

From Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (Paperback edition, Copyright 2005, W.W.Norton)

"The influence of faith on our criminal laws comes at a remarkable price. Consider the case of drugs. As it happens, there are many substances – many of them naturally occurring – the consumption of which leads to transient states of inordinate pleasure. Occasionally, it is true, they lead to transient states of misery, but there is no doubt pleasure is the norm, otherwise human beings would not have felt the continual desire to take such substances for millennia. Of course, pleasure is entirely the problem with these substances, since piety and pleasure have always had an uneasy relationship.

When one looks at our drug laws – indeed, at our vice laws altogether – the only organizing principle that appears to make sense of them is that anything which might radically eclipse prayer or procreative sexuality as a source of pleasure has been outlawed. In particular, and drug (LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, DMT, MDMA, marijuana, etc.) to which spiritual or religious significance has been ascribed by its users has been prohibited. Concerns about the health of our citizens, or about their productivity, are red herrings in this debate, as the legality of alcohol and cigarettes attest.

The fact that people are being prosecuted and imprisoned for using marijuana, while alcohol remains a staple commodity, is surely the reduction ad absurdum of any notion that our drug laws are designed to keep people from harming themselves or others. Alcohol is by any measure the more dangerous substance. It has no approved medical use, and its lethal use is rather easily achieved. Its role in causing automobile accidents is beyond dispute. The manner in which alcohol relieves people of their inhibitions contributes to human violence, personal injury, unplanned pregnancy, and the spread of sexual disease. Alcohol is also well known to be addictive. When consumed in large quantities over many years, it can lead to devastating neurological impairments, to cirrhosis of the liver, and to death. In the United States alone, more than 100,000 people annually die from its use. It is also more toxic to a developing fetus than any other drug of abuse. (Indeed, "crack babies" appear to have been really suffering from fetal-alcohol syndrome.) None of these charges can be leveled at marijuana. As a drug, marijuana is nearly unique in having several medical applications and no known lethal dosage. While adverse reactions to drugs like aspirin and ibuprofen account for an estimated 7,600 deaths (and 76,000 hospitalizations) each year in the United States alone, marijuana kills no one. Its role as a "gateway drug" now seems less plausible than ever (and it never was plausible.) In fact, nearly everything human beings do – driving cars, flying planes, hitting golf balls – is more dangerous than smoking marijuana in the privacy of one's own home. Anyone who would seriously attempt to argue that marijuana is worthy of prohibition because of the risk it poses to human beings will find that the powers of the human brain are simply insufficient for the job.

And yet, we are so far from the shady groves of reason now that people are still receiving life sentences without the possibility of parole for growing, selling, possessing, or buying what is, in fact, a naturally occurring plant. Cancer patients and paraplegics have been sentenced to decades in prison for marijuana possession. Owners of garden-supply stores have received similar sentences because some of their *customers* were caught growing marijuana. What explains this astonishing wastage of human life

and material resources? The only explanation is that our discourse on this subject has never been obliged to function within the bounds of rationality. Under our current laws, it is safe to say, if a drug were invented that posed no risk of physical harm or addiction to its users but produced a brief feeling of spiritual bliss and epiphany in 100 percent of those who tried it, this drug would be illegal, and people would be punished mercilessly for its use. Only anxiety about the biblical crime of idolatry would appear to make sense of this retributive impulse. Because we are a people of faith, taught to concern ourselves with the sinfulness of our neighbors, we have grown tolerant of irrational uses of state power.

Our prohibition of certain substances has led thousands of otherwise productive and law-abiding men and women to be locked away for decades at a stretch, sometimes for life. Their children have become wards of the state. As if such cascading horror were not disturbing enough, *violent* criminals – murderers, rapists, and child molesters – are regularly paroled to make room for them. Here we appear to have overstepped the banality of evil and plunged to absurdity at its depths.

The consequences of our irrationality on this front are so egregious that they bear close examination. Each year, over 1.5 million men and women are arrested in the United States because of our drug laws. At this moment somewhere on the order of 400,000 men and women languish in U.S. prisons for *nonviolent* drug offenses. One million others are currently on probation. More people are incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses in the United States than are incarcerated, for any reason, in all of Western Europe (which has a larger population). The cost of these efforts, at the federal level alone, is nearly \$20 billion annually. The total cost of our drug laws – when one factors in the expense to the state and local governments and the tax revenue lost by our failure to regulate the sale of drugs – could easily be in excess of \$100 billion dollars each year.

Our war on drugs consumes an estimated 50 percent of the trial time of our courts and the full-time energies of over 400,000 police officers. These are resources that might otherwise be used to fight violent crime and terrorism.

In historical terms, there was every reason to expect that such a policy of prohibition would fail. It is well known, for instance, that the experiment with the prohibition of alcohol in the United States did little more than precipitate a terrible comedy of increased drinking, organized crime, and police corruption. What is not generally remembered is that Prohibition was an explicitly religious exercise, being the joint product of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the pious lobbying of certain Protestant missionary societies.

The problem with the prohibition of any desirable commodity is money. The United Nations values the drug trade at \$400 billion a year. This exceeds the annual budget for the U.S. Department of Defense. If this figure is correct, the trade in illegal drugs constitutes 8 percent of all international commerce (while the sale in textiles makes up 7.5 percent and motor vehicles just 5.3 percent.) And yet, prohibition itself is what makes the manufacture and sale of drugs so extraordinarily profitable. Those who earn their living this way enjoy a 5,000 to 20,000 percent return on their investment, tax-free.

Every relevant indicator of the drug trade – rates of drug use and interdiction, estimates of production, the purity of drugs on the street, etc. – shows that the government can do

nothing to stop it as long as such profits exist (indeed, these profits are highly corrupting of law enforcement in any case.) The crimes of the addict, to finance the stratospheric cost of his lifestyle, and the crimes of the dealer, to protect both his territory and his goods, are likewise the results of prohibition. A final irony, which seems good enough to be the work of Satan himself, is that the market we have created by our drug laws has become a steady source of revenue for terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Shining Path, and others.

Even if we acknowledge that stopping drug use is a justifiable social goal, how does the financial cost of our war on drugs appear in the light of other challenges we face? Consider that it would require only a onetime expenditure of \$2 billion to secure our commercial seaports against smuggled nuclear weapons. At present we have allocated a mere \$93 million for this purpose. How will our prohibition of marijuana use look (this comes at a cost of \$4 billion *annually*) if a new sun ever dawns over the port of Los Angeles? Or consider that the U.S. government can afford to spend only \$2.3 billion each year on the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Taliban and Al Qaeda are now regrouping. Warlords rule the countryside beyond the city limits of Kabul. Which is more important to us, reclaiming this part of the world for the forces of civilization or keeping cancer patients in Berkeley from relieving their nausea with marijuana? Our present use of government funds suggests an uncanny skewing – we might even say derangement – of our national priorities. Such a bizarre allocation of resources is sure to keep Afghanistan in ruins for many years to come. It will also leave Afghan farmers with no alternative but to grow opium. Happily for them, our drug laws still render this a highly profitable enterprise."

The discussion now turns to the vast untapped resource of the hemp plant for material needs. The good people at NORML (National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws) discuss the uses of hemp on their website (www.norml.org), but I shall reproduce their page on hemp use below. Remember that hemp was once used as an energy source, cheap, renewable, and clean. In these times of energy crisis, we should consider all possible resources that present a viable option from fossil fuels. Consider the geopolitical ramifications of reducing our dependency on Middle East oil, and consider the current and impending international conflicts that are, and will be, a result of the clamor for more energy.

"Why are American farmers legally forbidden from growing a plant proclaimed by Popular Mechanics magazine to have the potential to be manufactured into more than 25,000 environmentally friendly products? It's because the plant is hemp -- also known as marijuana -- and for more than 60 years, it has remained the U.S. government's public enemy #1.

What is Hemp?

Hemp is a distinct variety of the plant species *cannabis sativa* L. that contains minimal (less than 1%) amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the primary psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. It is a tall, slender, fibrous plant similar to flax or kenaf. Various parts of the plant can be utilized in the making of textiles, paper, paints, clothing, plastics, cosmetics, foodstuffs, insulation, animal feed and other products.

Hemp produces a much higher yield per acre than do common substitutes such as cotton and requires few pesticides. In addition, hemp has an average growing cycle of only 100 days and leaves the soil virtually weed-free for the next planting.

The hemp plant is currently harvested for commercial purposes in over 30 nations, including Canada, Japan and the European Union. Although it grows wild across much of America and presents no public health or safety threat, hemp is nevertheless routinely uprooted and destroyed by law enforcement. Each year, approximately 98% of all the marijuana eliminated by the DEA's ["Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program"](#) is actually hemp.

Despite America's bureaucratic moratorium on industrial hemp cultivation, a domestic industry exists and continues to grow. U.S. [retailers and manufacturers](#) annually import approximately 1.9 million pounds of hemp fiber, 450,000 pounds of hemp seeds, and 331 pounds of hempseed oil from Canada and other nations that regulate hemp farming. (Federal law permits the importation of hemp fiber, sterilized seeds, and ingestible hemp-based products containing no THC.) In addition, a growing number of health professionals are praising hemp seeds' nutritional value, noting that it's second only to soy in protein and contains the highest concentration of essential amino and fatty acids found in any food. Given the crop's versatility, it's no wonder that hemp has been endorsed by organizations and individuals such as the U.S. Agriculture Department's Alternative Agricultural Research, the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), environmentalist [Ralph Nader](#) and health guru [Andrew Weil](#).

History of Hemp

Researchers trace hemp's history as a fiber and food crop back some 12,000 years. During America's colonial era, many of the founding fathers -- including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson -- espoused its manufacturing for rope, sails and paper. Early settlers also used hemp seeds as a source for lamp oil and some colonies made hemp cultivation compulsory, calling its production necessary for the "wealth and protection of the country."

Hemp continued to be cultivated in America until 1937 when Congress passed the [Marihuana Tax Act](#) outlawing marijuana. Although not a bill specifically aimed at hemp production, legal limitations posed by the legislation put an end to the once prominent industry.

Hemp production briefly re-emerged in 1942 when the federal government encouraged American farmers to grow it for the war effort. Armed with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) film "[Hemp for Victory](#)," thousands of farmers grew hundreds of thousands of acres of hemp for wartime needs. Unfortunately, when World War II ended, so did the government's allowance of hemp cultivation. By 1957, prohibitionists had reasserted a total ban on hemp production. That federal ban remains in effect today.

Where does the DEA Stand on Hemp?

Despite hemp's emergence as a worldwide economic industry, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) remain firmly opposed to it. Currently, only the DEA has the power to license farmers to legally grow hemp, even in those states where local laws permit it. Not surprisingly, the DEA has continued to deny every permit for large-scale hemp farming (In 1999, they did give Hawaii researchers permission to grow a one-quarter acre test plot of the crop.) within America's borders for the last four decades.

In a 1995 USDA "[White Paper](#)," the DEA stated that they are "opposed to any consideration of hemp as a legitimate fiber or pulp product," and recommended that any USDA researcher who wishes to explore the issue must first be briefed by White House anti-drug officials. Since then, DEA officials have stonewalled several state efforts to enact hemp cultivation and research bills by threatening to arrest any farmers who

attempt to grow it. Most recently, President George Bush's spokesman Ari Fleisher answered the question: "Does the President favor the legalization of industrial hemp?" by stating that Bush has not made "any statements ... that would lend one to reach that conclusion."

Hemp Today

Although our federal government refuses to waver on hemp prohibition, public, state and international support is growing. The European Union now subsidizes farmers to grow hemp, which is legally recognized as a commercial crop by the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

In recent years, a number of U.S. states have [commissioned studies](#) recommending hemp as a viable economic crop. Most recently, legislatures in Montana and North Dakota have enacted [legislation](#) licensing farmers to grow hemp (though federal approval still remains necessary), hopefully paving the way for a renewed U.S. hemp cultivation industry in the not-so-distant future.?"