

SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Sam Harris: The 'Salon' Interview

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(Photo via the [Matthias Rhomberg](#))

I consider *Salon* to be among the worst offenders of the new pseudo-journalism, and I have long maintained a personal boycott of the website. I ask my publishers to ignore any requests from its editors for interviews or for review copies of my books. And on the rare occasions that *Salon* publishes good work—the articles of Jeffrey Tayler stand out—I decline to forward the links on social media. My reason is simple: Despite the work of a few blameless writers, *Salon* has become a cesspool of lies and moral confusion.

However, in response to the repeated requests of one *Salon* writer, Sean Illing, I decided to make an exception. I agreed to do an interview with Illing under two conditions: 1) I would get final approval of all the words attributed to me; 2) I could say whatever I wanted about *Salon*. These conditions were agreed to, and I spent several hours producing the following exchange by phone and email.

In the end, *Salon* published a bowdlerized version of my interview, cutting out the parts that were critical of the website. I don't blame Illing for this. He was a pleasure to correspond with and appears to have made his best effort to get the whole text of our conversation published. And I'm actually happy that his editors decided to help make my case for me by further demonstrating their lack of integrity. *Salon* is irredeemable. I urge the few talented writers left there to flee a sinking ship.

Salon would have its readers believe the following:

[Harris's] remarks were edited merely for clarity and length. No substantive changes were made to the text beyond those considerations.

I've published my full remarks below. The section that *Salon* deleted is highlighted in blue.

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Let's start with your views on Islam. You've acknowledged that Islamic extremism is a hydra-headed problem that can't be reduced to single variable – certainly I agree with that. Given that the Islamic world has not always been what it is today, and has at times been more civilized than the Christian world, how much weight can we give to factors like history, geopolitics, foreign policy, or Western interventionism? And if these non-religious variables are significant, does it undermine the argument that Islam is a *uniquely* problematic religion?

The short answer is that I think the problems we are seeing throughout the Muslim world—jihadism, sectarian conflict, and all the attendant talk of Muslim “humiliation”—are almost entirely religious. And wherever rational grievances do exist, they are invariably viewed, and become magnified, through a religious lens. The truth is that a belief in *specific religious doctrines* is sufficient to produce all the violence, intolerance, and backwardness we see in the Muslim world.

The abysmal treatment of women, the hostility to free speech, the daily bloodletting between Sunni and Shia—these things have absolutely nothing to do with U.S. foreign policy or the founding of Israel. And, contrary to the assertions of many regressive Leftists and Islamist apologists, violent jihad is not a product of colonialism or the 20th century. The tactic of

suicide bombing is relatively new, of course, as is the spread of jihadist ideology on social media, but if you had stood at the gates of Vienna in 1683, you could have not helped but notice the civilizational problem of jihad.

Yes, politics and ordinary grievances enter into many of these recent conflicts. It isn't difficult to see why a person who has lost his or her family in an errant drone strike might hate America, and there is no question that a desire for revenge transcends religion or culture. But the truth is that a sincere belief in the metaphysics of martyrdom can turn an ordinary person into a dangerous religious maniac. And only Islam preaches this doctrine as one of its central tenets.

There are obviously regressive tendencies in all religions, particularly Christianity, which is not to say Christianity and Islam are equivalent. But the question is: If there are external, non-doctrinal factors that have shaped Islam and the Muslim world, how should Western critics incorporate that into their critiques of Islam as such?

Well, the developed world has a responsibility to act with the welfare of humanity in mind. So, to the degree that the liberal critique of American power holds any truth, we should address these injustices and do our best not to manufacture new ones. We are living in a global civilization, with economic, environmental, and political concerns that transcend national boundaries. I'm not saying that we'll have a world government anytime soon, but we need to do our best to rectify the worst disparities of wealth, health, and education globally, so that everyone can enjoy a minimum standard of well-being.

So, I agree that the West bears a disproportionate responsibility to help the world, given our relative wealth and power. And I certainly can't argue that we've done the best job of this. But that doesn't mean we are responsible for the global death cult of jihadism. We are confronting people, in dozens of countries, who despise more or less everything that we value, and are right to value—including free speech, open societies, gender equality, scientific rationality, and more or less everything else about civilization that is worth preserving. And the reasons why they hate these things are almost entirely religious.

You can make the list of U.S. crimes and missteps as long as you want, but it still doesn't explain ISIS. The fact that we invaded Iraq is merely a background condition for a local explosion of jihadist triumphalism and horror—one that is fully explained by a commitment to a specific interpretation of Islamic scripture. Unfortunately, these same ideas are currently addling the brains of people throughout the world who have no terrestrial grievances whatsoever. Medical students and engineers, who are second- and third-generation British citizens, have joined ISIS. There is nothing about Western foreign policy, global capitalism, or white privilege that explains this.

Many would push back and say much of that is true but there's also the problem of antecedent causes. After World War I, for example, countries like Britain and France and Russia constructed the modern Middle East, for reasons of self-interest and without concerns for sectarian rivalries. These agreements prepared the way for much of the political chaos we've seen since. In Iraq, for instance, where ISIS was born, the British imposed a Hashimite monarchy which marked the boundaries of the country irrespective of ethnic and religious tensions. We can't sidestep this history when talking about these problems today; it's only part of the story but it absolutely matters. Do you agree?

But the religious lunacy and tribalism was already in place—and that is why the West's careless partitioning of the region was so problematic. I agree that the history of colonialism isn't pretty. But the example you raise just proves my point. In fact, this practically became a science experiment that dissected out the crucial variable of religion. There are (or were) Christians living in all these beleaguered countries. How many Christian suicide bombers have there been? Where are the

Pakistani, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, and Palestinian *Christians* who are blowing themselves up in crowds of noncombatants? Have there been any? I'm guessing there must have been a few, but the Muslim supply of such people is apparently inexhaustible. In every case, we're talking about the same people, speaking same language, living in the same places, enduring the same material deprivation. In fact, the Christians of the Middle East have it worse. They've not only suffered the legacy of colonialism, they've been hounded out of their countries and often killed outright by their Muslim neighbors—and they still haven't organized themselves into a death cult. What's the difference that makes the difference? Religion.

We can also look outside the Muslim world to see that mere injustice and inequality rarely produce such destructive behavior. Many countries in Latin America have legitimate grievances against the U.S. Where are the Guatemalan suicide bombers? Where are the Cherokee suicide bombers, for that matter? If oppression were enough, the Tibetans should have been practicing suicidal terrorism against the Chinese for decades. Instead, they practice *self-immolation*, for reasons that are totally understandable within the context of their own religious beliefs. Again, specific beliefs matter, and we deny this at our peril. If the behavior of Muslim suicide bombers should tell us anything, it's that certain people really do believe in martyrdom. Let me be very clear about this: I'm not talking about all (or even most) Muslims—I'm talking about jihadists. But all jihadists are Muslim. If even 1 percent of the world's Muslims are potential jihadists, we have a terrible problem on our hands. I'm not sure how we deal with 16 million aspiring martyrs—but lying to ourselves about the nature of the problem doesn't seem like the best strategy.

A key difference I see is that Islam is bound up with a civilization and a culture in way that Christianity isn't, or isn't any longer. The enlightenment project, the modern scientific revolution – these things prepared the way for secular politics in the West; they made possible Jefferson's wall. And I don't think there's a "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's" equivalent in Islam – though perhaps I am mistaken. How significant is this difference and do you think it matters in terms of our expectations and our approach to dealing with the Muslim world?

Yes, these are points I've often made. Islam hasn't suffered the same collisions with secularism and science that Christianity has. And there are also doctrinal differences that make it more impervious to these collisions than Christianity and Judaism were. Unfortunately, the Qur'an doesn't contain anything like that line from Matthew, "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." To the contrary, it is difficult to find an Islamic rationale for truly separating religion and politics. Finding a durable basis for such a separation is one of the great challenges of our age, and that's why I support reformers like Maajid Nawaz, who is attempting to do just that. As you know, he and I have written a book together, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue*. The whole point of the book is to find a path forward, toward Islamic secularism and liberal reform. But the thing that has to be admitted up front, is that Islam presents some unique challenges in this regard.

You've been critical of liberal commentators like Glenn Greenwald, Reza Aslan and Nicholas Kristof. Do you not take any of their points, especially as it relates to blanket condemnations of Islam?

Unfortunately, these people are consistently on the wrong side of the issues. For instance, each of these men, with varying degrees of malice and stupidity, has publicly attacked Ayaan Hirsi Ali as a bigot. And yet Ayaan is a pure victim of Islamic theocracy. She is also a humanist hero who fully recapitulated the Enlightenment project, having been given almost no intellectual tools with which to do it.

Just think of it: Here is a woman who was raised in a condition of medieval theocracy in Somalia and subjected to FGM. Sensing that there was more to life than this, she fled an arranged marriage, emigrated to Holland, learned Dutch, got an education, and became a member of Parliament—only to see her colleague Theo Van Gogh killed in the street by a jihadist. To this day, these barbarians threaten her wherever she goes. And people like Greenwald, Aslan, and Kristof attack *her* for the stridency with which she criticizes the misogyny and intolerance of free thought that are endemic to Islam. Not only do they get the ethics of the situation absolutely wrong, they make her life more dangerous in the process. It is an absolute scandal.

These people are part of what Maajid Nawaz has termed the “regressive Left”—pseudo-liberals who are so blinded by identity politics that they reliably take the side of a backward mob over one of its victims. Rather than protect individual women, apostates, intellectuals, cartoonists, novelists, and true liberals from the intolerance of religious imbeciles, they protect these theocrats from criticism.

The profundity of this moral blindness seems to have achieved an almost crystalline form in the person of Glenn Greenwald. Greenwald is a gay, Jewish atheist who would be murdered three times over in scores of Muslim communities for reasons that are unambiguously religious. And yet, he considers any focus on this particular brand of theocracy—even by someone who has suffered under its shadow as much as Ayaan has—to be a sign of malice toward innocent people. When cartoonists get butchered in Paris to shouts of “We have avenged the Prophet!” Greenwald races to his keyboard [to castigate the dead](#), liberal cartoonists for their (nonexistent) bigotry. He allies himself with a group like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), which has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and works tirelessly to blur the line between legitimate civil rights concerns and theocratic bullying. These are the people who get Ayaan blacklisted from speaking at universities, and Greenwald has publicly stated that there is [no group he is prouder to have collaborated with](#).

According to Greenwald and the rest of the regressive Left, one can criticize religion in general, but any special focus on Islam must be motivated by bigotry or “Islamophobia.” And on that assumption, many of these people think it’s fair to slander and demonize anyone who does focus on Islam—even a true Muslim reformer like Maajid Nawaz. Maajid is a former Islamist, who now runs a counter-extremist think tank in the UK. And yet for merely entering into a dialogue with me about the prospects of spreading secular, liberal values in the Muslim world, he was branded a “native informant” and a “porch monkey” by Greenwald’s colleague at *The Intercept*, Murtaza Hussain, and a “lapdog” by Reza Aslan’s employee, Nathan Lean. These people are simply desperate to shut down dialogue on what is fast becoming the most important political and moral question of our time. Everything they do in this area is dishonest and destructive.

So, no, I don’t take any of their points to heart. And contrary to what you imply in your question, I don’t offer any “blanket condemnations” of anything or anyone. I speak about the specific consequences of specific ideas, in so far as they are believed. If 68 percent of British Muslims believe that anyone who “insults Islam” should be prosecuted and punished—then when criticizing the disastrous consequences of that idea for the U.K., I’m talking about those 68 percent. If 30 percent want to live under *shari’ah*, then I’m talking about precisely those people in that context. These are real poll numbers, by the way, and they’re very troubling.

When talking about America’s role in the world, you’ve used the phrase “well-intentioned giant.” Did you coin that or were you borrowing it? And do you really believe that America’s intentions in the world are especially noble?

No, I was simply commenting on the work of Arundhati Roy, who coined that phrase to disparage U.S. foreign policy. In

certain respects, I believe we are a well-intentioned giant—guilty of all the lumbering ineptitude that the image implies.

Do you think that's true because there's a difference in terms of the intentions and goals that America pursues in the world, relative to other nation-states? And how might our intentions and goals look to people on the receiving end of our foreign policies?

I'm glad you asked, because many people appear totally confused about this, especially on the Left. Intentions are hugely important. In many cases, intention is the only thing that differentiates a truly evil person (or regime) from one who is a mere victim of circumstance. A surgeon performing an appendectomy is not the same as Jack the Ripper just because he's cutting another person with a knife—and this remains true even if the patient dies. Needless to say, we make such distinctions in our criminal justice system all the time. The difference between first-degree murder, manslaughter, and a tragic accident is largely a matter of what the defendant intended to do and why.

I understand the importance of intention in that context, but it's more complicated when you apply that logic to something like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which I know you've written about. You've argued that there's a discernible difference in intentions here. But this conflict, like many others in the world, is asymmetrical. One side has more refined and advanced methods of killing and certain luxuries that the other side doesn't, and you might say that one side is extreme by virtue of their circumstances. I'm not interested in drawing a moral equivalence. But I am asking if you think these distinctions matter when you're talking about intentions and goals and tactics in a geopolitical context?

Generally speaking, I think we have to listen carefully to what people say they want out of life and take these declarations at face value. And when they say they want to go over to the next valley and murder every man, woman, and child, we should believe them. Given the fact that human beings have repeatedly shown themselves capable of genocide, it doesn't take an especially morbid imagination to accept that people who say they want to commit genocide will do so, if given the chance. In the case of Hamas, we have an avowedly genocidal organization ([just read its charter](#)) that was democratically elected. And this occurred in the context of a wider culture that has nursed a genocidal hatred of Jews for generations—and expressed this hatred in everything from its scripture to its textbooks. I'm not saying that the Palestinians don't have any rational grievances against Israel. Of course they do. But their culture has also been poisoned by religious hatred. And this same hatred exists throughout the Muslim world. Ayaan Hirsi Ali remembers being instructed as a teenager in Somalia to pray for the destruction of the Jews. Needless to say, neither she nor her teachers had ever met a Jew. In fact, they had very likely never met *anyone* who had ever met a Jew. And yet this annihilationist hatred was still central to their worldview.

Sure, but there are genocidal instincts and commands strewn through the Christian tradition too. They just happen not to be operative at this moment in time.

Yes—and they are not operative for historical and theological reasons that we can understand. We must find some way recapitulate these changes in an Islamic context.

Returning to your original question, we know that the Israelis aren't genocidal because it is well within their power to commit genocide today, and they're not doing it. That's a very important difference. Given what is being said on the Palestinian side, and given the atrocities they've perpetrated with their limited means, we have every reason to believe that if the power balance were reversed, and the Israelis were an impoverished minority living within and beside a well-armed

Palestinian state, we would see a very different outcome.

To be fair, though, that's a counterfactual and we don't really know what would happen if that were the case, if in fact it was Jewish settlements and neighborhoods that were being oppressed and occupied and backed by major powers for decades. It's hard to know what people will do when they lack the luxury of options, when moderation fails.

It is a counterfactual, but recall what I said about the Palestinian Christians, Tibetans, Native Americans, and so forth. Not every oppressed group readily becomes a death cult. Not every religious ideology can spawn ISIS. There is no reason for us to pretend that all belief systems are the same.

The reality is that the Israelis, for all their faults, have been more restrained in their use of force than the U.S. has—if for no other reason than that they are more vulnerable to world opinion. Every Palestinian child the IDF kills inches Israel ever closer to the brink of exile from the community of nations. Thus, when four children are blown up on a beach in Gaza by an Israeli missile, one thing should be absolutely clear: The missile went *astray*. Children were not the target because, even by the most self-interested and cynical calculus, killing Palestinian children is *disastrous* for Israel. Intentions matter—not to the dead children, obviously, or to their grieving parents—because intentions are the only guide to what a person or nation will do next. What people *intend* to do, the story they tell themselves and others about why they are pursuing specific goals, is the best indication of what they will do if they acquire the power to do it. The Israelis currently have the power to kill as many Palestinian children as they want. The fact that they kill so few, amid circumstances that have all the hallmarks of “collateral damage,” tells us something about them. The fact that the Taliban enters a school in Peshawar and methodically butchers 132 kids, after forcing them to watch their teacher being burned alive, tells us something about *them*.

The regressive Left is blind to these distinctions. For instance, we recently bombed a hospital run by Doctors Without Borders, killing 22 doctors, nurses, and patients. This was an utter tragedy—for the bombed, obviously, but also for U.S. foreign policy. It was obviously a mistake (on some level), because bombing this hospital was *totally against our interests*. The details are still unclear. Perhaps it will prove to be a case of criminal negligence. But, judging from my Twitter feed, fans of Noam Chomsky reacted as if President Obama had called a meeting and declared his intention to destroy one of the most beloved charities on earth by murdering its staff *en masse*.

We are better than our enemies. And the horror is that even such a simple statement of moral fact will be derided as wartime propaganda by many of our readers. Indeed, many will think that even using a term like “enemy” in this (or any) context is a kind of jingoistic outburst. These people take civilization for granted—which is a luxury we can't always afford. As impossible as it may be to believe, many of our readers think that we are *worse* than the jihadists. I am long past imagining that there is anything I can say to rectify this sort of moral confusion. (But here goes...)

Simply recall who we're fighting—groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS. These people kill doctors, aid workers, and journalists *on purpose*. They are telling us with every breath how they want the world to be. They are not saying, “Sorry guys, we just don't have the weapons you have, and so we're obliged to use asymmetric, seemingly barbaric tactics like burning people alive in cages, taking sex slaves, and crucifying children. However, all this savagery doesn't reflect how we want to live at all. Sorry for shooting Malala in the head. We won't behave like that once we build the Caliphate.”

On the contrary, the Taliban *still* intends to kill Malala, and they have proudly told us so. And the ghoulish videos we see

streaming out of ISIS are not their My Lai massacre. They're not some moral error these people are struggling to correct. They reflect a sustained and conscious effort to put their *best foot forward* to the rest of the Muslim community. This behavior, which would otherwise be impossible to understand, makes perfect sense given their interpretation of Islam. And that's the problem.

What do you say to someone like Reza Aslan, who has a legitimate point when he argues that religions don't promote peace or violence—people do. Do you think it's true that, fundamentally, religions are justificatory props and that it's more concrete or existential grievances that are really animating behavior?

Interestingly, Maajid Nawaz has made that the same statement—"Islam isn't a religion of peace or a religion of war; it's a religion." But, as you can tell from my very different relationships with Aslan and Nawaz, there are differences in how they approach this topic. Aslan uses this statement to shut down any discussion of Islam per se and to deny, against all evidence, that there is any connection between certain of its doctrines and the specific forms of violence and intolerance we see in the Muslim world. Aslan has a postmodernist view of religion. According to him, religions don't make any substantive claims about the nature of reality. They're just creative ways of organizing people's emotions, through architecture, art, ritual, and so forth. Bad people will do bad things, and good people will do good things, but religious beliefs do no real work in the world.

This is just post-modernist nonsense. Everything Aslan says stands in stark contradiction to the obvious fact that many people believe preposterous and divisive doctrines that come straight out of scripture—and these beliefs affect their behavior. Many people believe that changing one's religion is wrong, even a killing offense. Many believe that Jesus will be returning to Earth to raise the dead and that he disapproves of masturbation in the meantime. Many believe in past and future lives and that you can be reborn in this world as an animal. These are not ideas that people are bringing *to* their holy books.

There is a kernel of truth in Aslan's statement—but it doesn't have the consequences he alleges. It's true that people *also* take their values to their texts and purport to discover what they already value there. This is especially true of moderates and those who are in the process of losing their faith. When you talk to moderate Christians or Jews and ask them how they read the bible, you find yourself in the presence of people who are using their values to interpret (and effectively edit) their scripture. They believe in human rights and secular tolerance, and they're making a heroic effort to ignore the barbarism in the Old Testament and to find the pearls of wisdom that can be salvaged. They ignore all the crazy prophecies about the end of the world. Clearly, their core values have come from a larger cultural conversation, and they are doing their best to find support for those values in their faith tradition. It's not an especially honest endeavor, but it's not all that harmful either.

When we're talking about fundamentalists, however—those who read their religious books more or less literally—then we really are talking about pulling values and behavioral commitments directly out of the text. Here you find people thinking and saying and doing things that they would never endorse otherwise. It's not an accident that millions of Muslims shun alcohol and bacon. It's not an accident that they make pilgrimage to Mecca. It's not an accident that they pray five times a day. And it's not an accident that many of them despise Jews as the spawn of apes and pigs, treat women as second-class citizens, and answer the call to jihad. These beliefs and practices come right out of scripture.

Aslan or Greenwald are more than capable of defending themselves, but there are plenty of well-intentioned liberals, people who genuinely care about liberal values, who are looking for ways to talk honestly about illiberalism in the Muslim world or about theocratic encroachments on free societies elsewhere, but they want to do so without veering into xenophobia and bigotry. How do you suggest they do that?

It's actually very easy. I haven't veered into xenophobia and bigotry—unless you believe the lies that Aslan and Greenwald tell about me. You simply have to differentiate criticism of ideas from a hatred and intolerance of people. That is trivially easy to do. Regressive Leftists and theocrats *pretend* that it is difficult. They pretend that anyone who worries more about Islam than about the Anglican Communion must be a racist. This is a dangerous, divisive, demeaning lie. And it is fast becoming an article of faith on the Left.

If racism and bigotry were my underlying motive, explain [my fondness](#) for the spiritual aspects of the Islamic tradition. Or explain the fact that I have an even greater fondness for those of Buddhism and Hinduism, and often make invidious comparisons between these religions and Islam (are most Buddhists and Hindus white like me?). Or explain my friendships with current and former Muslims who I do everything in my power to defend from slander and hate. People like Maajid Nawaz, Asra Nomani, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Or explain the solidarity I feel with freethinkers like Sarah Haider, Ali A. Rizvi, Faisal Saeed al Mutar, Ibn Warraq, and all the other Muslim and ex-Muslim authors, bloggers, activists, and reformers whose names I don't even recall. I support these people unconditionally. If I'm a bigot, I'm one of the most confused bigots who ever lived.

The crucial irony to notice here is that it's people like Greenwald and Aslan who have abandoned the most vulnerable Muslims to theocracy and intolerance. This is what Maajid Nawaz calls the problem of “the minorities within the minorities”—the women, gays, intellectuals, apostates, within the Muslim world who can't even speak freely for fear of being murdered by their neighbors. I am explicitly making common cause with these people whenever I criticize the Islamic doctrines that are putting their lives in jeopardy.

One doesn't have to be a bigot to see *shari'ah* as a problem. In fact, it's impossible to be a true liberal without seeing *shari'ah* as a problem. It's impossible to be a true liberal and not acknowledge that one has to be very unlucky indeed to be born a girl in almost any Muslim-majority country. And this is an injustice that liberals should be the first to care about. Just because you were born a woman in Afghanistan, you shouldn't be condemned to live like a slave. There's not a shred of bigotry behind observations of this kind. On the contrary, it's the bigotry of low expectations that allows white, privileged secularists to imagine that a majority of woman and girls forced to wear the veil probably enjoy it.

[Note: *Salon* deleted the following section from the interview.]

As long as we're talking about the regressive Left, it would be remiss of me not to point out how culpable *Salon* is for giving it a voice. The problem is not limited to the political correctness and masochism I've been speaking about—it's also the practice of outright deception to defame Islam's critics. To give you one example, I once wrote [an article](#) about Islamist violence in which I spoke in glowing terms about Malala Yousafzai. I literally said *nothing* but good things about her. I claimed that she is the best thing to come out of the Muslim world in a thousand years. I said she is extraordinarily brave and eloquent and doing what millions of Muslim men and women are too terrified to do, which is to stand up to forces of theocracy in her own society. I also said that though she hadn't won the Nobel Prize that year, she absolutely deserved it—and deserved it far more than some of its recent recipients had. And in response to this encomium, *Salon* published a piece by the lunatic Murtaza Hussain entitled, [“Sam Harris Slurs Malala,”](#) which subjected my views to the same defamatory and dishonest treatment that I've come to expect from him. And this sort of thing has been done to me a dozen

times on your website. And yet *Salon* purports to be a forum for the civil discussion of important ideas.

Most readers simply don't understand how this game is played. If they read an article which states that Sam Harris is a racist, genocidal, xenophobic, pro-torture goon who supported the Iraq war—all of which has been alleged about me in *Salon*—well, then, it's assumed that some journalists who work for the website under proper editorial control have actually looked into the matter and feel that they are on firm enough ground to legally say such things. There's a real confusion about what journalism has become, and I can assure you that very few people realize that much of what appears on your website is produced by [malicious freaks](#) who are just blogging in their underpants.

I'm not saying that everything that *Salon* publishes is on the same level, and I have nothing bad to say about what you've written, Sean. But there is an enormous difference between honest criticism and defamatory lies. If I say that Malala is a total hero who deserves a Nobel Prize, and *Salon* titles its article "Sam Harris Slurs Malala," that's tabloid-level dishonesty. It's worse, in fact, because when one reads about what a nanny said about Brad and Angelina in a tabloid, one knows that such gossip stands a good chance of not being true. *Salon* purports to be representing consequential ideas fairly, and yet it does this sort of thing more often than any website I can think of. The latest piece on me was titled "[Sam Harris' dangerous new idiocy: Incoherent, Islamophobic and simply immoral.](#)" I don't think I'm being thin-skinned in detecting an uncharitable editorial position being taken there. *Salon* is telling the world that I'm a *dangerous, immoral, Islamophobic idiot*. And worse, the contents of these articles invariably misrepresent my actual views. This problem isn't remedied by merely publishing this conversation.

[Of course, *Salon* didn't actually publish that part of the conversation.]

I'd like to pivot away from politics and talk about your views on spirituality and atheism, which are unique among the so-called New Atheists. In a few articles I've written, I've tried to draw an existential distinction between truth and meaning, and I was pummeled by people like Jerry Coyne, who called me a confused apologist. On almost every relevant question concerning science and religion, I agree with you and Coyne, but I've argued that atheists need to think more about the existential function of religion, which means thinking about religion as more than a set of beliefs—even though beliefs are obviously important. I don't think we should tolerate untruths, particularly dangerous untruths, because they give meaning and shape to people's lives, but I do think we're missing something if we consider religion only in empirical terms. Am I wrong?

When it's generically stated like that, it's easy to agree. But we shouldn't lie about the zero-sum contest between reason and faith—and, therefore, between science and religion. Religious people do make claims about the nature of reality on the basis of their faith, and these claims conflict with both the methods and conclusions of science. If you believe that the historical Jesus was born of a virgin, resurrected, and will be coming back to Earth, you are a Christian. Indeed, it would be controversial to call oneself a Christian without believing these things. But each of these claims rests on terrible evidence and stands in contradiction to most of what we now know about the world. The odds are *overwhelming* that Jesus was neither born of a virgin, nor resurrected. And he didn't ascend to some place in the sky where he could abide for thousands of years, in a form that leaves him free to use his powers of telepathy to eavesdrop upon the private thoughts of billions of people. Nor will he return from on high like a superhero, flying without the aid of technology, or magically raise his followers to meet him in the stratosphere for the Rapture. All of these expectations—which most Christians harbor in one form or another—entail claims about biology, history, physics, and the nature of the human mind, that defy the centuries of

intellectual progress we've made on these topics. To believe any of these things is to ignore one's commonsense and a dozen specific sciences at the same moment.

Of course, we can pretend that none of this is happening and that science and religion represent "non-overlapping magisteria," as Stephen Jay Gould infamously said. But this is a lie. And it's a lie that has many unhappy consequences. Ironically, one of the consequences, which I have focused on more than my atheist colleagues have, is that it bars the door to rational and modern approaches to getting what religious people claim to want out of life. We can't develop truly rational and nonsectarian approaches to spirituality, for instance, if every generation is taught that faith in the divine origin of scripture must be preserved at any cost.

I've written and spoken a fair amount on these topics, because I share the sense that there really is something that religious people are right to want out of life and fear to lose under the glare of scientific rationality. It's understandable that they're afraid to lose an objective foundation for morality, because many overeducated people will tell you that morality is a fiction—we just make it up to summarize apish preferences that were etched into our brains through evolution. Notions of good and evil have no grounding in truth, because they are just culturally derived ways of talking about emotions like shame and disgust. Thus, to say that something is "good" is not to say anything about reality. As I argued in [*The Moral Landscape*](#) and elsewhere, I think this is utterly false. There are perfectly rational ways to think about moral truth.

Religious people are also right to worry that many scientists and secularists believe that spiritual experience is synonymous with psychopathology or conscious fraud. Again, this is untrue. But if one hopes to save the baby in the bathwater of religion, one mustn't ignore the fact that our world has been dangerously riven by divisive nonsense, simply because most people were told, since the moment they could speak, that one of their books was written by the Creator of the universe.

I agree that most of the claims religions make about the world are empirically untrue. One of the things I appreciate about your work on this subject is that it really wrestles with some of these existential questions, certainly more than other New Atheist writers – I'm thinking here of your book, [*Waking Up*](#). But I wonder what you'd say to non-literalist believers, people who might see God not as an empirical claim about reality or history but rather as a motive force or a bridge to self-transcendence, something that links the individual to a tradition or a community. How can atheists deal more with this aspect of religion, which is deep, universal and profound?

I doubt that so many believers recognize that their religious doctrines are empirically false. One problem is that when one compares religious doctrines to scientific theories, there are certain cases where a scientific theory appears far *less* intuitive than even the craziest religious doctrine. Consider the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics, wherein it is alleged that there are trillions upon trillions of nearly identical copies of ourselves in nearly identical worlds having nearly identical conversations. Many physicists believe this. By comparison, the idea that one person might have been born of a virgin or resurrected seems fairly pedestrian.

The crucial point, however, is not the strangeness of an idea, but how it is arrived at and granted credence. Some methodologies are truth-preserving, in that they reliably get our wishful thinking out of the way so that we can believe a proposition to the degree that there's good evidence and a good arguments for it. Other methodologies safeguard fraud and self-deception as though they were precious resources—and some even reward a person for being willing to die for a proposition for which he has no evidence whatsoever. Certain people will even sacrifice their children on the altar of these beliefs. I'm thinking of various Christian cultists who deny medical care to their kids because they imagine that relying on

anything other than prayer to heal them would be tantamount to apostasy.

So, while science and religion are very different enterprises, the differences between them can't be measured by comparing their respective beliefs to see which are stranger. I would argue that most people sincerely believe religious doctrines, not because they're attached to all of the good stuff they are getting out of their church or mosque, but because they are convinced that they are true.

For instance, I regularly hear from people who have lived their entire lives under the shadow of a paralyzing fear of hell that was drummed into them by their parents. They were told that they would burn for eternity in fire if they doubted any of the preposterous claims that spilled into their lives each Sunday from the pulpit. And they accepted this, of course, because they had no choice at all in the matter. They were children.

I have two daughters who are young enough to believe almost anything I tell them. If I told them that everyone they care for in this world is liable to be burned for eternity if we don't do X, Y, and Z, there's no question that they would believe me. And the growing struggle to maintain this faith in the face of every rational challenge would become a source of tremendous anxiety for them. I genuinely feel for people who are struggling against this form of indoctrination. And I see no reason to think that their beliefs are insincere.

I don't know what the numbers are, but I imagine there's a significant number of Christians who, for lack of a better word, are moderates, which is to say they take their bible a la carte and don't take seriously the empirical claims of Christianity. For such people the bible is a book of moral wisdom, full of stories written by men, a sacred guide of sorts, but not a blueprint for understanding reality. And perhaps some of these people, if you asked them whether or not they really believe in the virgin birth, they might reflexively say yes. But the truth or falsity of that claim has no real bearing on their lives. They just nod affirmatively when asked about it because they're accustomed to doing so and because professing belief in it is wrapped up with the other parts of their religious tradition that they enjoy and need. But they're holding on to the dogmas mostly because of the practical function it serves in their lives.

I agree that some people pay lip service to doctrines that they don't truly believe—or believe only for the time it takes to say, “Yes, I believe that.” Some religious ideas, while entertained, aren't operative in their lives in any meaningful way. Many of these people are just attached to the comfort and support they get from belonging to a faith community.

Most Christians say they believe in heaven or in an afterlife, for instance, but they're not pining for death or challenging the laws of physics in the hopes of reuniting with their creator, which would be perfectly rational if they truly believed that death was the best thing that could happen to them. But if you ask them if they believed in heaven, in an eternity of bliss in the next life, they'd probably say yes. But the point is that they're professing a belief in something but not living as though it were true.

This is interesting territory, cognitively and emotionally. In every area of life, there are gradations of belief. We are always sliding along a spectrum of confidence, which runs from stark confusion, to a coin toss between equally plausible but contradictory propositions, to a 99.99 percent certainty that a thing is as it seems. We represent the world in language, both to ourselves and to others, and we are moved by these representations to the degree that we grant them credence. Religion is just a variant of the same language game we play in every other area of our lives. However, it is the only variant wherein people win points for pretending to know things they absolutely do not (and cannot) know.

This is probably a good place to shift to the last topic I'd like to talk about, which is ascendant ignorance, particularly religious ignorance, in American politics. I remember reading [an article you wrote](#) about Sarah Palin

years ago, in which you lamented the phenomenon of Palin and what it suggested about the level of discourse in this country. That was a kind of turning point for me as well. The idea that someone so objectively stupid and unhinged could come that close to the presidency was shocking, even for a cynic like me. I'm not sure we're in a better place today. One of our two political parties almost universally rejects science as a basis for public policy, despite the enormous problems we face, like climate change. I'm curious what you think about all of this – why is America such fertile ground for this idiocy?

Well, it should come as no surprise that I think it mostly has to do with the influence of religion. There is a level of religious demagoguery that passes for necessary instruction from childhood onwards in this country—and we are alone among developed nations in this.

Ben Carson is a perfect example of how even the process of becoming a neurosurgeon is insufficient to correct for this indoctrination. It's astonishing: The man is both a celebrated neurosurgeon and a moron. Apparently, becoming a neurosurgeon can be like becoming an electrician or a plumber—you can learn it like a trade, and your mind can remain more or less untouched by the scientific worldview. Carson thinks that evolution and the big bang are “fairy tales.” He believes that Darwin was misled by Satan. He's a Seventh Day Adventist, and his worldview has been defined by the rantings of religious crackpots.

If that degree of indoctrination is possible in a neurosurgeon who had the benefit of being surrounded by real scientists and intellectuals his entire adult life, is there any wonder that other people find their faith difficult to shake?

I worry that such Christian demagoguery could become even more attractive politically because the secular Left has made it so painful to speak about the threat of political Islam. By conflating any focus on Islamism and jihadism with bigotry, there may come a time when only real bigots and Christian theocrats will be willing to address the problem. And they could gain political power because then even sane, secular people might feel that they have no other choice. Just imagine how our political landscape might change if we ever suffered a terrorist attack worse than 9/11.

As you mentioned, I felt that I glimpsed the possibility of Christian theocracy in the U.S. when Sarah Palin addressed the Republican National Convention. She was at the height of her powers, and she hadn't yet unraveled in those interviews with Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric. As I wrote in that article, I thought Palin's speech—given the needs of the moment and her audience—was the most effective political communication I had ever seen. This was terrifying—because I knew her to be both a religious lunatic and total ignoramus. The fact that she had any chance of acquiring so much power and responsibility seemed to make a mockery of the entire career of our species.

It's getting increasingly difficult to not be cynical or depressed, frankly, when you think about all of this in our current context and in light of the myriad challenges we face. We have to deal with a lot of problems, and many of those problems demand clear thinking and the application of science and technology. And yet our political climate is pervaded by anti-science demagoguery and unreason. I asked Neil deGrasse Tyson recently if he was optimistic about our capacity to solve complicated problems given our political dysfunction, and he seemed relatively hopeful. Do you share his optimism?

I don't really think in terms of optimism or pessimism. I recognize that things can get worse very quickly, and in surprising ways. But things can also get better nearly as fast, and also in ways that no one could foresee. When you look at the degree

to which we've overcome racism in the US, I think the progress we've made, which has always seemed deplorably slow, is suddenly quite stunning. We're coming to the end of the second term of our first black president, but if you go back and read [newspaper editorials from a hundred years ago](#), they read like KKK pamphlets. I'm not saying racism is no longer a problem, but we've made huge progress.

Similarly, the progress we've suddenly made on gay rights is very encouraging. Gay marriage seemed like a hopeless cause, and then it was the law of the land. We may be witnessing a similar transformation of our drug policy. There is no reason we couldn't make equally sudden progress against religious dogmatism.

In principle, everything could sort itself out in a generation. We just have to raise the next generation of kids to think like Neil deGrasse Tyson, and all these problems would be solved. Ironically, much of the liberal criticism I get, which you echoed in some of your questions, is only impeding this process. When I or Richard Dawkins criticize religion, we are often told—by secular liberals—that science can't be applied to every question in human life. After all, science is just *one* way of understanding our world, and there are other ways that are equally legitimate. Science just produces theories, not final pictures of reality. *Prove that you love your wife*—this is the kind of pushback one gets when talking about the conflict between science and religion. And this kind of wooly pseudo-philosophy leaves people a lot of scope for their delusions. If you're going to call me an asshole for publicly doubting that Jesus was born of virgin, please stop complaining that most Americans don't believe in climate change.

Notes

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