

2007 ASPEN IDEAS FESTIVAL

THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

BELIEVING THE UNBELIEVABLE:  
THE CLASH BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON IN THE MODERN WORLD

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PARTICIPANTS:

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Sam Harris

## P R O C E E D I N G S

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MR. GERSON: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Elliot Gerson, and I'm absolutely delighted on behalf of our sponsor for this track Allstate to introduce our next speaker. Sam Harris is the author of two best-selling books, *The End of Faith*, and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. He has appeared on countless television shows, he has written in many publications and indeed one could almost say that he was the first to launch a recent and very substantial intellectual and literary trend in the United States, carrying over into Europe, where people speak, very seriously, about faith and the lack of faith.

He is a graduate in philosophy from Stanford, he studied religion, extensively, over many, many years. He is also one of -- probably because of the best-selling status of his books and the demand for him as a speaker, he's very slow in getting his doctorate in neuroscience, but he assures me he will still do that some day.

One thing though, I think that can safely be said about Sam in terms of his intellectual impact and his contribution to the free exchange of ideas. While I think

1 it's probably still safe to say that it will be a very,  
2 very long time before a self-proclaimed atheist could be  
3 elected to public office in this country, unlike most  
4 countries in Western Europe, I think since Sam's  
5 pioneering book, and I think this is something that has to  
6 be applauded by everyone who believes in free speech and  
7 tolerance that people who are not of faith at least have  
8 the comfort in social settings to acknowledge their lack  
9 of faith in a way that really has not been the case in  
10 much of American cultural and social tradition.

11 Sam indicates that he himself didn't use the  
12 word atheist of his own opinions until after his book.  
13 But he again has generated, I think, enormous interest,  
14 controversy and debate. And I think that is healthy for  
15 people of faith as well as people without faith. I'm very  
16 pleased to introduce Sam Harris.

17 MR. HARRIS: How come you're all not at Walter  
18 Isaacson's talk on Einstein, even I want to be at Walter's  
19 talk on Einstein. Well, you have all made a terrible  
20 mistake. While I often -- can you all hear me okay -- I  
21 often begin any talk on this subject with an apology.  
22 Because I think I am destined to say some very derogatory

1 things about religion. And given that we live in a  
2 country where 90 percent of people believe in a biblical  
3 God, I think, I am destined to offend some of you here. I  
4 want to assure you that is not the point. It is not the  
5 point of my being here. It is not the point of my writing  
6 my books, I'm not being deliberately provocative. I'm  
7 simply extremely worried about the role that religion is  
8 playing in our world.

9 I think religion is the most divisive and  
10 dangerous ideology that we have ever produced. And what  
11 is more it is the only ideology that has systematically  
12 protected from criticism both from within and without. It  
13 remains taboo, you can criticize someone's beliefs really  
14 on any subject but it remains taboo to criticize their  
15 beliefs about God. And I think we are paying an  
16 extraordinary price for maintaining this taboo. So I'm  
17 going to break this taboo rather enthusiastically over the  
18 next hour. I will leave some time for questions and I'm  
19 happy to take your criticism.

20 I also want to point out upfront there is  
21 nothing that I'm about to say that should be construed as  
22 a denial of the possibilities of spiritual experience and

1 indeed of the importance of spiritual experience. And  
2 that is a subject I will come back to at the end. Here is  
3 my basic concern. Our ability to cause ourselves harm is  
4 now spreading with 21st-century efficiency, and yet we are  
5 still, to a remarkable degree, drawing our vision of how  
6 to live in this world from ancient literature. This  
7 marriage of modern technology, destructive technology and  
8 iron age philosophy is a bad one for reasons that I think  
9 nobody should have to specify much less argue for, and yet  
10 arguing for them has taken up most of my time since  
11 September 11, 2001. That day that 19 pious men showed our  
12 pious nation just how socially beneficial religious  
13 certainty can be. You know, as someone who has spent a  
14 few years publicly criticizing religion, I have become  
15 quite familiar with how people rise to the defense of God.

16 As it turns out there are not a hundred ways of  
17 doing this -- there appear to be just three. Either a  
18 person argues that a specific religion is true or he  
19 argues that religion is useful and indeed so useful that  
20 it might be necessary, or he argues that atheism is  
21 essentially another religion, dogmatic, intolerant or  
22 otherwise worthy of contempt. And I want to differentiate

1 these three strands of argument because they regularly run  
2 together and any conversation between a believer and a  
3 nonbeliever is liable to fall into one of these ruts.

4           Let us begin with the specific claim that a  
5 given religion is true. There are two problems with  
6 arguing this. The first is that as Bertrand Russell  
7 pointed out, over a century ago, they can't all be true.  
8 I mean given the sheer diversity of religions on offer.  
9 Even if we knew that one of them was absolutely true. I  
10 mean even if we knew that this was God's multiple choice  
11 exam here; is it a, Judaism; b, Christianity; c, Islam.  
12 Even if we knew we were in this situation, every believer  
13 should expect to wind up in hell purely as a matter of  
14 probability. It seems to me this should give religious  
15 people pause before they espouse their religious  
16 certainties. It never does but it should.

17           The second problem with arguing for the truth of  
18 religion is that the evidence for our religious doctrines  
19 is either terrible or non-existent. And this subsumes all  
20 claims about the existence of the existence of a personal  
21 God, the divine origin of a certain books, the virgin  
22 birth of certain people, the veracity of ancient miracles,

1 all of it.

2           Consider Christianity, the entire doctrine is  
3 predicated on the idea that the gospel account of the  
4 miracles of Jesus is true. This is why people believe  
5 Jesus was a son of God, divine etc. This textual claim --  
6 this textual claim is problematic because everyone  
7 acknowledges that the Gospels follow Jesus' ministry by  
8 decades and there is no extra biblical account of his  
9 miracles. But the truth is quite a bit worse than that.  
10 The truth is even if we had multiple contemporaneous  
11 eyewitness accounts of the miracles of Jesus it still  
12 would not provide sufficient basis to believe that these  
13 events actually occurred. Why not? Well, the problem is  
14 that first-hand reports of miracles are quite common even  
15 in the 21st-century.

16           I have met literally hundreds at this point of  
17 Western educated men and women who think that their  
18 favorite Hindu or Buddhist guru has magic powers. The  
19 powers ascribed to these gurus are every bit as outlandish  
20 as those ascribed to Jesus. I, actually, remain open to  
21 evidence of such powers. The fact is that people who tell  
22 these stories desperately want to believe them. All to my

1 knowledge lack the kind of corroborating evidence we  
2 should require before believing that nature's laws have  
3 been abrogated in this way. And people who believe these  
4 stories show an uncanny reluctance to look for non-  
5 miraculous causes.

6           But it remains a fact that yogis and mystics are  
7 said to be walking on water and raising the dead and  
8 flying without the aid of technology; materializing  
9 objects, reading minds, foretelling the future. Right  
10 now, in fact all of these powers have been ascribed to  
11 Satya Sai Baba, the South Indian guru by an uncountable  
12 number of eyewitnesses. He even claims to have been born  
13 of a virgin, which is not all that uncommon a claim in the  
14 history of religion or in history generally. Genghis  
15 Khan, supposedly, was born of a virgin, as was Alexander.  
16 Apparently parthenogenesis doesn't guarantee that you're  
17 going to turn the other cheek.

18           But Satya Sai Baba is not a fringe figure. He  
19 is not the David Koresh of Hinduism. His followers threw  
20 a birthday party for him recently and a million people  
21 showed up. So there are vast numbers of people who  
22 believe he is a living god. You can even watch his

1 miracles on YouTube; prepare to be underwhelmed. Maybe  
2 it's true that he has an Afro of sufficient diameter as to  
3 suggest a total detachment from the opinions of his fellow  
4 human beings. But I'm not sure this is reason enough to  
5 worship him; in any case. So, consider as though for the  
6 first time the foundational claim of Christianity. The  
7 claim is this that miracle stories of a sort that today  
8 surround a person like Satya Sai Baba become especially  
9 compelling when you set them in the pre-scientific  
10 religious context of the first century Roman Empire  
11 decades after their supposed occurrence. We have Satya  
12 Sai Baba's miracle stories attested to by thousands upon  
13 thousands of living eyewitnesses. And they don't even a  
14 merit an hour on the Discovery Channel. But you place a  
15 few miracle stories in some ancient books and half the  
16 people on this earth think it a legitimate project to  
17 organize their lives around them. Does anyone else see a  
18 problem with that?

19           Speaking more generally, Christianity, Judaism,  
20 and Islam are founded on the claim that the Bible and the  
21 Koran were dictated by the Creator of the Universe. There  
22 is a Creator, there is a Personal God and he occasionally

1 writes books. He doesn't code software, he doesn't  
2 produce films, Mel Gibson's claim to have been toiling all  
3 the while under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I think,  
4 is probably an exception here. But in any case God is  
5 principally an author of books.

6           And this idea has achieved credibility because  
7 the contents of these books are deemed to be so profound  
8 that they could not possibly have been produced by the  
9 human mind. Please consider how implausible this is.  
10 Consider how differently we treat scientific texts and  
11 discoveries. In the year 1665, beginning in the summer of  
12 1665, Isaac Newton went into isolation to dodge the  
13 outbreak of plague that was incidentally laying waste to  
14 the pious men and women of England. And when he had  
15 emerged from his solitude he had invented the integral  
16 differential calculus, he had discovered the laws of  
17 universal gravitation in motion, he had set the field of  
18 optics on its foundation. Many scientists think this is  
19 the most awe inspiring display of human intelligence in  
20 the history of human intelligence. And yet no one is  
21 tempted to ascribe this to divine agency. We know that  
22 these accomplishments were affected by a mortal and a very

1 unpleasant mortal at that.

2           And yet literally billions of us deem the  
3 contents of the Bible and the Koran so profound as to rule  
4 out the possibility of terrestrial authorship.

5 Now, given the depth and breadth of human achievement I  
6 think this is almost a miracle in its own right. It seems  
7 to me a miraculous misappropriation of awe. I mean it  
8 took two centuries of continuous human ingenuity on the  
9 part of some of the smartest people who have ever lived to  
10 significantly improve upon Newton's achievement. How  
11 difficult would it be to improve the Bible, I mean, anyone  
12 in this tent could improve this supposedly inerrant text  
13 scientifically, historically, ethically, spiritually in a  
14 matter of moments. Consider the possibility of improving  
15 the 10 Commandments. This might seem to be setting the  
16 bar kind of high because this is the only part of the  
17 Bible, the only text that God felt the need to physically  
18 write himself and in stone. Consider the second  
19 commandment; thou shalt not erect any graven images. Is  
20 this really the second most important thing, upon which to  
21 admonish all future generations of human beings? I mean,  
22 is this as good as it gets ethically and spiritually.

1           You remember the Muslims who rioted by the  
2 hundreds of thousands over cartoons. What got them so  
3 riled up? Well, this is it, the second commandment. Now,  
4 was all that pious mayhem, the burning of embassies, the  
5 killing of nuns, was all of that some kind of great  
6 flowering of spiritual and ethical intelligence, or was it  
7 egregious medieval stupidity? Well, come to think of it,  
8 it was egregious medieval stupidity. The truth is that  
9 almost any precept we would put in place of the second  
10 commandment would improve the wisdom of The Bible. How  
11 about don't mistreat children, how about don't pretend to  
12 know things you do not know.

13           Or what about just try not to deep fry all of  
14 your food? Could we live with the resulting proliferation  
15 of graven images, I think we would manage somehow. So I  
16 submit to you that there is not a person on this earth who  
17 has good reason to believe that The Bible and The Koran  
18 are the product of omniscient intelligence. And yet  
19 billions of people claim to know that they are the Word of  
20 God.

21           In fact, 78 percent of the American population  
22 claims to know that The Bible is the Word of God. Seventy

1 percent of college graduates believe that The Bible is the  
2 Word of God. So just leave aside questions of religion's  
3 truth for a moment. The second way of arguing in defense  
4 of God is to argue that religion is useful, and so useful  
5 that it may in fact be necessary. Now, this line of  
6 argument is also problematic for a few reasons. The first  
7 to say, it really is a total non sequitur. This is not --  
8 even if religious belief was exquisitely useful, I don't  
9 doubt there are circumstances in which it is in fact  
10 useful, but even if it were useful across the board this  
11 would not give us reason to believe that a personal God  
12 exists, or that anyone of our books are his word.

13           The fact that certain ideas are useful or  
14 motivating or give people meaning in their lives or the  
15 fact that the idea that God has a plan for me or  
16 everything happens for a reason, the fact that such ideas  
17 are consoling, does not offer the slightest reason to  
18 believe that they're true. And in fact, ironically they -  
19 - even if we had good scientific reasons to believe that  
20 these ideas were true, their power to console us wouldn't  
21 even offer an additional reason to believe that they're  
22 true.

1           I mean even if the cosmologists and the  
2   physicists came forward suddenly and said, you know, sorry  
3   for the misunderstanding guys, but it seems there is a God  
4   and he has a plan for you. The fact that so many of us  
5   would find this consoling would give us further reason to  
6   be skeptical in scientific terms, this is why we have  
7   phrases like wishful-thinking, and self-delusion and self-  
8   deception. This is why scientists do double-blind control  
9   studies wherever possible, this is why they submit their  
10  data for peer review. If we have conquered any ground in  
11  our career of rationality it is on this point, there is a  
12  profound difference between having -- between having good  
13  reasons for believing something and simply wanting to  
14  believe it.

15           Now, of course, there are other reasons to doubt  
16  the usefulness of religion, and many of these are  
17  enunciated on a daily basis by bomb blasts. I mean, how  
18  useful is it that millions of Muslims believe in the  
19  metaphysics of martyrdom? How useful is it that the Sunni  
20  and the Shia in Iraq have such heartfelt religious  
21  differences? How useful is it that so many Jewish  
22  settlers think that the creator of the universe promised

1       them a patch of desert on the Mediterranean?

2                       How useful has Christianity's anxiety about sex  
3       been these last 70 generations? Now, those who conflate  
4       usefulness and truth in defense of religion generally  
5       argue that religion provides the most reliable foundation  
6       for morality. Now, again before we even -- we're even  
7       tempted to evaluate this claim, please notice that it is a  
8       non sequitur, it's not -- even if religion made people  
9       moral, this would not provide evidence for the existence  
10      of God or that Jesus is his son, or any specific doctrinal  
11      proposition to which people are attached. Every religion  
12      could function like a placebo, they could be extremely  
13      useful and entirely barren of content. But let's talk for  
14      a moment about the supposed link between morality and  
15      religion.

16                      It seems to me that religion gives people bad  
17      reasons to be good, where good reasons are actually  
18      available. I mean ask yourself, which is more moral?  
19      Helping the poor, feeding the hungry, defending the weak,  
20      out of a mere concern for their wellbeing, or doing so  
21      because you think the creator of the universe wants you to  
22      do it.

1           The truth is people do not need to be threatened  
2 with damnation to love their children, to love their  
3 friends, to want to collaborate with strangers, or indeed  
4 to recognize that helping strangers can be one of their  
5 greatest sources of happiness. And what kind of morality  
6 is it that is entirely predicated on a self-interested  
7 desire to escape damnation? This seems to bypass the very  
8 core of what we mean by morality, which is an actual  
9 concern for the welfare of other human beings. Clearly it  
10 is possible to teach our children to form such a concern  
11 and to grow in empathy and compassion without lying to  
12 ourselves or to them about the nature of the universe,  
13 without pretending to know things we do not know. You can  
14 teach your children the golden rule as an utterly wise  
15 ethical precept without pretending to know that Jesus was  
16 born of a virgin.

17           And it's also worth observing that the most  
18 atheistic societies on the planet like Sweden and Denmark  
19 and the Netherlands are in many respects the most moral,  
20 they have rates of violent crime that are far lower than  
21 our own in the U.S. And they are more generous both  
22 within their own population and in the developing world on

1 a per capita basis. Sweden, which opposed the war in  
2 Iraq, has nevertheless admitted more Iraqi refugees into  
3 its borders than any country and many more than the U.S.  
4 has.

5           So if you're looking for a state model of  
6 Christian charity, the most atheistic societies at this  
7 moment fit it better than the most Christian societies do.  
8 What about this notion that we get our morality out of  
9 scripture? Well, clearly we don't get our most basic  
10 moral impulses out of scripture, because these can be seen  
11 emerging very early. I mean toddlers, 18-months old will  
12 spontaneously try to comfort somebody who looks upset.  
13 And a person clearly doesn't learn that cruelty is wrong  
14 by reading the Bible, the Koran, because if you don't  
15 already know that going in, you're just going to be  
16 confronted with, with endless celebrations of cruelty in  
17 these texts.

18           And these books are bursting with celebrations  
19 of cruelty, both human and divine. The God of the Bible  
20 hates sodomy and will kill you for it, but he rather  
21 enjoys the occasional human sacrifice. But I think the  
22 very least we can say he doesn't quite have his priorities

1 straight. In the Old Testament we witnessed the most  
2 immoral behavior imaginable. Genocide, ethnic cleansing,  
3 sexual slavery, the murder of children, kidnapping.

4 All of it not only permitted by God, but  
5 mandated by God. And if you doubt this take another look  
6 at books like Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and  
7 2nd Samuel and Numbers, and 1st and 2nd Kings, and  
8 Zechariah. I mean these books -- in these books, the most  
9 unethical behavior is celebrated. If these events  
10 occurred in our own time, half the prophets and kings of  
11 Israel would be shackled and brought to The Hague for  
12 crimes against humanity, including Moses for slaughtering  
13 the Medinites, including Joshua for slaughtering the  
14 Malachites, including Elijah for slaughtering the prophets  
15 of Baal. These men by our standards today they were utter  
16 psychopaths, as was Abraham for -- as Christopher Hitchens  
17 recently put it, "For taking such a long and gloomy walk  
18 with his son Isaac."

19 And you might wonder well, what about the 10  
20 Commandments? What about "Thou shall not murder." Well,  
21 the problem is the Ten Commandments simply give us more  
22 bad reasons to kill people. I mean what are you supposed

1 to do when your best friend breaks the Sabbath or erects a  
2 graven image, or takes the lord's name in vain? You're  
3 supposed to kill him. And if you're unwilling to kill  
4 him, your neighbors are supposed to kill you.

5           Is this really the best book we have on  
6 morality? Is it even a good book? Now, happily most  
7 Christians and Jews now disregard the morality on offer in  
8 the Old Testament. And they rationalize the barbarity we  
9 find there by saying, oh, this was appropriate to the  
10 time, it was appropriate to the ancient world. The idea  
11 being that the Canaanites were so ill-behaved, that just  
12 getting together a short list of reasons to kill your  
13 neighbor and sticking to it was a great improvement over  
14 the general barbarity of the time. No, it wasn't. It was  
15 within the moral compass of human beings then to recognize  
16 that killing somebody for adultery was evil. The Buddha  
17 managed it, Mahavira, the Jain patriarch managed it,  
18 numerous Greek philosophers managed it.

19           So Jews and Christians are simply lying to  
20 themselves when they talk about the impediments to  
21 morality that prevailed in the 5th century BC. And the  
22 other thing to notice is that rationalizing the barbarism

1 we find in the Old Testament merely renders it irrelevant,  
2 it doesn't render these books morally wise. I mean it is  
3 faint praise indeed, if the best that can be said of much  
4 of scripture is it can now be safely ignored.

5           Now, and despite what Christians say on the  
6 subject, the New Testament isn't so good as to make The  
7 Bible a reliable basis of morality. In fact, much of the  
8 book is an embarrassment to anyone who would say it's a  
9 moral book, much or less a perfectly moral book. And  
10 nowhere is this clearer than on the question on slavery.  
11 And the truth is The Bible in its totality, Old Testament,  
12 New Testament, support slavery. If we recognize anything,  
13 if we converge on any point in ethical terms now it is  
14 that slavery is evil. Nowhere in the Bible is this evil  
15 recognized much less repudiated. The slave holders of the  
16 south were on the winning side of the theological  
17 argument, they knew it, they never stopped talking about  
18 it. The best God does in the Old Testament is to admonish  
19 us not to beat our slaves so badly that we would injure  
20 their eyes or their teeth, or not to beat them so badly  
21 with a rod that they die on the spot, if they die after a  
22 day or two, no problem.

1           I think it should go without saying that this is  
2 not the kind of moral insight that got rid of slavery in  
3 the United States. Well, consider the treatment of women.  
4 And from millennia the great theologians and prophets of  
5 religions have set to work on the riddle of womanhood and  
6 the results in various times and places has been widow  
7 burning and honor killing, and genital mutilation, a  
8 cultic obsession with virginity, just other forms of  
9 physical and physiological abuses, so kaleidoscopic in  
10 variety as to scarcely admit of being summarized. Now, I  
11 have no doubt that much of this sexist evil predates  
12 religion and can be ascribed to our biology, but there's  
13 no question that religion promulgates and renders  
14 sacrosanct attitudes toward women that would be unseemly  
15 in a brachiating ape. Now, while man was made in the  
16 image of God, women was made in the image of man according  
17 to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Humanity therefore is  
18 derivative, it's ersatz.

19           The Old Testament values the life of women at  
20 one half to two thirds that of a man, the Koran says that  
21 the testimony of two women is required to offset the  
22 testimony of one man, and every women is deserving of one

1 half her brother's share of inheritance. But the Biblical  
2 God has made it perfectly clear that women are expected to  
3 live in absolute subjugation to their fathers, until the  
4 moment they're pressed into connubial service to their  
5 husbands.

6           And the New Testament offers no relief, and  
7 Saint Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, "Wives  
8 be subject to your husbands as to the Lord, for the  
9 husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of  
10 the Church. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let  
11 wives be subject to their husbands in all things." The  
12 Koran delivers the same message. And on most translations  
13 says that disobedient wives should be whipped or scourged  
14 or beaten.

15           The eleventh-century sage Al-Ghazali, perhaps  
16 the most influential Muslim since Mohammed, described a  
17 women's duties this way, "She should stay at home and get  
18 on with her spinning. She should not go out often. She  
19 must not be well informed, nor must she be communicative  
20 with her neighbors, and only visit them when absolutely  
21 necessary. She should take care of her husband and  
22 respect him in his presence and in his absence and seek to

1 satisfy him in everything. She must not leave the house  
2 without his permission, and if given his permission, she  
3 must leave surreptitiously. She should put on old clothes  
4 and take the deserted streets and alleys, avoid markets,  
5 make sure that a stranger does not hear her voice or  
6 recognize her.

7 She must not speak to a friend of her husband's  
8 even in need. Her sole worry should be her virtue, her  
9 home as well as her prayers and her fast. If a friend of  
10 her husband calls when the latter is absent, she must not  
11 open the door nor reply to him, in order to safeguard her  
12 and her husband's honor. She should accept what her  
13 husband gives her as sufficient sexual needs at any  
14 moment; she should be clean and ready to satisfy her  
15 husband's sexual needs at any moment.

16 Now, recall the blissful lives of women in  
17 Afghanistan under the Taliban or think about the millions  
18 of women who even now are forced to wear the veil under  
19 Islam or who are forced into these forced marriages with  
20 men they have never met. And you will realize that these  
21 kinds of religious opinions have consequences. The net  
22 effect of religion, especially in the Abrahamic tradition,

1 has been to demonize female sexuality, and portray women  
2 as morally and intellectually inferior to men. Every  
3 woman, it is imagined, holds the honor of the men in her  
4 lives for ransom, and is liable to tarnish it with a  
5 glance or destroy it outright through sexual indiscretion.

6 In this context, rape is actually a crime that  
7 one man commits against another man, it's -- the woman is  
8 only shame's vehicle, and often culpably acquiescent being  
9 all blandishments and guile and winking treachery. In The  
10 Old Testament in Deuteronomy 22, God says that, "If a  
11 woman doesn't scream loudly enough, while being raped, she  
12 should be stoned to death as an accessory to her own  
13 defilement." There is no escaping the view in the Bible  
14 and the Koran, that women have been put on earth to serve  
15 men, to keep their homes in order, and to be incubators of  
16 sons.

17 So I think this is a fact that really cannot be  
18 disputed, if we ever achieve a global civilization that  
19 truly values and honors the rights and capabilities of  
20 women it will not be because we paid more attention to our  
21 holy books.

22 So to summarize, the basic claim that we get our

1 morality from religion is clearly false. The claim that  
2 we are the only species that has moral impulses is also  
3 false. Clearly, our ability to co operate with one  
4 another can be explained in evolutionary terms. We've --  
5 chimpanzees with whom we share 99 percent of our DNA, find  
6 one another's emotional lives contagious, just as we do.  
7 They are motivated to reconcile after disputes, to comfort  
8 one another. Chimpanzees have even died trying to save  
9 other chimpanzees from drowning; they react negatively to  
10 situations that they perceive as unfair like the unequal  
11 distribution of food. Given how gregarious all primates  
12 are, it is not a surprise that evolution would have  
13 selected for a variety of ethical concerns and social  
14 instincts.

15           Now religious people, I think, are right to  
16 believe that our morality isn't merely a product of  
17 culture, it is deeply hardwired in us. And it clearly is  
18 massively empowered by our ability to speak and to write,  
19 I mean, language gives us the capacity to extend our moral  
20 horizons beyond our mere family and kin, and even beyond  
21 our species, but is also, it should be pointed out, that  
22 language also empowers our hatred and stupidity to a

1 remarkable degree and we are the only species to my  
2 knowledge that can forsake life saving medical research,  
3 demonize homosexuals or fly planes into buildings because  
4 of what we tell one another about God.

5           The fact is, the basic fact is on this point of  
6 morality is that we decide what is good in our good books.  
7 I mean, we come to the *Bible* and we see that it says in  
8 Leviticus, "If a woman is not a virgin on her wedding  
9 night, you are supposed to stone her to death on her  
10 father's doorstep." We choose to reject this pearl of  
11 ancient wisdom, and then we choose to emphasize something  
12 like the golden rule, so that the guarantor of our  
13 morality is in our brains, not in our books.

14           So I've spoken about the problems in arguing  
15 that religion is true and arguing that religion is useful.  
16 The last way of defending God is to argue that atheism is  
17 dogmatic intolerance or otherwise of worthy of reproach.  
18 Now, as I pointed out in my second book *Letter to a*  
19 *Christian Nation*, atheism is really a term we do not need.  
20 We -- in the same way that we don't have a word for  
21 someone who's not an astrologer, you know --

22           (Laughter)

1           MR. HARRIS: You know, we don't have websites  
2 for non-astrologers, there are no groups for non-  
3 astrologers. Nobody wakes up in the morning feeling the  
4 need to remind himself that he is not an astrologer. The  
5 irony is that atheism is completely without content, it is  
6 not a philosophical position, and all religious people are  
7 atheists with respect to everyone else's religion. I  
8 mean, we're all atheists with respect to the thousands of  
9 dead gods who lie in that mass grave we call mythology,  
10 think of Thor and Isis and Zeus. You know, these were  
11 once gods in good standing among our ancestors. Everyone  
12 now rejects them, well actually not everyone, I  
13 occasionally get hate mail from people who do believe in  
14 Zeus, but that's another story.

15           But the -- more importantly, every Christian  
16 rejects the claims of Islam, just as I do. You know  
17 Muslims claim they have the perfect word of the creator of  
18 the universe. Why do they believe this -- because it says  
19 so in the book; sorry, not good enough. So this term  
20 "atheism" really is misleading, we're talking about  
21 specific truth claims and their evidence or lack thereof.  
22 Now, what about the charge that atheism is dogmatic?

1           Let's get this straight. Jews, Christians, and  
2 Muslims claim that their holy books are so profound, so  
3 prescient of humanity's needs that they could have only  
4 been written by an omniscient being. An atheist is simply  
5 a person who has entertained this claim, read the books,  
6 and found the claim to be ridiculous. This is not  
7 dogmatism. There is nothing that an atheist needs to  
8 believe on insufficient evidence in order to reject the  
9 biblical God.

10           What dogma have we all embraced to not take  
11 Apollo and Zeus into account as we go about our day? What  
12 -- would it be dogmatic to doubt that the Iliad or the  
13 Odyssey was dictated by the creator of the universe? The  
14 atheists are simply saying, as Carl Sagan did, that  
15 extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. If  
16 ever there were an antidote to dogmatism, this is it.  
17 There is a related claim that atheists and scientists  
18 generally are arrogant, now this is rather ironic.

19           The truth is, is that, when scientists don't  
20 know something like why the universe came into being or  
21 how the first self-replicating molecules formed on earth -  
22 - they tend to admit it. Pretending to know things you do

1 not know is a profound liability inside us. You get  
2 punished for this rather quickly, but pretending to know  
3 things you do not know is the life blood of faith based  
4 religion.

5 Any -- this is really one of the profound  
6 ironies of religious discourse. In the -- the frequency  
7 with which you can hear religious people praise themselves  
8 for their humility --

9 (Laughter)

10 MR. HARRIS: While tacitly claiming to know  
11 things about cosmology and physics and chemistry and  
12 paleontology that no scientist knows. Any person who  
13 dignifies Genesis as an account of creation or as even as  
14 informative is essentially saying to someone like Stephen  
15 Hawking, "Stephen, you are a smart guy and you know, I see  
16 a lot of equations over there, but you don't enough about  
17 cosmology." You know, it says here that God did this in  
18 six days and then rested on the seventh; and I don't see  
19 how you've really grappled with the nuances of the  
20 biblical account. Then this would be amusing if we're not  
21 having such disastrous effect upon our public policy. It  
22 is impeding medical research and the teaching of science

1 in this country. 30 percent of biologists -- biology  
2 teachers in the United States at the high school level  
3 don't even mention evolution, because of the hassle  
4 occasioned by -- just the religious hysteria that it  
5 provokes in their students and their students' parents.

6 We all remember the recent presidential debate  
7 where three republican candidates for the presidency  
8 solemnly raised their hands to testify that they don't  
9 believe in evolution, and there was no -- there was no  
10 follow-up question.

11 (Laughter)

12 MR. HARRIS: I mean, this is embarrassing and it  
13 seems like every few months, the opinion page of the *New*  
14 *York Times* publishes another defense of this kind of  
15 ignorance. There is no question that this is eroding our  
16 stature in the eyes of the rest of the developed world.  
17 It is not arrogant or dogmatic to point this out, it seems  
18 to me that our intellectual honesty lives or dies in this  
19 trench.

20 Now it is also commonly imagined that atheists  
21 think there is nothing beyond human life and human  
22 understanding. The truth is that atheists are free to

1 admit that there is much about the universe we don't  
2 understand, I mean, it is obvious we don't understand the  
3 universe. But it is even more obvious that neither the  
4 Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding.

5           There could be life on other planets, complex  
6 life, technical -- technically accomplished civilizations.  
7 I mean, just imagine a civilization a million years old as  
8 opposed to a few thousand. Atheists are free to imagine  
9 this possibility; they are also free to admit that if such  
10 brilliant extra terrestrials exist the Bible and the Koran  
11 are going to be even less impressive to them than they are  
12 to human atheists.

13           (Laughter)

14           MR. HARRIS: It is often imagined that atheists  
15 are in principle closed to spiritual experience. But the  
16 truth is that atheists - there's nothing that prevents an  
17 atheist from experiencing self-transcending love or  
18 ecstasy or rapture or awe. In fact, there is nothing that  
19 prevents an atheist from going into a cave for a year or a  
20 decade and practicing meditation like a proper mystic.  
21 What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified and  
22 unjustifiable claims about the cosmos on the basis of

1 those experiences.

2           But there is no question that disciplines like  
3 meditation and prayer can have a profound effect upon the  
4 human mind. But do the positive experiences of say  
5 Christian mystics over the ages suggest that Jesus is the  
6 sole savior of humanity? Not even remotely because  
7 Christians would be having these experiences, but so have  
8 Buddhists and Muslims and even atheists. So there is a  
9 deeper reality here and it makes a mockery of religious  
10 denominations.

11           The fact is that whenever human beings make an  
12 honest effort to get at the truth, they reliably transcend  
13 the accidents of their birth and upbringing. We -- just  
14 as -- it would be absurd to speak about Christian physics,  
15 though the Christians invented physics, and it would be  
16 absurd to speak about Muslim algebra, though the Muslims  
17 invented algebra. It will one day be absurd to speak  
18 about Christian or Muslim ethics or spirituality.

19           And whatever is true about our circumstance, in  
20 ethical and spiritual terms, is discoverable now and can  
21 be articulated without offending all that we've come to  
22 understand about the nature of the universe, and certainly

1 without making divisive claims about the unique sanctity  
2 of any book or pegging these most beautiful features of  
3 our lives to rumors of ancient miracles.

4           Finally, there's this notion that atheism is  
5 responsible for the greatest crimes in the 20th century.  
6 Now this is actually, it is quite amazing to me, this is  
7 the most frequent objection I come across, so I think I  
8 should deal with it briefly. It is amazing how many  
9 people think that the crimes of Hitler and Pol Pot and Mao  
10 were the result of atheism. The truth is that this is a  
11 total misconstrual of what went on in those societies, and  
12 of the psychological and social forces that allow people  
13 to follow their dear leader over the brink.

14           The problem with Fascism and communism was not  
15 that they were too critical of religion. The problem is  
16 they're too much like religions; these are utterly  
17 dogmatic systems of thought. I recently had a debate with  
18 Rick Warren in the pages of *Newsweek*, and he suggested  
19 that North Korea was a model atheist society and that any  
20 atheist with the courage of his convictions should want to  
21 move there.

22           The truth is North Korea is organized exactly

1 like a faith based cult, centered on the worship of Kim  
2 Jong-il. The North Koreans apparently believe that the  
3 shipments of food aid that they receive from us, to keep  
4 them from starving to death, are actually devotional  
5 offerings to Kim Jong-il. Is too little faith really the  
6 problem with North Korea? Is too much skeptical inquiry,  
7 what is wrong here? Auschwitz, the gulag, and the killing  
8 fields are not the product of atheism; they are the  
9 product of other dogmas run amok; nationalism, political  
10 dogma.

11 Hitler did not engineer a genocide in Europe  
12 because of atheism; in fact Hitler doesn't even appear to  
13 have been an atheist, he regularly invoked Jesus in his  
14 speeches. But that's beside the point, he did it on the  
15 basis of other beliefs, dogmas about Jews and the purity  
16 of German blood. The history of Muslim jihad however does  
17 have something to do with Islam. The atrocities of  
18 September 11th did have something to do with what 19 men  
19 believed about martyrdom and paradise.

20 The fact that we're not funding stem cell  
21 research at the federal level does have something to do  
22 with what Christians believe about conception and the

1 human soul. It is important to focus on the specific  
2 consequences of specific ideas. So I want to make it very  
3 clear that I am not holding religion responsible for every  
4 bad thing that a religious person has done in human  
5 history. To be balanced against all the bad things that  
6 atheists have done, I am only holding religion responsible  
7 for what people do, and will continue to do, explicitly  
8 for religious reasons. So I submit to you there really is  
9 no society in human history that has ever suffered because  
10 its population became too reasonable.

11           Too reluctant to embrace dogma or too demanding  
12 of evidence. So in conclusion let me say that I think  
13 civilization in the 21st century is passing through a  
14 bottleneck of sorts, formed on the one side by 21st  
15 century destructive technology and on the other by Iron  
16 Age superstition, and we will either pass through this  
17 bottleneck more or less intact, more or less painfully, or  
18 we'll destroy ourselves. Now perhaps this fear sounds  
19 grandiose to some of you, but the truth is that  
20 civilizations can end. In fact every civilization in  
21 human history virtually has ended. Over and over again in  
22 history some unlucky generation has had to witness the

1 ruination of everything they and their ancestors who had  
2 worked hard to build. We are part of history. There is  
3 no guarantee that things can't go spectacularly wrong for  
4 us.

5           In fact, it is an article of faith in many  
6 religious communities that things will go spectacularly  
7 wrong, and that this is a good thing. Seventy nine  
8 percent of Americans think that Jesus is going to come  
9 down out of the clouds and rectify all of our problems  
10 with his magic powers at some point in history. Twenty  
11 percent of Americans claim to be certain that it will  
12 happen in their lifetime. This is precisely the sort of  
13 thinking we do not need, and I think it should be rather  
14 obvious that prophecies about the end of the world, could  
15 well be self-fulfilling.

16           So the uniqueness of our circumstance, with  
17 respect to the growth of technology, I think, also  
18 shouldn't be ignored. We've -- not only is technology  
19 growing but the rate at which technology is growing is  
20 also growing. Futurists like Ray Kurzweil have said that  
21 the rate is doubling every 10 years, so that if you look  
22 at the rate at which technology was growing in the year

1 2000 as your metric, the 20th century represents something  
2 like 20 years of change. Now we are in the process of  
3 making another 20 years of change in about 14 years and  
4 then 7 and then 3-and-a-half, if this trend continues, the  
5 21st century won't represent 100 years of technological  
6 change, but 20,000 years. 20,000 years ago human beings  
7 exactly like ourselves with the same sized brains, the  
8 same biological capacity for creative thought, had been  
9 languishing for at least 100,000 years and had produced  
10 nothing more complicated than a bow and arrow. We went  
11 from a bow and arrow to the internet in 20,000 years.

12           Imagine seeing this much change in a single  
13 century and let's be utterly conservative, let's just say  
14 we are going to have as much change in this century as we  
15 did last century. Even this is sobering when you  
16 recognize who is going to have access to this kind of  
17 technology. Let me -- just look at how the internet has  
18 facilitated the global jihadist movement among Muslims.  
19 Look how difficult it is proving to stop the proliferation  
20 of nuclear weapons. So I think if we accept that the -- I  
21 think quite reasonable premise that it's going to remain  
22 easier to break things than to fix them or defend them.

1           The growth of technology is quite sobering in  
2     the way that it is interacting with religion, especially  
3     in a world that has been shattered into competing  
4     religious and moral communities, and especially among  
5     communities who think death is an illusion; that this  
6     world is fit only to be consumed by God's fury. And that  
7     the destruction of every tangible good will itself be the  
8     highest good, because it will be a gateway to eternity.  
9     These are explicitly religious ideas, they have no basis  
10    in fact, and yet they are amazingly well subscribed. It  
11    seems to me that it is everyone's responsibility to help  
12    break this spell. Thank you very much.

13                   (Applause)

14           SPEAKER: Hello, in your arguments you use  
15    mostly reason and the brain to argue against religion and  
16    the Bible. The ancient philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in  
17    his Pensees, "The heart has reason in which reason does  
18    not know. We know this in countless ways." What would  
19    you say to people who try to lead a good and just life by  
20    -- through their religion, and by following what is in  
21    their hearts, rather than following the literal sayings of  
22    the Bible and following the reasoning?

1           MR. HARRIS: Yeah, well I certainly don't mean  
2 to diminish experience that has nothing to do with coming  
3 to a rational understanding of the way the world works.  
4 We have -- much of our experience is not a matter of  
5 reason, it's not a matter of belief even and some of the  
6 most important aspects of our experience aren't. So  
7 experiencing love and devotion and awe these are features  
8 of our subjectivity that I think are extraordinarily  
9 valuable.

10           The important thing to recognize is that if you  
11 think the only real container, the only viable container  
12 for those experiences is your denominational Church, it's  
13 the language of your ancestors. You know, if you are  
14 still committed to being a Christian, or a Muslim or a  
15 Jew, I think you are tacitly supporting the religious  
16 divisions in our world. I mean, you are giving cover, I  
17 think quite explicitly, to all of the people who take  
18 their holy books far more seriously.

19           But I can't tell you how much time I and other  
20 people have spent having to fight the battle against the  
21 liberals and moderate Christians and Jews and Muslims, who  
22 will insist upon the viability of these denominations and

1 of raising their children to be -- to think that they are  
2 Christians and Muslims and Jews, and will -- who will  
3 never admit that any of the extremist behavior going on in  
4 the name of their faith has anything to do with religion.

5 And so it -- there is no question in my mind  
6 that it provides a kind of friction in our discourse where  
7 we really can't call a spade a spade, and say okay this is  
8 -- much of the Bible and Koran is just life destroying  
9 gibberish, and we just have to acknowledge this and cease  
10 to take these books seriously.

11 SPEAKER: All right, thank you.

12 MR. HARRIS: Okay.

13 SPEAKER: Hi.

14 MR. HARRIS: Hi.

15 SPEAKER: First of all, I loved your first book;  
16 I thought it was absolutely brilliant.

17 MR. HARRIS: Oh, thank you.

18 SPEAKER: And I'm stunned at how young you are.

19 (Laughter)

20 SPEAKER: Because --

21 MR. HARRIS: Don't be stunned, I'm not that  
22 young.

1                   (Laughter)

2                   SPEAKER: Yeah, well in learning -- I mean, I  
3 thank you so much for taking the time to study western and  
4 eastern religions for decades, that's why I thought you  
5 were older.

6                   MR. HARRIS: Uh-huh.

7                   SPEAKER: And I haven't read the second book  
8 yet, I apologize. But my question has to do more with  
9 where our beliefs come from. We know there is a lot of  
10 peer pressure in our culture to be religious, to have a  
11 belief in god and to be a part of some organized religion.  
12 And I have tried my whole life to be a part of that in  
13 terms of -- I have tried three different religions, I have  
14 converted twice, and that thing doesn't work for me. The  
15 God thing does not work for me and I have always felt very  
16 unhappy about it, that it was a lack somehow in my  
17 character, but then I've read recently that there is a  
18 study that has been done and I am wondering if maybe this  
19 is why you are studying neuroscience, there is a study  
20 that has been done that posits there maybe a belief gene,  
21 there may be a gene in people that makes them believers  
22 and those of us who don't have it, we don't have it.

1           MR. HARRIS: Right, right. Well, I think you  
2 might be referring to Dean Hamer's much publicized notion  
3 of a God gene, which --

4           SPEAKER: Yes.

5           MR. HARRIS: -- if I am not mistaken related to  
6 a serotonin receptor or transporter that people have in  
7 abundance if they have the -- tend to have these  
8 transcending experience. So it didn't deal with belief  
9 per se. I think the issue of belief is that, I don't see  
10 religious belief as distinct from any other kinds of  
11 beliefs and we represent the world in our thoughts, and  
12 all of us are in the business of hoping that our  
13 representations are accurate or at least accurate enough,  
14 so that we can successfully negotiate our lives happily.

15           I mean, nobody wants to be mistaken, profoundly  
16 mistaken about their place in the world or about what you  
17 know, what happens after death, or where their loved ones  
18 go. We're not in the business of deceiving ourselves,  
19 just willfully.

20           And so religious beliefs are on all fours with  
21 all of our other beliefs, we're describing the world,  
22 we're trading in these descriptions through language.

1     Someone says to you, whether you realize that Jesus is  
2     your personal savior and you know, nobody, you know, he is  
3     the way and the truth and the life and nobody gets to  
4     heaven but through him, that is a description of the way  
5     this universe is organized in moral terms and in spiritual  
6     terms, and it's either right or wrong, and it purports to  
7     be right.

8                     And it offers -- it promises terrible  
9     consequences to those who don't accept it. This is a very  
10    strange scheme, I think, to believe in -- I'm not the  
11    first person to point out that it is a very strange sort  
12    of loving God who would have salvation depend on a  
13    person's ability to believe in him for bad reasons. I  
14    mean, it's, you know, it's just a weird scenario, but it  
15    is a scenario that is -- many people find emotionally  
16    consoling. And there is another aspect here is that  
17    reason and belief are not easily separated from emotion.  
18    I mean, we, our emotion -- our rationale lives are deeply  
19    entangled with our emotional lives and we feel emotional  
20    responses to things we find to be unreasonable. I mean, I  
21    happen think that doubt is on the continuum with disgust  
22    and other psychological rejection states and so when we

1     doubt a proposition, we are having an emotional response  
2     to it, and so I think we -- we just have to be -- I think  
3     there is an all purpose corrective here which is just  
4     intellectual honesty and if you cease to pretend to be  
5     certain about things you are not certain about, see where  
6     that gets you. See where that gets you in conversation  
7     with other human beings. I think it will get you a  
8     profoundly ethical life. It will certainly get you a  
9     profoundly non deceptive life.

10            SPEAKER: Which leads to me one other quick  
11     follow-up question?

12            MR. HARRIS: Yeah.

13            SPEAKER: When you say being intellectually  
14     honest, in the meaning you don't know these things. You  
15     said there were three ways to look at religion; one that  
16     it's true; second, that it's useful, and third that you're  
17     an atheist and that is a religion, but there is a fourth  
18     thing and that could be that you're an agnostic. You  
19     don't know whether it is true or not?

20            MR. HARRIS: Yeah, but I don't need too many  
21     agnostics about Zeus.

22            (Laughter)

1           MR. HARRIS: You know, all these agnostics about  
2 the God of Abraham should also be agnostic about Zeus,  
3 that's the same scenario, thank you.

4           MS. COLWELL: Hi, Angela Colwell. The Physics  
5 professor Mr. Haus (phonetic) just spoke to the Bezos  
6 scholars. One of the things he said, well actually before  
7 I say that, I would like to say about your comment on the  
8 biblical creation of women. It is only because creators  
9 have to make a rough draft before they get it right.

10           (Laughter)

11           MR. HARRIS: I stand corrected.

12           MS. COLWELL: But Mr. Haus was saying, in  
13 discussion of Galileo's theory of relativity and  
14 Einstein's discovery of the electromagnetism, such and  
15 such. Was that -- they're both right, but they're not  
16 necessarily consistent.

17           MR. HARRIS: Right.

18           MS. COLWELL: And I was wondering what your  
19 opinion on that sort of view is for evolution versus  
20 creationism?

21           MR. HARRIS: Well, this is -- this gets us, I  
22 think somewhat too far afield into questions of

1 epistemology and the philosophy of science. There are  
2 real problems in trying to make the claim that our beliefs  
3 about the world represent reality as it is. You know,  
4 that our beliefs can ever be perfectly true, and there is  
5 much evidence in science that we get these approximations  
6 which are incredibly useful as guides to reality.

7           And then they become overturned by other  
8 approximations that actually don't look much like the  
9 approximations they're overturning. So in relativity,  
10 Einsteinian relativity did not look much like Newton's  
11 physics. And yet they both work, within certain limits.

12           So the question is, what is the relationship  
13 between reality and our thoughts? All of this is -- gets  
14 very interesting and nuanced and is perfectly legitimate  
15 to debate at the fringe of science and theoretical  
16 physics, certainly. But it doesn't -- it really doesn't  
17 apply to our commonsensical human experience in the same  
18 way.

19           I mean, we can -- it's clear you can be right or  
20 wrong about a variety of propositions by which you would  
21 want to live your life, and you can believe things for  
22 good or bad reasons. For you can have justified or

1 unjustified beliefs. And we all recognize a degree of  
2 intellectual honesty and rigor here.

3 I mean if somebody tells you that your boyfriend  
4 is cheating on you, you're going to want evidence. And  
5 you're going to be convinced to the degree that they  
6 provide evidence. Now if they provide, you know, if they  
7 dump out all the pictures on the tabletop and say here he  
8 is, caught in the act, then you will -- that's one  
9 experience. If they just say, well, I saw it in a dream,  
10 --

11 (Laughter)

12 MR. HARRIS: -- you're not going to be so  
13 interested. And there's a continuum there, and there are  
14 these probabilistic ascriptions of certainty. We're very  
15 rarely, totally certain about anything, and yet we have  
16 degrees of confidence that we can all talk intelligently  
17 about. And anyone who is certain that the *Bible* is  
18 dictated by the creator of the universe, or the -- it's  
19 certain that Jesus was born of a virgin or certain that  
20 you get 72 virgins in paradise if you die in defense of  
21 Islam. These are virtually baseless certainties. And we  
22 can know that if we just speak honestly about these ideas.

1           SPEAKER: Hi, Mr. Harris.

2           MR. HARRIS: And I -- again I don't know -- I'm  
3 not keeping time very well here. So someone's going to  
4 get a hook -- okay, you're --

5           MR. ALTERMAN: I'm Ben Alterman, a Bezos  
6 scholar. You said that in religion woman was created for  
7 man, especially in the Old Testament?

8           MR. HARRIS: Uh-huh.

9           MR. ALTERMAN: In Genesis, there are two stories  
10 of creation.

11          MR. HARRIS: Yeah.

12          MR. ALTERMAN: There is also a story that goes,  
13 God created man, male and female, he created them.

14          MR. HARRIS: That's true.

15          MR. ALTERMAN: In Judaism, the interpretation is  
16 such that man and woman, the conventional one is such  
17 that, man and woman were created back to back as one  
18 single unit, and then God cleaved them in half. And from  
19 that interpretation, there comes a lot of discussion about  
20 how man and woman interplay off of each other and grow  
21 together.

22          MR. HARRIS: Right.

1           MR. ALTERMAN: And that they take different  
2 areas because of the type of person the man and woman is.  
3 What is your response to the evolution of religions such  
4 that -- just the way science has evolved over time and  
5 that it starts to include more as it learns more, and  
6 understands more about people.

7           MR. HARRIS: Right, right.

8           MR. ALTERMAN: And, well, the text is just a  
9 basis for something that's evolved over time.

10          MR. HARRIS: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think, we  
11 should be -- first thing I would say is that by my lights,  
12 they are not, and cannot, and will not evolve quickly  
13 enough. I mean this is the -- we just don't have that  
14 much time to wait around for people to dicker with their  
15 religious certainties, at least that's my view.

16          But the other thing is that we have to be honest  
17 about why they are evolving. The door leading out of  
18 religious literalism doesn't open from the inside. I mean  
19 these religions have been moderated because of the  
20 pressure of modernity. I mean, secular politics and a  
21 conception of human rights and our growing scientific  
22 understanding of the universe has applied pressure, much

1 more so in the case of Judaism and Christianity than it  
2 has in Islam, because Islam has been isolated from the  
3 enlightenment and you know even the renaissance in some  
4 significant sense.

5 And so this comes from outside, so this is not  
6 to be credited to faith. This is the legacy of faith  
7 continually losing the argument to science and secular  
8 politics and commonsense. This is why we're not stoning  
9 people to death for adultery in Aspen.

10 (Laughter)

11 MR. HARRIS: It's a good thing we are not.  
12 Yeah, yeah, just wait, it's possible. But -- so -- are  
13 you going to credit the Catholic Church that did not  
14 absolve Galileo of heresy until 1992? I mean it's -- this  
15 is a -- this organization is very slow to move. And I  
16 think at some point, we take something like their  
17 prescription against contraception use.

18 I mean this is flagrantly immoral, getting  
19 people killed throughout the developing world. I mean  
20 this is -- ministers go into villages riddled with AIDS  
21 and preach the sinfulness of condom use. Okay.  
22 Shockingly immoral behavior mandated by their religious

1 faith.

2 I certainly hope to live to see the day where  
3 the Vatican recants this dogma. And they say, well, this  
4 was a mistake. Condoms are blameless. That will be a  
5 good thing. Who is going to get the credit? The Vatican,  
6 when that happens?

7 This is a dinosaur of an organization that has  
8 really been slow to make the simplest accommodations to  
9 basic human sanity. So that's the other point I would  
10 make, is that we have to be honest about where the change  
11 is coming from.

12 And the other -- now that I'm on the subject,  
13 the other point I would make is that, our attachment to  
14 these traditions essentially sends the message that it's  
15 impossible to speak about spirituality and ethics in a  
16 truly new fresh, modern, rational, non-dogmatic, non-  
17 divisive way; that we have to stay linked to these  
18 traditions. I don't see any evidence for that and we  
19 don't play by those rules in any other domain, certainly  
20 not in science.

21 MR. ALTERMAN: But then how would you respond to  
22 the Sakyong and Rabbi Kula sitting down last night at an

1 evening exchange and talking openly about religions and  
2 comparing the ways they both work.

3 MR. HARRIS: Well, that is the discourse of  
4 religious moderation. It's true that you can put moderate  
5 Christians, and moderate Muslims, and moderate Jews on the  
6 same dais, and they may -- you know they may -- I think we  
7 should look closely at who is calling themselves a  
8 moderate and what they really believe.

9 I think there are many people who pretend to  
10 more moderation than they do in fact embody. I think  
11 there are people who are sitting on the same dais in a  
12 very friendly way, in a collegial way talking about the  
13 common project of religious diversity, all the while  
14 thinking that their colleagues are going to go to hell for  
15 eternity.

16 (Laughter)

17 MR. HARRIS: I think people are finding  
18 themselves in that situation a lot and not admitting it,  
19 but as I -- you know I sat down with Rick Warren who is  
20 criticized from the religious right. At least I wouldn't  
21 call him a moderate, he is still a fundamentalist of  
22 sorts, but there are people much more fundamental than he

1 who criticize him for not being biblical enough. You know  
2 in -- Jon Meacham asked him in the interview, "Do you  
3 think Sam is going to go to hell?" "Well, yeah,  
4 probably."

5 (Laughter)

6 MR. HARRIS: So it's -- and yet we had a  
7 perfectly congenial conversation, and we could collaborate  
8 on a common project to help people. There is no barrier  
9 to that. But this is to be ascribed to basic human  
10 decency. And a larger purview of ethics and intuitions  
11 about how we want to collaborate with one another.

12 SPEAKER: Thank you.

13 MR. HARRIS: Yeah. One more question.

14 MS. BASS: I'm Rebecca Bass, and I'm also a  
15 Bezos scholar. And I'm not a religious person and I don't  
16 know what I believe yet. But I was wondering if you had  
17 ever struggled with finding a balance between the logic  
18 intellectualism, and what I think is kind of an innate  
19 human need for something more, something less rational.

20 MR. HARRIS: Yeah. I think, I don't think I am  
21 a particularly good advertisement for achieving that  
22 balance, but --

1                   (Laughter)

2                   MR. HARRIS: -- within the privacy of my own  
3 mind, I do, you know, work to find that balance. And I --  
4 and you know, so I've spent months on meditation retreats.  
5 You know just doing nothing but practice meditation in  
6 silence and is -- this is not a matter of thinking or you  
7 inadvertently think, but the goal of meditation is not to  
8 think about anything rationally or figure anything out.

9                   It is simply to pay more and more attention to  
10 the flow of your experience and see what it's like to be  
11 just aware of sights, and sounds, and sensations. This is  
12 a highly non-rational pursuit. It's not an irrational  
13 pursuit.

14                  I mean it only becomes irrational if you begin  
15 making claims about the universe that are not rationally  
16 justifiable, but it is, you know, it's an occasion in  
17 which, you know, you experience bliss and a variety of  
18 things that spiritual people desperately want to  
19 experience. You don't have to pretend to know anything,  
20 you don't know in order to do that and that's really my  
21 basic point. Thank you very much. Thank you.

22                   (Applause)

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