SAM HARRIS IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER MCTERNAN

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Brothers and sisters, good evening. I'm very glad that you're here tonight. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. As you all know, my goal here at the Library is simply to make Patience and Fortitude, our two lions, roar. We've had occasion for that in the past few weeks, couple of weeks, since 9/11, we've had six events with a huge amount of people coming, and I think people are really eager to hear *live* discussions in our day and age of the forbidden fruit—the Blackberry and such—so it's a pleasure to have tonight Oliver McTernan and Sam Harris, who I hope will give us perhaps polite but also vigorous debate about the issues contained in Sam Harris's most recent book, *Letter to a Christian Nation.*

And I think what will happen tonight is we will have a discussion which is about as long as a psychoanalytical session, somewhere around fifty minutes, after which time you will have more or less twenty to twenty-five minutes to ask questions. I would like to impress upon you that we prefer—that is, everybody on stage, including myself at the present moment—questions rather than statements. So I've discovered in my ten years of doing this that it takes about fifty-two to fifty-seven seconds to ask a question, so if you could do that, that would be wonderful.

I also highly encourage you to join our e-mail list. For anybody who hasn't joined our e-mail list, which is expanding by two or three hundred every week, you should—you will hear what kind of events we have coming up. Also, I'm in the habit of creating unexpected events at the last moment, and that way you will always be kept informed. For anybody who joins the e-mail list today, you will be getting two free tickets to non-sold-out events. I can't get you free to events that are sold out. For instance, this week we have Frank Rich coming, unfortunately that is no longer available. But many more other events are coming up—I'll be interviewing Jan Morris, we have David Rockwell coming, and many more wonderful people, so do come, if you can.

Tonight, this debate, which I think has gotten a little bit of play in the press, *Letter to a Christian Nation,* I don't know if any of you saw page ten of Week in Review—quite impressive, sort of gives you an idea of the topic—Religion=Madness. And I think, as some of you may also have noticed, there's a question mark, so I guess the debate tonight

might be a little bit of a question as to whether that's accurate or not. Or whether it's accurate or not that some people view Sam Harris as a secular fundamentalist, or if indeed he is saving us from the impediment of religion. I think this is something I will leave in the very good hands of Oliver McTernan.

For those of you who don't know who Oliver McTernan is, I feel both sorry for you because you don't yet, and I feel happy because you will now. He's a wonderful BBC host, also in charge of an NGO called Forward Thinking that tries to resolve conflict in areas and regions where there is conflict, which I gather would be anywhere where human beings live. And so he will tell you a little bit about the kind of work he does. Very often he does that kind of work with religious leaders and in the political sphere that sometimes is very contentious. So he will tell you a little bit about Forward Thinking. He also is a former priest, so I think he's in a very good position here to debate some of the issues contained in this book.

As to Sam Harris, all of you know who he is, I imagine. He is the author of *The End of Faith* and now *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It's, as I said, gotten a lot of play in the press, and I think without further ado, I'd like to simply open the evening to Oliver McTernan's probing, and I hope goading, questions. Thank you very much.

(applause)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Thank you, Paul. We'll follow that introduction. Being in New York, I was reminded of a story of Mario Cuomo. He said when he decided to enter into politics, his teacher at college took him aside, a Father O'Flynn, and he said, "Mario, when you go into this game, you'll be expected to do a lot of after-dinner speaking, a lot of public speaking and gatherings and so forth." And he said, "If you'll take my advice, think of yourself as a corpse at an old Irish wake. They need you there to have the get-together, but they sure don't expect you to say a great deal." **(laughter)** Well, Sam, it struck me, you know, sort of, we could say a great deal tonight on both your books and that's why I thought it would be best for us to try and focus our discussion on your latest book, *A Letter to a Christian Nation*. Now, I'd like to begin, and I'd like to begin in the sort of style of *Hard Talk*. I don't know if you've seen it on BBC, where you shake hands in the beginning and then shake hands at the end, but it's to probe. And what I'd like to start with is just a few general remarks about the book as it struck me and then to move on to more particular issues that you raise. And just in the sort of provocative style of *Hard Talk*, let me just read—

SAM HARRIS: You're softening me up, I can tell.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Not at all. **(laughter)** Let me just read. A remark I read in a review recently. "In 1817, James Mill," who was the father of John Stuart Mill, "wrote a history of India several hundred pages long in which he confidently dismissed the country's culture as primitive, superstitious, fanatical, and degenerate. The fact that Mill had never visited India, knew no Indians, spoke no Indian language, gave him no pause

for hesitation over his conclusions." Now, Sam, I think some of that criticism could be leveled at your most recent book, and the fact that you chose to define for yourself what a committed Christian is, what a liberal Christian is, what a moderate Christian is, in some way opens you to the accusation that, like other people today in the neocon world, of shaping reality to fit the argument or the assumptions.

Now, when I first read your book, my immediate reaction was—well, I'd two, two immediate reactions. The first was that this is a peculiar situation to America—it certainly doesn't resonate with my experience in Europe or in my experience visiting places like Africa or South America, so that it was a peculiar American issue. And the second reaction was to say where have you been over the past thirty years or so? Simply because a lot of the issues I find you legitimately raise in the book have been the subject of intense debate, both within the theological world, you know, theological periodicals, and especially in Europe in the media.

Now, having said that, I recognize, and the presence of so many people here tonight confirms that, that the issues you raise are very important, and the way you raise them, in fact, resonates with a lot of people. I was at the Clinton Global Initiative over the last few days, and on Friday morning, I sat down for breakfast next to a prominent American writer in *Vanity Fair* and she thought I might be in London today. I said, no I was here to debate with you. And she immediately said how important both your books have been for her, that she really felt you raised issues in a way that resonated within her.

There's much in your book that I would agree with. I was going to quote out several things—but we'll pick those up later—that I would fully endorse on so many issues and the way you raise it, but the great problem I have in the way you frame your argument, because I fear the way you frame the argument in the *Letter to the Christian Nation*, you have actually prevented what you desire and what you express in the conclusion, saying you want a robust public debate that's intelligent and with integrity, and I'm not—I'm paraphrasing your words. That leads me to the opening question, which Paul alluded to in his introduction, that you could be accused of reflecting in your style the mindset that you most reject, that you could be said to be a secularist fundamentalist, so may I open with that?

SAM HARRIS: Sure, yeah, I think that's a very good place to start. Well, first, thank you all for coming. It's really—

Someone in audience: We love you, Sam.

(laughter)

SAM HARRIS: I don't know who said that, but I'll take it from all of you. **(laughter)** It's really, it's quite amazing and humbling to open my big mouth in this context and have so many people want to hear what comes out, so I really have no illusions about how lucky I am to be in this circumstance, and so I thank you for listening. Well, Oliver, your question really goes to the issue of religious moderation, religious liberalism,

religious progressives, because in response to *The End of Faith*, in which I criticize religious moderation and really religious faith in principle, I have heard from so many people like you, who have said that, you know, I have caricatured faith, I have spoken to the extreme, in such a way as to (1) legitimize the extreme and (2) it seems to have the character of a kind of secular fundamentalism. My position seems fundamentalist in a sense. So let's talk about that briefly.

Let's take the second part first. This idea that there can be a secular fundamentalism, or that reason can be dogmatic. This, I think, is a trick, an artifact of language, that we need to see through. I can't tell you how many times I've heard that atheism is a faith, for instance, or science is a religion. And that is a kind of a clever way of turning the argument back upon the person who is demanding evidence and demanding good reasons for various beliefs and so I just—I want to point out that this would satisfy *none* of us on the question of the existence of Zeus, for instance. You're not being a fundamentalist to reject Zeus out of hand. Everything said about Zeus is clearly a product of the human imagination. Nobody—and I say this with the caveat that I actually do get hate mail from people who believe in Zeus and believe in Poseidon **(laughter)**, so with a few exceptions, we have all seen through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We see them as literature and they are taught as literature and in *The End of Faith*, in both books, but in *The End of Faith* in particular, I ask the reader to imagine just how strange a world it would be if our public policy was constrained by people who thought that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was actually—had actually been dictated by the creator of the universe

and that we had to—before deciding what medical research to do, we had to subject it to some view through the prism of whatever Ovid had given us.

Imagine living in a world where the human community had been Balkanized into separate camps based on rival interpretations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or the plays of Shakespeare. Really ancient literature around which people's moral allegiance has accreted and really just generation after generation reliably driving a wedge between various human communities. I think that would be so strange a world it would really be impossible to imagine that we would let ourselves get in that situation, except we are in exactly that situation with religion, because I view these books, I view the Bible and the Qur'an in precisely the same way that I think the rest of us view this literature.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But, Sam, when you look at the world today, I think there are competing worldviews. Sometimes these overlap, there's interchange and so forth. When I use the words "secular fundamentalist," I would say that it mirrors the sort of religious fundamentalists who say that there is one worldview that excludes any possibility or concept of the other being right. Now, that's where I fear, if we start from there, you don't give the grounds for an honest exchange, because you've excluded the integrity—the intellectual integrity, the spiritual integrity or beliefs of another.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Actually, I'm not articulating a worldview, I'm really articulating a reluctance to accept people pretending to be certain about things they're clearly not certain about. It's very—what I'm advocating is not a—I'm not pushing forward a whole

machinery of belief that has to be accepted, I'm simply saying that we should use the same criteria we use in every other area of our lives to judge the reasonableness of claims, when people start making claims about God and the afterlife and the divine provenance of various books. So, for instance, when someone comes forward and says that they're sure that Elvis is still alive, and they've, you know, they've got a shrine to Elvis in their bedroom and this absorbs an immense amount of energy. We all know that that conviction is basically incompatible with the state of the evidence. So there's not a worldview being marshaled there—you know, strong conviction, low evidence, something's not right **(laughter)**, and yet change the subject to God, and it has to be the biblical God or the Qur'anic God, it can't be—it can't be Heavens Gates with the messiah coming back on the spaceship—I don't know if you've heard of that cult.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: You use language in a way that I would say is very lazy and loose because it doesn't do justice to the theological research over centuries. Rightly in both books you've been critical of some of the conclusions of that, but to equate that with some of the examples you gave I think again closes down dialogue, it doesn't give you the sort of credible hearing that your—the issues you raise—should be given.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, let me bracket the heresy that's about to come out with the fact that I'm very interested in spiritual experience. If a Christian goes into a cave and prays to Jesus for eighteen hours a day and comes out after a year talking about how his mind has been transformed, I'm very interested to hear about that transformation, and I actually don't doubt that such transformations are possible. In fact, I think you'd be a fool

to doubt that. It's quite obvious that there's this—there's a phenomenology here where people, based on how they use their attention, and based on novel concepts, can radically transform their experience of the world, so I think that someone could very likely become very much like Jesus and love his neighbor as himself, etcetera, I mean, there's a normative psychological possibility there that I don't doubt and that I talk about to some degree in the *End of Faith*.

But the question is, what is reasonable to believe on the basis of that experience? If I spent a year in a cave praying to Jesus and had even *visions* of Jesus, say, and felt my life transformed, what would be reasonable to conclude, just based on the fact that Hindus have the same experience in their caves—they're praying to Krishna, and they have the same devotion and bliss and other esoteric phenomenon flood their minds. At the very least, having one other data point, the fact that Hindus do it and they never think of Jesus, proves that the divinity of Jesus and the unique revelation of the Bible is not the best interpretation of the data. There's a deeper possibility here, there's the raw fact that the human nervous system—and I'm not prejudging the relationship of consciousness to the brain, who knows what it is—but we as a system, however we're entangled with the universe, are susceptible to having experiences like this. So what I dispute, and I think I can dispute it categorically, is that—the claim that any one of these books deserves the kind of attention it's getting. The claim that it is legitimate to organize an entire tradition around this accidental product of the Iron Age I think is fundamentally illegitimate.

(laughter)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: You know, Sam, this is the problem I have with the whole presentation of your thought, is that you are—for me it's flawed logic. You work from the particular to the general conclusion. You will take a peculiar brand of evangelical Christianity that's prominent here in America, and you, you know, conclude that the whole of Christian tradition, with all its diversity, cultural differences, theological differences, is shaped in that way, and so, I'm finding it very difficult to get into a more serious conversation. We're like ships passing in the night. And I'd love to challenge you to come out of the American experience and just broaden it and try and hear what I, as a European, have to say, and it's a quite different experience of spirituality.

One of the areas, I would say, which we can pick up on, is how you define—sometimes you talk about faith, sometimes you talk about religion. I'm not clear whether you use those words—you know, you interchange the use of those words. For me, they're two very different things. Another thing, I know you don't like the word "atheist," and you make that clear in your book, but I would, if I just can prefix this with another short story, a real story of a Danish journalist who was stopped in Northern Ireland, during the worst period of the conflict and sectarian killing, and one of the death squads stopped him and he was asked whether he was a Catholic or a Protestant. And he said, "I'm an atheist." And they said, "Well, that doesn't matter, you're a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist." **(laughter)** Now, Sam, it really struck me that I would describe you as a Protestant atheist, and I say that because your whole argument—

SAM HARRIS: Don't tell my mother.

(laughter)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Your whole argument focuses on the Bible as the word of God. You seem to ignore the great debate of the Reformation, which was basically the debate between the role of Natural Law revelation and Natural Law, the role of tradition, and of course the Bible as we have it. As you know, the Protestant tradition only focuses on the Bible as the authentic authority. The orthodox Catholic traditions always see the Bible as a product of the believing community, not something that just landed and created the community, but actually grew out over centuries from the shared experience and faith, and also the Jewish tradition exactly the same—the Hebrew Bible was the product of a believing community, and grown through oral tradition into written tradition, and so forth. Now that is anathema to the people you focus on, and that's why I say one of the flaws that I find is if you define what you mean by committed Christian and then restrict that very much within a particular Christian tradition, which again is peculiar to this part of the world, it doesn't allow for the sort of debate that you ask for.

SAM HARRIS: Right, right. Well, two things. One let me argue briefly about why it's appropriate to be especially worried about the fundamentalist Christians in this society. We're living in a country in which 44 percent of the population claims to either be certain or confident that Jesus is going to come back and rescue us in the next fifty years. Now, one thing I argue in my book is that this belief is really incompatible with making the hard and sensible decisions we have to make to create a durable future for civilization. I

mean, just imagine, imagine what it would be like if any significant percentage of the U.S. government actually believed that the world was going to end, and it was going to end gloriously, and they were going to be raptured into the sky by Jesus so that they could witness a sacred genocide that happens at the end of human history and this is going to happen in the next few decades. It's quite possible that people in our government believe this because 44 percent of us believe this. So I think it's—even from the relative safety of Europe that that should concern you and the rest of the world.

(laughter)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: It does. It deeply concerns me, but I don't see that as having anything to do with Christianity—I think it's a distortion of the Christian tradition.

SAM HARRIS: Okay, great, I'm very glad you said that.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: And that's where I find so much in your book I could agree with, but it is the way you have framed the argument, I think you've closed down the debate.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, what worries me about that is that everyone is free to define Christianity or religion or faith any way they want. I can't tell you how many times I've been in a conversation where the response is, "But that's not Islam, that's not Christianity," and then I'm presented with an utterly benign religion, which, as far as I

can tell, has a subscriber of maybe one in that case. **(laughter)** I mean, it's really just, Jesus is just a basic human possibility, and he's not the son of God, he's just—okay, so, how many Christians subscribe to that? Well, I think, not many.

Now, no doubt there are millions who subscribe to your brand of Christianity and I don't doubt that. But the problem with moderates and progressives standing up and saying, "This is the real version of Islam," or "this is the real version of Christianity," is that while we need them to say that on some level, we need to figure out how to moderate the Muslim world, this is something you're—this is a problem you're especially close to. We need to figure out how to get 1.4 billion Muslims to say, "Osama bin Laden has completely distorted Islam," but there's a tension here, there's a tension between expressing a moderate version of these faiths and simply obfuscating the problem of the millions upon millions of people who take their faith far more literally. So it's, I think we have to be very careful when we say, "This is not the real Christianity," because we've got a hundred and fifty million people in this country alone who disagree with you.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: And I agree with that, that you're right in, you know, drawing attention to that, because when I say, "this isn't the real Christianity," I think it is a brand of Christianity that I find as scary as you do, but the problem is—and I'm sure the vast majority of Muslims find Osama bin Laden's version of Islamic faith as scary as we do in the West—but the issue is, do the press and the media don't find the—and I hate using words like "liberal" or "moderate"—they don't find mainstream belief attractive, it's not sexy enough, so you go for the extreme expression of it, because it then sets you up in a

sort of controversy which, you know, attracts listeners and so forth. Now, if we're talking about trying to promote a responsible debate, how do we tackle that?

SAM HARRIS: Well, one problem again I'd like to notice is that if we're not willing to criticize fallacious and illegitimate and poorly anchored beliefs just in principle because they're coming to us under the guise of a tradition, because these are sacred beliefs that have to be treated differently than other beliefs, we run a terrible risk, because it's always surprising to see how this little bit of dogmatism manufactures human suffering. There are a variety of examples I use in my book.

One, the Catholic dogma that contraception is somehow morally problematic. This is, this is—I don't know how mainstream it is among Catholics that you know, but this is the official position of the Vatican. Maybe they'll reconsider it at some point. They'll only reconsider it on the basis of being criticized, as far as I can tell. But this is a dogma that seems like it's not going to get anyone killed, it's probably going to increase the birthrate in various places, but when you broadcast this dogma onto a place like sub-Saharan Africa, where you have ministers preaching the sinfulness of condom use in villages where AIDS is epidemic, and where the only information about condom use is the representation of the ministry, I argue this is genocidal stupidity and this is—you have the same ministers also preaching the necessity of believing the divinity of Jesus in countries like Sudan, where literally millions have died from civil wars between Christians and Muslims—so this is, it's divisive as well.

I think this is, these dogmas in and of themselves, are not—they're not as bad as the dogma of jihad, for instance, or the notion that death in the defense of Islam is the best thing that could possibly happen to one of your sons. But it's not even a matter of—in principle it's not a matter of the effects, because I think we should just be interested in understanding what's true, and speaking honestly about the state of our knowledge, but when you look at the effects, the effects of dogma are almost uniformly bad, because of this reason: dogmas are the beliefs we hold immune to criticism from other—from conversation and from the revisions that experience is naturally going to impose. "We're going to believe this no matter what" is essentially the mode of holding dogma. And that's, that's gotta be a bad idea.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I would agree with you—the current policy of the Vatican—I would say policy rather than dogma—is highly irresponsible, given the extent of HIV and so forth in developing countries, but I think within, as far as I know, and I'm not now active in ministry, or I resigned active ministry so as not to have the institutional baggage, you might say, in the work I do. But I know that within the Catholic Church there is a deep debate on this, and I think in practice probably most missionaries would endorse the use of condoms, so, you know, I wish your book had sort of reflected those tensions and didn't just brand everyone, you know, in the same category of caricature as the evangelical, you know, literalist, you might say, believer, that worries you here in the United States.

SAM HARRIS: But I think we have to be honest, though, about where those moderating changes are coming from. I mean, they're not coming from within the faith. Even if it's only theologians talking to one another, I would argue it's not coming from within the faith. It's coming from the pressure of modernity, the pressure, I mean, in this case, I fully expect that you and I will live to see the day that this policy fully erodes and some pope will stand up and say this, we now admit it, I don't know how he's going to admit it in a truly face-saving way in light of his role as the pope, but he—someone's going to admit this was a bad idea and never should have been practiced, the way that we now admit slavery was a bad idea.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But I wouldn't entirely give it to modernity, as the reason for change. I think if you look at the history of the development of dogma and teaching, it's always been the interaction between personal faith, individual Christians trying to live out their faith in different circumstances, reflecting on that, and that being fed back into the sort of teaching authority of whatever, and that's how, if you look at the history of theology, there's been enormous development in areas, but it's never, as you would portray in the book, almost as someone believes that God has spoken to them—it's the lived experience of people trying to come to terms with the reality in which they're living.

SAM HARRIS: The thing is, though, the Bible could be so much better. **(laughter)** I mean, it really could be, you and I, I know you and I could write a better book in terms of—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But, Sam, this is precisely where I would say your attitude to the book sort of dismisses almost two centuries of textual criticism, biblical criticism—

SAM HARRIS: I'm not dismissing that, it's just—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: No, but the traditional understanding of the Bible is that first and foremost it's human words, it's not—God's word isn't something that is dropped down. It's a human word grown out of lived human experience, reflecting all the cultural problems and so forth over several centuries. Now, it's—having said that, it is also a theological work, and if we just pick it up as if it was written the other day for us in English without trying to address the sort of background and the language and the various things that one needs to put together to get to the essence of the message, of course we get this literalist interpretation. You see, one of the problems I have in the way you use the Bible in *Letter to a Christian* is you're like what we used to describe the old scissor-and-paste merchant, or today would be cut and paste. You know, you have your argument and then you search through all through the book to find a relevant passage, which you take out of context and then place it there. Now, any passage from the Bible has to be read within a context, and I think the same is true with the Qur'an, and so you know it's so important for that. Another point I'd like—

SAM HARRIS: Could I just answer that?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Yes, please.

SAM HARRIS: Because I think it's actually the moderates who are most guilty of cherry-picking. It's the moderates who ignore how much barbarism is in the Bible and that if Christianity were really having a conversation with itself that was tending toward producing the best possible twenty-first century wisdom out of this tradition, you wouldn't have a book like Leviticus or Deuteronomy still between the covers of that text, and you would have a very robust mechanism that would allow you to just jettison the barbarism that's even in the New Testament and to give you one example that I give in my book that shows that it's not a matter of merely cherry-picking, if the Bible is the best we've got in terms of morality, then it should get the most basic questions of morality right. And one very easy question is this question of slavery, which has been resolved to everyone's satisfaction. We know that slavery was wrong. We know that Thomas Jefferson would have been a better man had he freed his slaves. We know that slavery was probably the easiest and most consequential moral dilemma we had as a society and yet any honest reading of the Bible in its totality, not cherry-picking, has to at least acknowledge that it offers more support for slavery than condemnation of it. And so God is wrong on the question of slavery. God tells us how to keep slaves, we beat them—we can beat them, but not so badly that we knock out their eyes or their teeth, this is not the best guidance—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Yeah, but Sam, if we're working within a sort of concept of revelation or inspiration as sort of God talking directly to an individual writer then of

course we have problems. If we research how these books came to be formed and written, and what the central message of these books are, then I think we become aware. In fact, you say we should cut out all these passages, I think these are real warnings to believers today of how badly we can get it wrong, and in fact they're there as a very important thing of saying there is no moment in our human history where we can claim to have a monopoly of truth, and you see the evolution of—

SAM HARRIS: But the thing is there's no moment in the book, though, where God says, "Listen, when you get to the New World and you get your wits about you and you develop three branches of government, you can jettison this stuff."

(laughter)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But again you're speaking in a very literalist—you're speaking as a literalist—it's impossible to—

SAM HARRIS: But any person can be forgiven for being a literalist when they simply read the book just with an open mind, this is God's revelation, or this is just the best book we have.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I don't think you can pick up the Bible and read it as if it was written for us today.

SAM HARRIS: But so many do, so many do.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Ah, yeah, that, now that is the problem. **(laughter)** If so many do, then we have to address that problem and I think the churches are guilty for not making available in a more broader way the learning and work that has gone in, and partly the reason of that, of course it's threatening. The whole issue of the Reformation was why the Catholic Church was against putting the Bible in the hand of people because people would start making their own decisions—you know, it was a way of controlling. And these are real religious problems, but I would say, they're—you know, you have to distinguish between religion and faith if we're going to address those problems.

I'm very conscious of the limited time we have, and we want to give time for question and answer. What I'd like to move on to is—and I'm picking up on concepts coming from the book, your concept of God—and you say, "How can anyone believe in a benevolent and omnipotent god who permits the tsunami to swallow 180,000 innocent people in a few hours?" Now, you know, that's a very legitimate question, but it presumes that we believe in an interventionist God, or have an interventionist notion of God, or a string-puller, or a God who, you know, sort of intervenes in some cases to prevent some things happening and doesn't in others. Now, personally, if I ever believed in a God like that, I would reject that concept of God. And the question I'm coming to is—

SAM HARRIS: Why would you reject that concept of God?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Because I would find it obnoxious, and I don't find that the God that *I* find when I read both the scriptures and theology, I find a total different concept of God. I've never believed in an interventionist God. A great friend of mine, the late rabbi Hugo Gryn, who spent his teenage years in the death camps and fortunately survived, Hugo used to say the question that confronted him in the death camps wasn't "Where is god?" but "Where is man?" And I found in places like Ethiopia, you know, where you come face to face with famine, again you say, it's not "Where is God?" but, "Why are we allowing these deaths to happen when we have the know-how, the means, to do it?" You know, I think the interventionist god becomes the coat hanger where we can excuse ourselves, as it were, from our human responsibilities—

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, I would agree.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: And the tsunami was is a good example. That the warning systems were there. The other question is why are so many poor people having to live in places of danger, you know, live on the coastline because they don't have the opportunity of land elsewhere? I think these are very human issues and to sort of say, well, this is proof that God doesn't exist, because he would come in and prevent it or something—

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think it's proof that an interventionist God who is both good and omnipotent doesn't exist, I mean, that, I think, is a deal-breaker.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Well, why do you conclude that? I don't follow.

SAM HARRIS: If he's got the power to stop the tsunami, and he doesn't, then he's at the very least evil. **(laughter)**

OLIVER MCTERNAN: If the fault—I mean, yes, but you're operating—sorry—you're operating, as I say, with a very fixed notion of an interventionist God. Now, again we're going from particular—

SAM HARRIS: In that conversation I'm talking about the interventionist God of the 44 percent of Americans. Now, because I've, you have to hear, when a tsunami wipes out 200,000 kids, we have people in our culture who say, "You see, He's punishing us for tolerating gay marriage," I mean, it's really that bad here.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Yeah, but Sam, sorry, we've come back to what I would say the flawed language. Right, 44 percent of Americans may believe this, but 44 percent of Americans do not represent the whole of Christian tradition and Christian belief, they do not represent the billions of people elsewhere in the world who may have another belief. Now, if you sort of argue, and say, "Well, what is wrong with the beliefs of 44 percent of Americans?" I think that is a legitimate question. If you say, "Because 44 percent the conclusion is that the billions of other Christians are wrong and it's an illusion to believe in the God that they do," then I think your logic is flawed and I would be critical of it in that sense.

SAM HARRIS: Well, again, I think there are two problems with this track you're on. One is that I don't see any way, once you dignify the claim that the Bible or any book, but in this case the Bible, is somehow uniquely legitimate as a guide, whether it's literally the word of God or whether it's just the best we have, and you are going to invoke some kind of double standard where the beliefs that are coming to us through this tradition get easier treatment than the beliefs of scientists or the beliefs of people arguing in any other mode of discourse, then I don't see how you really criticize those beliefs of fundamentalists as illegitimate. I know there are—I know theology has a vast literature of arguing one point against the other within the context of the tradition, but it seems to me that there is no version of Christianity that is really open to discovering that Jesus was an ordinary man, born of an ordinary act of procreation, and died like an animal. I mean, that is not a possibility that is compatible with Christianity. That is a deal-breaker. And it's very likely true, and yet there's—the discourse of Christianity is fundamentally immunized against it. And this moderate God, this moderate Christianity that has a noninterventionist God—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I'm not representing a moderate God or a moderate Christianity. I would hope that the work that I do and the areas I live in and the people I know and the people who—I'm talking about thousands of people who put their daily lives at risk who've made fundamental options to live in a way that they're trying to transform the world, that would be a challenge to the people that you talk about, and I'm just—I think they present a challenging God, a God that makes the world, and makes

humanity, feel terribly uncomfortable, but here's none of that reflected in your presentation—there's none of that reflected in your presentation—no, but you dismiss it all as moderate, whereas I would say in fact it's a radical God I believe in, and I know lots of radical Christians who make radical options for the transformation of the world—they seem *inconvenient* to your line of argument, so you, right at the beginning, rule them out.

SAM HARRIS: It's not that it's inconvenient, it's just that it still is such a half-measure when confronted with—let me give you an example. We have Francis Collins, whom I'm sure many of you know, the head of the Human Genome Project in the United States, published a very popular book, *The Language of God*. In it he argues that science, molecular biologically specifically, is compatible with Christianity generally and an evangelical Christianity. But he is not a fundamentalist. He believes that evolution occurred, he believes that the universe is billions of years old, as he should, as a physicist, but he—because he is—his thinking about morality is still constrained by a very loose adherence to the dogmas of Christianity, he, as a representative of medical science, will come forward and say, "You know, I'm *for* stem cell research, but it is a very difficult call. This is really—you know, lots of soul-searching is required here." Now, I argue in both my books that lots of soul searching is not required, it's really a—if you think for a second that the interests of blastocysts—of three-day-old human embryos, collections of 150 cells, the size of a pinhead—if you think that they have interests that just might trump the interests of a little boy with a spinal-cord injury, I argue that your moral intuitions have been clouded by religious metaphysics just in principle, but I don't see

how you're going to get there if you're going to honor the—in any shape, the dogmas of the Catholic Church on this.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Is it your concern how you get there? I think the question you raise is a legitimate one, and a rightful challenge you put, but how people of faith get there, it's their problem—

SAM HARRIS: Well, it's our problem, it's the world's problem.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Well, no, then, yeah, but it's in a sense it's the challenge that has to go on, that we're constantly hitting the issue that I would *again* say is peculiar to America, and it's been, I'm afraid the way you've presented the argument, you've again generalized it to—

SAM HARRIS: Well, let me just make a quick lateral move to Islam. Because maybe we have a legitimate debate about Christianity, but as far as I'm concerned, or as far as I know, Islam is unified in the opinion that at the very least the Qur'an *is* the word of God, this is not a human product, and if you know of hundreds of millions of Muslims who think otherwise, I would like to meet them, but they're not, as far as I know, that is heresy under Islam. So that is kind of the perfect hothouse version of this species of ignorance I'm talking about. It really is: the book is perfect and you cannot deviate.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: You've come on to the area that most disturbed me. And it's an area that I work in every day, in the Muslim world and creating understanding. I just felt that you presented in your book what I would say—I would accuse it as lazy research. You know, it's a caricature that doesn't reflect the reality, it doesn't reflect the diversity of the Muslim community, the diversity of faith, the diversity of culture, regional diversity that's found in their—it's certainly—you describe, you know, a Muslim community in Europe that certainly doesn't resonate with my day-to-day experience of dealing with that.

I think there are real debates going on inside Islam. I would say there is an element of truth in the picture that you're portraying there of Islam, but it's an *element* of truth that you make the *whole* truth and as such I think it is extremely dangerous, because I think at a time like this, it entrenches the prejudices that are so dangerous, and it doesn't again enable those Muslim believers who do want a dialogue, who do want to enter into a sort of meaningful relationship with the wider community and so forth. It doesn't give them the opportunity to do so. It's right, you will find a lot of Muslims who believe that in twenty-three years the word of the Qur'an was dictated to the Prophet and it is as it stands. There are others who say it also reflects the cultural milieu in which it was dictated, you know, in a sense—

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think we have to be precise here, because to say that there are lines in the Qur'an that were relevant to the time and need to be interpreted in light of the time, for instance, much of the war-making in the Qur'an moderate Muslims say, well,

this was Mohammed's response to the exigencies of the time, that is not to be applied as jihad in the present, but that is different than saying this is just—this is a book written by people, this is not the perfect word of the creator of the universe. The problem is—and once again I agree with you that we need moderate Muslims to find their voice, and I'm not trying to quash that. I mean, this is—I'm trying to inspire that. I'm quite aware that there are different voices necessary in this dialogue.

No one can speak the way I speak in the Muslim world because he would be killed, and I don't mean just in the Middle East, I mean in Muslim communities anywhere. As a Muslim, to stand up and say, these are the problems with Islam, and to write a book like *The End of Faith* or *Letter to a Christian Nation*, where I speak about Islam briefly, you have, as far as I can tell, at the very least, you have courted the fate of Salman Rushdie, to go into hiding for a decade. Very likely you have signed your own death warrant. That's a problem. And until you can, in the Muslim world, stand up and talk about the very obvious problems with Islam, the treatment of women, the idea that almost every political question of the day is seen through the lens of a religious affiliation, the fact that so many Muslims, so much of the time, feel a reflexive solidarity with other Muslims, simply because they're Muslims, no matter how sociopathic their behavior, the fact that our—that we are just reflexively defining our world into these separate moral communities, until you can talk honestly about that, you've got your work cut out for you—I'm glad you're doing your work, but—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I quite agree. I think there is room for honest debate, honest criticism, but that must be in the context of informed debate, and what worries me is that if we just endorse the sort of popular images or whatever, then we're not appreciating the extent of the debate that is actually going on *inside* the Islamic world, the Muslim world, and the diversity of belief, that a lot of what we condemn I would put down to cultural practices rather than the essence of the Muslim faith. That is something that I've learned in the last three, four years through active engagement with a diversity of Muslim communities, not just one community.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I do not dispute that there are millions and millions of Muslims who are not jihadists, and are not likely to be jihadists, and wish the whole problem of jihad would go away. And there are millions and millions of Muslims who are probably bad Muslims by the lights of the Qur'an, which is to say they don't read it all that attentively, they've got their lives to live, and that's a good thing. But the problem is that when you go—the fact that we have these texts, that are uniquely venerated, keeps us hostage to their contexts, and when you go back to the texts, you find, in the case of the Qur'an, I would argue, you find a manifesto for religious divisiveness, religious intolerance, you find reasons to hate and fear the infidel, more than anything else you find.

Let me just—I can guarantee you. If the Qu'ran were exactly the same, and had one line in it that said, "If you see a red-haired woman on your front lawn at sunset, kill her." Okay, exact same book, but just insert that line over the ages. I can tell you the world we

would live in. We would live in a world where red-haired women would be killed very often in the Muslim world and we would also live in a world in which people like yourself, but Muslim people like yourself, would say, “That’s not the true Islam.” You know, we would find, you know, twenty red-haired women in Baghdad with their heads cut off and someone would come forward and say,” that has nothing to do with Islam, because some of them were strawberry blondes, some of them were not beheaded but were shot,” and it’s not—that’s obscurantism, it’s not—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: You’ve made your point, Sam, I take the point you’re making, and what I want to say is that we—yes, of course, there is a lot of room for criticism, and the book, whether the Bible or the Qur’an, can be a dangerous book in the hands of some, but it all depends on how it is interpreted. It can also be—

SAM HARRIS: But some lines don’t admit of figurative interpretation. Some lines really are just what they seem—they’re really, they’re just—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: No, but I’m sorry, this is where I disagree again. I work with a group of Muslim scholars who would see the Qur’an actually as the best weapon they describe we have against terrorism. Because if you take young people who’ve been radicalized, and you take them through and you let the text speak for itself within context, that you don’t take a line, but you look at a line within a broader context, that it actually moves people’s minds into an understanding of life, the relationship with God, the moral responsibility, and so forth, that liberates them from that sort of mindset that you’re

describing. So what I'm trying to say is we cannot be dismissive of the debates that are going on inside and I just wish—and then I think it's time, Paul, that we did throw it open to question and answer—I just wish, Sam, that in taking—that in having the courage to write this book, you had taken a little bit more time to *research* it, and a little bit more time to frame it in a way that would have allowed the sort of debate that you were hoping that it would promote. And I hope maybe tonight is the beginning of this. If I may now throw the floor open—

SAM HARRIS: Let me just, I can't let the final line to be more research. I just want to tell you that in writing this book, before we published it, I sent the manuscript to people who I *knew* would hate it, the head of Religious Studies at Stanford, and the chaplain at Stanford, and half a dozen other ministers, people who I knew would just be quite disposed to find any errors of scholarship in the book. And I received no—I received a lot of—many of the disgruntled noises that you have made—and there's legitimate debate to be had here pragmatically, but in terms of *errors* about Christianity or Catholicism, or errors about Islam, even, I mean, I'm flooded with e-mail, and I'm not getting the e-mail of errors, I'm getting the e-mail of, it's the whole range, you know, "You're going to hell, you're the Antichrist," or "This is not my faith."

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Yeah, but that does not justify, I think, again, the conclusions you reach. You know, that you're going—that we can spend all night focusing on particular experiences and then concluding with general, sweeping general statements,

and that's where I think there is a flaw in the presentation. But let's open it up, because I'm sure a lot of people here will have—

Q: Sam, I think that you're one of the brightest guys writing on the face of the planet, **(applause)** but my question is this: reading your book only leads me to one conclusion, which is that we're going to be blown off the face of the earth by a bunch of fanatics and there isn't much we can do about it except go into our classrooms and put our faces down on our desks and wait for it to happen. You're so smart—do you have any advice or suggestions on what we as individuals in this room can do to change the ugly conclusions that I'm drawing from your book.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, I knew someone would ask something like that.

(laughter)

Q: I e-mailed it to you in advance so you should have thought about it.

(laughter)

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, how to solve the problems of the world. You know, I really do think it comes down to a matter of discourse. This is why I am reluctant to simply agree with you. There is something that—I mean, you and I have a fundamental disagreement about some things. But I can actually meet you more than halfway in acknowledging that

my mode of speaking about these problems is guaranteed to offend *so* many people that it could be destructive. Okay, so you can't go—I can't go into the Muslim community speaking the way I do—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: It doesn't offend me, it makes me *dismiss* you.

SAM HARRIS: Okay, and that's another problem, that's another problem.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I think that's sad, I think that's sad, because in a sense you know, you talked about the Stanford people, you know, sort of looking at that. I would question anyone, a serious scholar, looking at your book and saying, well, not taking issue with certain statements you make. And I think they did you a disservice in not challenging you morally before it was published, and I say that with—because I think that a lot of what you're saying in your book is important and needs to be heard, but it needs to stimulate a debate, not close down the debate.

SAM HARRIS: Right. I still think the move you're making is not a matter of pointing out actual flaws in my analysis of what millions believe. We—you know, open the newspaper tomorrow and I guarantee you you're going to see something about suicide bombing. And the suicide bomber will have had it in his head that he's going to go to paradise and it's not an accident that he had that in his head. There is a discourse among some significant subset of Muslims at this moment that is readily legitimized by the Qur'an and the Hadith that gives this expectation to young men and has generated this

death cult around them where even their mothers will celebrate their suicidal atrocities and to say simply that calling a spade a spade with respect to this, saying that it's too easy under Islam to justify this behavior. For you to say that that is not sufficiently cognizant of all these beautiful trends within Islam that criticize this behavior is a half-truth.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I'm not saying that. No, I'm not saying that.

SAM HARRIS: I mean, full stop, we have to acknowledge that it is illegitimate for crowds a hundred thousand strong to call for the deaths of newspaper editors because they have published cartoons. I mean, this is a tendency that's at odds with modernity, but the move that you then make, the subsequent move you make, with respect to Christianity, with respect to Islam, I feel is a kind of obscurantism. I know that I didn't—I'm not talking about Bill Moyers's Christianity in this book, I know Bill Moyers is not waiting to be raptured, and I know that he has found some way of reading the Bible that, that—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Sam, I'm not talking as a sort of armchair observer or critic. I go to Gaza, I meet Hamas, I meet Islamic Jihad, I talk face-to-face with them. I know the issues that you raise are serious issues. But in answer to the question there, do we just stand back and sort of—you print something like that and say, "Oh my God, we've got to eradicate this belief or otherwise the world is going to fall apart," or do we go into a situation and try and understand what is the grievance that is feeding into this belief—

SAM HARRIS: Okay, but once again, that's the move that I argue against.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But, no, sorry, but in the relationship between faith and violence, I think you rightly say violence can stem from belief, in *that*, may I say, you differ from most secularists, who actually, the paradigm we work in in the world is a secularist paradigm which dismisses religion as a cause of conflict, which does not see it, that always be greed or grievance. So you are unique there in the secularist argument.

SAM HARRIS: And do you agree with me in that, or do you agree with the secularists?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: No, but I would agree with you, yes, I do think that there are, exactly because of what you are saying the ambiguities contained in the texts—the ambivalence both in the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim texts—give rise to that and that religion itself, and the historical record shows, it can be a direct cause of conflict. Most of the conflict we deal with today in my experience is grievance-based. There is very little what I would say ideological-driven conflict. It's a grievance-driven—

SAM HARRIS: Okay, well, I think there, we differ.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But there, there, if you go into the situations of conflict, it is there that you have to understand how the text actually can become an *ally* in resolving the conflict, not in fact feeding it, and that's the important nuances that I think we have to—

SAM HARRIS: I would agree, in that it has to become an ally. I mean, what's the alternative? I have no illusions that somehow we're going to convince 1.4 billion Muslims to be atheists like me. I mean this is not—the transition to secularism has gotta be through some artful theology, so the text *has* to be an ally, I would agree with you, and there need to be Muslims who don't talk like me, but talk like *true* moderates, who say, this is where Osama bin Laden is going wrong, and they *have* to build constituencies.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: And they do.

SAM HARRIS: Okay, well, they're not doing it fast enough, as far as I can tell.

(applause)

Q: I'm being told to ask my question, I'm sorry.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Sorry, we were getting lost up here.

Q: You are understandably scornful of organized religion, but what do you say to the people who need something to believe in to explain the unknown, to reassure them about their fears? I'm just curious, are you empathetic to those people, and what's your response? What would your response be?

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, well, I think it's—I have two parts to my response. One is, of course I am empathetic. I mean, we are *all* going to die. We are in an astonishing circumstance, and I think worse than the fact that we're all going to die, we're all going to lose everyone else. I mean, you know, forget about your own death, if you just live long enough, you are going to witness the death of everyone you love in this world, so there's no question that people are tending to draw some comfort from their religious beliefs in light of that.

What I argue in both my books is that we really—we have to find some way, and I think we *can* find some way, of being happy here, without deluding ourselves about the nature of the universe, and certainly without pretending to know things we don't know, we *clearly* don't know. There's not a person in this world who believes that he's certain that Jesus was born of a virgin or is coming back in his lifetime, who really knows that. I mean, there's not—*no* spiritual experience puts you in a position to know that. And so we are tolerating false certainty on just such a massive scale, and yes, not all Christians promulgate those false certainties, but the other piece, the other answer to that, is that even *if* religion is useful in consoling us, we should be suspicious of that argument, because the usefulness of consoling ideas is—I mean, this is why we have words like "wishful thinking" and "delusion." Just imagine if I, you know, thought I was six feet tall. You know, I'm not six feet tall, right, but let's say I just tell people I'm six feet tall, and I believe it, and even in the presence of someone who's actually six feet tall and who can see the top of my head, I say I'm six feet tall. What if asked why I say that, I were to say things like, "You know, I feel better being six feet tall," or "Studies have shown that

men six feet or above are generally thought more attractive, or get higher-paying jobs, you want me to forgo some of those benefits?" I mean, these are—there's something *wrong* with me if I'm arguing in that way, and yet this is really the way that religious people by and large, moderates, progressives, liberals, not—take the full sweep of everyone who's not a fundamentalist. I mean, people tend to go to the *usefulness* of believing these things and yet we wouldn't countenance that in any other area of our lives, and, what's more, I just think it gives you bad reasons to be consoled and to be moral when good reasons are actually available.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Sam, is the you know the selfishness you might say that drives the lifestyle, particularly, if I may say, in North America as sort of fundamentalist belief that I have a right to live this way irrespective of what damage it may cause. We're told that in the next forty years, everyone living on the coastal regions in the poor countries that were the victims of the tsunami will have to be moved, because of the result of global warming. Now, that's got nothing to do with an interventionist God, a benevolent God, or all the things like that, it's talking about us and our attitudes to life and the way we engage with the world.

SAM HARRIS: Right. The one thing I would say to that, though, is one of the greatest casualties of 9/11 and all of this faith-based violence has been environmentalism. I mean, nobody's got *time* to worry about the environment, or many of us don't have time, because there's at least the *illusion* of more pressing needs. And you know, I'm not

writing books about the environment, I could be, I could be just as motivated, but there's something more lurid about people flying planes into our buildings.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But aren't you in a way distracting the debate, you might say.

SAM HARRIS: If I knew in my gut that global warming was really the most important thing to be paying attention to, I'd be irrational not to pay attention to it—

OLIVER MCTERNAN: But the scientists will tell us it is, and you now are saying to me—

SAM HARRIS: The scientists are not spending all their time thinking about how *bad* our religious conflicts could get, and how quickly they could get there. I really think we are inevitably moving into an age of nuclear terrorism. I don't think we are going to stop proliferation, and not stopping proliferation, I think it's a matter of time before people can get their hands on whatever they want. You know, we—look how the war on drugs has succeeded in keeping drugs off the street. It just doesn't happen, and there's enough money there, we're not going to un-invent the technology. With all due respect, environmental scientists are not thinking all day long about *those* problems, and they shouldn't be, they should be thinking about global warming, but we have many, many problems, and the problem I have with *religion* is that it absorbs so much of the oxygen, we have no time. You and I are sitting here talking about *this*. If—but for this religious

dogmatism, we would simply be talking about the real problems that confront all of us imminently and global warming might be at the top of that list.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I would like to think that, but I very much doubt it, but if I can say, I think one of the serious problems we face today has been created by a misanalysis, the secularist analysis of situations in the Middle East, and part of it has been this concept that Muslims are a homogenized group and all Muslims are the same and there has been no nuance in trying to understand how we deal with situations. So in fact ignorance has driven, I would say, particularly Washington's policies. And are driving policies. Now you can't put that solely at the door of the 44 million fundamentalists in America. I think a lot of the thinking there has come from a very strong secularist sort of mindset that has dominated our social and political sciences over the past almost a hundred years, you might say. So, you know, what I'm saying is these are real issues, but we have to put all the issues up there and be honest about them and not just scapegoat one group and say well, there's the problem, it's not here, it's not within us.

SAM HARRIS: That's not something I've ever been accused of, because I've been offending *every* group on the subject of religion. I mean, I really, this book has very little to do with Islam.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Offend the people, I think equally, who have put us in a situation where our future is in real threat, through the global warming, through the selfish lifestyle, I mean, maybe your next book, and I'm saying that quite seriously,

would be addressed to that sort of—how many more millions in America live in that way?

SAM HARRIS: But I have a question to that. In light of that, we have to be flexible enough as a civilization in the twenty-first century, to respond to emergent problems like global warming. We didn't know anything about it, all of a sudden we do, it's a scientific controversy, and now there's no controversy, Al Gore is right, we've got a problem. You and I, in the next five minutes, could invent a religion that is better than *any* of our religions at giving people a basis to do that. I mean, I can invent it right now.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Frankly, Sam, I think we'd have such a dull homogenized world if we did, I think the beauty—

SAM HARRIS: You wouldn't like to lose some of these catastrophes and genocides?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: No, sorry, the beauty of life, you see for me the beauty of life is actually the diversity of the world—

SAM HARRIS: Where is jihad and honor killing fit in with this diversity?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Where is the selfish lifestyles of North America and Europe that is leading to millions of deaths—

SAM HARRIS: No, I agree with you about the selfish lifestyle; I'm biting that bullet.

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I think it's the same issue, I think it's a distraction to say that. They are problems that we have to address, but let's address them, but let's address them in an objective way. Sorry, I'm being a very bad chair.

SAM HARRIS: We're fighting again.

Q: We really weren't here to hear about global warming. I was wondering, Mr. Harris, given the hostility that a lot of your views receive and the condescension that they got here tonight, I'm wondering if it's possible, do you feel is it possible to persuade a believer into doubt? I mean, you write beautifully, and everything that you say makes a heck of a lot of sense, but I find myself wondering are you only writing for the lonely skeptics who suddenly say "yes, finally," but have you ever found it possible, or *do* you think it's possible to persuade a dogmatic believer to ease up on that dogma and doubt a little.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's a good question because it's really, I mean I can count probably on one hand the number of times I've seen in my life—not only on this issue, but on any issue, seen somebody's basic view of fundamental questions change in real time, right before my eyes, I mean, it's not something that—people are rather ill-disposed to change their minds, this is something we all know. But I receive e-mails from people who have been fundamentalists, and I've received e-mails from ministers who

have lost their faith, and they lost it on the basis of some kind of intrusion of reason and argument, and witnessing untenable aspects of the way their faith failed to map onto reality—tsunamis, etcetera, or the loss of people in their lives, or just noticing how much suffering is born of the irreconcilable nature of having many faiths that claim to be the only legitimate faith.

So people, for whatever reason, lose their faith, and some people have read my books and claimed that that was the thing that tipped them over the edge, or it just, it was the final straw, etcetera, but there—no, there is a significant element of preaching to the choir and trying to energize people who basically already agree with me, to ask the indelicate questions, to be less patient, to be less accommodating. And again, I say this whenever I'm in a situation like this. I'm not advocating that we all rush out and become boorishly hostile in the face of people's religious beliefs. You know, you get into an elevator with somebody and you see a cross around their neck, that's not the moment to say, "You know, Jesus was just an ordinary guy and died like an animal." **(laughter)**

I mean, it's not—there's a room for civility and I think it's—the front line of this war of ideas really is in the public sphere, where, when, you know, you're giving a lecture, when you're writing an editorial, when a journalist is in a position to ask a question of a religious demagogue or a politician who's clearly looking at the questions of the day through a quote "biblical worldview," which is now in our culture invoked without the slightest hint of embarrassment, as far as I can tell. It's time to ask indelicate questions and to respond as though someone had just spoken with certitude about the existence of

Zeus. It's really—it's *that* strange, and at a certain point we're going to have to see it as such. And this does not discount all of human spiritual possibilities.

Q: Oliver, your statement on the beauty of the diversity of religions and the boredom that would come from subscribing to a uniform, more interesting, and perhaps helpful idea, how does that work with the missionary aspect and the proselytization that it seems almost all of these religions have and the total intolerance of any other religion. Comment on that?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I think it's a very good question, and it's a question that I would feel very uncomfortable, and part of the reason why I made a decision five years ago to come out of active ministry in an institutional church, because there were whole areas I felt that we had to move on, you know, that the issues that confront us today required us to look at it in a much more open way, and I felt that if I wanted to be free to address particularly areas of religious conflict, that I couldn't do it with the baggage of an institution. I think that is one of the big issues facing—and I talk now from a Christian point of view—the Christian churches today: should they continue missionary activity? And it's a question—I can't give you, I'm not going to give a definitive answer. My inkling is to say "no." That there should be, you know, a *respect* for traditions and beliefs, and I'm not talking about a sort of wishy-washy concept of tolerance, but a real engagement, a real understanding, that no particular religious tradition has a monopoly in truth, that what we are actually searching for is truth, which is objective, which is outside

the ability of any institution to contain it in its practices, beliefs, and dogmas, and so forth, so I hope that answers your question.

Q: Sam, you place great emphasis and weight on the antiquated stories, beliefs, images in religious texts, and I just wondered how you, what your thinking is about orthodox groups that appear to follow these texts but don't follow them as violently as Islamists and fundamentalist Christians. I'm thinking of Orthodox Jews, Muslims in the United States, Amish communities.

SAM HARRIS: Right, right. Well, I just think it matters specifically what you believe, and one problem with this kind of conversation is we have this one term "religion" as though it named a unified class of human practice and ideology. And I view religion very much as a word like "sport" or "drug"—there is a wide range of sports, some are dangerous, some aren't, likewise with drugs, so, for you, the way you've just expressed a reluctance to spread the Gospel because we should respect other people's religious traditions, I think there is such diversity in what we mean by "religion" that there are some religious traditions that I think like, you know, Salafi Islam, that is not susceptible to respect or very soon won't be, and that's a huge problem. Maybe there's another brand of Islam that doesn't fall into that bin, but Islam is so far from Jainism as a religion, that to call them both religions is just to make a mockery of language here.

So, you know, there are orthodox groups—I would throw out the Jains as the preeminent example here—no matter how orthodox, or even dogmatic, you become as a Jain, you are

never going to wind up a Jain suicide bomber. The Jains are—you know, the core of their belief system is nonviolence. They're vegetarian, they won't kill a fly, Gandhi got his nonviolence from the Jains. The more you become like a Jain, you become less and less a problem to anyone else, and that's not to say that Jainism is reasonable, necessarily, but that its dogmatism and orthodoxy aren't in and of themselves a huge problem. You know, they might be a problem for that person who's practicing it, but they don't necessarily broadcast their problematic nature everywhere all at once and to everyone. So, you know, I'm not lying awake at night worried about the Amish **(laughter)** and yet I wouldn't—the idea that you can raise your kids and then cut off their education at the eighth grade, as I believe the Amish do, I think is, you know, a bad practice and maybe a practice we shouldn't tolerate. Maybe it's child abuse. There's a legitimate discussion to be had there, and if I got the Amish wrong, I apologize.

Q: Okay, it was stated before that the Bible and other scripture is predominantly culturally bound. So basically saying it's culturally bound is in other words saying that it's manmade, so wouldn't it follow that, I guess, basically if scripture and the Bible are manmade and culturally bound, those documents are meant to represent either a direct or an indirect connection with God Him- or Herself, which basically validates the belief in His or Her existence, so if we freely admit that it's manmade, wouldn't it then follow that the notion of God is manmade?

SAM HARRIS: I think that's to you, Oliver.

(laughter)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Thanks, Sam. A good question. It's, I suppose, how we understand revelation, be it Christian revelation, Jewish, or Islamic. And I mention those because they're people of the book, as it were, that believe they have foundational texts that were revealed. If you look at how those texts came into being, you know, through research and language, it's very clear in all the cases they came into being through a period that stretches in certainly some cases over centuries. I believe that a divine being, you know, and I think my faith looks not to the beginning but to the end, what is the purpose of life? And I think the purpose of a human life is more than just the sum of the biological process, you know, that there is an essence within each of us that makes us human and whether we call that "soul" or whatever, I mean, that's the sort of language of the Greeks that I think has complicated issues. But there is something in each and every human being, whatever their cultural differences, beliefs, and that, that connects us with others, and it's that spirit, that aspect of human life, I think is evolving towards fulfillment in a divine being.

The way that has been revealed, I think, has been through human history. And I think the dreadful things that Sam rightly referred to that can be found in all of the scriptures, are part of that spiritual evolution, you know, where people *have* done dreadful things and I think they're there in the foundational scriptures as a very sober reminder how at this point in time we can get things desperately wrong. They're not a sort of—but they're saying that we *can* take wrong turnings. Sam mentioned a challenge earlier saying that if

we were to write a new religion, you know, what would it be? We could do a better job. If you break down all of the books that are called, you know, divine, and you get to the essence of what they are, it's to do unto others what you would have them do unto you. That's—pardon?

Q: (inaudible)

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Well, no, it's not. Of course you don't. I think people can—I believe in revelation through natural law, people can discover that, and people *do* and have done it without but we can't—you know, the scriptures are there. We have to understand why they are there. They are the product of several centuries of human history. We can't just start with a tabula rasa and say, "Right, we're here now, we wipe everything out and we start again." We've got to address what has been the received wisdom, you might say, of centuries.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm sorry—we're going to take one more question.

Q: Thank you both, very much, Sam, great work, I appreciate it, keep it up. Oliver, the question is for you, and I sincerely thank you for all your efforts in what you're doing in the world. My question earlier—you stated earlier that you do not believe in an interventionist God, and I'm wondering whether—I'd like to know where you learned—did you learn this from someplace that you can point to, that you've come to this conclusion, or do you through some, perhaps an emotional sense of where you are today

have come to some conclusion and then my question is how do you validate it and how valid could it be if it's based on emotion and just who you are as a human being? And what does that pose if that's the case?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: Well, it's a combination I would say of human experience and study. The human experience for me began at I think the age of eight, where I was brought up in a sort of traditional Catholic community in the west of Ireland. And I remember as a child it was an occasion when I had an opportunity not to go to Mass with my family. The tradition was you went to Mass every Sunday. And the—I would say the popular cultural belief was that if you didn't do this something dreadful would happen to you. And I remember at the age of eight, "Now this is my opportunity to test whether something will happen to me," and I went off and didn't go to church and nothing happened. Now, I mean, that's a very simple story, but it's—I suppose if we have a probing nature, we want to prove things for ourselves.

Now, the real sort of notion of God as I have has been very much formed through theological study and philosophical study and looking, you know, at the different traditions, not just the Christian traditions, but interfaith process as well. And I mean, I would, if I had the sort of concept of a God that was a string-puller interventionist, as I mentioned earlier, I would give up belief in that—even if that God existed, I couldn't tolerate Him because of the inconsistencies in the way in which He behaves to the world. You know, that if you're in one part of the world, you're privileged and if you're in another part, you die prematurely.

I mean, it just would not make sense, but I learned very early on not to actually use God as a coat hanger, but faith for me, as I mentioned, is not moderate or liberal but it's a very radical challenge to live your life in a very dangerous way because I think that's how I interpret our scriptures, and it's not a comfort zone, in fact it takes you out of a comfort zone, and I only wish it were a comfort zone. I would feel less obliged to do the things I did. If I didn't have that sort of faith, I wouldn't have made the decision I made five, six years ago, to move out of a very sort of comfortable, institutional role, you know, that would have seen me through life and have a position within that that gives you recognition and so forth, into an unknown, but it was an act of faith on my part, not disbelief, that led me to that option, and I'm glad I did, because I can bring to the work I'm doing now, I think, whether it's in Gaza or elsewhere, a richness that I wouldn't be able to bring otherwise, and be able to connect with people, because one understands something of the mindset that is there, and I think that's—certainly I don't regret any of the thirty years that I spent in active ministry. I found it a very enriching spiritual *and* human experience and, as I say, something that's prepared me for my present-day work.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Sam, for the congregation here present, do you have any final words of wisdom before you sign your book?

SAM HARRIS: After all this, I'm still left with a problem, because—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Just one?

OLIVER MCTERNAN: I have many.

SAM HARRIS: Yes, just one. There's this—because once again I think we're conflating language of pragmatism and what is useful and what is, what constrains us in our dialogue in the world given how many people believe these things, and how many people are organizing their lives around what I would argue are fairy tales. If we could invent a religion now, it would *be* the most useful religion. If our religion were merely what you said it was, do unto others, let's say we taught our kids that this was true: do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and study math and science to the best of your ability, and if you don't do that, after death, you're going to be tortured for eternity by a green-headed demon. **(laughter)** Okay, now that would be a useful religion. It would be—I guarantee you that if we could spread that to billions we would live in a better world.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And learn English, too.

SAM HARRIS: And learn multiple languages—add that to the list of precepts. We would live in a better world. It would not be a world of jihad, it would not be a world of where in El Salvador, a very Catholic country, women spend up to thirty years in prison for having back-alley abortions, this is in a country where they stigmatize contraception as a sin against God, we wouldn't live in that world. And yet there would not be the slightest reason to think that this green-headed demon actually exists. So at some point

you have to just be honest and realize that there are ways to argue that the Golden Rule is the most beautiful precept anyone has come up with, without presupposing anything on insufficient evidence, and that's what I think we all have to start doing.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would like to thank Oliver McTernan and Sam Harris, who both will be signing their books. I highly recommend that you come and hear Bill Moyers, who will have another view of religion, next week, next Tuesday, Bill Moyers will be here, with Bill McKibben. Thank you very much.