

SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Is Religion Built Upon Lies?

Sam Harris vs. Andrew Sullivan

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From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 01/16/07, 5:20 PM

Hi Andrew—

First, I'd like to say that it is a pleasure to communicate with you in this forum. We've engaged one another indirectly on the internet, and on the radio, but I think this email exchange will give us our first opportunity for a proper discussion. Before I drive toward areas where I think you and I will disagree, I'd first like to acknowledge what appears to be the common ground between us.

I think you and I agree that there is a problem with religious fundamentalism. We might not agree about how to solve this problem, or about how fundamentalism relates to religion as a whole, but we both think that far too many people currently imagine that one of their books contains the perfect word of the Creator of the universe. You and I also agree that the world's major religions differ in ways that are nontrivial—and, therefore, that not all fundamentalists have the same fundamentals in hand. Not all religions teach precisely the same thing, and when they do teach the same thing, they don't necessarily teach it equally well.

We are both especially concerned about Islam at this moment—because so many Muslims appear to be “fundamentalists” and because some of the fundamentals of Islam pose special liabilities in a world overflowing with destructive technology. I think, for instance, that we would both rank the Islamic doctrines of martyrdom and jihad pretty high on our list of humanity's worst ideas.

Where I think we disagree is on the nature of faith itself. I think that faith is, in principle, in conflict with reason (and, therefore, that religion is necessarily in conflict with science), while you do not. Perhaps I should acknowledge at the outset that people use the term “faith” in a variety of ways. My use of the word is meant to capture belief in specific religious propositions without sufficient evidence—prayer can heal the sick, there is a supreme Being listening to our thoughts, we will be reunited with our loved ones after death, etc. I am not criticizing faith as a positive attitude in the face of uncertainty, of the sort indicated by phrases like, “have faith in yourself.” There's nothing wrong with that type of “faith.”

Given my view of faith, I think that religious “moderation” is basically an elaborate exercise in self-deception, while you

seem to think it is a legitimate and intellectually defensible alternative to fundamentalism.

Assuming I've got that about right, I propose that in my next post, I launch into a brief diatribe about religious moderation, and then you can respond any way you see fit. If I have misconstrued any of your views above, please sort things out for me.

All the best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 1/17/07, 11:36 AM

Dear Sam,

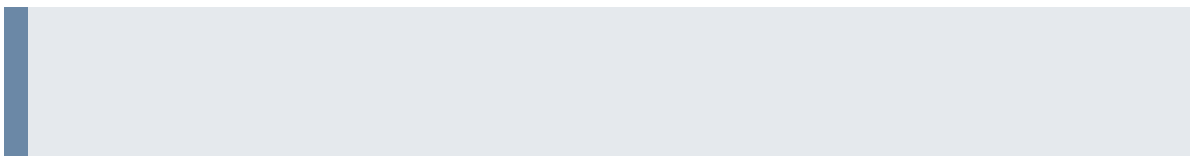
First off, same back at you. I found your book, "The End of Faith" to be an intellectual tonic, even when I strongly disagreed with it. It said things that needed to be said — not least because many people were already thinking them — and it said them without cant or bullshit. I was and am grateful for that. And I wrote the religious passages of my own book, "The Conservative Soul," with some of your arguments in mind.

We agree that Islamic fundamentalism is by far the gravest threat in this respect (because of its comfort with violence); and that the core feature of what occurred on 9/11 was not cultural, political, or economic — but religious. We agree that a large part of the murder and mayhem in today's Iraq is also rooted in religious difference, specifically the ancient rift between Sunni and Shia. We also agree, I think, that the degeneration of American Christianity into the crudest forms of Biblical inerrantism, emotional hysteria and cultural paranoia is a lamentable development. But we differ, I think, on why we find these developments discouraging.

The reason I find fundamentalism so troubling — whether it is Christian, Jewish or Muslim — is not just its willingness to use violence (in the Islamist manifestation). It is its inability to integrate doubt into faith, its resistance to human reason, its tendency to pride and exclusion, and its inability to accept mystery as the core reality of any religious life. You find it troubling, I think, purely because it upholds truths that cannot be proved empirically or even, in some respects, logically. In that sense, of course, I think you have no reason to dislike or oppose it any more than you would oppose my kind of faith. Your argument allows for no solid distinctions within faiths; my argument depends on such distinctions.

I'm struck, in other words, by the *difference* between Christianity as it can be and Christianity as it is expressed by fundamentalists. You are struck by the similarity between my doubt-filled, sacramental, faith-in-forgiveness and fundamentalism. We Christians are all as nutty as one another, I think you'd say. And my prettifying up religion as something not-so-crazy or unreasonable therefore may be more irritating to you than even the profundities of Rick Warren or Monsignor Escriva. At least, that's where I predict you will aim your next rhetorical fire. I'm braced.

Here's the nub, I think. You write:



I think that faith is, in principle, in conflict with reason (and, therefore, that religion is necessarily in conflict with science), while you do not.

Agreed. As the Pope said last year, I believe that God is truth and truth is, by definition, reasonable. Science cannot disprove true faith; because true faith rests on the truth; and science cannot be in ultimate conflict with the truth. So I am perfectly happy to believe in evolution, for example, as the most powerful theory yet devised explaining human history and pre-history. I have no fear of what science will tell us about the universe — since God is definitionally the Creator of such a universe; and the meaning of the universe cannot be in conflict with its Creator. I do not, in other words, see reason as somehow in conflict with faith — since both are reconciled by a Truth that may yet be beyond our understanding.

But just because that Truth may be beyond our human understanding does not mean it is therefore in a cosmic sense unreasonable. As John's Gospel proclaims, in the beginning was the Word — logos — and it is reasonable. At some point faith has to abandon reason for mystery — but that does not mean — and need never mean - abandoning reason altogether. The key is with Pascal: "l'usage et soumission de la raison." Or do you believe that Pascal, one of the great mathematicians of his time, was deluded into the faith he so passionately and simultaneously held?

Cheers,

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 01/17/07, 9:20 PM

Hi Andrew—

I think we basically understand one another, and yet we disagree on many points of importance—so we're off to a good start. You are right to say that my view of faith doesn't really allow for "solid distinctions within faiths," while yours "depends on such distinctions." This summarizes our disagreement very well. I recognize, of course, that there are many important differences between religious moderation (your "Christianity as it can be") and religious fundamentalism. And I agree that these differences have something to do with doubt and the progress of reason on the one hand and a hostility to both doubt and reason on the other. But, as you expect, I don't view the boundary between moderation and fundamentalism as "solid," or even principled, and I hold a very different view of many of the topics you raised—Pascal included. (I do think Nietzsche had it right when he wrote, "The most pitiful example: the corruption of Pascal, who believed in the corruption of his reason through original sin when it had in fact been corrupted only by his Christianity.")

First, on my frustration with religious moderates, to which you alluded: It is true that your colleagues in the religious middle have taught me to appreciate the candor and the one-note coherence of religious fanatics. I have found that whenever someone like me or Richard Dawkins criticizes Christians for believing in the imminent return of Christ, or Muslims for believing in martyrdom, religious moderates claim that we have caricatured Christianity and Islam, taken "extremists" to be representative of these "great" faiths, or otherwise overlooked a shimmering ocean of nuance. We are invariably told that a mature understanding of the historical and literary contexts of scripture renders faith perfectly compatible with reason, and

our attack upon religion is, therefore, “simplistic,” “dogmatic,” or even “fundamentalist.” As a frequent target of such profundities, I can attest that they generally come moistened to a sickening pabulum by great sighs of condescension. Present company excluded.

But there are several problems with such a defense of moderate religion. First, many moderates assume that religious “extremism” is rare and therefore not all that consequential. Happily, you are not in this camp, but I would venture that you are in a minority among religious moderates. As you and I both know, religious extremism is not rare, and it is hugely consequential. Forty-four percent of Americans believe that Jesus will return to earth to judge the living and the dead sometime in the next fifty years. This idea is extreme in almost every sense—extremely silly, extremely dangerous, extremely worthy of denigration—but it is not extreme in the sense of being rare. The problem, as I see it, is that moderates don’t tend to know what it is like to be truly convinced that death is an illusion and that an eternity of happiness awaits the faithful beyond the grave. They have, as you say, “integrated doubt” into their faith. Another way of putting it is that they have less faith—and for good reason. The result, however, is that your fellow moderates tend to doubt that anybody ever really is motivated to sacrifice his life, or the lives of others, on the basis his heartfelt religious beliefs. Moderate doubt—which I agree is an improvement over fundamentalist certitude in most respects—often blinds its host to the reality and consequences of full-tilt religious lunacy. Such blindness is now particularly unhelpful, given the hideous collision with Islamic certainty that is unfolding all around us.

Second, many religious moderates imagine, as you do, that there is some clear line of separation between extremist and moderate religion. But there isn’t. Scripture itself remains a perpetual engine of extremism: because, while He may be many things, the God of the Bible and the Qur’an is not a moderate. Read scripture more closely and you do not find reasons for religious moderation; you find reasons to live like a proper religious maniac—to fear the fires of hell, to despise nonbelievers, to persecute homosexuals, etc. Of course, one can cherry-pick scripture and find reasons to love your neighbor and turn the other cheek, but the truth is, the pickings are pretty slim, and the more fully one grants credence to these books, the more fully one will be committed to the view that infidels, heretics, and apostates are destined to be ground up in God’s loving machinery of justice.

How does one “integrate doubt” into one’s faith? By acknowledging just how dubious many of the claims of scripture are, and thereafter reading it selectively, bowdlerizing it if need be, and allowing its assertions about reality to be continually trumped by fresh insights—scientific (“You mean the world isn’t 6000 years old? Yikes...”), mathematical (“pi doesn’t actually equal 3? All right, so what?”), and moral (“You mean, I shouldn’t beat my slaves? I can’t even keep slaves? Hmm...”). Religious moderation is the result of not taking scripture all that seriously. So why not take these books less seriously still? Why not admit that they are just books, written by fallible human beings like ourselves? They were not, as your friend the pope would have it, “written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost.” Needless to say, I believe you have given the Supreme Pontiff far too much credit as a champion of reason. The man believes that he is in possession of a magic book, entirely free from error. Here is the Vatican’s position (from the Vatican website), in the words of Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus* (his 1893 encyclical on the Study of Holy Scripture):

It is absolutely wrong and forbidden, either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture, or to admit that the sacred writer has erred. For the system of those who, in order to rid

themselves of these difficulties, do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the things of faith and morals, and nothing beyond, because (as they wrongly think) in a question of the truth or falsehood of a passage, we should consider not so much what God has said as the reason and purpose which He had in mind in saying it—this system cannot be tolerated. For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical, are written wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Ghost; and so far is it from being possible that any error can co-exist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican. These are the words of the last: “The Books of the Old and New Testament, whole and entire, with all their parts, as enumerated in the decree of the same Council (Trent) and in the ancient Latin Vulgate, are to be received as sacred and canonical. And the Church holds them as sacred and canonical, not because, having been composed by human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority; nor only because they contain revelation without error; but because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author.” “

“This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church”—of course it does change a little from time to time. Being bogus to a remarkable degree, it has to. The fact that the current pope freely uses terms like “reason” and “truth” does not at all guarantee that he is on good terms with the former, or would recognize the latter if it bit him. Starting with the (utterly unjustified) premise that one of your books is an infallible guide to reality is not a particularly promising approach to inquiry—be it physical, ethical, or spiritual.

Please consider how differently we treat scientific texts and discoveries, no matter how profound: Isaac Newton spent the period between the summer of 1665 and the spring of 1667 working in isolation and dodging an outbreak of plague that was laying waste to the pious men and women of England. When he emerged from his solitude, he had invented the differential and integral calculus, established the field of optics, and discovered the laws of motion and universal gravitation. Many scientists consider this to be the most awe-inspiring display of human intelligence in the history of human intelligence. Over three hundred years have passed, and one still has to be exceptionally well-educated to fully appreciate the depth and beauty of Newton’s achievement. But no one doubts that Newton’s work was the product of merely human effort, conceived and accomplished by a mortal—and a very unpleasant mortal at that. And yet, literally billions of our neighbors deem the contents of the Bible and the Qur’an to be so profound as to rule out the possibility of terrestrial authorship. Given the breadth and depth of human achievement, this seems an almost miraculous misappropriation of awe. It took two centuries of continuous ingenuity to substantially improve upon Newton’s work. How difficult would it be to improve the Bible? It would be trivially easy, in fact. You and I could upgrade this “inerrant” text—scientifically, historically, ethically, and yes, spiritually—in this email exchange.

Consider the possibility of improving the Ten Commandments. This would appear to be setting the bar rather high, as these

are the only passages in the Bible that the Creator of the universe felt the need to physically write himself. But take a good look at commandment #2. No graven images? Doesn't this seem like something less than the-second-most-important-point-upon-which-to-admonish-all-future-generations-of-human-beings? Remember those Muslims who recently rioted by the hundreds of thousands over cartoons? Many people wondered just what got them so riled up. Well, here it is. Was all that pious mayhem nothing more than egregious, medieval stupidity? Yes, come to think of it, it was nothing more than egregious, medieval stupidity. Almost any precept we'd put in place of this prohibition against graven images would augment the wisdom of the Bible (*Don't pretend to know things you don't know? Don't mistreat children? Avoid trans fats?*). Could we live with all the resulting problems due to proliferating graven images? We'd manage—somehow.

Of course, people of faith are right to insist that there is more to life than being reasonable—which is to say there is much more to life than merely understanding the world and getting one's beliefs about it to cohere. But we can have ethical and spiritual lives without lying to ourselves and to others and without pretending to be certain about things we are clearly not certain about. Anyone who thinks he knows for sure that Jesus was born of virgin or that the Qur'an is the perfect word of the Creator of the universe is lying. Either he is lying to himself, or to everyone else. In neither case should such false certainties be celebrated.

Religious moderates—by refusing to question the legitimacy of raising children to believe that they are Christians, Muslims, and Jews—tacitly support the religious divisions in our world. They also perpetuate the myth that a person must believe things on insufficient evidence in order to have an ethical and spiritual life. While religious moderates don't fly planes into buildings, or organize their lives around apocalyptic prophecy, they refuse to deeply question the preposterous ideas of those who do. Moderates neither submit to the real demands of scripture nor draw fully honest inferences from the growing testimony of science. In attempting to find a middle ground between religious dogmatism and intellectual honesty, it seems to me that religious moderates betray faith and reason equally.

I've gone on at such length, and I still haven't addressed your claim that "God is truth" or your apparent attempt to ram through some hybrid of the ontological and cosmological arguments ("since God is definitionally the Creator of such a universe"). But I'm not sure what you mean by "God," or what exactly you believe about reality that requires the framework of Christianity. Feel free to spell it out in your next email, if you care to.

Best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 1/21/07, 4:33 PM

Sam

You raise so many points that I hope you'll forgive me for focusing for a moment on just a couple. I want to address the main point of your latest post: your disdain for religious "moderates" (including, I assume, me). You say first of all that religious moderates "don't tend to know what it is like to be truly convinced that death is an illusion and that an eternity of happiness awaits the faithful beyond the grave." We allegedly under-estimate the real power of religious fundamentalism.

I plead emphatically not-guilty. In many ways, we religious "moderates", because we are embedded in communities,

churches, mosques and synagogues that may be prey to fundamentalist rigidity, know this phenomenon much better than you, an atheist outsider, ever could. We have read the scriptures not searching for gotchas, but for truth. Some of us have battled the fundamentalist version of this truth for much of our lives. Some of us have come out of fundamentalism ourselves. In my book, I describe my own fundamentalist periods in the past. As a gay Catholic, I know what the cold draft of fundamentalism is like; I've felt its dogmatism and dismissal and denial close at hand. So spare me the thought that you know it better than I do.

I'm also aware that it might not be as simple as you claim it is.

I have met fundamentalists whose convictions are extreme but whose spiritual humility nonetheless leads them to great tolerance for dissent and doubt among others and great compassion for the needy. I have met those who are utterly uncompromising on the issue of sexual morality and yet have never shown me anything but interest, empathy and friendship. I have seen fundamentalists do amazing work for the poor and forgotten - driven entirely by their fundamentalist fervor. Try and think of how many souls and bodies the Salvation Army has saved, for example, how many sick people have been treated by doctors and volunteers motivated solely by religious conviction, how many homeless people have been taken in and loved by those seized by the fundamentalist delusion.

I disagree with many of fundamentalism's theological assumptions; when fundamentalism enters politics, I will resist it mightily as an enemy of political and social freedom; when it distorts what I believe to be the central message of Jesus - love and forgiveness - I will criticize and expose it. But when I see it in the eyes and face of a believer, and when she glows with the power of her faith, and when that faith translates into love, I am unafraid and uncritical. I know I cannot know others' hearts; I cannot know their souls. I know further that the mystery of the divine will always elude me; and that beneath what might appear as a bigot may be a soul merely seized by misunderstanding or fear or even compassion. My sense of the fallibility of human reason and the ineffability of God's will leads me not to dismiss these "extremists" as fools or idiots, but to wonder what they have known that I may not know, even as I worry about their potential for evil as well as good (a potential we all have, including you and me).

I also disagree that religious moderates simply have less faith. You write:

"Religious moderation is the result of not taking scripture all that seriously."

Blogger, please. In many ways, the source of much of today's religious moderation is taking scripture more seriously than the fundamentalists. Take the Catholic scholar Garry Wills. Read his marvelous recent monographs on Jesus and Paul and you will see a rational believer poring through the mounds of new historical scholarship to get closer and closer to who Jesus really was, and what Paul was truly trying to express. For me, the deconstruction of a crude notion of Biblical inerrantism is not a path to a weaker faith but to a stronger one, unafraid of history, of truth, of the past, or the inevitable confusion that the very human followers of a divine intervention created after his death and resurrection. I find in this unsatisfying scriptural mess very human proof of a remarkable event - the most remarkable event, in my view - in the

history of humankind.

This is a real faith, a modern faith, a mature faith that cannot be dismissed as glibly as you'd like. Going back to Pope Leo XIII struck me as a very weak move. Have you heard of the Second Vatican Council? Are you aware of the development of doctrine, the evolution of theories of ecclesiastical authority that aren't reducible to some comic-book depiction of nineteenth century papal diktats? You say others cherry-pick the Scriptures, but you have done some of the more egregious cherry-picking in describing the priorities of Christianity. No, Sam, the Gospels really aren't, to any fair reader, about owning slaves, the age of the planet, or the value of pi. They are stories about and by a man who preached the love of the force behind the entire universe, and the need to reflect that love in everything we do. Yes, there are contradictions, internal clashes, vagueness, politics, cultural anachronisms, and any number of flaws in a divinely inspired human endeavor. But there is also a voice that can clearly be heard through and above these things: a voice as personal to me as it was to those who heard it in human form.

I also find in your last email a form of intolerance that reminds me of some of the worst aspects of fundamentalism. Take these sentences:

Anyone who thinks he knows for sure that Jesus was born of virgin or that the Qur'an is the perfect word of the Creator of the universe is lying. Either he is lying to himself, or to everyone else. In neither case should such false certainties be celebrated.

What you are doing here by the use of the word "lying" is imputing to the believer an insincerity you cannot know for sure. When we speak of things beyond our understanding - and you must concede that such things can logically exist - we are all in the same boat. Your assertion of nothingness at the end of our mortal lives is no more and no less verifiable than my assertion of somethingness. And yet I do not accuse you of lying - to yourself or to others. I respect your existential choice to face death alone, as a purely material event, leading nowhere but physical decomposition. Part of me even respects the stoic heroism of such a stance. Why can you not respect my conviction that you are, in fact, wrong? Why am I a liar in this - either to myself or to others - and you, in contrast, an avatar of honesty? Isn't this exactly the sort of moral preening you decry in others?

God bless

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 01/23/07, 9:20 AM

Andrew

Our debate appears to be heating up. You have now convicted me of “intolerance” reminiscent of “the worst aspects of fundamentalism.” As I indicated in my last essay, I am quite familiar with this line of attack and find it depressing. Nevertheless, your specific charge is rather amazing, and I am eager to respond to it.

But first, a little housekeeping:

1. You spend the first two paragraphs of your last essay taking offense at something I did not say, culminating with, “spare me the thought that you know it [fundamentalism] better than I do.” I did, in fact, attempt to spare you that thought when I wrote:

First, many moderates assume that religious “extremism” is rare and therefore not all that consequential. Happily, you are not in this camp, but I would venture that you are in a minority among religious moderates. As you and I both know, religious extremism is not rare, and it is hugely consequential.

Indeed, this was one of several places where I sought to communicate that I do not view you as a run-of-the-mill religious moderate. I was extending an olive branch, of sorts, and you have gone and poked yourself in the eye with it. What’s a well-intentioned atheist to do?

2. Contrary to your allegation, I do not “disdain” religious moderates. I do, however, disdain bad ideas and bad arguments—which, I’m afraid, you have begun to manufacture in earnest. I’d like to point out that you have not rebutted any of the substantial challenges I made in my last post. Rather, you have gone on to make other points, most of which I find unsurprising and irrelevant to the case I have made against religious faith. For instance, you claim that many fundamentalists are tolerant of dissent and capable of friendship with you despite their dogmatic views about sex. You also remind me that many devoutly religious people do good things on the basis of their religious beliefs. I do not doubt either of these propositions. You could catalogue such facts until the end of time, and they would not begin to suggest that God actually exists, or that the Bible is his Word, or that his Son came to earth in the person of Jesus to redeem our sins. I have no doubt that there are millions of nice Mormons who are likewise tolerant of dissent and perfectly cordial toward homosexuals. Does this, in your view, even slightly increase the probability that the Book of Mormon was delivered on golden plates to Joseph Smith Jr. (that very randy and unscrupulous dowsler) by the angel Moroni? Do all the good Muslims in the world lend credence to the claim that Muhammad flew to heaven on a winged horse? Do all the good pagans throughout history suggest that Mt. Olympus was ever teeming with invisible gods? As I have argued elsewhere, the alleged

usefulness of religion—the fact that it sometimes gets people to do very good things indeed—is not an argument for its truth. And, needless to say, the usefulness of religion can be disputed, as I have done in both my books. As you may know, I've argued that religion gets people to do good things for bad reasons, when good reasons are actually available; I have also argued that it rather often gets people to do very bad things that they would not otherwise do. On the subject of doing good, I ask you, which is more moral, helping people purely out of concern for their suffering, or helping them because you think God wants you to do it? Personally, I'd much prefer that my children acquire the former sensibility. On the subject of doing bad: there are, at this very moment, perfectly ordinary Shia and Sunni Muslims drilling holes into each other's brains with power tools in the suburbs of Baghdad. What are the chances they would be doing this without the "benefit" of their incompatible religious identities?

3. You have also made the false charge that I think religious people are "fools" or "idiots." Needless to say, I do not think Blaise Pascal was an idiot (nor do I think you are, for that matter). But I do consider certain ideas idiotic, and idiotic ideas can occasionally be found rattling around the brains of extraordinarily intelligent people. One of the horrors of religious dogmatism is that it can produce a Pascal—a brilliant man who was irretrievably self-deceived on matters of profound importance. As I wrote in *The End of Faith*:

It is true that Pascal had what was for him an astonishing contemplative experience on the night of Nov. 23, 1654—one that converted him entirely to Jesus Christ. I do not doubt the power of such experiences, but it seems to me self-evident that they are no more the exclusive property of devout Christians than are tears shed in joy. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, along with animists of every description have had these experiences throughout history. Pascal, being highly intelligent and greatly learned, should have known this; that he did not (or chose to disregard it) testifies to the stultifying effect of orthodoxy.

I stand by this claim. There is no way around the fact that St. Paul, Pascal, the popes (any of them), and every other Christian worth the name have made a claim about the exclusive validity of Christianity. This claim is, at best, ludicrously provincial. The evidence adduced in support of Christian doctrine can be found in every other religion—saints performing miracles, resurrections from the dead, channeled books, psychic powers, devotional thrills, unconditional love, etc.—these claims are either equally compelling or equally bogus. Happily, for my purposes, "equally compelling" reduces to "equally bogus"—because these claims are mutually incompatible. If Christianity is right, all other religions are wrong. Christians are committed to the following (at least): Jesus was the messiah (so the Jews are wrong); he was divine and resurrected (so the Muslims are wrong—"Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger—they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them": Qur'an, 4:157); there is only one God (so the Hindus are wrong). But, of course, the Christians have no better reason to think they're right than the Jews, Muslims, or Hindus do.

4. Your brandishing of Vatican II is just silly, and only bolsters my argument. Are you saying that for about 1960 years Christians (including all the popes) were mistaken about the true doctrine of Christianity? Would you have our readers believe that Vatican II represents some kind of epistemological breakthrough? In reality, Vatican II was just damage control.

The Catholic Church has been struggling to make the best of a bad situation ever since Galileo—who, as you know, was forced to his knees under threat of torture and obliged to recant his understanding of the earth’s motion and then placed under house arrest until the end of his life. He wasn’t absolved of heresy until 1992 (a few decades after Vatican II), at which point the Church ascribed his genius to God, “who, stirring in the depths of his spirit, stimulated him, anticipating and assisting his intuitions.” (This might be an appropriate place to vomit.) In any case, I didn’t have to quote Leo XIII for lack of modern material. I could have quoted John Paul II, post-Vatican II. Here he is all his sagacity:

This Revelation is definitive; one can only accept it or reject it. One can accept it, professing belief in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, the Son, of the same substance as the Father and the Holy Spirit, who is Lord and the Giver of life. Or one can reject all of this.

No doubt, if I wanted to take the time, I could find even less ecumenical statements coming from the current pope. The bottom line is that this pope, and all his predecessors (and you, apparently) believe that the Bible is a magic book: that it was not authored by human beings, however brilliant, but by some supernatural force. This is a claim for which there is not a scintilla of evidence and about which there are many good reasons to be skeptical. The Bible is, as you suggest, an “unsatisfying scriptural mess.” But it is worse than that. No, I have not argued that the book is principally “about owning slaves,” just that it gets the ethics of slavery wrong. The truth is that even with Jesus holding forth in defense of the poor and the meek and the persecuted, the Bible basically condones slavery. As I argued in Letter to a Christian Nation, the slaveholders of the South were on the winning side of a theological argument. They knew it. And they made a hell of a lot of noise about it. We got rid of slavery despite the moral inadequacy of the Bible, not because it is the greatest treatise on morality ever written.

You and I both know that it would take us five minutes to produce a book that offers a more coherent and compassionate morality than the Bible does. Did I say five minutes? Five seconds—just tear out Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Exodus, and 2 Samuel from the Old Testament, and 2 Thessalonians and Revelation from the New Testament. The book would be mightily improved. Would it then be the most profound book we have on morality (or cosmology, biology, psychology, etc.)? Not by a long shot. But it would be a much better book than it is at present.

5. Contrary to your assertion, I have not made any claims about there being a “nothingness at the end of our mortal lives.” The truth is, I don’t know what happens after death. Is it dogmatic for me to doubt that you and the pope do? What reason have you given me to believe that you know that “something” happens after death, or that your something is more probable than the Muslim something, the Hindu something, or the Buddhist something? The question of what happens after death (if anything) is a question about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world. It is true that many atheists are convinced that we know what this relationship is, and that it is one of absolute dependence of the one upon the other. Those who have read the last chapters of *The End of Faith* know that I am not convinced of this. While I spend a fair amount of time thinking about the brain (as I am finishing my doctorate in neuroscience), I do not think that the utter reducibility of consciousness to matter has been established. It may be that the very concepts of mind and matter are fundamentally misleading us. But this doesn’t entitle religious people to imagine that all their crazy ideas about miraculous books, virgin

births, and saviors ushering in the end of the world are remotely plausible.

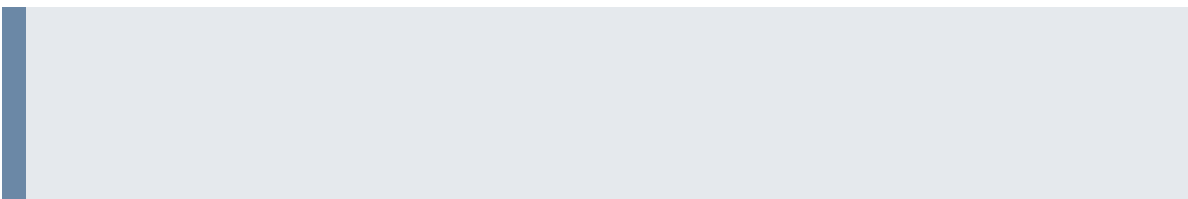
6. I'd like to address some of the assertions you made in your first post. You wrote:

Science cannot disprove true faith; because true faith rests on the truth; and science cannot be in ultimate conflict with the truth? I have no fear of what science will tell us about the universe - since God is definitionally the Creator of such a universe; and the meaning of the universe cannot be in conflict with its Creator. I do not, in other words, see reason as somehow in conflict with faith - since both are reconciled by a Truth that may yet be beyond our understanding.

This is more than a little wooly and clearly question-begging. You are making the positive assertion that the universe had a Creator. Doing so, you are attempting to make a substantial contribution to the science of cosmology. When the real cosmologists come back from their next conference and say things like, "spacetime may be a closed manifold and, therefore, may have no beginning or end" this would be one of many possible descriptions of the universe which would close the door on a creation event and, therefore, on a Creator. There are many ways that science could conflict with the "truth" upon which your faith now rests.

Needless to say, your attempt to pull theism up by its bootstraps ("since God is definitionally the Creator of such a universe; and the meaning of the universe cannot be in conflict with its Creator") could be used to justify almost any metaphysical assertion. "The Flying Spaghetti Monster who created the universe" is also "definitionally" the Creator of the universe; this doesn't mean that he exists, or that the universe had a Creator at all. Many other chains of pious reasoning could be cashed-out in the same way: "Satan is the Tempter; I find that I am tempted on a hourly basis to eat ice cream and have sex with my neighbor's wife; ergo, Satan exists." Or what if I suggested that what we know about the brain renders the idea of a human soul rather implausible, and one your brethren countered: "The immortal soul governs all the activity in a person's brain; I have no fear about what neuroscience will tell me about the brain, because the soul is definitionally the brain's operator." Would this strike you as an argument for the existence of souls? Granted, there are still many gaps in neuroscience into which a soul might still be inserted, just as there are gaps in our understanding of the cosmos into which the faithful eagerly insert God, but such maneuvers are utterly without intellectual merit. You can insert almost anything "definitionally" into those gaps. The Muslims have inserted Allah, and the Qur'an is His perfect word. The Hindus have inserted Gods of every color and flavor. Why don't these efforts persuade you?

Now let me briefly address your primary charge of "intolerance." The sentences that you appear to have found most troubling are these:



Anyone who thinks he knows for sure that Jesus was born of virgin or that the Qur'an is the perfect word of the Creator of the universe is lying. Either he is lying to himself, or to everyone else. In neither case should such false certainties be celebrated.

What if I told you that I am certain that I have an even number of cells in my body? What are the chances that I am in a position to have actually counted my cells (there are on the order of 100 trillion) and counted them correctly? Would it be unfair (or worse, “intolerant”) of you to dismiss my assertion as either a product of self-deception or outright dishonesty? Note that this claim has a 50% of being true (unlike claims about virgin births and resurrections), and yet it is patently ridiculous. Some claims to knowledge—even about facts that have a high order of probability—immediately brand their claimants as intellectually dishonest. Please forgive me for saying that it is extraordinarily obvious that neither you, nor the pope, nor any other Christian is in a position to know that Jesus was actually born of a virgin or that he will one day return to earth wielding magic powers.

As far as the Qur'an being the perfect word of the Creator of the universe, the Qur'an itself makes it especially easy to dismiss this idea. The book claims to be so perfect, it could not have possibly be written by a human being, (10:37), and readers are challenged to just try to write a surah equal to any in the text (2:23). Anyone who has actually read the Qur'an (and any other work of significant literature) would agree that this would be remarkably easy to do. The Qur'an declares that if it was not the perfect word of Allah, its critics would find some mistakes in it (4:82). Its critics have found mistakes in it. What's a reasonable person to conclude?

It is not my intention to go on at tiresome length, but your last post has opened so many doors to the winds of unreason that I can't resist running from room to room trying to settle things down. You seem to have taken particular offense at my imputing self-deception and/or dishonesty to the faithful. I make no apologies for this. One of the greatest problems with religion is that it is built, to a remarkable degree, upon lies. Mommy claims to know that Granny went straight to heaven after she died. But Mommy doesn't actually know this. The truth is that, while Mommy may be rigorously honest on any other subject, in this instance she doesn't want to distinguish between what she really knows (i.e. what she has good reasons to believe) and 1) what she wants to be true, or 2) what will keep her children from grieving too much in Granny's absence. She is lying—either to herself or to her children—but we've all agreed not talk about it. Rather than teach our children to grieve, we teach them to lie to themselves.

You can call me “intolerant” all you want, but that won't make unreasonable claims to knowledge sound any more reasonable; it won't differentiate your claims to religious knowledge from the claims of others which you consider illegitimate; and it won't constitute an adequate response to anything I have written or am likely to write.

Best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 1/25/07, 3:54 AM

Dear Sam

Thank you very much for your latest post. It was clarifying for me - and forced me to think hard about how to respond. I even communicated with my Imaginary Friend about it. You raise a blizzard of points, but there is one above all that needs to be addressed, because it cuts to the chase, and shows, I think, that we are closer than might appear.

Your fundamental point is the following, it seems to me. I can say that the revelation I have embraced is true, but because it cannot be proven by the robust standards of scientific empiricism, I cannot prove it to be true to your satisfaction. If I cannot prove it to be true, in empirical fashion, then my faith must be excluded from rational discourse. In fact, if I understand you right, it must not only be excluded, it must be stigmatized. It must be ridiculed. It must end. Even if religion were to mean that everyone loved one another for ever (which, I readily concede, it obviously doesn't), that still would not be relevant for judging its truth. And the truth of a religious claim is the most fundamental thing about it. If I cannot prove this, I should shut up. As you rightly say, with self-fulfilling precision:

“You can call me ‘intolerant’ all you want, but that won’t make unreasonable claims to knowledge sound any more reasonable; it won’t differentiate your claims to religious knowledge from the claims of others which you consider illegitimate; and it won’t constitute an adequate response to anything I have written or am likely to write.”

I agree with all of that, except the last phrase. I believe I can offer an adequate response. It may not be adequate to you; but it is adequate to me, and to many, many others - in fact, to the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived. My response rests on an understanding of truth that is not exhausted by empiricism or materialism. I do not believe, in short, that all truth rests on scientific premises and can be ‘proven’ by empirical or scientific methods. I believe science is one, important, valuable and respectable mode of thinking about the whole. But there are truth questions it has not answered and cannot answer. What I found insightful about your book was your openness to this possibility. You repeat that openness in your recent posting:

“While I spend a fair amount of time thinking about the brain (as I am finishing my doctorate in neuroscience), I do not think that the utter reducibility of consciousness to matter has been established. It may be that the very concepts of mind and matter are fundamentally misleading us.”

So you allow for a space where the logic of science and of materialism does not lead us toward truth, but may even mislead

us about it, and lead us away from it. This is a big concession, and it undermines the certainty of your entire case. Such an argument must rest on a notion of ultimate truth that is deeper than science, beyond science. It must rest on a notion that allows for the rational legitimacy of my faith.

It might even include an appreciation of other modes of rational discourse that are not empirical in origin or form. Take, for example, the question of historical truth. You rely in your books on a lot of historical facts to buttress your empirical case. But these facts are not true - and could never be proven true - by the scientific method that is your benchmark. There are no control groups in history. There are no experiments. But there is a form of truth. Discovering that historical truth is the vocation of a historian - and it is a different truth than science, and reached by a different methodology and logic.

Similarly, mathematics can achieve a proof that has no interaction with the physical world. It may even be the closest to divine truth that human beings can achieve. But it is still logically separate from empirically verified truth, from historical truth, and even from the realm of human consciousness that includes aesthetic truth, the truths we find in contemplation of art or of nature.

My point here is to say that once you have conceded the possibility of a truth that is not reducible to empirical proof, you have allowed for the validity of religious faith as a form of legitimate truth-seeking in a different mode. The reason why you are not like some other, glibber atheists is that you recognize this. I might say that God has already been in touch with you on the matter.

But that is not the sum of your argument. You argue further that even if you concede the possibility of a legitimate form of religious truth-seeking, the content of various, competing revelations renders them dangerous. They are dangerous because they logically contradict each other. And since their claims are the most profound that we can imagine, human beings will often be compelled to fight for them. For if these profound matters are not worth fighting for, what is?

I agree that this is a central problem for religion in the world. It has always been so. It will always be so. This is not a new problem. It is arguably the oldest human debate. Whether one reads Pascal or Spinoza, Locke or Montaigne, Hobbes or Leo Strauss, the religious question always prompts a political question. I think the problem is eased - if never fully solved - by a critical move that I unpack in my book, "The Conservative Soul." That move is rooted in skepticism. Hobbes put it best, as he often did:

"For the nature of God is incomprehensible; that is to say, we understand nothing of what he is, but only that he is; and therefore the attributes we give him, are not to tell one another, what he is, nor to signify our opinion of his nature, but our desire to honor him with such names as we conceive most honourable amongst ourselves."

In my book, excerpted in Time Magazine [here](#), I put it this way:

If God really is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding. Not entirely. We have Scripture; we have reason; we have religious authority; we have our own spiritual experiences of the divine. But there is still something we will never grasp, something we can never know - because God is beyond our human categories. And if God is beyond our categories, then God cannot be captured for certain. We cannot know with the kind of surety that allows us to proclaim truth with a capital T. There will always be something that eludes us. If there weren't, it would not be God.

I don't think you're far away from this. That's why you've gone on retreats, explored Buddhism, experimented with psilocybin, as I have. You see: we are closer than you might think. But you differ with me on how this translates into life. You ask legitimately: how can I, convinced of this truth, resist imposing it on others? The answer is: humility and doubt. I may believe these things, but I am aware that others may not; and I respect their own existential decision to believe something else. I respect their decision because I respect my own, and realize it is indescribable to those who have not directly experienced it. That's why I am such a dogged defender of pluralism and secularism - because I believe secularism alone does justice to the profundity of the claims of religion. The attempt to force or even rig laws to encourage others to share my faith defeats the point of my faith - which is that it is both freely chosen and definitionally dealing with matters that cannot be subject to common consensus.

And that brings me to the asymmetry of our positions. We both accept that there may well be a higher truth beyond empirical inquiry or proof. I respect your opinions in this matter, and feel informed by them. You regard my opinions as inadmissible in public debate, ludicrous, a form of lying, and irrational. Yes, you are being intolerant. More, actually. The entire point of your book is intolerance. Where I respect your position, you refuse to respect mine.

Or maybe, now that I've unpacked it, you respect my position a little more. Let me know,

God bless,

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 01/26/07, 10:20 AM

Dear Andrew

Many thanks for your last essay. As will probably come as no surprise, you have not yet converted me to Catholicism. Still, you have put forward many points that deserve a serious response. I'll be away from my email for the next few days, so I won't be back at you until next week. For the moment, let me simply reiterate my appreciation for your willingness to engage in this debate. Many people appear to be finding it very useful. And I've found it a genuine pleasure to correspond with you.

All the best,

Sam

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 01/29/07, 9:20 PM

Dear Andrew—

Many thanks for your last essay. Before I address your central argument, I'd like to point out that you continue to misunderstand me in small ways that make me seem (even) more boorish than I am. I did not, for instance, claim that you could not possibly offer an adequate response to my arguments, only that repeatedly calling me "intolerant" would not constitute such a response. Indeed, if I thought there were nothing you could say to convince me of the legitimacy of your point of view, I could scarcely be having this debate in good faith. I remain open to evidence and argument on this and all other fronts. In fact, I could easily imagine a scenario that would persuade me of the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus, and the utter sanctity of the blessed Virgin. Granted, this communication would have to be of the crass "signs and wonders" variety, for I am a very doubting Thomas, but there is no question that my mind could be fundamentally changed, even in this email exchange. If, for instance, your "Imaginary Friend" gave you some highly specific information that you could not have obtained by any other means, I would take this as powerful evidence in favor of your point of view. To increase my vulnerability to this line of attack, I have just written a 30-digit number on a scrap of paper and hidden it in my office. If God tells you (or any of our readers) what this number is, I will be appropriately astounded and will publicize the results of this experiment to the limit of my abilities. It is, of course, true that your success would be open to a variety of interpretations—perhaps such a miracle says nothing about the existence of God but demonstrates that clairvoyance is an actual power of the human mind and that you possess it in spades. Or perhaps it proves that Satan exists, and he is similarly endowed. Of course, we should expect some skeptical readers to accuse us both of fraud. Let us cross these bridges if we ever come to them. The point, of course, is that if God exists, it would be trivially easy for Him to blow my mind. (Hint to the Creator: I'm thinking of an even number, and it's not 927459757074561008328610835528).

This brings me to a point upon which atheists like myself are always harping: most people consent to have their minds blown on far lesser terms, with far more ambiguous stimuli, and keep reason in chains while the "will to believe" triumphs in a very unfair fight. Atheists like myself are generally asked to contemplate "miracles" of the following sort: some fellow was a big drinker (like our president), prayed to Jesus, and now lives a life of blissful sobriety. It is left to professional skeptics to wonder how an intelligent person can believe that mere recovery from alcoholism confirms the doctrine of Christianity. Hindus get sober, and atheists do as well. These facts alone nullify any religious interpretation of the data.

Testimony on the basis of "spiritual" experience tends to be equally ambiguous. Here is something I recently wrote for the Newsweek/Washington Post blog "[On Faith](#)" I quote it here, because I think it bears on this question of what counts as evidence for specific religious ideas:

I recently spent an afternoon on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, atop the mount where Jesus is believed to have preached his most famous sermon. It was an infernally hot day, and the sanctuary was crowded with Christian pilgrims from many continents. Some gathered silently in the shade, while others staggered in the noonday sun, taking photographs.

As I sat and gazed upon the surrounding hills gently sloping to an inland sea, a feeling of peace came over me. It soon grew to a blissful stillness that silenced my thoughts. In an instant, the sense of being a separate self-an “I” or a “me”-vanished. Everything was as it had been-the cloudless sky, the pilgrims clutching their bottles of water-but I no longer felt like I was separate from the scene, peering out at the world from behind my eyes. Only the world remained.

The experience lasted just a few moments, but returned many times as I gazed out over the land where Jesus is believed to have walked, gathered his apostles, and worked many of his miracles. If I were a Christian, I would undoubtedly interpret this experience in Christian terms. I might believe that I had glimpsed the oneness of God, or felt the descent of the Holy Spirit. But I am not a Christian. If I were a Hindu, I might talk about “Brahman,” the eternal Self, of which all individual minds are thought to be a mere modification. But I am not a Hindu. If I were a Buddhist, I might talk about the “dharmakaya of emptiness” in which all apparent things manifest. But I am not a Buddhist.

As someone who is simply making his best effort to be a rational human being, I am very slow to draw metaphysical conclusions from experiences of this sort. The truth is, I experience what I would call the “selflessness of consciousness” rather often, wherever I happen to meditate-be it in a Buddhist monastery, a Hindu temple, or while having my teeth cleaned. Consequently, the fact that I also had this experience at a Christian holy site does not lend an ounce of credibility to the doctrine of Christianity.

You are, of course, right to say that there are many different contexts in which a statement about the world can be deemed “true” (or likely to be true) and not all of these are empirical or scientific, narrowly defined. Some are even fictional. It is, for instance, true to say that “Hamlet was the prince of Denmark.” But admitting the role of context does not render all truth-claims equally legitimate. As you point out, history is not an exact science, but it isn’t exactly in conflict with science either. Permit me to quote from another of my essays, as it addresses precisely this point:

It is time we conceded a basic fact of human discourse: Either people have good reasons for what they believe, or they do not. When they have good reasons, their beliefs contribute to our growing understanding of the world. We need not distinguish between “hard” and “soft” sciences here, or between science and other evidence-based disciplines, like history. There happen to be very good reasons to believe that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Consequently, the idea that the Egyptians actually did it lacks credibility. Every sane human being recognizes that to rely merely on “faith” to decide specific questions of historical fact would be both idiotic and grotesque-that is, until the conversation turns to the origin of books like the Bible and the Koran, to the resurrection of Jesus, to Muhammad’s conversation with the angel Gabriel, or to any of the

other hallowed travesties that still crowd the altar of human ignorance.

Science, in the broadest sense, includes all reasonable claims to knowledge about ourselves and the world. If there were good reasons to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that Muhammad flew to Heaven on a winged horse, these beliefs would necessarily form part of our rational description of the universe. Faith is nothing more than the license that religious people give one another to believe such propositions when reasons fail. The difference between science and religion is the difference between a willingness to dispassionately consider new evidence and new arguments and a passionate unwillingness to do so. The distinction could not be more obvious, or more consequential, and yet it is everywhere elided, even in the ivory tower

So, while I admit that there are many different contexts in which our beliefs may be justified, and many different modes of justification, there is still an important difference between justified and unjustified belief. My previous remarks-about not knowing what happens after death, about the gaps in science, about the potential validity of contemplative experience, etc.-do nothing to change this picture. And it is the manifest failure of most religious people to observe the distinction between justified and unjustified belief (generally calling their non-observance “faith”) that leaves me convinced that they are generally misled in their search for truth.

It is the willingness of scientists to say “I don’t know”-to really integrate doubt into their view of the world-that constitutes their privileged position with respect to truth. As you know, there are an uncountable number of questions upon which religion once offered a faith-based answer, which have now been ceded to the care of science. Indeed, the process of scientific conquest and religious forfeiture is relentless, unidirectional, and highly predictable. Some smart person begins to doubt received opinion-about the causes of illness, the movement of celestial bodies, the nature of sensory perception, etc.-he or she then observes the world more closely (often making shrewd use of technology and/or mathematics) and makes predictions that can be verified by others. What we see, time and again, is a general unwillingness for religious people to seriously interact with this discourse (and even an eagerness to subjugate or murder its perpetrators) whenever it challenges doctrines to which they are emotionally attached. Eventually, however, the power that comes with actually understanding the world becomes too seductive to ignore, and even the clerics give in. In this way, real knowledge, being truly universal, erodes the basis for religious discord. Muslims and Christians cannot disagree about the causes of cholera, for instance, because whatever their holy books might say about infectious disease, a genuine understanding of cholera has arrived from another quarter. Epidemiology trumps religion (or it should), especially when people are watching their children die. This is where our hope for a truly nonsectarian future lies: when things matter, people tend to want to understand what is actually going on in the world. Science (and rational discourse generally) delivers this understanding and offers a very frank appraisal of its current limitations; Religion fails on both counts.

I also disagree that religious faith can be as well-behaved as you suggest. You claim that religious beliefs are “freely chosen and definitionally dealing with matters that cannot be subject to common consensus.” What does it mean to say that a belief is “freely chosen”? If our beliefs purport to represent any state of the world (physical, historical, contemplative, or even fictional), we do not “choose” them. They tend to be forced upon us by compelling chains of evidence and argument. Did you freely choose to believe that Jesus was crucified rather than guillotined? I doubt it. The biblical account just happens to specify crucifixion, and you find this account compelling. (I presume it is also relevant that Jesus predates the guillotine by over a thousand years.) The point, of course, is that you are not free to believe whatever you want. And people who would

avail themselves of such freedom are demonstrably crazy. Consensus really is the gold-standard here, as elsewhere. Consensus, of course, admits of exceptions. It is possible for a solitary genius to have the truth in hand before anyone else realizes it. Eventually, however, others will authenticate his/her results. This is also true of contemplative or classically “mystical” results. Yes, subjective experience is private to a significant degree, but it isn’t merely so. Language allows us to form a consensus about what is reasonable to believe even about one’s private experiences.

Not lying to oneself and others takes discipline. It is, of course, hard to know how much progress one has made down the path of honesty, but it is not difficult to spot the pratfalls of others. Here, I do not merely refer to twenty-megaton displays of religious mendacity of the Ted Haggard variety. I mean the daily and ubiquitous failure of most religious people to admit that the basic claims of their faith are profoundly suspect. How likely is it that Jesus was really born of a virgin, rose from the dead, and will bodily return to earth to judge us all? How reasonable is it to believe in such a concatenation of miracles on the basis of the Gospel account? How much support do these doctrines receive from the average Christian’s experience in church? It seems to me that honest answers to these questions should raise a tsunami of doubt. I’m not sure what will be “Christian” about any Christians left standing.

It seems profoundly unimaginative-and, frankly, dangerous-to think that we cannot possibly overcome the religious divisions in our world. What is the alternative? Do you really think that the 23rd century will dawn, with unimaginably powerful technology having spread to every corner of the earth, and our thinking will still be governed by sectarian religious certainties? Muslims eager for jihad? Rapture-ready Christians holding political power?

Let me close by asking you a simple question: What would constitute “proof” for you that your current beliefs about God are mistaken? (i.e., what would get you to fundamentally doubt the validity of faith in general and of Christianity in particular?) I suspect the answer to this question will say a lot about why you believe what you believe.

Best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 2/5/07, 9:12 AM

Dear Sam,

Thanks for waiting for this belated response. As a form of apology, and since some readers have said I’ve ducked some of your specific questions in the past, perhaps I should answer your last question first. It may move things forward a little. You wrote:

“What would constitute “proof” for you that your current beliefs about God are mistaken? (i.e., what would get you to fundamentally doubt the validity of faith in general and of Christianity in particular?)”

It’s a good question. It prompts me to say something I’ve been reluctant to talk about for reasons best expressed by

Wittgenstein. But here goes anyway.

I have never doubted the existence of God. Never. My acceptance of God's existence - of a force beyond everything and the source of everything - goes so far back in my consciousness and memory that I can neither recall "finding" this faith nor being taught it. So when I am asked to justify this belief, as you reasonably do, I am at a loss. At this layer of faith, the first critical layer, the layer that includes all religious people and many who call themselves spiritual rather than religious, I can offer no justification as such. I have just never experienced the ordeal of consciousness without it. It is the air I have always breathed. I meet atheists and am as baffled at their lack of faith - at this level - as you are at my attachment to it. When people ask me how I came to choose this faith, I can only say it chose me. I have no ability to stop believing. Crises in my life - death of loved ones, diagnosis with a fatal illness, emotional loss - have never shaken this faith. In fact, they have all strengthened it. I know of no "proof" that could dissuade me of this, since no "proof" ever persuaded me of it.

I simply grew up from my earliest childhood in complete acceptance of this reality. I have had two serious crises of faith - but neither came close to a loss of faith in God's existence. The first crisis was the worst. Almost fourteen years ago, it occurred to me not that God didn't exist - that never occurred to me - but that God might be evil. I wrote about this experience - I remember precisely where and when it happened - in my spiritual memoir/essay, "[Love Undetectable.](#)" I will not reiterate it here. The "proof" I contemplated for thinking God was evil was the cliched conundrum of human suffering. It was a particularly grim moment in the plague years, when the suffering of good people I loved a lot began to get to my faith. Yes, I know this paradox might (and should) have occurred to me earlier in life. But it's also human to avoid these things most fully until those closest to you are struck down. So there I was, having my Job moment.

What proof, what argument, what evidence persuaded me that God was actually not evil but good? Nothing that will or should persuade you. The sense that evil was the ultimate victor in the universe, that evil is the fundamental meaning of all of this, that "none of this cares for us," to use Larkin's simple phrase: this sense pervaded me for a few minutes and then somehow, suddenly, unprompted by any specific thought, just lifted. I can no more explain that - or provide a convincing argument that it was anything more than your own moment of calm in Galilee. But I can say that it represented for me a revelation of God's love and forgiveness, the improbable notion that the force behind all of this actually loved us, and even loved me. The calm I felt then; and the voice with no words I heard: this was truer than any proof I have ever conceded, any substance I have ever felt with my hands, any object I have seen with my eyes.

You will ask: how do I know this was Jesus? Could it not be that it was a force beyond one, specific Jewish rabbi who lived two millennia ago and was executed by the Roman authorities? Yes, and no. I have lived with the voice of Jesus read to me, read by me, and spoken all around me my entire life - and I heard it that day. If I had been born before Jesus' birth, would I have realized this? Of course not. If I had been born in Thailand and raised a Buddhist, would I have interpreted this experience as a function of my Buddhist faith rather than Jesus? If I were a pilgrim right now in Iraq, would I attribute this epiphany to Allah? An honest answer has to be: almost certainly.

But I am a contingent human being in a contingent time and place and I heard Jesus. Do I believe that other religious traditions, even those that posit doctrines logically contrary to the doctrines of Jesus, have no access to divine truth? I don't. If God exists, then God will be larger and greater than our human categories or interpretations. I feel sure that all the great religions - and many minor ones - have been groping toward the same God. I don't need to tell you of the profound similarities in ethical and spiritual teaching among various faiths, as well as their differences. I believe what I specifically believe - but since the mystery of the divine is so much greater than our human understanding, I am not in the business of

claiming exclusive truth, let alone condemning those with different views of the divine as heretics or infidels. We are all restless for the same God, for the intelligence and force greater than all of us, for that realm of being that the human mind senses but cannot achieve, longs for but cannot capture. But I've learned in that search that integral and indispensable to it is humility. And such humility requires relinquishing the impulse to force faith on others, to condemn those with different faiths, or to condescend to those who have sincerely concluded that there is no God at all. And when I read the Gospels recounting the sayings and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, I see a man so committed to that humility he was prepared to die under its weight.

I should add that this unchosen belief in God's existence - the "gift" of faith - does not prompt me to lose all doubt in my faith, or to abandon questioning. I have wrestled with all sorts of questions about any number of doctrines that the hierarchy of the church has insisted upon. As a gay man, I have been forced to do this perhaps more urgently than many others - which is one reason I regard my sexual orientation as a divine gift rather than as a "disorder". For me, faith is a journey that begins with the gift of divine revelation but never rests thereafter. It is nourished by a faith community we call the church, and is sustained by the sacraments, prayer, doubt and the love of friends and family. It is informed by reason, but it cannot end in reason.

I understand that this form of faith would provoke Nietzsche's contempt and James Dobson's scorn. But there is a wide expanse between nihilism and fundamentalism. I fear your legitimate concerns (which I share) about the dangers of religious certainty in politics have blinded you to the fertility of this expanse. And I think you're wrong that we religious moderates are mere enablers of fundamentalist intolerance. I think, rather, we have an important role in talking with atheists about faith and talking with fundamentalists about the political dangers of religious fanaticism, and the pride that can turn faith into absolutism.

In fact, people of faith who are not fundamentalists may be the most important allies you've got. Why don't you want us to help out?

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 02/08/07, 7:20 PM

Dear Andrew—

Many thanks for your latest essay. I must say, if we were at a dinner party, this is where I might be tempted to admit that rational dialogue can take us only so far (So, how are things over at The Atlantic?...). But we are not at a dinner party, and I think you and I have a responsibility to see whether a conversation of this sort can ever terminate in a proper meeting of minds.

I am, of course, unconvinced by your response. But this can hardly disappoint you, as it was not intended to convince me. You simply wrote to inform me that you have never doubted God's existence, cannot account for how you came to believe in Him, and are well aware that these facts will not (and should not) persuade me of the legitimacy of your religious beliefs. I now feel like a tennis player, in mid-serve, who notices that his opponent is no longer holding a racket.

You have simply declared your faith to be immune to rational challenge. As you didn't come to believe in God by taking

any state of the world into account, no possible state of the world could put His existence in doubt. This is the very soul of dogmatism. But to call it such in this context will seem callous, as you have emphasized how your faith has survived—and perhaps helped you to survive—many harrowing experiences. Such testimonials about the strength and utility of faith mark off territory that most atheists have learned never to trespass. This reminds me of the wonderful quotation from Mencken: “We must respect the other fellow’s religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.” The truth is, no one wants to be in the business of arguing that another person’s principal sources of comfort and gratification are not as he thinks them to be. But we are now in this up to our eyebrows, so permit me to just blurt out what I’m thinking and to tell you why I believe that your nonjustification-justification of faith should not satisfy you (or anyone else).

While you claim to have integrated doubt into your faith, you say that you have never (never) doubted the existence of God. This seems rather like my saying, “I am an extremely loving person. I just don’t happen to love my parents or my children. Never have. Probably never will.” There are surely instances where the caveats to an assertion loom too large to ignore.

As stated, your notion of God doesn’t have much in the way of specific content (apart from love). Beyond that, you have sought refuge in a towering mystery—and have boosted yourself there with the claim that any Being sublime enough to have created our universe must be so far beyond our ken as to perpetually elude our powers of description. This last assertion seems plausible, as far as it goes. But, of course, it isn’t an argument for the existence of God, much less a good one. In any case, your vaporous conception of a deity allows you to say that your religious beliefs do not conflict with those of others. God as a loving cipher allows for multiple, and even contradictory, doctrines to achieve parity. Faith in the absence of specifics makes a man humble.

All this, frankly, seems a little evasive. Given your attachment to Christianity and your admiration for the pope (who, as you know, makes far more restrictive—and, therefore, arrogant—claims about God), I suspect there is a raft of religious propositions that you actually do accept as true—though perhaps you are less certain of them than you are of God. I refer now to the specific beliefs that would make you a Christian and a Catholic, as opposed to a generic theist. Do you believe in the resurrection and the virgin birth? Is the divinity of the historical Jesus a fact that is “truer than any proof? any substance? any object”? If these are not the sort of things a person can just know without any justification, why can’t they be known in this way? If a man like James Dobson is wrong to be certain, without justification, that Jesus will one day return to earth, why is your assertion about the existence of a loving God any different? What would you say to a person who once doubted the story of Noah, but whose doubt “suddenly, unprompted by any specific thought, just lifted”? Is such a change of mood sufficient to establish the flood myth as an historical fact?

Perhaps I’m missing something, but your claim about God really does not appear limited to your own experience. You are not saying—“Sam, I just don’t know how I can convince you of this, but when I close my eyes and think of Jesus, I experience a feeling of utter peace. I’m calling this feeling ‘God,’ and I suspect that if more people felt this way, our world would be radically transformed.” An assertion of this sort would give me no trouble at all. But you are saying quite a bit more than that. You are claiming to know that God exists out there. As such, you are making tacit claims about physics and cosmology and about the history of the world. What is more, these are claims that you have just pronounced unjustified, unjustifiable, and yet impervious to your own powers of doubt.

You also appear to see some strange, epistemological significance in the fact that you cannot remember when or how you acquired your faith. Surely the roots of many of your beliefs are similarly obscure. I don’t happen to remember when or how

I came to believe that Pluto is a planet. Should I say that this belief “chose me”? What if, upon hearing that astronomers have changed their opinion about Pluto, I announced that “I have no ability to stop believing?. I know of no ‘proof’ that could dissuade me of [Pluto’s planethood], since no ‘proof’ ever persuaded me of it.” I’m sure you will balk at this analogy, but I’m guessing that your parents told you about God from the moment you appeared in this world. This is generally how people are put in a position to say things like faith “chose me.” The English language chose both of us. That doesn’t mean that we cannot reflect critically on it or recognize that the fact that we both speak it (we might say it is the “air we breathe”) is an utterly non-mysterious consequence of our upbringings. Indeed, you do admit the role that such contingency plays in matters of faith. As you say, if you had been raised Buddhist, you’d almost certainly be a Buddhist. But you refrain from drawing any important conclusions from this. If you had been raised by atheists, might you even be an atheist?

I also hope you appreciate the irony of your viewing your sexual orientation as a gift from God. I’m very happy, of course, that you don’t consider your homosexuality to be a curse or a product of Adam’s fall. But the idea that homosexuality is sinful or otherwise pathological has more than a little to do with the history of religion. Is there any force on this earth that has done more to shame and terrorize homosexuals (or heterosexuals for that matter) than your own church? I’m not suggesting that the revulsion that some heterosexuals feel for homosexuals can be entirely explained in terms of religious doctrine (but it can be largely explained in such terms; and this hatred has, at a minimum, been enshrined and made durable by religious institutions). So I find it peculiar that you consider your successful ordeal of living as a homosexual in a homophobic faith to be evidence in support of the religious project. It’s like hearing a man who has been unfairly confined to a straight-jacket all his life say that he is grateful to have been taught such “economy of motion.” This is not to make light of the very obvious and important fact that we can all grow through adversity. Many people can honestly say things like, “cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me.” So, I do not doubt for a moment that your struggle with the sexual taboos of Christianity has made you a better person. But your experience does not transform a two-thousand-year pandemic of needless and crushing sexual neurosis in the name of Christ into some kind of spiritual sacrament. Generally speaking, the Church has promulgated views about human sexuality that are unconscionably stupid and utterly lacking in empathy. Full stop. The fact that you have navigated this labyrinth of sacred prejudice and kept your sanity is no point in favor of religion. The glory is very much your own.

Finally, let me make it clear that I do not consider religious moderates to be “mere enablers of fundamentalist intolerance.” They are worse. My biggest criticism of religious moderation—and of your last essay—is that it represents precisely the sort of thinking that will prevent a fully reasonable and nondenominational spirituality from ever emerging in our world. Your determination to have your emotional and spiritual needs met within the tradition of Catholicism has kept you from discovering that there is a mode of spiritual and ethical inquiry that is not contingent upon culture in the way that all religions are. As I wrote in *The End of Faith*, whatever is true about us, spiritually and ethically, must be discoverable now. It makes no sense at all to have one’s spiritual life pegged to rumors of ancient events, however miraculous. What if, tomorrow, a blue-ribbon panel of archaeologists and biblical scholars demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Gospels were ancient forgeries and that Jesus never existed? Would this steal the ground out from under your spiritual life? It would be a shame if it would. And if it wouldn’t, in what sense is your spirituality really predicated upon the historical Jesus?

I’m asking you to imagine a world in which children are taught to investigate reality for themselves, not in conformity to the religious dogmatism of their parents, but by the lights of truly honest, fearless inquiry. Imagine a discourse about ethics and mystical experience that is as contingency-free as the discourse of science already is. Science really does transcend the

vagaries of culture: there is no such thing as “Japanese” as opposed to “French” science; we don’t speak of “Hindu biology” and “Jewish chemistry.” Imagine a world that has transcended its tribalism—racism and nationalism, yes, but religious tribalism especially—in which we could have a truly open-ended conversation about our place in the universe and about the possibilities of deepening our experience of love and compassion for one another. Ethics and spirituality do not require faith. One can even achieve utter mystical absorption in the primordial mystery of the present moment without believing anything on insufficient evidence.

You might want to say that every religion offers a guide to doing this. Yes, but they are provisional guides at best. Rather than pick over the carcass of Christianity (or any other traditional faith) looking for a few, uncontaminated morsels of wisdom, why not take a proper seat at the banquet of human understanding in the present? There are already many very refined courses on offer. For those interested in the origins of the universe, there is the real science of cosmology. For those who want to know about the evolution of life on this planet, biology, chemistry and their subspecialties offer real nourishment. (Knowledge in most scientific domains is now doubling about every five years. How fast is it growing in religion?) And if ethics and spirituality are what concern you, there are now scientists making serious efforts to understand these features of our experience—both by studying the brain function of advanced contemplatives and by practicing meditation and other (non-faith-based) spiritual disciplines themselves. Even when it comes to compassion and self-transcendence, there is new wine (slowly) being poured. Why not catch it with a clean glass?

All the best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 2/14/07, 3:54 PM

Dear Sam,

Thanks for your invitation to sup from “a clean glass.” You unpack that revealing metaphor in the following way:

I’m asking you to imagine a world in which children are taught to investigate reality for themselves, not in conformity to the religious dogmatism of their parents, but by the lights of truly honest, fearless inquiry. Imagine a discourse about ethics and mystical experience that is as contingency-free as the discourse of science already is.

My first thought is: where are all these children separated from their parents? Would they have to be sent away to protect them from the influence of parental dogmatism? And my second thought is amusement at your use of the passive tense: “are taught”. By whom? You? Who is teaching these finally liberated children, and on whose authority? And where is this discourse they will enter that is “contingency-free”? I have never heard or read or engaged in one.

That is because I have never met a human being or a human mind that is “contingency-free”, and never will. No child grows up without the contingent facts of their family, place, genes, and any number of details that make us who we are. You and I would be very different people if we had different contingent genetics and different contingent histories. This is the

experience of being human, an experience eternally different from the dream of your new, unfettered, purely rational “education,” where the young are severed from the toxins of contingent culture and faith and family. You echo the later themes of Plato’s Republic in this respect, and Socrates’ irony still echoes through the millennia. You are not the first person to come up with such an idea, Sam, and I have no doubt that the guardians you will pick to educate the young will be selected in good faith - your good faith, not the children’s or their parents’. And I am not the first person to find this project for all mankind absurd in my lighter moments and deeply sinister in my darker ones.

Science, your preferred mode of human understanding, is not contingency-free either. I know of no scientist who would claim so. It is shot through with contingency. It is the consequence of millennia of human thought, logic, experiment, argument, discovery, thesis, antithesis, synthesis - propelled by human curiosity, pride, obsession, and error. What science knows at any given moment is a function of everything it has ever known. And it is built and unbuilt by human minds with human weaknesses. Yes, it can overturn all of it at any moment in theory - but it will still be defined in part by what it has overturned. And such moments of revolution are rare. Much more common is the slow accumulation of insight and evidence until it becomes the coral reef we call science “now”.

Science rests as well on some basic elements of faith. You’ve read your Hume and you know what I mean. A reader came up with a useful list of some of them:

our faith that our senses and our memories are (usually) reliable, rather than being hallucinations induced by some unknown outside source; our belief that our short-term thought processes are (usually) reliable (that is, that we are sane at all); our belief that the entire universe didn’t whisk into existence a second ago (including all of us, with a complete set of fake memories), and won’t whisk out of existence a second later; our belief that other bodies which act like ours contain conscious awarenesses like our own (and that the “intensity” with which they feel sensations and emotions can be judged by the complexity of their behavior); the belief that it is likely that a consciousness is permanently destroyed by the destruction of its physical body and will never be resurrected later in another body (that is, the only thing that makes us think murder is immoral at all).

These little puddle-jumps of faith are the foundation for your reason. I think they are justified. But that reason is really, au fond, a belief, an act of faith, an acknowledgment that, as humans, we have no “contingency-free” place from where to start at all and no “contingency-free” place on earth to end up at. We are not gods.

The place you are seeking - this “contingency-free” place where no specifics exist but pure truth and a clean glass - is something we people of faith call heaven. Your search for it is a religious search, even if you are unaware of it. We religious people have known about heaven for ever; but only the truly foolish among us have ever mistaken it for earth, or human life. And when those truly foolish people have attempted to replicate this heaven on earth, they have been responsible for the worst atrocities religion has produced, which is why I fear similar darkness from the world-view you are, with impeccable intentions, enthusiastically proposing. But the glass you and I drink from, Sam, is never clean; it has been drunk from since before our human history; it has passed from lip to lip through vistas of history and pre-history. It has been filled and emptied and filled again, its contents traced in stories and myths and parables and histories and DNA. It is contingent in the

way that everything human is contingent.

Can I imagine a world without such human contingency? Yes, I can. I can imagine all sorts of things - flying spaghetti monsters, to use one vivid term now beloved of today's atheists. I can imagine Lucy in the sky with diamonds. I can imagine all the people living life in peace.

But it is important to note that such a world has never, ever existed, and never, ever will. No human society has ever functioned without the large faith that underpins all the little faiths: religion. No society has ever existed without the mature human acceptance of what we do not know and what is greater than we are. No civilization has ever been atheist at its core. No polity has ever been constructed in the absence of faith, or in the absence of a tradition of faith that makes belief in the present possible at all. Earth to Sam: Does this not tell you something? Or is it plausible that human beings tomorrow will become something that in all of human history and pre-history they have never, ever been?

You write: "whatever is true about us, spiritually and ethically, must be discoverable now." Yes—absolutely yes. But now is always and everywhere a function of all that we have ever been. The key contribution of religion is to grapple with that fact at a far deeper level than science, to see human life as an intersection, in Eliot's words, of the timeless with time. Religion at its deepest is the attempt to reconcile this profound human predicament: that we exist in bodies but dream beyond them, that we are caught between the irrational instinct of beasts but endowed with the serene hope of angels. This paradox of humanity—which you would erase into a clean slate—is what religion responds to and has always responded to. The genius of the religious life lived to its fullest lies, in Oakeshott's words,

"in the poetic quality, humble or magnificent, of the images, the rites, the observances, and the offerings (the wisp of wheat on the wayside calvary) in which it recalls to us that 'eternity is in love with the productions of time' and invites us to live 'so far as is possible' as an immortal."

This is drinking from the unclean glass and drinking deeply.

In that context, let me unpack the contingency of my own faith. In my last letter, I wrote of how I experience faith as a gift, something I didn't actually choose. This unchoice can be understood as simply a function of the contingent accident of my birth and upbringing, as you point out and I readily concede. But I do not consider its contingency a mark against it - since there is nothing on earth that is not contingent. For eternal truth to be apprehended by the human soul, it must enter a contingent world, and be refracted and distorted by such an entrance. Contingency is as integral to any human being's faith as eternity. This is a logical necessity for faith to exist at all.

My story is the story of every person of faith—a mix of contingency and eternity. I have tried to explain the eternity, and I understand if it simply baffles the faithless. So let me explain the more comprehensible contingency, and why it actually supports my faith, rather than undermines it. The contingency comes from my family, of course. But it also comes from where I was born and grew up—England. The Catholicism I imbibed was a minority faith in a majority Protestant or agnostic culture. And I can track its origins through history—through my Irish ancestors who held onto it despite cruel persecution, back to the time when England itself was pervaded by the religious faith I still hold. In high school and university, I was able to study the history of that faith—the astonishing cultural wealth and spiritual depth of the Catholic

church that kept the memory of Jesus alive for millennia. I was then able to move to a different continent and country and walk into a church that was itself part of that universal inheritance. There is no free place on earth where I cannot find a home. And I know who made that possible. Without that long lineage of faithful preservation, without that dreaded institution, the Church, I would have no cup from which to drink. They passed it, these souls, from person to person, from generation to generation, in one of the most astonishingly persistent endeavors in human history.

The more I discovered about that long endeavor, the more amazed I was by it. Yes, you will cite the terrible parts of its history, parts I have not shied from myself. But you have missed so much more. The more I questioned and asked, the more history and theology I engaged in, the more I used reason to inquire into faith, the more remarkable the achievement of Christianity appeared to me. My reason strengthened and informed my faith. I felt blessed to have been given this gift, amazed at my good fortune. The thought of throwing it away for a “clean glass” that is itself an illusion seems absurd to me.

Why would I want to forget all of that precious inheritance—the humility of Mary, the foolishness of Peter, the genius of Paul, the candor of Augustine, the genius of Francis, the glory of Chartres cathedral, the haunting music of Tallis, the art of Michelangelo, the ecstasies of Teresa, the rigor of Ignatius, the whole astonishing, ravishing panoply of ancient Christianity that suddenly arrived at my door, in a banal little town in an ordinary family in the grim nights of the 1970s in England?

You want to be contingency-free? Maybe you need a richer slice of contingency. There is more wisdom, depth, range, glory, nuance and truth in my tradition than can be dreamt of in your rationalism. In answer to your question, “why not leave all this behind?” my answer is simply: why on earth would I? Why would any sane person abandon such an astonishingly rich inheritance that civilizes, informs, educates, inspires and then also saves? If faith were to desert me, I may be forced to leave. But even then, the wealth of that human inheritance would inform me and make my life worth living. I would cling to and celebrate this cultural inheritance, even if the faith that made it possible has waned for me.

Why would a human being not look at the unclean glass he is born with and ask: what is this that I have been given? Who passed this down to me? Why? Who died to give this to me? Who suffered? Who spent their lives transcribing texts to keep the memory of this man alive? Who built these churches and composed these chants and wrote these books for me to engage long after they have all disappeared from the earth? How does this amazing cultural, intellectual, spiritual inheritance connect with that inchoate sense of the divine that still permeates my soul? Could it be that what I sense in my soul is what Augustine sensed? What Dominic sensed? What John actually saw and loved and rested his head against?

I know this may sound alien to you. So let me put this in a context that might appeal to you, as a rational, empirical person. How do you explain Christianity’s enduring power? Is it all a terrible, ugly blight on the human mind that must be thrown out in favor of “truly honest, fearless inquiry”? But wouldn’t “truly honest, fearless inquiry” into religious faith begin by asking how Christianity came to exist at all?

Consider the evidence. I do not believe in a flying spaghetti monster. I believe in Jesus of Nazareth as God Incarnate. We have no evidence of a flying spaghetti monster. But we have solid evidence of Jesus’ existence. We have a handful of independent historical artifacts that attest that a minor Jewish rabbi in first century Israel was executed by the Roman authorities. We have many Gospels that date from the period after his death testifying to the power of his message. Purported messiahs and crucifixions were not uncommon at the time. But only one of the thousands of Rome’s victims is remembered in this way - and not just remembered but worshiped over two millennia later in the most advanced civilization the world has ever known. Does this not intrigue you? Have you never asked in the spirit of “truly honest, fearless inquiry”:

How on earth did this happen?

As a simple piece of historical inquiry, it's an astonishingly unlikely turn of events. Within a short period of time, not only was an obscure, failed Jewish rabbi remembered, his teachings became the official religion of the empire that had executed him. In the ensuing centuries, his life and teachings inspired many of the greatest minds, souls and talents humankind has ever produced. The collapse of the empire that elevated him did not lead to the disappearance of Christianity. It led to its eventual re-emergence as a vibrant, beautiful, rich experience for millions. Only Muhammad and the Buddha rival the story of this man - a fact that leads me to ask questions of both (particularly Buddhism), but which prompts you to condemn and anathematize all religious claims of any kind.

Even today, as I type these words, I look on my desk and see the sign I bring with me everywhere: his cross. When I go to dinner later, a small cross will come with me, in my wallet. In my study at home, a fourteenth century wooden carving of Jesus stares down at me from the wall. He is alive in me and millions of others after all this time, sustaining, nurturing, inspiring not just me but countless more. Even if you do not believe in him in the way I do, surely you must acknowledge that something very special has been going on here, something truly remarkable, something beyond the norm of much else in human history.

I have a rational, empirical explanation for this. It is that those who saw Jesus saw something so astonishing, so utterly unlike anything that had ever occurred before, that they became on fire with this new truth. They saw God. It was a contingent expression of God - how could it not be if humans were to witness it? But it was also an eternal expression, so that today some will still say: I know this Jesus as well as anyone ever knew him. And Jesus grasped this paradox of contingent-eternity that is the core mystery of the Incarnation. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

What is your explanation? How do you account for why one person out of the billions who have ever lived had this impact? How probable is it that all these countless followers were all deluding themselves completely? And if Jesus wasn't nothing, what was he in your eyes? What secret did he hold that so many others haven't?

That is an empirical question. And it merits an empirical answer.

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 2/20/07, 12:34 PM

Andrew—

Hmm...I'm afraid you chased a few red herrings in your last essay. I did not, for instance, beckon you to a world of my delusions, perfectly free of contingency. Nor did I claim that science is the gateway to such a world. I merely asked you to imagine what it would be like if our discourse about ethics and spirituality were as uncontaminated by cultural prejudice as the discourse of science already is. You appear to have misread me. Consequently, much of your last essay targeted terrain that I have never thought to occupy. I did hear some bomb-blasts in the distance. They were magnificent.

You are, of course, right to point out that science is beholden to the limits of human cognition (though it has begun to escape some of these limits with the aid of computers). Our cognitive horizons are clearly bounded by our neurophysiology, and

our neurophysiology is a consequence of our evolution on this earth-which, as you know, is teeming with slithering contingencies as far as the eye can see. The point that I was trying to make is that science is not nearly as beleaguered by contingency as religion is. And this is what is so right with science and so wrong with religion. Needless to say, the discourse of science already exists, and it already functions by norms that are quite alien to religion. If applied in religion, these norms would leave very few traditional doctrines still standing. But contrary to your fears on the matter, this would not make religious music, art, or architecture any less beautiful.

This brings me to a related topic of confusion: there is nothing “purely rational” about the world I am advocating. Your comments seem to invoke a stark opposition between reason and emotion that I do not believe exists (and which now seems quite implausible at the level of the brain). The feeling we call “doubt” can be considered an emotion, and this is this feeling that prompts me to object to much of what you have written over the course of our debate. Could I find your reasoning doubtful without the feeling doubt? I don’t know. But it has long been clear that people with neurological injuries that impede certain aspects of emotional processing fail at a variety of reasoning tasks. More to the point, perhaps, I do not think there is anything unreasonable about love, or about valuing love, or indeed, about valuing it above most (perhaps even all) things. While love is not reducible to reason, it is not in conflict with it either. So I think it is time we retire facile oppositions between cold rationality and juicy aesthetics, between truth and beauty, between reason and emotion, etc.

Regarding the fate of our children: needless to say, we have already picked guardians to educate them; we call them “teachers.” What happens at Harvard or Yale when a student raises his hand in history class and announces, “My daddy says that London and Constantinople are the same city”? One must presume that the next words he hears will be, “Sorry, but your daddy is wrong.” Parents are not the eternal gatekeepers of epistemology, and if they do successfully mislead their children about matters of fact, their children pay the price. Any aspiring doctor who has it on his mother’s authority that the pancreas is located in the head will have a tough time getting through medical school.

Your excursus into philosophical skepticism was also unnecessary-the “puddle-jumps of faith” that lie at the foundation of our reason are not a problem for atheism. This is not the sort of faith I’ve been criticizing. The fact that the underpinnings of our knowledge are in some sense inscrutable (and may remain so), the fact that [Hume’s worries](#) make sense, the fact that Wittgenstein can say things like “our spade is turned,” does not place every spurious claim to knowledge on an equal footing with science. The [discomfort induced in mathematics by Godel](#) does not make the doctrine of Mormonism even slightly more plausible. There is still a difference between jumping a puddle and walking on water.

You end your last essay by arguing for the veracity (or at least plausibility) of Christianity on the basis of its cultural success. I suspect you must know that this was a hard turn into a blind alley. You even acknowledge the existence of other very successful religions, and this spells doom. Consider the case of Islam. Here is a religion that explicitly repudiates the core claims of Christianity (Muhammad assures us that anyone who thinks Jesus was divine will spend eternity in hell, Qur’an 5:71-75; 19:30-38). Islam has nearly as many subscribers as Christianity does and is now spreading faster than any religion on earth. What should I make of this, if I am to follow your reasoning? Am I to believe that Muhammad really flew to heaven on a winged steed? That the Qur’an is the perfect word of God? On your account, these claims have stood the test of time. But that is not the point. The point is, they do not withstand the test of dispassionate scrutiny. And yet, in many respects, Muhammad’s career as a prophet was more impressive than Jesus’ was. At the very least, he escaped crucifixion. Of course, Christians have managed to make even the crucifixion of their Savior into a success story. It would seem that faith can rationalize anything.

In any case, the extra-Biblical evidence of Jesus' life is not as compelling as you seem to suggest. As you know, there is no contemporaneous description of the ministry of Jesus in the Bible or anywhere else. And even if the historical record offered multiple, first-hand accounts of his miracles, this would not constitute sufficient support for the basic claims of Christianity. First-hand reports of miracles are a dime a dozen, even in the 21st century. Many spiritual seekers in India testify to miracles performed by their gurus on a daily basis. These miracles are every bit as outlandish as the miracles attributed to Jesus. I have met literally hundreds of western educated men and women who are convinced that their favorite yogi has magic powers. I remain open to evidence of such powers (and my openness has exposed me to a fair amount of abuse in the atheist community). But as far as I can tell, all of these stories are promulgated by people who desperately want to believe them; all (to my knowledge) lack the kind of corroborating evidence one should require to actually believe that Nature's laws have been abrogated in this way; and most people who report these events demonstrate an utter disinclination to look for non-miraculous explanations. In any case, stories about mystics (and charlatans) walking on water, raising the dead, flying without the aid of technology, materializing objects, reading minds, foretelling the future are being told now. Indeed, all of these powers have been attributed to the South Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba by an uncountable number of eyewitnesses-and the man claims to have been born of a virgin to boot! He has literally millions of followers, many of them educated westerners. You can watch some of his "miracles" on YouTube, performed before credulous throngs of spiritually hungry souls. Prepare to be underwhelmed. And yet, you are suggesting that tales of similar events emerging from the pre-scientific religious milieu of the 1st century Roman Empire (decades after their supposed occurrence) are especially credible.

The endurance of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is not much of a mystery—and it is certainly not so mysterious as to lend credence to ancient miracles. No doubt there are many factors that have contributed to Christianity's success. The problem of sunk-cost is surely one: just look at how much attentional, emotional, and financial resources people have invested in this religion. No one is eager to realize he has been wasting his time. Realizing that the core claims of Christianity are illegitimate would be tantamount to a Christian admitting, "I have been wrong all these years." It is no surprise that people keep their shoulder to the door, bracing against such epiphanies. I have received thousands of letters and emails from people describing just how painful it was for them to finally admit that they were duped by Christianity, and that they duped their children in turn. I have heard from many ministers who have ceased to be ministers, and even Christians. More commonly, I hear from people who are terrified to articulate their growing skepticism about the doctrine of Christianity for fear of being shunned by friends and family. I do not doubt how much psychological and social pressure religious people are under. I don't think you should doubt it either.

Another factor is the very experience of belonging that you wrote about so eloquently—the fact that you can go anywhere on earth and find a home. (Frankly, I'd rather be assured of going anywhere on earth and finding a reasonable human being, but to each his own.) I do not doubt the attraction of having such communal infrastructure, and I admit that there is no secular equivalent (at the moment). But it is important to point out that this perk of religious affiliation says nothing about the truth of any specific religious doctrine. When the Scientologist says, "We have offices in 175 cities," this does nothing to redeem his claims upon my credulity. Scientologists can build as many offices as they like, enjoy as much fellowship as they like, and smile as widely as they are able—none of this will render the writings of L. Ron Hubbard profound. None of this will lend intellectual credibility to a belief system that can be best summarized in a episode of *South Park*.

Are you really surprised by the endurance of religion? What ideology is likely to be more durable than one that conforms, at every turn, to our powers of wishful thinking? Hope is easy; knowledge is hard. Science is the one domain in which we human beings make a truly heroic effort to counter our innate biases and wishful thinking. Science is the one endeavor in

which we have developed a refined methodology for separating what a person hopes is true from what he has good reason to believe. The methodology isn't perfect, and the history of science is riddled with abject failures of scientific objectivity. But that is just the point-these have been failures of science, discovered and corrected by-what, religion? No, by good science.

I do not deny that there is something at the core of the religious experience that is worth understanding. I do not even deny that there is something there worthy of our devotion. But devotion to it does not entail false claims to knowledge, nor does it require that we indulge our cultural/familial/emotional biases in an unscientific way. The glass can get very clean-not sterile perhaps, not entirely without structure, not contingency-free, but cleaner than many people are ready to allow. One need not believe anything on insufficient evidence to experience the "ecstasies of Teresa" (or those of Rumi, for that matter). And those of us with the benefit of a 21st century education can be more parsimonious in drawing conclusions about the cosmos on the basis of such ecstasy. Indeed, I think we must be, lest our attachment to the language of our ancestors keep their ignorance alive in our own time.

Best,

Sam

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 3/14/2007 06:51 am

Dear Sam,

First off, sorry for the dropped ball. Two reasons: mounds of other work and, if I were being completely honest, a bit of a block. I don't want to go around in circles, so I spent some time re-reading our [entire exchange](#) and trying to figure out what the core questions are that I haven't adequately addressed. I also found myself a little embarrassed in retrospect by the forthrightness of my claims to faith. I feel an unworthy apologist for Christianity in many ways. I'm not a trained theologian nor a priest nor even someone who thinks of himself as a good Christian. The Pope believes I live in mortal sin because I love and live with another man. But I remain a believer in Jesus and in the Gospels and in the church, and I agreed to start this, so I'd better continue. So here goes.

You argued a while back that my notion of God "doesn't have much in the way of specific content (apart from love)." I have indeed held back a little (although God-as-love is no small idea; it is an immense idea). What you have been driving at - rather effectively - is my refusal to say outright that because I believe that Jesus was and is the Son of God, the tenets of other faiths - Islam, Buddhism, Judaism - must be logically false. Mine, you insist, is a solid truth-claim that requires being addressed, especially because these mutually contradicting truth-claims are the source of so much conflict and dissension. You're right, I think, to judge me "a little evasive" on this score.

So let me get less evasive. As a Christian, I do deny Islam's claim that Jesus was not actually divine. I deny Judaism's claim that the Messiah has not yet come. I deny any other number of truth-claims held by people of other faiths. And you rightly point out that the nature of the phenomenon we're discussing - faith - has no universal rubric upon which to rationally decide one claim over another. You want me to engage instead in a discourse about the meaning of the universe that is based on more solid ground - the "real science" of cosmology, biology, chemistry, and ultimately neuroscience - as the key to understanding reality. Or you want me to be more consistent and take the gloves off and start pounding at the Muslims and Jews (and atheists, for that matter) for being so wrong about the most important issue we face as humans.

What is my answer to this? My first is to insist that spiritual humility and the limits of human wisdom should and do temper my own convictions on matters of faith. I am very much aware that humans have no common rubric by which to judge these religious truth-claims except their internal coherence, their congruence with historical data, their longevity, and one's own conscience. The last of these is dispositive to my mind, because of the irrational and deeply personal nature of the phenomenon we're discussing. So I defer to others' consciences and I'm a reluctant proselytizer. I'm also aware of the hideous human toll over the centuries of excessive religious certainty and intolerance. I've read my Locke, and I spent years studying European religious history. I'm not going back to the Inquisition or indeed to the rigidity and certainty of much of modern Islam. This is both a pragmatic and a religious move - pragmatic because I want to live in a peaceful world (I like my iPod and my civil society), and religious because the violence such certainty provokes violates the very teachings of the God I worship. I'm tolerant because I am a Christian.

My second reply is that all these alternative modes of understanding - science, history, etc - are as contingent in the human mind as faith itself. There are small leaps of faith that are necessary for these other modes of understanding to kick in. And all human knowledge is definitionally contingent. You agreed in part but countered that, while contingency is something both religion and science share, some avenues of knowledge are less contingent than others. And you have a point there. The question soon becomes one of relative contingencies. Is scientific thought less contingent than theology?

I think it probably is, which is why I'm fascinated by new research into the brain, evolution, biology, cosmology and the rest. I was intrigued, as I'm sure you were, by the [recent piece](#), "Darwin's God," in the New York Times Magazine, that posited an evolutionary origin or a neurological accident for the universal human tendency to believe that something is "out there" when, empirically, it isn't.

So let me discuss that article and see if it helps our dialogue. One non-religious argument for the resilience of religion is that in our evolutionary past, it was more conducive to survival to suspect a threat behind a rustling bush than to dismiss it. So we developed an innate capacity to believe in things that are not there. Another theory suggests that religious faith emerged from the fact that, as social animals, we often have to assume the existence of others' minds and intentions even when we have no direct evidence for them:

"The process begins with positing the existence of minds, our own and others', that we cannot see or feel. This leaves us open, almost instinctively, to belief in the separation of the body (the visible) and the mind (the invisible). If you can posit minds in other people that you cannot verify empirically, suggests Paul Bloom, it is a short step to positing minds that do not have to be anchored to a body. And from there, he said, it is another short step to positing an immaterial soul

and a transcendent God.”

For much of human history, the theories run, we filled in the gaps in our empirical or scientific knowledge by attributing the inexplicable to magic or superstition or fickle gods. As magic declined and gods became less fickle, monotheistic religion grew. But magic never completely left us (we still do cross our fingers for luck). And as science has grown, monotheism should have surely declined. But it hasn't. And science - good old science! - offers an answer: our minds may have rationally out-thought religion, but our brains haven't out-grown it.

We are evolutionarily programmed for faith. Hence the fact that we know of almost no civilizations without religion; and even when religion did decline - in, say, Europe in the twentieth century - pseudo-religions emerged to replace it. Those pseudo-religions, I don't need to remind you, killed many more than the actual ones. Even in post-modern America, in those places where traditional faith has evaporated, the new age is always dawning.

You could still argue that this is an inherent tragedy of human evolution and that we should still try to resist this pull of the irrational, just as we resist and constrain the evolutionary pull to disseminate our DNA as widely as possible. But in matters of ultimate truth, this isn't the only option. Let me borrow the words of one scientist of evolution, Justin Barrett, who still has faith:

“Christian theology teaches that people were crafted by God to be in a loving relationship with him and other people. Why wouldn't God, then, design us in such a way as to find belief in divinity quite natural? Suppose science produces a convincing account for why I think my wife loves me - should I then stop believing that she does?”

Even if science were to come up with a convincing and exhaustive non-religious explanation of the reason for our continuing to be religious as a species, it would still be unable to account for the enduring, subjective experience of that religion. Faith survives - and it is integral to the human experience. It is as integral to being human as the difficulty of believing, in any serious way, that one day, I won't exist. That is why, I think, religion is best understood, at its core, as an experiential response to the simple fact of our own death. Once a human being has asked himself, as Hamlet did, “To be or not to be?” a human being has become religious, whether he likes it or not. Death is a place from whose bourne no traveler returns, right? (Except Jesus and Lazarus, of course, but let's postpone miracles and the resurrection for another exchange, can we?)

Maybe religion is best understood not as The Answer to The Question, but as the only human response to the most pressing human fact - our own death. Oakeshott places religious life in the [mode of practice](#), not in the mode of philosophy. I have struggled with this argument for a long time, but the older I get, the wiser it seems.

You and I will both die. To the question of what becomes of us then, science has a simple answer. We decompose and rot and eventually become dust. But the human mind, because it is human, resists that as the final answer to the question of our destiny. We find it very hard to think of ourselves as not being. That resistance is always there. There is no escaping it. I

predict you will feel it at the hour of your death, if you have any time to contemplate it. This resistance to our own extinction is part of science and part of our genetic impulse to survive - but also why we feel ourselves connected to something eternal.

Is this sense of an after-life an illusion? We cannot know for sure. But death isn't an illusion. And when death is nearest, faith emerges most strongly. You can either see this as a reason to pity people of faith - they're too weak to look mortality in the face and deal with it. Or you can see this as part of the wisdom of people of faith: we know what we are, and we have reached a way of dealing with it as humans, full humans, not just arguments without minds and bodies. Remember, man, that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return.

My own faith came alive most fully when I believed I was going to die young. It came alive as I watched one of my closest friends die in front of me at the age of 31. During that "positive hour," to quote Eliot, I also experienced [religious visions](#), I heard a voice inside of me with a distinct tone that seemed to me divine, I experienced a moment of terrible doubt followed by a moment of complete, unsought-for relief. Maybe all this was a function of fear and existential panic. Maybe it was all a coping mechanism. Maybe it was grief, wrapped up in shame. But I am far from the only person to have experienced such things. Maybe these psychological and spiritual experiences are simply the best way that humans have devised through countless millennia for coping with their own conscious knowledge of their own mortality.

But what that really means is: we have learned how to be human through religion. And how can we not be human? And who would want not to be human? What you are asking for, as I have argued before, is salvation by reason. But even after you have been saved by reason, you will die, Sam. And what will save you then?

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 03/20/07, 2:20 PM

Dear Andrew -

Many thanks for your latest essay. I've got too much to say, so permit me to jump right in:

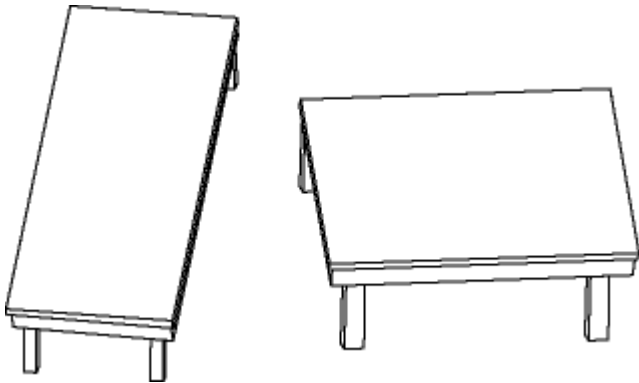
[You write](#) that "we are evolutionarily programmed for faith." While this claim seems debatable, let's just accept it as a given. What can we conclude from this? We certainly can't conclude that any specific religious doctrine is true (or likely to be true). Nor can we say that religious faith is desirable in the 21st century, or even compatible with our long-term survival as a species. Here is your quotation from Justin Barrett, with a few, minor edits:

"[Viking] theology teaches that people were crafted by [Odin] to [rape and pillage]. Why wouldn't [Odin], then, design us in such a way as to find [raping and pillaging] quite natural?"

We probably do have a genetic proclivity for raping and pillaging. Clearly, rape is an excellent strategy for getting one's genes into the next generation, and a wide variety of species engage in it (orangutans are notorious; they've even raped humans.) But who is going to argue for the moral legitimacy of rape based on the fact that it has paid evolutionary dividends?

The fact that we have a biological tendency to attribute agency to forces in nature does not suggest that it is wise (or moral) to nurture this disposition. And the fact that we find it difficult to conceive of our own nonexistence does not mean that we are likely to persist in some numinous form after death. If the history of science tells us anything, it tells us that we shouldn't rush to draw metaphysical conclusions from our failures of intuition. We now know a fair amount about how bad our intuitions can be—with respect to causality, probability, logical dependence, and a wide range of other parameters that determine our commonsense (and erroneous) view of the world. Spend a little time thinking about the [Monty Hall problem](#), and once you understand it, witness how difficult it is to explain to someone who has never thought about it before. Even profoundly simple situations can confound us.

Even seeing what is plainly before our eyes can be difficult (or impossible). Consider the following visual illusion (Roger Shepard's "Turning the Tables"):



These tabletops are exactly the same size and shape. Once you have used a ruler or tracing paper to satisfy yourself that this is true, they will still look different to you, based upon the way your brain has been hard-wired to interpret spatial cues. It seems quite likely that every person who has ever lived would perceive these figures as being different in shape and size—a far higher percentage than believe in God. The fact is that our intuitions are not always a reliable guide to the truth; and in certain situations, they can be relied upon to be wrong. So why should we think that our inability/reluctance to conceive of our own nonexistence offers an indication of what happens after death?

And is it really so difficult to imagine one's own nonexistence? I think it might be easier than advertised. Presumably, you don't find it hard to accept that you didn't exist before you were born, so why is it so difficult to believe that you will cease to exist after you die? Think of all the times and places where you now aren't: The 14th century got along fine without you (well, not so fine). If you are in D.C. at this moment, you are utterly absent from every other city on earth. There are people walking the streets of Rome right now, carrying on without the benefit of your company. Is your absence from just one more point in time and space really so difficult to imagine? (This time and space argument doesn't originate with me. I believe I've borrowed it from Douglas Hofstadter.)

Or imagine dying in parts: what if you had a stroke that damaged your visual cortex—where would your faculty of sight be thereafter? If a priest said that your visual self had gone on to heaven before you, would you believe him? What if another

stroke caused you to lose your ability to speak and to understand language-do you think that your eloquence must survive in some immaterial form? There is simply no question that brain damage can cause any of us to lose the specific faculties that constitute our conscious selves. Why is it so hard to imagine that we can lose all these faculties at once?

Or consider the analogy of sleep: each night you fall asleep and surrender your subjectivity to oblivion. You probably do this quite happily-indeed, you will be miserable if you fail to do it. Perhaps you believe that we all remain subtly conscious even while deeply asleep (this might be so), but if you're like me, you awaken each morning without any sense of having lived for most of the night. You already know, therefore, what it's like for your experience of the world to cease. Is a permanent cessation really so difficult to imagine?

Finally: how is your last essay anything but exhibit A in a criticism of religion as "the denial of death"?

I'd now like to return to the question of whether a given religious doctrine-like the doctrine of the Resurrection-is true (or likely to be). As I've pointed out before, the truth or falsity of a proposition is one thing; the psychological/social effect of believing it is quite another. It seems to me that most religious people ignore this distinction. In fact, there is a powerful incentive to do so, because to focus on the plausibility of a doctrine, without being beguiled by its consolations, forces a person to confront just how dubious most religious propositions are. The long-range interest of maintaining one's faith (and reaping its consolations) generally overwhelms every present temptation to honestly evaluate whether or not a specific article of faith is likely to be true.

I'd like you to focus, however, on a few competing doctrines in terms of their plausibility:

(1) There is no God.

(2) There is a God, but all of our religions have distorted Her reality. Jesus was just an ordinary prophet who happened to become the center of a myth-making cult. God loves everyone and has never been concerned about what a person believes. After death, all people, Christians and non-Christians, simply merge with the Deity in a loving embrace.

(3) Christianity is the one true religion, and Catholics have the truest version of it.

You seem to be basically committed to (3). Needless to say, I've put my money on (1). But let's say that we knew, with absolute certainty that I'm wrong and that either (2) or (3) is true. How much money would you be willing to wager on the divinity of Jesus? Would you bet your life on it? You might say that you already have bet your life, but that isn't precisely true. You have invested a lot of time, energy, and emotion in being a Catholic. But given the benefits you say you get from your faith, this seems less like an investment and more like a withdrawal of funds. Forget about the consolations of your faith for a moment and ask yourself how sure you are that (2) is wrong and (3) is right.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and attempt to read your mind: I suspect that if the truth of proposition (2) were revealed to you in a glorious epiphany, you would be both powerfully consoled (who wouldn't?) and not at all surprised to learn that the doctrine of Christianity was basically wrong. If a revelation of (2) wouldn't utterly surprise you, how can you claim to

be so sure that Jesus was the son of God?

While you admit to being “a little evasive” about the details of your Christianity, I think this has been less of an issue than your not addressing many of the points I’ve raised which are (in my view) quite damaging to the case you have made for faith. Of course, a certain amount of slippage is inevitable in any exchange like this, and I have surely compounded the problem by going on at such length. But in re-reading our exchange, I’ve come to feel that you have generally pirouetted around my main points, often as a result of a misunderstanding. Here are a few of the issues that I don’t think you’ve addressed adequately:

Moderation v. fundamentalism: There appears to be no principled separation between religious moderation and religious fundamentalism other than a facility for (and an inclination to) doubt. But how much doubt is too much? Why not doubt the whole shebang, as I do? The pope seems to believe many things which you doubt. Do you have reason to believe that the pope is mistaken about the true doctrine of Christianity, or do you just not like the social consequences of some of his beliefs? Can you justify the intermediate position you’ve taken with respect to Catholicism in terms of truth and falsity (rather than consolation and its lack)? And if you disagree that the truth of an idea can be neatly separated from its consolations, what does the phrase “wishful thinking” mean to you?

The inadequacies of the Bible: What is the intellectual justification for considering the Bible to be the inspired word of God, given how much bad stuff (like slavery) is in there, and how much good stuff (like all of science) isn’t? Do you really think that no mere mortals could have written Mark, Matthew, John and Luke? Not even the combined talent of a first-century Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy? It seems to me that this textual claim really lies at the core of the matter: either the Bible is a book like any other great work of literature, or it’s a magic book. Once one accepts it to be a magic book, I agree that a wide range of religious implications follow; but if one doesn’t accept this claim, it seems to me that the basis for being a Christian (as opposed to anything else) evaporates. Would it really surprise you if God told you that the Bible was a product of fallible, human minds? And if this wouldn’t truly astound you (in the way that finding out that George Washington never existed presumably would), how can you claim to be so certain of the doctrine of Christianity?

Ontological fancy footwork: All that business about God being “definitionally” the creator of the universe, outside of space and time, etc. just doesn’t wash. The “marzipan at the center of the sun” is definitionally at the center of the sun. Does this mean there is marzipan at the center of the sun?

The contingency of your own faith: As you said, if you’d been raised a Buddhist, you’d probably be a Buddhist. And yet, you also believe that Christianity is really true. This seems to entail that, by sheer accident of birth, you were raised and culturally conditioned to believe the one true faith. Do you really believe this? Doesn’t it seem more likely that you just happen to subscribe to the religion into which you were born (as most people do) because of social pressure, emotional consolation, attachment to tradition, etc.?

The troublesome example of other religions: Don’t you think Mormons and Muslims have similar stories to tell about feeling consoled in the presence of death, hearing voices, etc.? Can’t both Mormons and Muslims use the same argument you have used about the cultural success of their faiths to vindicate their own truth claims? How is it that you reject their claims, and how is it that in rejecting them you don’t find your own religious beliefs coming under pressure?

The argument from cultural success: Apart from the fact that the argument from cultural success would vindicate any

religion that has millions of subscribers, it's also just plain false. The success of Christianity (or any faith) is not an argument for its truth. While dialogue and consensus (and, therefore, cultural success) play a role in our knowledge gathering, we don't do epistemology by plebiscite. The majority of people really can be wrong—as are the majority of American Christians about the age of the universe and about the evolution of life on this planet.

Ancient miracles are less compelling than modern miracles (and modern miracles don't compel you): Christianity is predicated on the reliability of the gospel account of the miracles of Jesus. And yet, there are modern books cataloguing the miracles of Hindu adepts, written by educated Westerners. Why not grant these testimonials even more credence than the gospel? I would bet that you are not even inclined to read this literature, much less organize your life around it. Then why not view the gospel with the same skepticism?

These are just a few of the areas in which I think your defense of faith breaks down. I summarize them here, not as a demand that you answer each question sequentially, but to give you and our readers a sense of where I am left unconvinced by what you have written thus far.

Thanks again for your willingness to discuss these things at such length.

All the best,

Sam

Sam and Andrew conclude the debate

From: Andrew Sullivan To: Sam Harris 04/5/07, 11:57 PM

Dear Sam,

My apologies again for the late response to your last post. Work squats on my life. Let me tackle your first points first. I argued that because we may be programmed by evolution for faith, faith may be intrinsic to being human and therefore something we should engage rather than deny. You make the solid point that we are also programmed by evolution for rape. Does that make rape defensible? Of course not, even though, as you point out, rape is a very effective and very natural way to disseminate DNA. But my response would not be to say that the evolutionary impulse to inseminate should be resisted entirely. I'd argue that the sex drive should be channeled respectfully toward others, i.e. moderated. So rape cedes to consensual DNA dissemination. Similarly, the drive for faith needs to be channeled respectfully toward others, i.e. moderated. Fundamentalism cedes to toleration. Hence my insistence on maintaining the humility appropriate for such immense claims about the meaning of everything; and hence my support for a faith that is live-and-let-believe in its social manifestation. I think my project in this respect is far more feasible than yours. By attempting to abolish rather than moderate faith, I fear you deliver an intrinsic human impulse into the hands of those who most abuse it—the fundamentalists of all stripes.

You then ask why I should find it is so hard to imagine my non-existence? Your good points have made me realize more fully why I feel the way I do. The reason I find it so hard to imagine, I realize, is that I believe that God loves me—which is, helpfully, relevant to your subsequent argument. You posit the following options, and ask me to choose:

(1) There is no God.

(2) There is a God, but all of our religions have distorted Her reality. Jesus was just an ordinary prophet who happened to become the center of a myth-making cult. God loves everyone and has never been concerned about what a person believes. After death, all people, Christians and non-Christians, simply merge with the Deity in a loving embrace.

(3) Christianity is the one true religion, and Catholics have the truest version of it.

You want me to say (3) and I will, but I hope to do so in a way that explains my faith a little better. There are, I think, many other options for human beings with respect to faith. Here's my version of the options:

(1) There is no God.

(2) There are many gods.

(3) There is a God and it is evil.

(4) There is a God, but all of our religions have distorted Her reality. Jesus was just an ordinary prophet who happened to become the center of a myth-making cult. God loves everyone and has never been concerned about what a person believes. After death, all people, Christians and non-Christians, simply merge with the Deity in a loving embrace.

(5) There is a God, but all of our religions have distorted Her reality. Jesus was a man more suffused with divinity than any other human being who has ever lived. God loves everyone and has never been concerned about what a person believes, except that a person know God and accept God's love freely and expresses that love toward everyone he or she encounters. Jesus uniquely showed us how to accept God's love and how to be worthy of it. After death, all people, Christians and non-Christians, simply merge with the Deity in a loving embrace. But Jesus was the proof that such love exists, and that it is divine and eternal, and that it cares for us.

(6) None of us knows anything about these things.

I guess I've tipped my hand by endorsing (5) but acknowledging the wisdom of (6). The reason I cannot conceive of my non-existence is because I have accepted, freely and sanely, the love of Jesus, and I have felt it, heard it, known it. He would never let me go. And by never, I mean eternally. And so I could never not exist and neither could any of the people I have known and loved.

For me, the radical truth of my faith is therefore not that God exists, but that God is love (a far, far less likely proposition).

On its face, this is a preposterous claim, and in my defense, I have never really argued in this dialogue that you should not find it preposterous. It can be reasoned about, but its truth itself is not reasonable or reachable through reason alone. But I believe it to be true—not as a fable or as a comfort or as a culture. As truth. And one reason I am grateful for this discussion is that you take this truth claim seriously on its own terms.

What did Jesus do? The first and immense thing is that he existed at all. Here's how I put it in [my book](#):

“This, it seems to me, is the true mystery of the incarnation, the notion that in Jesus, God became man. I believe this in the only way I can: that one man represents, for all time, God’s decision to truly be with us. The reason I call myself a Christian is not because I manage to subscribe, at any given moment, to all the truths that the hierarchy of my church insists I believe in, let alone because I am a good person or a “good Catholic.” I call myself a Christian because I believe that, in a way I cannot fully understand, the force behind everything decided to prove itself benign by becoming us, and being with us. And as soon as people grasped what had happened, what was happening, the world changed forever. The Gospels - all of them, including some that were rejected by the early Church - are mere sketches of a life actually lived, and an experience that can never be reduced to words or texts or doctrines...

In this nonfundamentalist understanding of faith, practice is more important than theory, love more important than law, and mystery is seen as an insight into truth rather than an obstacle. It is the great lie of our time that all religious faith has to be fundamentalist to be valid. There is another way. For Christians, that other way is about a man, Jesus, whose individuality and humanity cannot be abstracted. And it is about a commemoration of that man, as he asked us to commemorate him—in a meal, a breaking of bread, a Seder-made-new, the mass, as Catholics have come to understand it. This is my faith, if I were forced to describe it.”

This is what Jesus told people: to treat God as an intimate father, to pray simply, to believe against so much evidence that good does indeed prevail against evil, to know that God is not indifferent to us, and to re-enact his last meal for ever as a way to remind ourselves of his love and experience his real presence. And this is what Jesus lived: a life full of love and friendship and self-giving, even to the point of non-violent submission to violence, as proof of God’s love. I do not need the proof of miracles to believe this. The universe itself is a miracle to me. If there are aspects of it that science has not yet grasped but that believers have somehow glimpsed, then I am content to allow for the possibility of miracles. But I have not witnessed any but the normal ones: the miracle of the blossoms outside my window at this time of year or the miracle that someone else actually loves me unconditionally, or the miracle of a newborn child. This is miracle enough for me. Or in the saying attributed to John Donne:

“There is nothing that God has established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once.”

The resurrection? Yes. But I see it as no more and no less remarkable than the incarnation—and it is, in many ways, the only possible consequence of the incarnation. The Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles provide contradictory accounts of what the resurrection actually was. Jesus appeared in the guise of others, as a vision, as a fully physical entity, and in other ways that defy science and logic. I don't know how to understand it except as a mystery. But I do believe in the empty tomb as much as I believe in the cramped manger. They go together—marks of an appearance in human history as mysterious as the divine must always be to human minds.

To your specific challenges, I think I addressed the moderation vs. fundamentalism argument at the beginning of this missive.

Is the Bible uniquely the word of God? Yes—but it was also first spoken and then written by human beings. I don't believe in its inerrancy or its literal truth. But I believe in the deepest truths of the Gospels, and the truth of the life and death of the man they describe. Has God spoken to us in other ways? Of course. But for me, the words of Jesus speak of God's love more truly than anything else I have ever come across. I'm still looking.

Contingency? An eternal truth has to enter human discourse at one time or another. It will become necessarily contingent as soon as it touches the human and becomes part of history. There is no other way. So faith's contingency is neither an argument for or against it.

Other religions. I'm curious. And I find in many of them many of the themes of Jesus: the unimportance of wordliness, the oneness of God, the equal dignity of human beings, the impulse to charity. But I do find Christ's witness the final truth, which must mean that others fall short. But I do not see this as a reason to hate or condemn or even deny the alternatives, where they also see this deeper truth. Everything is true as long as it isn't taken to be anything more than it is. And I am in no position to judge the sincere choices of others in matters inherently beyond our knowledge.

Cultural success? I agree that such success doesn't actually prove anything about a faith. But it is a sign that a truth has endured the test of time and is more than a sudden spasm of fashion. That the life of Jesus has altered human history in ways rarely equaled is indisputable. That's not dispositive, but it is something.

Perhaps, then, Sam, we have talked as much as we fruitfully can. I have to say I am deeply grateful for the opportunity. Those of us who say we have faith are not often challenged as forcefully as you have done for me in your book and in this dialogue. It may frustrate you to know that I have actually found this exchange to be supportive of my own belief. Being forced to defend my faith in public, when usually it lies in the inarticulate folds of private experience, has been a difficult but useful exercise. I'm afraid I haven't persuaded anyone—or maybe led a few to your side of the equation. But in these matters of ultimate meaning, being persuasive is not as important as being right, is it? Thanks for helping me get closer to that ideal. But my doubt, which is a part of my faith, still gets in the way.

Cheers,

Andrew

From: Sam Harris To: Andrew Sullivan 04/17/07, 4:15 PM

Dear Andrew—

Well, we have reached the end of our debate, and still we do not agree. We'll have to leave it there for the time being. I think, however, that our stalemate conceals some important asymmetries. For instance, I feel that you should have been convinced by my side of the argument. Can you say the same? You seem, rather, to have argued in a different mode. In your last essay you admit that your notion of God is “preposterous” and then say that you never suggested I should find it otherwise. You acknowledge the absurdity of faith, only to treat this acknowledgement as a demonstration of faith's underlying credibility. While I have yet to see you successfully pull yourself up by your bootstraps in this way, I have watched you repeatedly pull yourself down by them.

You want to have things both ways: your faith is reasonable but not in the least bound by reason; it is a matter of utter certainty, yet leavened by humility and doubt; you are still searching for the truth, but your belief in God is immune to any conceivable challenge from the world of evidence. I trust you will ascribe these antinomies to the paradox of faith; but, to my eye, they remain mere contradictions, dressed up in velvet.

If God loves the world, he has a terribly noncommittal way of showing it. Why rig a silly game in which only the poorly educated and mentally unbalanced are perfectly tuned to glimpse the truth of your existence, while smart, well-adjusted, and well-educated people (like yourself) must wrestle with doubt, barricade themselves behind euphemism, and cling to spurious “mysteries” to keep from tumbling into unbelief? You beckon me to a world in which George Bush and James Dobson have an effortless bead on the deepest conceivable truth; meanwhile, 93 percent of the members of the National Academy of Sciences may well be doomed for eternity by their skepticism. It's hard for me to imagine that this scenario seems even remotely plausible to you—but this is Christianity at a glance. I am not the first to notice that it is a strange sort of loving God who would make salvation depend upon a person's ability to believe in him on bad evidence.

Finally, let me say that there is something tragically unnecessary about all of this. I do not doubt the consolations you get from your faith. But faith is like a pickpocket who loans you your own money on generous terms. Your resultant feelings of gratitude are perfectly understandable, but misplaced. You are the source of the love that you attribute to Jesus (how else can you feel it?). Realizing this, what need is there to feel certain about ancient miracles?

I do share your feeling of gratitude for this conversation. It has been a great pleasure to correspond with you. I very much admire your writing, your candor, and your willingness to put your beliefs on the line.

Until we next meet?

All the best,

Sam

Notes

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