THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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

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

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

MR. HARRIS: How come you’re all not at Walter Isaacson's talk on Einstein, even I want to be at Walter's talk on Einstein. Well, you have all made a terrible mistake. While I often -- can you all hear me okay -- I often begin any talk on this subject with an apology. Because I think I am destined to say some very derogatory
things about religion. And given that we live in a
country where 90 percent of people believe in a biblical
God, I think, I am destined to offend some of you here. I
want to assure you that is not the point. It is not the
point of my being here. It is not the point of my writing
my books, I'm not being deliberately provocative. I'm
simply extremely worried about the role that religion is
playing in our world.

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

I also want to point out upfront there is
nothing that I'm about to say that should be construed as
a denial of the possibilities of spiritual experience and
indeed of the importance of spiritual experience. And that is a subject I will come back to at the end. Here is my basic concern. Our ability to cause ourselves harm is now spreading with 21st-century efficiency, and yet we are still, to a remarkable degree, drawing our vision of how to live in this world from ancient literature. This marriage of modern technology, destructive technology and iron age philosophy is a bad one for reasons that I think nobody should have to specify much less argue for, and yet arguing for them has taken up most of my time since September 11, 2001. That day that 19 pious men showed our pious nation just how socially beneficial religious certainty can be. You know, as someone who has spent a few years publicly criticizing religion, I have become quite familiar with how people rise to the defense of God. As it turns out there are not a hundred ways of doing this -- there appear to be just three. Either a person argues that a specific religion is true or he argues that religion is useful and indeed so useful that it might be necessary, or he argues that atheism is essentially another religion, dogmatic, intolerant or otherwise worthy of contempt. And I want to differentiate
these three strands of argument because they regularly run together and any conversation between a believer and a nonbeliever is liable to fall into one of these ruts.

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

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

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

I have met literally hundreds at this point of Western educated men and women who think that their favorite Hindu or Buddhist guru has magic powers. The powers ascribed to these gurus are every bit as outlandish as those ascribed to Jesus. I, actually, remain open to evidence of such powers. The fact is that people who tell these stories desperately want to believe them. All to my
knowledge lack the kind of corroborating evidence we
should require before believing that nature's laws have
been abrogated in this way. And people who believe these
stories show an uncanny reluctance to look for non-
miraculous causes.

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

But Satya Sai Baba is not a fringe figure. He
is not the David Koresh of Hinduism. His followers threw
a birthday party for him recently and a million people
showed up. So there are vast numbers of people who
believe he is a living god. You can even watch his
miracles on YouTube; prepare to be underwhelmed. Maybe it's true that he has an Afro of sufficient diameter as to suggest a total detachment from the opinions of his fellow human beings. But I'm not sure this is reason enough to worship him; in any case. So, consider as though for the first time the foundational claim of Christianity. The claim is this that miracle stories of a sort that today surround a person like Satya Sai Baba become especially compelling when you set them in the pre-scientific religious context of the first century Roman Empire decades after their supposed occurrence. We have Satya Sai Baba's miracle stories attested to by thousands upon thousands of living eyewitnesses. And they don't even a merit an hour on the Discovery Channel. But you place a few miracle stories in some ancient books and half the people on this earth think it a legitimate project to organize their lives around them. Does anyone else see a problem with that?

Speaking more generally, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are founded on the claim that the Bible and the Koran were dictated by the Creator of the Universe. There is a Creator, there is a Personal God and he occasionally
writes books. He doesn't code software, he doesn't produce films, Mel Gibson's claim to have been toiling all the while under the influence of the Holy Spirit, I think, is probably an exception here. But in any case God is principally an author of books.

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

And yet literally billions of us deem the contents of the Bible and the Koran so profound as to rule out the possibility of terrestrial authorship. Now, given the depth and breadth of human achievement I think this is almost a miracle in its own right. It seems to me a miraculous misappropriation of awe. I mean it took two centuries of continuous human ingenuity on the part of some of the smartest people who have ever lived to significantly improve upon Newton's achievement. How difficult would it be to improve the Bible, I mean, anyone in this tent could improve this supposedly inerrant text scientifically, historically, ethically, spiritually in a matter of moments. Consider the possibility of improving the 10 Commandments. This might seem to be setting the bar kind of high because this is the only part of the Bible, the only text that God felt the need to physically write himself and in stone. Consider the second commandment; thou shalt not erect any graven images. Is this really the second most important thing, upon which to admonish all future generations of human beings? I mean, is this as good as it gets ethically and spiritually.
You remember the Muslims who rioted by the hundreds of thousands over cartoons. What got them so riled up? Well, this is it, the second commandment. Now, was all that pious mayhem, the burning of embassies, the killing of nuns, was all of that some kind of great flowering of spiritual and ethical intelligence, or was it egregious medieval stupidity? Well, come to think of it, it was egregious medieval stupidity. The truth is that almost any precept we would put in place of the second commandment would improve the wisdom of The Bible. How about don’t mistreat children, how about don’t pretend to know things you do not know.

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

In fact, 78 percent of the American population claims to know that The Bible is the Word of God. Seventy
percent of college graduates believe that The Bible is the Word of God. So just leave aside questions of religion's truth for a moment. The second way of arguing in defense of God is to argue that religion is useful, and so useful that it may in fact be necessary. Now, this line of argument is also problematic for a few reasons. The first to say, it really is a total non sequitur. This is not -- even if religious belief was exquisitely useful, I don’t doubt there are circumstances in which it is in fact useful, but even if it were useful across the board this would not give us reason to believe that a personal God exists, or that anyone of our books are his word.

The fact that certain ideas are useful or motivating or give people meaning in their lives or the fact that the idea that God has a plan for me or everything happens for a reason, the fact that such ideas are consoling, does not offer the slightest reason to believe that they’re true. And in fact, ironically they -- even if we had good scientific reasons to believe that these ideas were true, their power to console us wouldn’t even offer an additional reason to believe that they’re true.
I mean even if the cosmologists and the physicists came forward suddenly and said, you know, sorry for the misunderstanding guys, but it seems there is a God and he has a plan for you. The fact that so many of us would find this consoling would give us further reason to be skeptical in scientific terms, this is why we have phrases like wishful-thinking, and self-delusion and self-deception. This is why scientists do double-blind control studies wherever possible, this is why they submit their data for peer review. If we have conquered any ground in our career of rationality it is on this point, there is a profound difference between having -- between having good reasons for believing something and simply wanting to believe it.

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

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

It seems to me that religion gives people bad reasons to be good, where good reasons are actually available. I mean ask yourself, which is more moral? Helping the poor, feeding the hungry, defending the weak, out of a mere concern for their wellbeing, or doing so because you think the creator of the universe wants you to do it.
The truth is people do not need to be threatened with damnation to love their children, to love their friends, to want to collaborate with strangers, or indeed to recognize that helping strangers can be one of their greatest sources of happiness. And what kind of morality is it that is entirely predicated on a self-interested desire to escape damnation? This seems to bypass the very core of what we mean by morality, which is an actual concern for the welfare of other human beings. Clearly it is possible to teach our children to form such a concern and to grow in empathy and compassion without lying to ourselves or to them about the nature of the universe, without pretending to know things we do not know. You can teach your children the golden rule as an utterly wise ethical precept without pretending to know that Jesus was born of a virgin.

And it's also worth observing that the most atheistic societies on the planet like Sweden and Denmark and the Netherlands are in many respects the most moral, they have rates of violent crime that are far lower than our own in the U.S. And they are more generous both within their own population and in the developing world on
a per capita basis. Sweden, which opposed the war in Iraq, has nevertheless admitted more Iraqi refugees into its borders than any country and many more than the U.S. has.

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

And these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. The God of the Bible hates sodomy and will kill you for it, but he rather enjoys the occasional human sacrifice. But I think the very least we can say he doesn’t quite have his priorities
straight. In the Old Testament we witnessed the most immoral behavior imaginable. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, sexual slavery, the murder of children, kidnapping.

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

And you might wonder well, what about the 10 Commandments? What about “Thou shall not murder.” Well, the problem is the Ten Commandments simply give us more bad reasons to kill people. I mean what are you supposed
to do when your best friend breaks the Sabbath or erects a
graven image, or takes the lord’s name in vain? You’re
supposed to kill him. And if you’re unwilling to kill
him, your neighbors are supposed to kill you.

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

So Jews and Christians are simply lying to
themselves when they talk about the impediments to
morality that prevailed in the 5th century BC. And the
other thing to notice is that rationalizing the barbarism
we find in the Old Testament merely renders it irrelevant, it doesn’t render these books morally wise. I mean it is faint praise indeed, if the best that can be said of much of scripture is it can now be safely ignored.

Now, and despite what Christians say on the subject, the New Testament isn’t so good as to make The Bible a reliable basis of morality. In fact, much of the book is an embarrassment to anyone who would say it’s a moral book, much or less a perfectly moral book. And nowhere is this clearer than on the question on slavery. And the truth is The Bible in its totality, Old Testament, New Testament, support slavery. If we recognize anything, if we converge on any point in ethical terms now it is that slavery is evil. Nowhere in the Bible is this evil recognized much less repudiated. The slave holders of the south were on the winning side of the theological argument, they knew it, they never stopped talking about it. The best God does in the Old Testament is to admonish us not to beat our slaves so badly that we would injure their eyes or their teeth, or not to beat them so badly with a rod that they die on the spot, if they die after a day or two, no problem.
I think it should go without saying that this is not the kind of moral insight that got rid of slavery in the United States. Well, consider the treatment of women. And from millennia the great theologians and prophets of religions have set to work on the riddle of womanhood and the results in various times and places has been widow burning and honor killing, and genital mutilation, a cultic obsession with virginity, just other forms of physical and physiological abuses, so kaleidoscopic in variety as to scarcely admit of being summarized. Now, I have no doubt that much of this sexist evil predates religion and can be ascribed to our biology, but there’s no question that religion promulgates and renders sacrosanct attitudes toward women that would be unseemly in a brachiating ape. Now, while man was made in the image of God, women was made in the image of man according to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Humanity therefore is derivative, it’s ersatz.

The Old Testament values the life of women at one half to two thirds that of a man, the Koran says that the testimony of two women is required to offset the testimony of one man, and every women is deserving of one
half her brother’s share of inheritance. But the Biblical
God has made it perfectly clear that women are expected to
live in absolute subjugation to their fathers, until the
moment they’re pressed into connubial service to their
husbands.

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

The eleventh-century sage Al-Ghazali, perhaps
the most influential Muslim since Mohammed, described a
women’s duties this way, “She should stay at home and get
on with her spinning. She should not go out often. She
must not be well informed, nor must she be communicative
with her neighbors, and only visit them when absolutely
necessary. She should take care of her husband and
respect him in his presence and in his absence and seek to
satisfy him in everything. She must not leave the house without his permission, and if given his permission, she must leave surreptitiously. She should put on old clothes and take the deserted streets and alleys, avoid markets, make sure that a stranger does not hear her voice or recognize her.

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

Now, recall the blissful lives of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban or think about the millions of women who even now are forced to wear the veil under Islam or who are forced into these forced marriages with men they have never met. And you will realize that these kinds of religious opinions have consequences. The net effect of religion, especially in the Abrahamic tradition,
has been to demonize female sexuality, and portray women
as morally and intellectually inferior to men. Every
woman, it is imagined, holds the honor of the men in her
lives for ransom, and is liable to tarnish it with a
glance or destroy it outright through sexual indiscretion.

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

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

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

Now religious people, I think, are right to believe that our morality isn't merely a product of culture, it is deeply hardwired in us. And it clearly is massively empowered by our ability to speak and to write, I mean, language gives us the capacity to extend our moral horizons beyond our mere family and kin, and even beyond our species, but is also, it should be pointed out, that language also empowers our hatred and stupidity to a
remarkable degree and we are the only species to my knowledge that can forsake life saving medical research, demonize homosexuals or fly planes into buildings because of what we tell one another about God.

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

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

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

But the -- more importantly, every Christian rejects the claims of Islam, just as I do. You know Muslims claim they have the perfect word of the creator of the universe. Why do they believe this -- because it says so in the book; sorry, not good enough. So this term "atheism" really is misleading, we're talking about specific truth claims and their evidence or lack thereof. Now, what about the charge that atheism is dogmatic?
Let’s get this straight. Jews, Christians, and Muslims claim that their holy books are so profound, so prescient of humanity's needs that they could have only been written by an omniscient being. An atheist is simply a person who has entertained this claim, read the books, and found the claim to be ridiculous. This is not dogmatism. There is nothing that an atheist needs to believe on insufficient evidence in order to reject the biblical God.

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

The truth is, is that, when scientists don’t know something like why the universe came into being or how the first self-replicating molecules formed on earth -- they tend to admit it. Pretending to know things you do
not know is a profound liability inside us. You get
punished for this rather quickly, but pretending to know
things you do not know is the life blood of faith based
religion.

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

(Laughter)

MR. HARRIS: While tacitly claiming to know
things about cosmology and physics and chemistry and
paleontology that no scientist knows. Any person who
dignifies Genesis as an account of creation or as even as
informative is essentially saying to someone like Stephen
Hawking, "Stephen, you are a smart guy and you know, I see
a lot of equations over there, but you don't enough about
cosmology." You know, it says here that God did this in
six days and then rested on the seventh; and I don't see
how you've really grappled with the nuances of the
biblical account. Then this would be amusing if we're not
having such disastrous effect upon our public policy. It
is impeding medical research and the teaching of science
in this country. 30 percent of biologists — biology teachers in the United States at the high school level don’t even mention evolution, because of the hassle occasioned by — just the religious hysteria that it provokes in their students and their students' parents.

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

(Laughter)

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

Now it is also commonly imagined that atheists think there is nothing beyond human life and human understanding. The truth is that atheists are free to
admit that there is much about the universe we don’t understand, I mean, it is obvious we don’t understand the universe. But it is even more obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding. There could be life on other planets, complex life, technical -- technically accomplished civilizations. I mean, just imagine a civilization a million years old as opposed to a few thousand. Atheists are free to imagine this possibility; they are also free to admit that if such brilliant extra terrestrials exist the Bible and the Koran are going to be even less impressive to them than they are to human atheists. (Laughter) MR. HARRIS: It is often imagined that atheists are in principle closed to spiritual experience. But the truth is that atheists – there’s nothing that prevents an atheist from experiencing self-transcending love or ecstasy or rapture or awe. In fact, there is nothing that prevents an atheist from going into a cave for a year or a decade and practicing meditation like a proper mystic. What atheists don’t tend to do is make unjustified and unjustifiable claims about the cosmos on the basis of
those experiences.

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

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

And whatever is true about our circumstance, in ethical and spiritual terms, is discoverable now and can be articulated without offending all that we've come to understand about the nature of the universe, and certainly
without making divisive claims about the unique sanctity
of any book or pegging these most beautiful features of
our lives to rumors of ancient miracles.

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

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

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

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

   The fact that we’re not funding stem cell
research at the federal level does have something to do
with what Christians believe about conception and the
human soul. It is important to focus on the specific
consequences of specific ideas. So I want to make it very
clear that I am not holding religion responsible for every
bad thing that a religious person has done in human
history. To be balanced against all the bad things that
atheists have done, I am only holding religion responsible
for what people do, and will continue to do, explicitly
for religious reasons. So I submit to you there really is
no society in human history that has ever suffered because
its population became too reasonable.

Too reluctant to embrace dogma or too demanding
of evidence. So in conclusion let me say that I think
civilization in the 21st century is passing through a
bottleneck of sorts, formed on the one side by 21st
century destructive technology and on the other by Iron
Age superstition, and we will either pass through this
bottleneck more or less intact, more or less painfully, or
we’ll destroy ourselves. Now perhaps this fear sounds
grandiose to some of you, but the truth is that
civilizations can end. In fact every civilization in
human history virtually has ended. Over and over again in
history some unlucky generation has had to witness the
ruination of everything they and their ancestors who had worked hard to build. We are part of history. There is no guarantee that things can’t go spectacularly wrong for us.

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

So the uniqueness of our circumstance, with respect to the growth of technology, I think, also shouldn’t be ignored. We’ve -- not only is technology growing but the rate at which technology is growing is also growing. Futurists like Ray Kurzweil have said that the rate is doubling every 10 years, so that if you look at the rate at which technology was growing in the year
2000 as your metric, the 20th century represents something like 20 years of change. Now we are in the process of making another 20 years of change in about 14 years and then 7 and then 3-and-a-half, if this trend continues, the 21st century won’t represent 100 years of technological change, but 20,000 years. 20,000 years ago human beings exactly like ourselves with the same sized brains, the same biological capacity for creative thought, had been languishing for at least 100,000 years and had produced nothing more complicated than a bow and arrow. We went from a bow and arrow to the internet in 20,000 years.

Imagine seeing this much change in a single century and let's be utterly conservative, let's just say we are going to have as much change in this century as we did last century. Even this is sobering when you recognize who is going to have access to this kind of technology. Let me -- just look at how the internet has facilitated the global jihadist movement among Muslims. Look how difficult it is proving to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. So I think if we accept that the -- I think quite reasonable premise that it's going to remain easier to break things than to fix them or defend them.
The growth of technology is quite sobering in the way that it is interacting with religion, especially in a world that has been shattered into competing religious and moral communities, and especially among communities who think death is an illusion; that this world is fit only to be consumed by God's fury. And that the destruction of every tangible good will itself be the highest good, because it will be a gateway to eternity. These are explicitly religious ideas, they have no basis in fact, and yet they are amazingly well subscribed. It seems to me that it is everyone's responsibility to help break this spell. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

SPEAKER: Hello, in your arguments you use mostly reason and the brain to argue against religion and the Bible. The ancient philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in his Pensees, "The heart has reason in which reason does not know. We know this in countless ways." What would you say to people who try to lead a good and just life by -- through their religion, and by following what is in their hearts, rather than following the literal sayings of the Bible and following the reasoning?
MR. HARRIS: Yeah, well I certainly don’t mean to diminish experience that has nothing to do with coming to a rational understanding of the way the world works. We have -- much of our experience is not a matter of reason, it’s not a matter of belief even and some of the most important aspects of our experience aren’t. So experiencing love and devotion and awe these are features of our subjectivity that I think are extraordinarily valuable.

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

But I can’t tell you how much time I and other people have spent having to fight the battle against the liberals and moderate Christians and Jews and Muslims, who will insist upon the viability of these denominations and
of raising their children to be -- to think that they are Christians and Muslims and Jews, and will -- who will never admit that any of the extremist behavior going on in the name of their faith has anything to do with religion.

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

SPEAKER: All right, thank you.

MR. HARRIS: Okay.

SPEAKER: Hi.

MR. HARRIS: Hi.

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

MR. HARRIS: Oh, thank you.

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

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: Because --

MR. HARRIS: Don’t be stunned, I'm not that young.
(Laughter)

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

MR. HARRIS: Uh-huh.

SPEAKER: And I haven’t read the second book yet, I apologize. But my question has to do more with where our beliefs come from. We know there is a lot of peer pressure in our culture to be religious, to have a belief in god and to be a part of some organized religion. And I have tried my whole life to be a part of that in terms of -- I have tried three different religions, I have converted twice, and that thing doesn’t work for me. The God thing does not work for me and I have always felt very unhappy about it, that it was a lack somehow in my character, but then I've read recently that there is a study that has been done and I am wondering if may be this is why you are studying neuroscience, there is a study that has been done that posits there maybe a belief gene, there may be a gene in people that makes them believers and those of us who don’t have it, we don’t have it.
MR. HARRIS: Right, right. Well, I think you might be referring to Dean Hamer's much publicized notion of a God gene, which --

SPEAKER: Yes.

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

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

And so religious beliefs are on all fours with all of our other beliefs, we're describing the world, we're trading in these descriptions through language.
Someone says to you, whether you realize that Jesus is your personal savior and you know, nobody, you know, he is the way and the truth and the life and nobody gets to heaven but through him, that is a description of the way this universe is organized in moral terms and in spiritual terms, and it's either right or wrong, and it purports to be right.

And it offers -- it promises terrible consequences to those who don't accept it. This is a very strange scheme, I think, to believe in -- I'm not the first person to point out that it is a very strange sort of loving God who would have salvation depend on a person's ability to believe in him for bad reasons. I mean, it's, you know, it's just a weird scenario, but it is a scenario that is -- many people find emotionally consoling. And there is another aspect here is that reason and belief are not easily separated from emotion. I mean, we, our emotion -- our rationale lives are deeply entangled with our emotional lives and we feel emotional responses to things we find to be unreasonable. I mean, I happen think that doubt is on the continuum with disgust and other psychological rejection states and so when we
doubt a proposition, we are having an emotional response
to it, and so I think we -- we just have to be -- I think
there is an all purpose corrective here which is just
intellectual honesty and if you cease to pretend to be
certain about things you are not certain about, see where
that gets you. See where that gets you in conversation
with other human beings. I think it will get you a
profoundly ethical life. It will certainly get you a
profoundly non deceptive life.

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

MR. HARRIS: Yeah.

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

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

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

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

(Laughter)

MR. HARRIS: I stand corrected.

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

MR. HARRIS: Right.

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

MR. HARRIS: Well, this is -- this gets us, I think somewhat too far afield into questions of
epistemology and the philosophy of science. There are real problems in trying to make the claim that our beliefs about the world represent reality as it is. You know, that our beliefs can ever be perfectly true, and there is much evidence in science that we get these approximations which are incredibly useful as guides to reality.

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

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

I mean, we can -- it’s clear you can be right or wrong about a variety of propositions by which you would want to live your life, and you can believe things for good or bad reasons. For you can have justified or
unjustified beliefs. And we all recognize a degree of intellectual honesty and rigor here.

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

(Laughter)

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

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

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

MR. HARRIS: Uh-huh.

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

MR. HARRIS: Yeah.

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

MR. HARRIS: That’s true.

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

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

MR. HARRIS: Right, right.

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

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

But the other thing is that we have to be honest
about why they are evolving. The door leading out of
religious literalism doesn’t open from the inside. I mean
these religions have been moderated because of the
pressure of modernity. I mean, secular politics and a
conception of human rights and our growing scientific
understanding of the universe has applied pressure, much
more so in the case of Judaism and Christianity than it has in Islam, because Islam has been isolated from the enlightenment and you know even the renaissance in some significant sense.

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

(Laughter)

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

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

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

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

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

MR. ALTERMAN: But then how would you respond to the Sakyong and Rabbi Kula sitting down last night at an
evening exchange and talking openly about religions and
comparing the ways they both work.

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

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

(Laughter)

MR. HARRIS: I think people are finding
themselves in that situation a lot and not admitting it,
but as I -- you know I sat down with Rick Warren who is
criticized from the religious right. At least I wouldn’t
call him a moderate, he is still a fundamentalist of
sorts, but there are people much more fundamental than he
who criticize him for not being biblical enough. You know
in -- Jon Meacham asked him in the interview, “Do you
think Sam is going to go to hell?” “Well, yeah,
probably.”

(Laughter)

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

SPEAKER: Thank you.

MR. HARRIS: Yeah. One more question.

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

MR. HARRIS: Yeah. I think, I don’t think I am
a particularly good advertisement for achieving that
balance, but --
MR. HARRIS: -- within the privacy of my own mind, I do, you know, work to find that balance. And I -- and you know, so I’ve spent months on meditation retreats. You know just doing nothing but practice meditation in silence and is -- this is not a matter of thinking or you inadvertently think, but the goal of meditation is not to think about anything rationally or figure anything out.

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

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

(Applause)