The End of Faith* should “replace the *Gideon Bible* in every hotel room in the land”. That of course won’t happen. Perhaps equally unlikely is that a book of this nature will shift the minds of those of faith. While the passionate and incisive argument will appeal to the atheists amongst us, and may persuade some agnostics that their position “is an untenable waffle”, it is unlikely to sway those believers for whom faith is supposedly blind to reason.

If Harris’s core thesis is to be believed – that the intolerance and dogma of religion is a threat to a more sustainable future – then the inability for minds to shift on this issue should be a source of some concern. ■