The Temple of Reason
The Complete Interview with Sam Harris
By Bethany Saltman
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BETHANY: Norman Fisher, a Zen teacher, wrote this in a recent issue of *The Sun*: "It seems to me, there is a human need for religious expression and practice. For me, religion is not something that is imposed from the outside. It comes from within. A natural outgrowth of our human nature." What you think about this idea of religion being a natural outgrowth of our human nature?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think that is almost certainly true. But everything we're doing is a natural outgrowth of human nature. Genocide is. Rape is. That's not an argument for the normativity of any particular expression of human nature. And even if you had a detailed story about all of the essential purposes religion has served over the years, even if we admitted that for 50,000 years, we just would not have survived, say, without believing in a creator God, that, in and of itself, does not suggest that it's a good thing to believe in a creator God now, in the 21st century, with a world that has been shattered into separate moral communities on the basis of religious ideas. One example I occasionally use is the phenomenon of rape. There's no question that rape is a natural propensity of primates. Not even just primates. And there's no question that it has served an evolutionary function. I mean, you can easily tell a story as to why a species that occasionally practices rape is reproduced more than one that doesn't. But that no one will even think of arguing that this makes rape an essential feature of a civil society, and therefore we should tolerate it.

BETHANY: How rape would rape be evolutionary benefit?

SAM HARRIS: Well, it's just that you would think that men, over the eons, who have been aggressive enough to occasionally rape women, will have more successfully gotten their genes into the next generation. So, whatever genes that may underwrite rape, will have been selected for in that kind of environment. If you look at it among chimpanzees or orangutans, it's a strategy for simply just getting your genes to survive. But it's one of the more abhorrent practices in a civilized society. And we're wise to do everything we can to prevent it. But I think that also central to [Norman Fisher's] quote is this idea that religion is the receptacle, in some sense, of really good and ennobling and well-being-promoting features of our psychology. And I would agree with that. At least, religion has traditionally been the only area in which people talk about contemplative experience, and ethics. And I do think contemplative experience and ethics are absolutely essential to human happiness. I just think we have to now speak about them without endorsing any divisive mythology.

BETHANY: The rape analogy is pretty inflammatory. Is that intentional? Are you making an analogy between organized religion and rape?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I can even be more inflammatory than that. If I could wave a magic wand and get rid of rape, or get rid of religion, I would not hesitate to get rid of religion. That's how bad I think religion is. I think more people are dying, and will die, as a result of our

religious myths, than as a result of any other ideology that I can think of. I think it is the most dangerous thing we are doing. Not to say that it's the only dangerous thing we're doing. I would not say that all human conflict is born of religion, or religious differences. But the way in which the human community is necessarily fractured on the basis of religious doctrines, these doctrines that are just fundamentally incompatible, in an age where the most dangerous weapons are proliferating, and are bound to proliferate, is a very scary scenario. And I don't think we're serving ourselves in the developed world, and I don't know we're serving people elsewhere, to indulge this kind of political correctness, which suggests that really, our religions are fundamentally benign and not fundamentally divisive.

BETHANY: Would it be safe to say that you think that religious identity is always destructive?

SAM HARRIS: Yes, in so far as people really believe that it matters. Surely, we can all point to people who call themselves Christians or Muslims or Jews, who really don't take their religion very seriously, and nothing much in their lives turns on what they believe about the afterlife. And so, there are versions of religious affiliations that are not so significant. Obviously I'm not lying awake at night worrying about people like that. But insofar as people really think that there is a profound difference between being a Christian and a Muslim, say, then I think it really is intrinsically divisive. Because Muslims generally are looking at everyone else, thinking that everyone else is going to go to hell. And the Christians obviously return the favor. And the difference between hell and heaven for eternity is a rather big difference, and really raises the stakes between people in their disagreements with one another.

BETHANY: And how is that religious identity different from ethnic or national or racial identity?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think it's similar, in the sense that we have these ideas that divide people into kind of tribal identities. And that these are the lines across which human conflicts tend to occur. The problem with religion, for me, is that it really is the only style of us/them thinking, in which we posit a transcendental difference between an in-group and out-group. So the difference between yourself and your neighbor is not nearly the color of your skin, or political affiliation. It's that your neighbor believes something that is so metaphysically incorrect, that he's going to spend eternity in hell for it. And if he convinces your children that his beliefs are valid, your children will spend eternity in hell. So, if you really believe that it matters what name you call God, and just how you practice your religion while alive, you have many more reasons, and far more significant reasons to fear and despise your neighbor, than merely not liking the sound of his language, or not liking the color of his skin.

BETHANY: So it's like hating someone not just personally, but in a worldly sense, or in an eternal sense.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. Hating and fearing. I think fear is a big component here, if you look at what people think is at stake. People are worried that their children are going to be corrupted by an unbelieving culture, or a culture that believes otherwise. So, Muslim parents are genuinely concerned that their children's faith is going to be eroded, either by the materialism of the west,

or the secularism of the west, or Christianity. And obviously, our own fundamentalist communities in the west are concerned in very much the same terms.

BETHANY: What about someone who is, say, raised Jewish, very mildly, maybe goes to temple a little bit, celebrates holidays, and participates in religious life in a cultural way, and identifies as Jewish. But isn't worried that the Jewish tradition is going to be eroded by living in a Christian society, but feels Jewish, and wants to preserve that tradition, for the sake of a personal feeling of being in an in-group. But isn't really concerned about what other people are doing.

SAM HARRIS: Well, this is easier in Judaism than in most religions. Judaism does not tend to be particularly other-worldly, or particularly concerned about what happens after death, or the eternal significance of holding various ideas. Judaism tends to much more be a contract with God, a purpose toward living well in this life.

BETHANY: Here and now. Right.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. It also tends to be much more of a cultural identity, than it is a faith-based proposition, about what it's necessary to believe in order to be saved. But that said, the extreme forms of Judaism are quite scary and divisive. There are, I'm sure, Orthodox Jews who are waiting for the Messiah to come back, and waiting for the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. And once that happens, they'll be eager to live out of the book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and kill people for adultery, and kill people for working on the Sabbath. And I see no reason why they shouldn't be thinking along those lines. Because that is really what the books say you should do.

BETHANY: Well, you know, it's interesting. I actually have done a bit of research into born-again Christians, which is why I'm doing this interview with you. And I've interviewed a lot of people. And I've talked to people in southern California, particularly. And I'm not a born-again Christian. I'm a Buddhist. And it's been fascinating for me to talk to people. And I have asked similar questions to what you're asking, but in a really different way. I really wonder how it is that these people believe this because it feels so unbelievable to me. But I'm very intrigued by it. And I've met lots of people who definitely believe that if you don't believe what they believe, then….I know they're praying for me because they are convinced I'm going to go to hell. And it's irritating to me. And it feels very arrogant. But I really don't believe that they are a real danger, a physical danger. I'm not afraid that they're really going to do anything that is going to harm me, though it is ideologically destructive.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I'll give you a few counterpoints to that. Let me think, what's the best way in here. Well, two things. One is, first we should admit that many people in this culture who are fundamentalists are fundamentalists by comparison with moderates and liberals and progressives. But they're not fundamentalists compared with the Christians of the middle ages. Even our own fundamentalists have learned, by and large, to ignore the most barbaric passages in the Bible. And they're not, presumably, eager to see people burned alive for their heresy. So, you know, our own religious bewilderment has been significantly modulated by 200 years or

more of confronting the limitations of religion in light of science, and the virtues of secular politics. We have been modulated by modernity, even the religious extremists among us.

There are a few exceptions to this. There are the Dominionist Christians. The – Christian reconstructionists, who actually do want to live out of Leviticus, and they do think homosexuals should be put to death. And adulterers, and others. But by and large, yeah. I agree. You know, the people living in Orange County, going to their mega-church, are not –

BETHANY: Rick Warren is not going to shoot anybody or bomb a Sabarro's.

SAM HARRIS: No. Except when you look at the consequences. The public policy consequences.

BETHANY: Definitely. If you are gay, for instance, your life will be damaged by those beliefs.

SAM HARRIS: They're actually somewhat sanguine about killing people. I mean, the resistance to stem cell research, for instance, is prolonging the really scarcely endurable misery of tens of millions of people at this moment. And Rick Warren-style Christians are pretty sanguine about that. Even ones who have looked at the details. And I don't know if you've read this recent article in The New Yorker. I think it was Michael Specter who wrote it.
The title was "Political Science." And it was about just how the Christian right is distorting the government's relationship to science. And one example in this article that I've since written about in my new book is the fact that we now have a vaccine for the Humanpapilloma virus, which is the cause of cervical cancer from which 5000 women die every year in the United States. So, we have a cure for cervical cancer, which is a vaccine that can be given to girls. And it's safe and effective. Six thousand women in the clinical trial were given the vaccine, and all of them are now immune to the virus. So the question is why not use this vaccine aggressively, to protect girls everywhere from cervical cancer? Well, you have evangelical Christians at the CDC, political appointees, on the committees that make recommendations on this subject, arguing that we should not use this vaccine, because this will remove one of the natural impediments to premarital sex. I mean, they're valuing HPV, which is now the most common sexually-transmitted disease in the country, as a way of keeping people from having premarital sex. And one has even gone on the record. He – I think his name was Reginald Finger. He's on immunization committee of the CDC. He's gone on the record saying, "Even if we had a vaccine against AIDS, I would have to think long and hard about whether we used it. Because this would encourage premarital sex." Now, this is just a psychotically immoral way of thinking. And it is a way of thinking that is widely subscribed by people who would not otherwise scare you. I think we have to be cognizant of the real effects of religious beliefs.

BETHANY: If we were to eliminate religious identity, wouldn't something else come up to take its place? What do you think about the fact of human beings longing to identify? And if it weren't religious identity – because that's the broadest, safest, eternal identity -- do you think something else would rise up in its place?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I don't think one necessarily would. And I think this urge to identify with a subset of the human population is something that we should be skeptical of, at this point.

We should be skeptical of nationalism, and other kinds of tribal affiliations because they are divisive, and therefore dangerous. You can be a Red Sox fan or a Yankees fan, and get your identity that way. Even that has its liabilities, if pushed too far.

BETHANY: I guess that's what I'm asking.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. I think this is a structure in human consciousness. This in-group, out-group thinking, which is rarely benign. And so, we should be on guard against it. And we certainly shouldn't be eager to indulge it. And when you look at what's going on in Western Europe, you see that you have societies that are successfully unwinding their commitment to religious identity. And I don't think it is getting replaced by anything. There are cultures– like, in Sweden, or in Denmark or the Netherlands, or Canada, Australia, Japan, outside of Europe, there are many developed societies that have a very high level of atheism. And the religion that is there, is not the populist, fundamentalist, shrill version we have in the States. And so, it's doable.

BETHANY: Well, it's interesting you mentioned Canada. I have good friends who are Canadian, and who are practicing Buddhists. And they have a really difficult time -- they've lived in a monastery, and everyone in their family and everybody that they know thinks that they're fundamentalists. They're extremely suspicious of any religious activity. And they feel really alienated. And so that's another side.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. Well, no. To some degree, [your friends] are the casualties of the fact that we have not learned to talk about the contemplative life in terms that do not simply and naively endorse religious ideology. If you are a person going into a cave for a year to meditate, you are, by definition, a religious extremist of some sort. And there are many reasons why this is clearly untrue. But you have to really dig into the details, to explain how that is different from Osama bin Laden being in his cave.

BETHANY: Right. And what about your own identity? Do you consider yourself an atheist, a humanist, a Buddhist? I read your recent piece in Shambhala Sun about Buddhism, so are you a Buddhist practitioner?

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, I certainly am. I mean, if you look at what I do with my attention when I meditate, yes. I'm a Dzongchen [a type of Tibetan Buddhist] practitioner. But I really don't think of myself as a Buddhist. And I think, as you know from that article, that there's a social cost in doing so, in thinking of one's self as a Buddhist. I think we have to get out of the religion business. And talk about what the human mind is like, what the potential for human happiness is, and talk in 21st century terms about reasonable approaches to seeking and maximizing the happiness in this world.

BETHANY: So, would you identify as an atheist?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I'm not eager to do that, either [for] three reasons. One, the term atheist just has a massive PR problem. It really is just next to child molester, in terms of alienating anyone you're speaking with.

BETHANY: In our social context.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. In the United States. Secondly, I just think it's an unnecessary term. Because we don't have terms for someone who's not an astrologer, or not an alchemist, or – someone who doesn't believe that Elvis is still alive. I mean, there are all kinds of specious doctrines out there, that we discard. And yet, the act of discarding them doesn't brand us with a new identity. And so, you know, I really think we only need to speak about reason and common sense and compassion. And all of the tests of reasonableness that religious doctrines don't need. And then just keep having the conversation. And there was a third reason why I didn't want to be an atheist. Now I can't think of it.

BETHANY: (LAUGHTER) That's fair enough. Here's something that has come up for me a lot, talking to different – born-again Christians, fundamentalists. I hear a lot about moral relativism. I went to Saddleback Church, and there was this huge video screens. And on it this tirade against moral relativism. And, you know, liberal pluralists, secular humanists, all get accused of moral relativism. And you also are opposed to moral relativism.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. Yeah.

BETHANY: And so, I'm just curious. Do you feel like that places you in the same camp as jihadists and born agains? How do you work with that?

SAM HARRIS: No, I don't think I'm in the same camp at all. This really is the essential BETHANY to deal with in debating with – religious people. Because this is the first place everyone goes. Before I answer, I just remembered why I don't want to be an atheist, for the third reason. And it speaks to your point about your friends in Canada. What you find among atheists, generally, are people who are not predisposed to having spiritual experiences.

BETHANY: Exactly.

SAM HARRIS: They're not interested in the contemplative life. And atheist groups tend to select for people who are kind of cognitively closed to a certain range of the data of human experience. And then they really do disavow anything profound, in terms of what might be realized by meditation, or some deliberate act of introspection. And they're clearly wrong about the possibilities there. And they're often very smugly and stridently wrong. And so, the atheist discourse, in and of itself, tends to be pretty barren on that front, although necessary, in its opposition to religion. On the subject of moral relativism, this really is the great fear that religious people have, that without believing that one of our books was written by the creator of the universe, we have no reason – real reason, to treat one another well, to not kill, to not rape, et cetera. And there's just no evidence for that whatsoever. I mean, it's just fundamentally untrue that people who do not believe in God are more prone to violent crime, for instance. This is also something that I'm getting into in my next book. But the evidence, if anything, is otherwise. If you look at where we have the most violent crime, and the most theft, and the most tenuous commitment to non-harming in the United States – it's not in the blue states, that are relatively secular. It's in the red states, with all of their religiosity. In fact, three of the five most

dangerous cities in the United States are in Texas. Now, this is not a causal argument. I'm not saying that we can look at this data and say, "Religion causes violence." But you can look at this data and say that high levels of religious affiliation don't guarantee that people are going to behave well in the public sphere. And likewise internationally, you look at the top 20 societies, ranked by the UN in terms of human development. And this includes variables like levels of violent crime, and infant mortality, and literacy, and many of the indicators you would want of societal health. The most atheistic societies on the planet rank the highest, on that UN index -- societies like Sweden, and Holland, and Denmark. And if you look at the bottom in the index, they're all theocracies, most of them Muslim. So, the idea that a strong commitment to the literal truth of one's religious doctrine is a good incubator of societal health and morality – the evidence is not there.

And I think it's easy to come up with other bases for morality, that are objective, and not relativistic. And Buddhism has certainly done that. I mean, the proposition in Buddhism is, it matters how you behave. And it matter what kinds of intentions you form in your relationship to other human beings. Because these things affect your mind. And your mind is actually the true locus of your happiness or suffering. And if you're interested in being as happy as possible, you will, of necessity, be interested in overcoming your fear and hatred of other human beings, and in maximizing your love and compassion, and positive connection to other human beings. And so, an interest in happiness, a wise interest in happiness, begets a commitment to morality, in a very deep way. And this is not a relativistic picture. You know, the Buddha is simply saying, "There is a right answer to the BETHANY of human happiness. And here it is."

BETHANY: Right. But as you yourself say, that's not a Buddhist answer, per se. And the Dali Lama has said that he doesn't want people to become Buddhists. He wants people to be good Christians, or good Muslims, or happy. And that's a relativistic position. He's –

SAM HARRIS: Well, he's a bit of a politician here, and I think necessarily so. He's not able to really call a spade a spade. And if we asked him what he really believed about all the other religions, if he was able to answer us, we would get a surprisingly candid and non-relativistic answer out of him.

BETHANY: Saying Buddhism is the best religion?

SAM HARRIS: Yes, and that it's not a religion, that ultimately, it's a science. And that in so far as it's a religion, we should outgrow it. I imagine that he and I agree about what Buddhism is, and should be. And, you know, it's no surprise to me that he can't speak the way I speak, and would never be inclined to speak the way I speak.

BETHANY: You talk quite a bit in your book about the idea of tolerance, and how it's part of the problem, that we feel like we're supposed to be tolerant. Once people open their mouths about religion, we're supposed to step back and allow them a lot of space to have their own beliefs, and et cetera. And you're intolerant of that kind of position. But I'm not sure how we should express that intolerance.

SAM HARRIS: Well, how do we express it with respect to people who believe in Elvis?

BETHANY: We laugh it off, if someone believes in Elvis.

SAM HARRIS: No, but we're worse than that. I mean, if someone applies for a job, and in the process of applying for the job they express their absolute certainty that Elvis is still alive, if that job is a job that holds any significant responsibility, one would hope that person has just lost the job. You know, believing that Elvis is still alive, and regularly putting in an appearance in the Midwest, that is a belief that is clearly incompatibly with a reasonable evaluation of the data. I mean, if you believe that, and you believe it strongly, there's something wrong with you. And we all recognize that.

BETHANY: So, if someone is a religious believer, then we should express our intolerance by not allowing them in to positions of power.

SAM HARRIS: Well, yeah. It should be – once we recognize that believing that Jesus is going to come down out of the clouds like a superhero some time in the next 50 years and save us, which 44 percent of the American population apparently believes – once we recognize that that is every bit as specious a belief as a belief that Elvis is still alive, then yes. Some radical difference in our discourse is called for. The problem is, there's so many people who subscribe to this belief, that how you get to a state of speaking reasonably about it, and acting reasonably in light of it, is a very difficult BETHANY. But, yes. Ultimately, it should be like beliefs in Zeus. You know, anyone who believes in Zeus is a nut. And we all recognize this.

BETHANY: Well, sometimes we put those nuts away. Or medicate them.

SAM HARRIS: In The End of Faith, [I talk about how] there is a relevant difference, in believing in Jesus versus believing in Zeus, in that because the first belief has so many subscribers. And because there is such cultural support of this idea. You can get perfectly sane people believing the unbelievable. And it does not mean that they're crazy. The thing I say in The End of Faith about this is that the real liability of religion is that it allows perfectly sane people to believe en masse what only a lunatic would believe on his own. And so that is a relevant difference. It's not like all these people need to be medicated. But we have to recognize that there are behavioral consequences to certain beliefs. And certain beliefs are genuinely crazy, and indefensible intellectually. And they have moral consequences that we should find intolerable. And religion is a structure that allows otherwise intelligent, otherwise sane, otherwise moral people, to endorse positions that are unintelligent, fundamentally, that could only be endorsed by a madman on his own. And are not moral, even in the slightest.

BETHANY: How did you get so confident?

SAM HARRIS: How did I get confident?

BETHANY: Yeah.

SAM HARRIS: I'm just seeing – I'm just calling it as I see it. I mean, the religious divisions in our world are so transparently obvious.

BETHANY: But doesn't any part of you wonder?

SAM HARRIS: Wonder about whether Jesus might be the son of God, and maybe he is coming back in 50 years?

BETHANY: When you put it like that, obviously…

SAM HARRIS: Well, I don't know. It's not obvious to most people.

BETHANY: Well, right. But I guess for me, I'm always wondering – I don't believe that Jesus is going to come down like a superhero. And part of me doesn't believe that other people really believe that either.

SAM HARRIS: Right.

BETHANY: But there's something else happening for so many of these people. I mean, you use words like "unintelligent" very freely. And I've sat in rooms of people who, I look around, and I wonder.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. It's really possible to be very intelligent, and believe that Jesus is going to come back in 50 years. I have no doubt about that. I get the craziest e-mails from highly intelligent people. And – you know, I just got an e-mail from a guy in – a biomedical physicist, working under another biomedical physicist, brought to a conference of physicists where he was the only atheist in a room of five physicists, all talking about the literal truth of Scripture. You know, it is possible to be very smart, to have been successfully brainwashed. Because of these variables. Because of the fact that religion appears to be the only game in town for people, when it comes time to deal with the reality of death, or to talk about spiritual experience, to talk about ecstasy and devotion, and the meaning that they're looking for in life. And it's a real cultural problem, or problem of secular discourse, that we don't have other ways of talking about these things.

BETHANY: I guess I'm just impressed and envious that you can so freely make your observation. And stick with it. And say, "This is unintelligent." It feels more mysterious to me.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I just know what it's like to experience religious ecstasy. I've sat enough meditation retreats to know just how good you can feel, in a spiritual way. I mean, not that I've experienced the ultimate in samadhi [the experience of non-dual awareness]. But I know just how altered one's experience can be. And I know how alluring it is, to interpret that in light of any given metaphysical scheme. You know? In my own life, I have interpreted it in more of an eastern context. But, you know, any Christian feeling the way I have felt in various periods of meditation, will be thinking a lot about Jesus, and about the certainty that God's grace is now hitting him full in the face. And all of it will seem to confirm his religious beliefs. And so the thing that a Christian needs to do is realize that whatever he's experiencing in this moment, no matter how good it is, has been experienced by other people in other contexts. It has been experienced by Buddhists thinking only about Buddha. And it's been experienced by Hindus,

thinking about Krishna. And therefore, it does not confirm that Jesus is the unique son of God, and born of a virgin, and coming back to earth as the Bible says.

BETHANY: Well, that's really interesting. Because that's a very relativistic position.

SAM HARRIS: No, it's not relativistic in the sense that –

BETHANY: Well, you're saying all religious experience, whether it's samadhi in the middle of a retreat, whether it's some kind of ecstatic experience about considering Jesus – that they are the same.

SAM HARRIS: No, I'm not saying they're the same. I'm saying that there's a deeper truth to human experience. And people are having more or less of the range of possible human experience in all these different contexts. And then they're interpreting their experiences in light of the metaphysics to which they subscribe. And they're drawing a false conclusion. There's a deeper, non-relativistic truth about just what is possible for the human mind. And there are various techniques that are more or less effective in exploring that landscape of possibility. A very simple analogy: if you could give five people from five different religions a tab of acid, they're all going to interpret their experience, very likely, in light of their cultural and religious tradition. Many of them will interpret this change in their experience to confirm their religious belief system. And yet, the real ground truth, the non-relativistic truth is, they all just dropped acid together. You know, so, the real – the truer description of what's going on for them – at least in this particular experiment, is that acid has a certain serotinergic effect upon the brain, and it has this effect upon everyone's brain.

BETHANY: Well, so everyone is having a similar effect, from the acid. I guess I'm still asking the same question. Are we all experiencing the same type of trip?

SAM HARRIS: I think there's significant overlap. But I don't think they're genuinely coterminous. I don't think that every experience that is being sought and found within a Buddhist contemplative context, is being sought and found reliably in every other contemplative context. The doctrines really do have a consequence. And so, the doctrines are fundamentally dualistic. And some are explicitly non-dualistic. And there's a reason why the dualists are only always talking about dualism. And I think this reason is, most of them, most of the time, tend to realize nothing other than their feeling of dualism.

BETHANY: Okay.

SAM HARRIS: If they were experiencing the world in non-dual terms, they'd see a problem with their dualism.

BETHANY: Okay. In your book, you write, "I believe there is an oak in my yard, because I can see it." Does belief always come down to a matter of evidence? When people say that they have seen God, I look for the evidence in their behavior. When someone says that they're in love, I look for the evidence in the way they treat the person they say that they love.

SAM HARRIS: Right.

BETHANY: Can behavior be evidence? Or do you need a photo of yourself with God?

SAM HARRIS: Well, no. There are different degrees of rigor with which we can establish any given claim as being true. And in many areas of our lives, this is all very loose, and rigor would be very hard to achieve. But we still, even in those areas, don't feel like we're talking nonsense when we talk about a man loving his wife, and et cetera. Though, you know, if you want to sit down and scientifically prove that he loves his wife, then you would have set yourself a real experimental challenge. But generally-speaking, we know what we mean by love. And this has many different components. It has a behavioral component. It has a subjective, emotional, or effectual component. And those clearly can break free of one another. I mean, it's quite possible to feel love for someone, but not be able to show it. And it's possible to show it and actually not feel it. You know, to be a great actor, and act the loving part, and yet not really feel much love for the person you're treating so well. So, we can recognize these different facets of the potential fact of being in love. And we have a – you know. To some degree, we know what we mean by love, and we can come to real agreement about what it is as a phenomenon. And to some degree, it's a concept that is pretty loose. And once we try to talk about it rigorously, there are some interesting and even controversial things to find out about it. It's just an area of discourse that needs to proceed.

And for instance, you know, if you take the Buddhist concept of loving kindness, and map it onto what most people, most of the time in the West mean by love, you don't get a neat equivalence at all. You know, from the Buddhist point of view, romantic love has a lot of craving and attachments, and other psychological states in it. And may not have much metta or loving kindness. So, but we can talk about all of this rationally. It seems to me that our discourse never breaks down merely into faith-based assertions of, "Well, there's nothing to say about it, but I know I love my wife." If we had the brain locus of love perfectly isolated, and we could intrude upon the brain by mechanical or pharmacological means in a more precise way than we can now, then we could really explore the state of love in a very linear way. I mean, you could really dial up your experience of love, and then we might have some interesting philosophical problems to answer about, what is love? If you have a love machine that can just dial up the experience of love, does that mean that you actually love the person you seem to love, when you get your hand on the dial? But I mean, all this – none of this requires that we just believe things that are fundamentally unjustifiable. There's nothing irrational about valuing the experience of love. People like to say things like, "Well, there's reason on the one hand. But then there are things like love, on the other. Which are really fundamentally not a matter of reason." And I think that's just a false way of partitioning our discourse.

Because you don't have to believe anything on insufficient evidence, like, that Elvis is still alive, or that Jesus is coming back, in order to fall in love with other human beings, and to value that experience. And to seek to maximize it. And to notice the difference between loving someone, and fearing them. And to value falling on one side of that difference more often than not. I mean, that seems to me to be perfectly rational, to approach life in that way. And it's the way we do naturally attempt to live.

BETHANY: So, you seem to have a lot of faith in empirical data.

SAM HARRIS: I wouldn't use –

BETHANY: You wouldn't use the word "faith."

SAM HARRIS: I wouldn't use the word faith. I mean, you can use the word faith in that way. It's just, it doesn't mean the same thing as it does in a religious context.

BETHANY: You talk about a community of scientifically-trained yogis. How would a community like that help people? How can science help people through the pain of death? Through the fear of death, or through grief? What about things like liturgy? You could look rationally and say why something like liturgy helps somebody, so maybe that's not a problem in your mind. But, do you believe that things like devotional practices or liturgy can effectively help people through these liminal realms?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think there's a power to ritual, to take one piece. Which is obvious and, I think, not at all understood. Certainly not at all understood in scientific terms. And we have to understand it. We should want to understand it.

BETHANY: Empirically.

SAM HARRIS: Empirically. And if ritual is, in some sense, necessary for us, if it is doing work for us psychologically and culturally that could not be done by anything else – and we would be much poorer for the absence of ritual, then what we need, clearly, are secular rituals. Or, rituals that don't demand that their practitioners believe anything that it's not reasonable to believe. And we need these rituals for all those moments in our lives that require ritual. You know, occasions that we want to mark, with some special significance. Whether it's births or deaths or weddings. And the one problem is that we, really, at the moment, only have religious language for these occasions.

But you know, this is actually an idea that has been bouncing around among a few scientists at the moment, that, we need a kind of scientific liturgy. The universe is actually far more mysterious and extraordinary and beautiful and beguiling, than is ever suggested by our religious texts. And so it's not like if you look out into this universe, billions of light years across, you are impoverished by reality, and can't find anything amazing to say about what is real. You know, it's actually far more amazing than the God in the Bible stalking the deserts of the Middle East, wanting burnt offerings. And so, we need a language that expresses a reasonable awe at the nature of the cosmos, and our appearance in the cosmos. And we need to make this language emotionally moving for people. So I think if you really could have a temple of reason which presented a ritual version of our growing scientific understanding of ourselves in the cosmos, that would be thrilling to people. You know, it's not a project that I've thought much about. But surely the smartest people on the planet at the moment could think of profound and ennobling and uplifting scientific things to say at the occasion of somebody's death. That wouldn't require that anyone reach for the virgin birth of Jesus, or the certainty that we're all gonna be reunited in heaven.

BETHANY: Well, it would be poetry. Which we have.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. But I'm saying, you could even have a scientifically-informed poetry, that would add something to people's view of the world. Because you know, the circumstance we find ourselves in is astonishing. You know, it's amazing. It's also terrifying. But it's not like once you divest yourself of your religious myths, you're left with an excruciatingly boring, trimmed down sense of confinement. I mean, that is just not what is left. In fact, the religions are excruciatingly boring and confining. The truth, in so far as we understand it, is far more magical and open-ended and thrilling. It takes a little more work to understand it.

BETHANY: Well, it seems to me that people do a lot of these secular rituals. And new age-y kinds of circles really try to foster that. And I agree with [what you write in your book] that spirituality is a very unfortunate term. But people have their altars that aren't connected to any particular tradition, their "spiritual but not religious" rituals. And I always find that kind of sad, to tell you the truth. To divorce that kind of ritual from rich traditions, feels a little empty. And when things are connected to longstanding traditions, they have more meaning.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I agree that we haven't brought it off. That's definitely true. I absolutely hate it when someone trots out a song in English rather than Sanskrit. And part of that is, it has a kind of incantational value in a language you don't understand. And when you're singing the English, it doesn't sound as good, and it just sounds clearly goofy. And this is probably a problem in Catholic circles, losing the Latin Mass, and giving it in the vernacular. It loses something. And I agree.

But again, you know, we can talk about this reasonably. And we don't have to believe anything divisive, it really is question of art, ultimately. What we're talking about is, what kind of art is going to be most pleasing, and uplifting, in this context. And again, it's not merely an exercise of rationality, to generate such art. But there's nothing irrational about creating such art.

BETHANY: Well, this is connected to another question about Buddhism. You obviously approve of the Buddhist teachings. And yet, you don't approve of Buddhism, per se. And as a Buddhist, I don't know how one would pass on those teachings without the religion. Wouldn't that become Buji-Zen. Just, you know, "everything I do is Zen." Not just Zen, but any kind of Buddhism, where the religion is taken out of it, and people kind of take a little of this and a little of that. And nobody is practicing Buddhism any more, before you know it .

SAM HARRIS: Yes. Well, that is a liability. But nobody is really practicing Buddhism in Buddhism, either. I mean, the same people who are failing to become enlightened by picking and choosing their practices, are probably failing to become enlightened living in a monastery.

BETHANY: What do you mean?

SAM HARRIS: Well, it's just to say that it's very hard to achieve a deep and stable realization of the truths of Buddhism, to speak narrowly about the goal here. If the goal is to transcend your identification with discursive thought, and live in a truly immediate and unmediated awareness

of the nature of thought, and thought merely arising in awareness, and not confusing you into thinking you're the thinker of your thoughts, and you're a separate ego. And you're going to ask, how many people realize that in any sort of stable way? There are very few of them. And there are many people going to heroic extremes to try to stabilize that awareness. Through meditation, on meditation retreats. And very few of them do it. And it's just damn hard to do.

BETHANY: Well, yeah. The ultimate might be difficult. But you're going to have a heck of a lot better chance of taming the ego if you're in a context which supports it, and you'll get much better results. You can change your life.

SAM HARRIS: No, I'm not disputing that. It's just that, we shouldn't be – let me see what I'm actually trying to say here. It's clearly hard to do, and it's not happening commonly, even in the most dogmatic circumstances. And we can talk – in so far as we understand what the process of enlightenment is, we can talk increasingly rationally about what it is, and why it works in one context and not in another. And all of that would be a rational enterprise. And it seems to me that all of that could be done without believing anything preposterous. And certainly without endorsing the dogmatic side of Buddhism.

You could clearly have retreat centers with motivated yogis who are spending every waking moment meditating, and have what is taught in those retreat centers be completely in harmony with our 21st century understanding of the universe. And you would not have to teach them about the version – about the fact that Guru Rinpoche was born from a lotus. Or, you wouldn't have to go into all of the rigamarole of –

BETHANY: You mean, you could sort of drop the sutras, drop the Buddhist teachings.

SAM HARRIS: Well, you can drop the stuff that doesn't make any sense. And you – and we can talk – and we can admit that few of us are in a perfect position to talk about, ultimately, what makes sense. I mean, you know, take myself. I have a fair amount of experience in meditation. I've read a lot of Buddhist books, and books from other contemplative traditions. And so therefore, I fancy myself a pretty well-educated consumer of spiritual ideas. But I would be the first to admit that I am not in a position to perfectly authenticate the reasonableness of every spiritual doctrine.

BETHANY: Well, isn't that why we have tradition? And faith, based on our experience?

SAM HARRIS: The traditions are not particularly good, either. I mean, this is the difference. It's pretty clear that these traditions are perpetuated by many people who are not really in a better position than we are. In fact, many of them are in a worse position to talk about the veracity of certain spiritual ideas. Because they're people who have been sheltered from a real conversation with not only other spiritual traditions, but – you know, the 21st century science. So, you know, there are people who while they may be great meditators, to one or another degree, they are significant – I mean, their understanding of the human mind, and the rest of human discourse, is really, extremely narrow, by our standards. And we shouldn't make a fetish of that kind of narrowness.

You know, there are great Lamas who don't know a damn thing about physics or biology, or anything else that you should know something about in order to talk about the way the cosmos really is. Now, is it possible to do nothing but meditate, and discover the ultimate truths of the cosmos? I have no idea. But it's clearly possible to meditate and change your experience of the world in very radical ways. And that's something I'm very interested in doing, and that's something that I think we should talk about rationally, and understand scientifically. But it's pretty clear to me that claims about the Buddha's omniscience are – or the omniscience of any other adept who is practiced in the tradition of Buddhism, are pretty hollow, given the fact that there's very little evidence that any person about whom this was claimed, has said the sort of things that would suggest omniscience. And omniscience construed as, in – not just in ultimate terms, in terms of Buddhist wisdom, but in terms of understanding all the relative truths of the universe.

BETHANY: So, when the Buddha said that he saw past, present and future. You don't buy it.

SAM HARRIS: Well, it's such an extraordinary claim that I would require extraordinary evidence in order to really buy it. I'm totally open to such evidence. And would be fascinated to hear any of it. But it's just not the kind of thing that is being well-demonstrated. And it's the kind of thing that you don't have to believe in, in order to get the project of contemplative Buddhism off the ground. I mean, I am motivated to go into retreats for months at a time, without believing any of this stuff. Maybe you have to believe this stuff to go into retreat for decades at a time. That may be true. And so then maybe it would be reasonable to argue that without believing the whole package, the whole metaphysical package of Buddhism, you're never really going to become a Buddha. Maybe that's true. And then we can talk about that. Maybe it's like the cosmic placebo effect. You have to be somehow deceived by a dogma, in order to reap the fullest benefits of a certain dogma. Or maybe it's true. But then again, maybe Jesus is coming back in the next 50 years.

BETHANY: And maybe Elvis is alive in the Midwest. I can't understand what would motivate you to practice, if you're not experiencing a little bit of what the Buddha saw.

SAM HARRIS: Oh, I am experiencing, by my lights, the most important part of what the Buddha saw. But I'm not experiencing knowledge of the future, or magic powers. But I'm experiencing -- in terms of the loss of self, and the very clear difference between the suffering of being lost in thought, and the freedom of not being lost in thought. I mean, that is what you experience when you learn how to meditate.

BETHANY: Right. But you also experience what karma means.

SAM HARRIS: Yes. But karma, as a doctrine, can be fully authenticated within the bounds of this life. And we can just admit to ourselves that we have no idea what happens after death. I mean, I have no idea what happens after death. And all the people who are so confident that they know what happens after death, I tend to doubt that they're really being honest with themselves, or with anybody else about it. I'm open-minded about there being something after death, and I'm interested in work like the work that Ian Stephenson has done, looking at these cases of reincarnation. I think that's what most scientists and most secular intellectuals, certainly most

atheists, would think that is just the most obscene use of research dollars and a person's scientific career, but I think it's interesting. And I'm just awaiting the evidence. But you can talk about karma in the sense of the effects on your mind, of your intentions. And, you know, the difference between right speech and wrong speech, for instance, just on the way you feel about other people, the way other people feel about you, and the behavioral and emotional consequences that follow. You can talk all about that, and authenticate all of that quite rationally, within the bounds of not only this life, but within the bounds of a single hour.

BETHANY: Or of a single moment.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah.

BETHANY: Right.

SAM HARRIS: But it's just – you know, if you want to talk about the wisdom and usefulness of right speech – you know, that is an experiment you can run really quickly in your own life. And you don't have to think, "This is gonna pay off in the next life as well."

BETHANY: Right. No. I'm not talking about dogma. Whatever. This is sort of a tangent.

SAM HARRIS: Again, there may be something necessary about believing in an afterlife reward or punishment, when you look at what people – when you look at really extreme commitments to the contemplative life. You know, when you read what people write, who go into caves for decades at a stretch, they tend to emphasize the utter emptiness and illusoriness of this life. And the terrible torments that await someone who hasn't realized the dharma, over an infinity of future lives. Yes, I have no doubt that people are really being motivated by that. I just don't see how anyone can honestly claim to be certain about that.

This is one of the things that I'm most critical of, among religious moderates. Because it's religious moderates who tend to say that you can believe things because the beliefs motivate you, or give your life meaning, or make you feel good, or console you. And it just seems to me that you really can't, or shouldn't, be able to believe things for those reasons. It's crazy to believe something just because it makes you feel good. You have to believe it because you think it's true. I mean, the utility of a belief is a secondary characteristic. In order – and what's amazing is, this is so easily seen whenever you change the subject.

BETHANY: Right. The refrigerator [example from the book].

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, exactly. That example. Or, you know, you could feel free to make your example. Anything like that, people immediately recognize as crazy. But you change it to God, or you change it to an afterlife, or anything else, and people all of a sudden have a real sense of the necessity of this thing.

SAM HARRIS FOLLOW-UP

BETHANY: The first question is kind of a basic one. How are you defining religion?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I'm defining faith more than I'm defining religion. And I would define religion as the full collection of those practices and utterances and modes of discourse that relate to this question of the existence of God, or presumes to be certain about this existence of God – and deals with the intolerable reality of death by presuming that in some basic sense, death is an illusion, and that after death, we get – we're put into some other circumstance. That's a common feature of all religions that I'm aware of. Any religion that says when you're dead you're dead really isn't much of a religion.

BETHANY: Okay. So, those are the defining features.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. But I mean, there are many specific features that may or may not be common to one religion. You know, ritual, and the worship of one God or a God. you know, I think, for instance, Buddhism can be called a religion, depending on what you're fixating on. Or it can be distinguished from all religions, as being non-theistic, and not necessarily dogmatic, et cetera.

BETHANY: So, it may be a religion, it may not. It depends on how you're looking at it. One of the things that was coming up was, you've talked in our last interview, and you've talked about this in other places as well, about Buddhist meditation specifically having what you're referring to as something that we can see in a rational way as results. As opposed to a religion that is based more on belief or faith. Can you give me some evidence for that? How do you feel confident that those results are, in fact, results? That they're not just more manifestations of a mind.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. Well, let me just add one caveat, which is – there are clearly results in virtually everything we do, and it's true of religion practice as well. So that, for instance, a Christian can say, in an empirical frame of mind, he can say, "If you do this, it will have a certain result. If you pray to Jesus, you'll notice a change in your life." And I don't dispute any of that. I just think that the crucial distinction between the empirical teachings of Buddhism and the faith-based teachings that predominate in western religion is that with the former, you really don't have to believe anything on insufficient evidence to get the project started. Whereas, with faith-based religion, almost by definition, you have to accept certain propositions which really fly in the face of any reasonable accounting of how nature works. And accept them on faith, in order to even begin the project of being a subscriber of that religion. And – you know, any of the dividends that that religion brings.

So, for instance, if you want to learn to meditate as a Buddhist, I could tell you how to do that, and tell you why to do that. And at no point in this process of your beginning to do it or doing it, will you have to believe anything on faith. I mean, we could use faith slightly differently, and you could have the faith that this is worth looking into, for instance. Or, it's worth your

attention. And that's not what most religion people mean by faith. Whereas if you're gonna be a Christian and worship Jesus to the exclusion of every other historical prophet, you have to accept certain propositions about Jesus to make that adherence seem at all warranted. You have to accept that he was the Son of God, or is likely to have been the Son of God, born of a virgin, et cetera. The tomb was empty. You know, there's a list of things that Christians find captivating. And I would argue they're unjustifiable. And no matter what the results of Christian practice are, they're unjustifiable. Which is to say that, you know, if you're doing the Jesus prayer and your life is completely transformed, that really does not offer much evidence to the – as to the divinity of Jesus, or the fact that he was born of a virgin, et cetera. Because there are Hindus and Buddhists having precisely that experience, and they're never thinking about Jesus.

BETHANY: Right. I guess that's the question. You seem to be implying – and I would agree – that Buddhists tend to have a better chance at transforming their lives. Because of the technology, if you will, of meditation.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I wouldn't say that. They have a better chance at talking reasonably about the capacity of the human mind to experience different states, and the relationship between introspection and such transformations of mind. Also, the relationship between spiritual experience and ethics. The discourse of Buddhism on just the value of introspection and the relationship between insight and ethical behavior, is much more reasonable and evidence-based, and unconstrained by dogma. I mean, I think that's just a fact that awaits the attention of anyone who wants to look into it. But it's not to say that you can't completely transform your life by adhering to the dogmas of any – you know, one of our religions. You know? You can become a Catholic agarite (?) who spends 18 hours a day doing the Jesus prayer, and – you know, you're gonna experience radical transformations in your state of consciousness, and maybe become an extraordinarily compassionate person. It's just, when it comes time to talk about why that's happening, and what's actually going on in the universe, you're gonna be speaking, very likely, in terms of mythology. And I would argue, unjustifiable mythology. And think that you're – the changes in your experience confirm the mythology.

BETHANY: All right. So, it's not the Buddhist practice, per say. It's more the fact that it's more clearly presented, as something that people can do. And you can do it in other religions, but the other religions are gonna have more dogma attached to it.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. It really just comes down, to my mind, to to what degree is any system of introspection or spiritual practice cluttered by concepts and cluttered by unnecessary dogmas and false certainties about metaphysics, et cetera? So, there are some traditions where it's just all clutter. And it's sheerly by accident that anyone experiences anything true about the universe. And then there are systems where it's really stripped down to the point where you could call it a first-person science. Where nobody feels any temptation to pretend to be certain about something they're not certain about. Whereas in other systems, it's all false certainty as far as the eye can see. Not to say those false certainties don't have an effect on people.

BETHANY: Right. But even in Buddhist circles, people are always tempted to be certain of things– that's just human –

SAM HARRIS: Right. Anyone who thinks that they're certain about rebirth, or they're certain that the Dali Lama – this Dali Lama was the last Dali Lama in a previous life – that's just a false certainty. No one's in a position to be certain about that. Even though you'll get people who claim to be. But – there's – in the same way, no one is in a position to be certain about the virgin birth of Jesus. But the problem – I mean, the distinction is that you can be a Buddhist – you can be a practicing Buddhist who meditates, who sees the value of compassion, et cetera. And notices impermanence, and notices all the core truths that the Buddha was talking about, without ever believing that you're certain about the lineage of the Dali Lama. Whereas you can't do that in Christianity. You really can't. You cannot be a Christian who is not convinced of the core dogmas of Christianity.

BETHANY: Well, I guess it comes down to people's certainty of their own experience. Doesn't it?

SAM HARRIS: But what experience delivers a certainty about the paternity of Jesus Christ?

BETHANY: Well, see, I have not had that experience. And I wouldn't imagine – I can't imagine what that experience is.

SAM HARRIS: But, not only can you not imagine it, no Christian can describe it. I mean, it's just – because they're not having that experience. What they're having is, they're having the experiences that Buddhists and everyone else has. But they're having it within the context of their religious dogma. So, I go to church. I'm not sure Jesus is the son of God. But I go to church and sing the hymns with enough feeling, that I start to feel blissful and ecstatic, and better than I've ever felt in my life. And I take this – in a very naïve way, as somehow confirmation of the world view that is being taught to me in church. You know, I wouldn't feel this blissful if Jesus wasn't the son of God.

BETHANY: So, it's making the connection between one's personal experience of bliss, and then this mythology. Whereas in Buddhism, you can have the pure experience and not attach it.

SAM HARRIS: No. And what you have in Buddhism is a very clear discussion about states of mind,– I mean, you have the Abhidharma. You don't have this idea that these changes are only occurring because the Buddha was omniscient. You know, and if the Buddha weren't omniscient, you couldn't possibly feel bliss right now, by focusing on him.

BETHANY: I guess what I'm asking is – one can be certain. I mean, I asked you this in the last interview. You're so confident. You are very certain of your own experience. Of what you see.

SAM HARRIS: But I'm also very certain that my own experience is, in large measure, a tissue of cognitive errors and partial viewings of the universe. And that is also something that you can come to understand through introspection, and through a rational appreciation of what it is to be an embodied conscious agent in this world. So, it's not like my view entails the idea that our subjective experience is somehow delivering us an open channel to the truth of the universe. I mean, we are monkeys that use language, at some level. And so on that level, we're not fitted to this circumstance perfectly, such that we can come – we should expect that we can understand it

perfectly. You know, I – so, that's not – but that is something we can be pretty confident about. I'm sure I don't understand – I mean, I'm certain that almost any other certainty I would put forward would be false.

BETHANY: How did you come to Buddhist practice?

SAM HARRIS: Well, it's been about – almost 20 years at this point. But I came initially through a few drug experiences. I mean, I took – I had a brief psychedelic phase, which convinced me, if nothing else, that it was possible to have a very different experience of the world. And then I started to read about how people were viewing these possibilities. And then I just saw that there was a vast literature on mysticism and contemplative experience. And then I just – having read a lot of it, I found my way through to Buddhism and Buddhist practice. And initially, that took the form of doing the Pasma (?) Practice, and the Theravada tradition. And I spent a lot of time on the Pasma retreats in the US and elsewhere.

And then I also studied with some Hindu teachers, some Vedanta teachers. And that became kind of a bridge to Tibetan Buddhist practice, and Dongzhen practice, in particular. More of the non-dual conception of the nature of awareness, and the intrinsic freedom of awareness that you can sometimes lose when you're practicing in the Theravada tradition. You can get a very kind of goal-oriented, purified-mind approach to practice. So, yeah. I've been in a variety of different contexts within Buddhism and eastern religion, generally.

BETHANY: And are you working with a teacher now?

SAM HARRIS: I'm not. But I've had a lot of really good luck meeting great teachers, especially in the Tibetan tradition. And, all of whom at this point have died. I mean, they were some of the great lights of the Tibetan tradition, all of whom were in their 70s and 80s when I met them. So, yeah. I mean, there's the son of one of the Dongzhen Masters I studied with in Nepal, who I occasionally see, and will sit at retreat with. But for the most part, when I sit retreats, I just go to some Vipassana (?) retreat center and just do my Dongzhen practice, and just don't make too much noise about it. I don't know how much you've been to different practice scenes in the Buddhist tradition. But, there are some – like the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts (?)—are really well set-up for intensive practice. I just have very good connections with the people who teach at those centers, who, while they teach within the tradition of Vipassana, also spend a lot of time studying Dongzhen, and they're pretty eclectic. So.

BETHANY: Because I just saw, there's an interview with you on Alter-net. And it said you were a Zen Buddhist.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, that actually was just a misprint.

BETHANY: Okay. I thought maybe they just didn't know the difference, or that there was a difference.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, I think they didn't know the difference. Because I never would have said I was a Zen Buddhist. I think Zen Buddhist is probably synonymous with Buddhism.

BETHANY: Yeah, probably.

SAM HARRIS: But I have – yeah, I've never sat a Sesshin. I've never worked with a Zen teacher.

BETHANY: So, another question is about science. We got into a really interesting conversation near the end of our interview last time about liturgy and art, and the temple of reason, is what you called it. And I'm wondering, do you think that in your kind of magic wand fantasy, will science replace religion and art?

SAM HARRIS: No, not art. But I think religion. Yeah. I very much view religion as a failed science, in terms of – in so far as it makes truth claims about the way the world is. You know, obviously there's also just the ritualistic aspect of religion, and the architecture, and the communities, and the music, et cetera. And that's all – we'd call that art. And, you know, there's no reason to think that there's anything wrong with that. Except what religion does, which really is on a collision course with science, is make claims about the way the world is. And it makes these claims on insufficient evidence. Or, in conflict with mountains of evidence, which science is continually producing. So at that level, I think there really is a zero-sum conflict between religion and science. Which is to say that whenever you claim something to be true on the basis of religious dogma, you are trespassing on the terrain of science, and actually impeding the progress of science.

And whenever science comes through with a good reason to believe or disbelieve something, it has, by its very nature, eroded some of the ground on which religion seeks to keep moving. Because it's taking out one – you know, it's – for instance, if science were to – I'm trying to think of an example that actually came to pass. Well, I mean, just the obvious one. Everything we know about the life sciences now suggest that life has been evolving for billions of years, and that complex life, or our own lineage of descent from prior primates, is millions of years old. And we absolutely did descend from species which were not themselves human beings. You know, this completely closes the book, or should, on Creationism and the Biblical story of Genesis, et cetera. So, I mean, religion really loses when science delivers the goods. And likewise, you know, religious people have to resist these deliverances, if they're attached to their religious ideas.

BETHANY: I guess – this is just another way of asking the same question I asked before. Do you believe that there are aspects of life that will never be explained by science? For instance, liturgy as part of art, or whatever you want to call it. Is that addressing something that is unique in the world, and can't be addressed by science? Isn't rational. Can't be discussed in that way?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think there's a confusion that we fall into, around this concept of explanation, and what it means to explain anything. And what is lost, if anything, when things are explained. For instance, I have no doubt that it's possible, and will one day come to pass, that we understand love at the level of the brain. And we understand it incredibly well. Which is

to say, we've explained love. But it seems to be there'd be no reason to think that this would diminish the experience of love. You know, no more so than – you know, understanding the chemical composition of chocolate makes me want to eat any less of it.

BETHANY: Right. But that kind of understanding isn't going to help someone who's about to get married. I mean, it could. But it's not going to mark the occasion in that magical way that people seem to long for.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Which is to say, there's just no conflict between a full understanding of what's going on in the world, and our seeking those experiences that we find most pleasurable, most life-affirming, et cetera. I think, however, it may be possible that our understanding of love or anything else really will open the doors to ways we can maximize what we want out of life. which is to say, to get more love or feel more loving, et cetera. I mean, it could be, for instance, that-- this is such a free associative guess. But you know, what if it turns out that we establish beyond any reasonable doubt that not getting enough sleep reduces one's capacity to feel love. You know? So, people who are sleep-deprived love their wives and husbands less than people who get enough sleep. You know, that could be neurologically true. I have no reason to think it is. But let's say it's so. You know, then we're all gonna want to sleep more, or sleep enough, if we want to be more loving in this world. And so, you know, there's more surprising facts about us that could be delivered, that would change how we lived.

BETHANY: But it seems like you're presupposing a different human race than the one I'm familiar with.

SAM HARRIS: How so?

BETHANY: There are all kinds of things we know about ourselves, and about what we know is, quote, good for us. And there are lots of things that will make us more loving, kind people. And we might know what they are, but we don't do them.

SAM HARRIS: Well, that's just to say we're moved by other forces.

BETHANY: That's what I mean.

SAM HARRIS: But, you know, our understanding of that, I think, will be increasingly helpful. You're pointing to one of the great mysteries of every human personality. How we can know what's good for us. How we can know what we want to get out of life, and yet constantly frustrate our better interests by doing otherwise.

BETHANY: Well, that's kind of what I mean by the role of something like liturgy. Might we be able to get in there, and actually open something up, that can't –

SAM HARRIS: More, community. I think more than liturgy, just the sheer fact that peer pressure and the eyes of others can have an effect on how you behave. I mean, if you announce to all your friends that you want to quit smoking, it becomes harder to pick up the next cigarette. Because you've asked everyone to bear witness to this intention. But that's something that we

can – it's just, there's more to be understood about why people don't do what they know they should do, to be happy. And all the while, do otherwise while seeking happiness, presumably. It's a weakness-of-will thing, which is so strange about us. But – you know, it's absolutely a fact of life.

It seems to me that there's no argument, ever, against understanding all these phenomenon at multiple levels. I mean, that seems to me to be always a good thing. Whether or not that understanding gives you any option to dismiss, as far as what you can do better – you know, that just remains to be seen.

BETHANY: I guess I'm just reacting to the idea of understanding things in place of the more kind of mysterious ways that we go about trying to allow other forces into our consciousness. You know, we can understand until we're blue in the face. Or in the brain, or whatever. And it's just probably still not – it may not help us. Whereas other things that do have a religious or spiritual lineage, that do come from that type of understanding of things, can help, when we have all the evidence and all the understanding in the world, and we're still suffering.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, I think there's a false dichotomy between understanding and mystery, I think we should point out. From a meditative point of view, or from a first-person, subjective point of view. It's all mystery. And it's just, you understand all the stuff you understand. Which is to say that you can talk about, and associate various concepts. But if you look at anything – you know, you look at your own hand. You look at the sky. You look at any object about which you could muster some language. And ask yourself, "What is it, actually?" I mean, anything. Any object will do. It is, in and of itself, mysterious. I mean, the appearance in your consciousness is –

BETHANY: Exactly. That's what I mean.

SAM HARRIS: So, it's all – it's like, I can tell you about the neurology of motion. How you move your hand. But the fact that you can move your hand is just irreducibly mysterious.

BETHANY: Exactly.

SAM HARRIS: And that's something that you can be in contact with moment to moment, when you cease to think about your experience, and just pay attention. But that's not – that fact is not in conflict with the fact that understanding the cause and effect relationships of what's going on in the universe gives us very real power to predict those events, to manipulate those events, and to get what we want out of life. And the one thing you may be pointing to, which is just another wrinkle here, is, it may be that there are circumstances in which not understanding what's going on helps you get what you want out of life better than understanding does. Which is to say that the person who thinks that Jesus is really the son of God, and has not been infected by any doubts on that subject, may be better-equipped in certain circumstances to be happy than the person who understands that Jesus was probably just an ordinary man, and there are many different religions, and they're all contaminated by superstition, et cetera, et cetera. And that may be so. It may be that there are odd cases, in which being absolutely certain of a dogma delivers more happiness than being as rational as we would want most people to be, most of the

time. But I just don't – I think the liabilities of having a world that is shattered by competing religious certainties are so much – so much graver and so much more obvious than any of the possibility—the possible benefits of those religious certainties, that I just think it's not worth worrying about.

BETHANY: I actually have a question related to what you just said. You say that, as you just said, the world has been shattered into separate moral communities, on the basis of religious ideas. And you call for more open discussion about what makes sense in Buddhism and presumably other faiths as well. Let's open this thing up. But I guess the question is, isn't that what we've been doing all along? Trying to understand what makes sense? Isn't that the very conversation that is creating these – that has shattered our world? How is the conversation that we're trying – that you are trying to have, different from the conversation that's been coming down to us through the ages, and has caused all this conflict?

SAM HARRIS: Well, we have, for most of this time and for most of the last 2000 years, we have been provincial for reasons of language, and reasons of geography, to a degree that is now just impossible. We are interconnected now in all of the literature of the world is available to everyone virtually. It's all been translated. Or, all the relevant stuff has been translated. I mean, now it's all in plain view. And it seems to me we don't have the right to our religious provincialism, to the degree that we had 200 years ago, where the people on another continent were jabbering in a language you didn't understand, or had been poorly translated. We could live with our illusions about deep differences between human beings. People didn't even know that the people they met on other continents were the same species. You know, it was a few hundred years ago. So, I mean, now we're in a very different period in human history, where we know that if there's anything true about the universe that we're talking about, it transcends the contingencies of any local culture. You know, it's just not – we have to talk about the human project in terms that are not encumbered by the accidents of any one person's history.

So, you know, the person – if you grew up in Connecticut, it's crazy to think that – you know, there's something about Connecticut, there's something about the history of Connecticut, that is essential to your understanding the universe. And equips you uniquely to understand the universe in a way that a Tibetan, or an Iraqi, or anyone else, can't. It's just not so. So, it's just – we aren't equipped to play a very different game now, in talking about what's reasonable. Because all of these mythological systems have collided with science, and so science is clearly the prime example of a discourse that transcends culture, and transcends locality. And you know, there is no such thing as Japanese science. Or Buddhist science. There's just science. And that's a fact that has to, ultimately, incorporate everything we assert about the human mind, and human happiness.

BETHANY: Okay. that makes perfect sense. What about Communism? We talked about atheism in the last interview. And you gave some good reasons for not wanting to be an atheist. One of them being that atheists don't have much faith in any kind of introspection.

SAM HARRIS: Right. And that is – I mean, I am an atheist by almost any reasonable definition of atheism. It's just, there's something about atheist culture in the United States which is selecting for people who are skeptical of everything that goes under the name of religion and

spirituality, and mysticism. And that's just not – you know, it's a cultural accident. It's not really any deep truth about atheism.

BETHANY: Well, what about atheistic philosophy like Communism? And the destruction and violence that has been the result of those kinds of revolutions?

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, I think that's just – this comes up a lot. In fact, it's the most common return to my argument against faith. That actually, atheism is the most dangerous thing, as witnessed by Communism or Nazism, or the Khmer Rouge. The idea being that the end game for atheism is Auschwitz or the Gulag or the Killing Fields. It's just a misconstrual of what actually happened there. All I'm really arguing against is dogma. And those are systems of belief that were every bit as dogmatic as religious systems. In fact, I call them political religions. So my argument is that there's no culture in human history that has ever suffered because its people became too reasonable, or too desirous of having evidence in defense of their core beliefs.

And so, it would be – Stalinism, measured by that example, is clearly seen not to be an occasion where reason really triumphed. Or, people became scrupulous about being honest about what they knew, and what they didn't know. It was just a crazy system of political convictions, for which people were willing to murder others by the millions. And that's – whenever people start committing genocide, you might – I think it's worth asking what they believe to be true about the universe. And I think, at least my reading of history suggests that they're always believing something rather obviously indefensible and dogmatic, when they're hurling women and children into mass graves.

BETHANY: Okay. And you also said that Islam is not a peaceful religion. You've said that before. Do you think that there is such a thing as a peaceful religion?

SAM HARRIS: Oh, yeah. Jainism is the example. Certainly the best example that I know of. Jainism is a religion of India that emerged more or less at the point that Buddhism emerged. It's got only a few million subscribers at this point. But it is absolutely a religion of peace. Nonviolence is the core –

BETHANY: They're the ones who wear masks, right?

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. Their ascetics, or their holy men wear masks. But in general, to be a practicing Jain, you just have to be committed to not killing anything for any reason, and being a vegetarian, and being as pacifist as possible. And so what I argue is that this is a perfect example of the details actually mattering. You know, if you became the most deranged, dogmatic Jain on the planet, you are gonna become less and less likely to harm people.

BETHANY: Right. You write about this in your book.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. And that's just – you know, hugely relevant to our current discussion about the role that religion is playing in this world. Because Islam is not at all like Jainism. And there's just no way to squint your eyes to make it look like Jainism. And (LAUGHTER) – you know, Osama bin Laden is really talking reasonably straight Islam. You can split some hairs,

and say that he hasn't defined non-combatants the way they should be defined, and he's therefore killing people who shouldn't be killed. But – all of his talk about martyrdom and jihad, that is straight Islam.
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BETHANY: And so in terms of the Jains, do you think that – just based on the fact that they do believe a certain dogma, but they're peaceful – how do you feel about them as a religious group?

SAM HARRIS: Oh, they don't worry me at all, this group. I think they probably believe things, dogmas. Which is to say, they probably believe things on insufficient evidence. And that's not in and of itself a good thing, in my mind. But these are not the dogmas that are gonna get anyone killed. I can imagine a scenario in which Jainism – Jain dogma, and Jain attachment to dogma, and an unwillingness to criticize dogma, could get lots of people killed. It's just not – we're not likely to be in that situation. If the Jains were willing – I don't actually know what Jains say on this subject. But, if Jains were unwilling to kill even bacteria, now that we understand bacteria, that they are in fact alive, then they wouldn't be willing to use antibiotics, and they wouldn't be willing to –

BETHANY: They'd probably want to overturn Roe versus Wade, for sure.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. I mean, I don't happen to know where in gestation Jains draw the line, if they draw it anywhere, in terms of what is living and what isn't. But –

BETHANY: But don't you think if they were in power, we'd figure out something to be arguing about?

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. No, I – it's just, there's no – dogma, in my mind, has got nothing going for it. Because one, there is – it's just dishonest. I mean, whenever you endorse a dogma, you are claiming to know something you don't know. Or – even if you're right. I mean, even if the dogma happens by accident to be true, you're believing it for the wrong reasons. You know, it doesn't actually constitute knowledge. I mean, let's say Jesus really was born of a virgin. It doesn't mean all the Christians are in possession of knowledge at this moment. Because they think Jesus was born of a virgin for reasons that are just, frankly, bad. The broken clock is right twice a day analogy.

BETHANY: This leads me to another area of conversation. You know, it's hard to have the kind of conversation that you're having. And one of the reasons is because you're pointing to things like, quote, "bad" reasons. And you're pointing to in-group and out-group thinking, and you're saying that this is a problem, and that this creates a lot of violence in the world. And – but even in talking about that, you have to be pointing to other people. You have to be creating, in a sense, another in-group and out-group. People who believe that – you know, that Christian dogma is crazy, and people who don't.

SAM HARRIS: Right.

BETHANY: So – and it seems like a lot of times people will jump to that immediately. "Well, you know, you can't really say that, because you're just doing exactly what you're saying is the problem."

SAM HARRIS: Well, no. It's not that – people who think that tolerance is really the end-game here point that out. I mean, they think that the problem is intolerance. Well, I'm talking about the problems of religious intolerance, and religious conflict. And therefore, the end-game has to be, be more and more tolerant. And be tolerant of everything. And that's just, I think, false. And ultimately quite dangerous. Because there are certain views that are just so obnoxious and maladaptive, that they have to be resisted at all costs. And there are people who believe things about this universe that are just posing an unconscionable liability for all of us. And you know, the people who are aspiring to martyrdom, and have demonized the entire human race apart from the narrow few who accept their religious propositions – I mean, these people have grown incredibly dangerous by the light of their religious certainties.

BETHANY: Well, do you think there's any way –

SAM HARRIS: So, like, toleration is – we're past the point of tolerance.

BETHANY: But what if they became tolerant? I think that's what people are saying. Like, shouldn't we – since it's gonna be impossible, or very near impossible, to get anybody to drop their religious affiliation, shouldn't we be trying to get the Muslims to be more tolerant?

SAM HARRIS: Well, yeah, we should. I mean, that's what's somewhat paradoxical about my argument. Is that, you know, while I bash religious moderates, I'd be the first to admit that religious moderates are better than fundamentals in general. And therefore in the Muslim world, what we need are more moderate Muslims. I mean, even if the entire world ultimately is gonna be secular and atheistic, or – which is to say, just perfectly reasonable and not lying to itself on any front – in the Muslim world, we're not gonna get there by just magically getting them all to leap from being fundamentalism to being reasonable.

BETHANY: Exactly.

SAM HARRIS: So, yeah. You know, I think we need to do whatever we can to empower the moderates of the Muslim world, and to empower the seculars, in particular. People who, whatever they believe about God, are willing to say that that should be kept private, and we should have our political system and our governments organized around – you know, secular values, and real universal ways of articulating morality and public policy.

BETHANY: Because even if we were all atheists, we would still have to be tolerant. We would certainly still find other things to be in conflict over.

SAM HARRIS: Oh, yeah. We would definitely find other things to be in conflict over. And I'm – what I'm pointing out about religion is that it is the one front upon which we reliably stop talking to one another, and stop making sense. And become no longer willing to have our beliefs about the world revised through conversation. I mean, it's – you know, you put a fundamentalist

Christian and a fundamentalist Muslim in the room together, and the conversation is truly open on all subjects. I mean, it's open on – they're gonna be able to form a consensus picture of the way the world works. I mean, you can talk to them about food and art, and what is beautiful. And they can agree to disagree, and they can – it's like, there's a collaborative project that is really open-ended. Except if the conversation turns to the divinity of Jesus, or what's gonna happen after death, they will plunge into their incompatible religious certainties. And that – one, seems unnecessary to me. And two, is now manifestly dangerous. And so, I think we can't – we have to criticize that feature of human discourse. Which is, we have a discourse which is fundamentally, really, in principle, broken down on the subject of God. Because this is just the very nature of dogma. You know, this is – dogma is the thing you're certain about, but refuse to talk about, because your certainty is ill-founded.

BETHANY: And you also mentioned that hatred and fear is a source of much of the world's conflict. And you also describe believers as scary a lot. And so, I guess we're wondering if you fear the believers.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. Well, what I fear is that our religious beliefs, and even beliefs that on their face can seem benign – even Jainism, in the extreme case – cause, when the circumstances are right, good people to do terrible things. You know, the bad people are gonna do bad things anyway. There are good people who really think – who are motivated by compassionate impulses. Their hearts are, for the most part, in the right place. And they are making decisions on the basis of their religious affiliation and religious dogmas, that are getting lots of people killed unnecessarily. You know, just to take one local and comparatively minor example, you have in – I don't know, I can't remember if we spoke about this last time. But, you know, in the US, you have Christians who are really concerned about human sexuality, and premarital sex, and teen sex. And they're just – this is really at the center of their moral concern. I mean, this is what they're worried about, for the most part.

And this drives our political system to a massive degree, obviously. And we debate things like gay marriage as though they're questions of real civilizational importance. And all this is being underwritten by religion. Religious taboos about sex. You know, Christian's squeamishness about sex. You know, the idea of original sin and virgin birth, and all that. And all of this can seem a waste of energy at some level, and not much worse than that, until you look at specific outcomes. And – you know, one outcome that was recently in the news was, we have a vaccine for the humanpapilloma virus. Did we talk about this?

BETHANY: Yeah. Didn't that just pass? Didn't something just happen with that?

SAM HARRIS: Well, it just passed the FDA. The CDC still has to advice about whether or not we're gonna use it. You know, about whether we're gonna immunize girls. But I mean, this is – I don't think that these are bad people.

BETHANY: Right.

SAM HARRIS: You know, the people who are saying, "No, we shouldn't use it, because it will remove a barrier to premarital sex," are not evil. I mean, they're just worried about the wrong

things. And they're worried about the wrong things because they have imbibed uncritically these religious taboos, which are completely unnecessary, and completely unjustifiable.

BETHANY: Well, how do you work with your own fear, so that it doesn't turn into the kind of fear that's creating all of this division?

SAM HARRIS: Well, you know, that's just the moment-to-moment project of not contracting. You know? I mean, noticing those moments when you're out of balance, just energetically, as a —in relation to your – whatever experience is presenting itself. And releasing that contraction. Ceasing to be – ceasing to recoil from other human beings, or from whatever circumstances. And so far as you can do that, you are – I mean, that's what, at one level, meditation is. Is noticing suffering, and letting go of it. And to the degree that you can do that, you can cease to be motivated by your suffering, or by your anxieties. Your fear, your anger, et cetera. But – you know, obviously I'm a work in progress. So, I don't do that perfectly by any stretch. And – but at a higher level, or more global level, some fears are justified. You know, it's not like all fear or all anger is unwarranted, or even counterproductive.

And I think the Buddhist conception of wise fear, and enlightened wrath – I mean, this particularly is something that's spoken about it Vajrayana Buddhism, although I'm sure there's a corollary, or an analogous way of talking about this in Zen. You know, it's not like the manifestation of the enlightened mind is always this pacifistic, smiling, non-confrontational acceptance of whatever's going on. So, there is the sort of wisdom. And I don't pretend to be wielding it perfectly. But it's clear to me that there are certain practices in this world that we cannot accept. And that if we accept them, we're accepting them out of idiot compassion, and not actual compassion.

BETHANY: Okay. I'm asking this because it's really sort of at the bedrock of what you're talking about, in people's religion experiences. And that – you know, people are afraid of what they considered to be non-believers, on unbelievers. You're afraid of people who have these beliefs. And so –

SAM HARRIS: But that's the – there's a difference. I'm informed by – I mean, you can be informed about what you're afraid of, or you can be delusionally afraid of something you shouldn't be afraid of. You know, we are wise to be afraid of the death cult that is brewing in the Muslim world of jihadists who are eager to die in the right circumstances, and are actively trying to acquire nuclear weapons. Now, how much should we be afraid of them? That's open to reasonable debate. But there's no question this should concern us. And therefore, there's no question that we should take some steps to prevent them from getting nuclear weapons, to prevent them from immigrating to the United States, et cetera, et cetera.

Whether – you know, there is no analogy to be drawn with religious belief as being afraid of atheists like myself. I mean, they have – they don't understand what an atheist – I mean, if they think that I have something important in common with Josef Stalin, they've just misunderstood with atheism is. But I don't think there's any doubt that we understand what jihadism is about. It should be scary. Now, maybe we should be more scared of the Avian flu. I mean, it's just a question of what actual – the risk is, of any specific threat coming to pass.

BETHANY: Well, maybe if jihadists learned to do a little meditation, and not contract from their fear of the unbelievers, that would be –

SAM HARRIS: But this is the irony. This is why spirituality, and spiritual experience is not quite enough. Why it matters what the context is. Because I don't have any doubt that these guys are experiencing religious ecstasy.

BETHANY: Really?

SAM HARRIS: Oh, no doubt whatsoever.

BETHANY: Religious ecstasy, or just power ecstasy?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I mean, at some level ecstasy is ecstasy. I mean, you know, the guy who's on his way to – with his station wagon filled with explosives to blow himself up, at a checkpoint – I have no doubt that he has put himself in a state, on the basis of his religious convictions, that – you know, if you could just trade places with him for a moment, and experience what it's like to be him, you would experience a really uncomplicated state of profound and thrilling rapture. I mean, I'm sure he is just – you know, he feels that his entire life has summated to this moment, lawfully and perfectly. And this is gonna be – he's bound to have every single desire he could possibly form, fulfilled.

BETHANY: Well, to me, that would be like, I'm on my way – I just got a million dollars, and I can go buy whatever I want at Barney's…it's lust, not ectasy…

SAM HARRIS: Well, no, but I bet it's better than that in a contemplative sense, in that – you know, I'm sure a lot of these guys are not – you know, when you're in a state like that, it probably has some of the features that we recognize to be –

BETHANY: It's greed…

SAM HARRIS: -- the features of spiritual experience. I mean, it probably has a kind of blissful, orgasmic, concentrated, non-distracted –

BETHANY: But it certainly isn't non-dual.

SAM HARRIS: Well, no, it's not non-dual. But there's a lot – you can go very far in meditation practice, and in contemplative, mystical experience, without ever questioning dualism. You know? I would argue that entire Christian contemplative tradition is built upon practices that never question dualism. And you have – you know, through all the religious ecstasy of Christian contemplatives over the years is expressed in a context that presupposes dualism. And it all sounds dualistic to me. And that they're all going out of their minds with pleasure.

BETHANY: I guess when I read that stuff, I understand it as non-dualistic. And I feel like they must be stepping into that.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. But it's so easy, it's so hard to stabilize your non-dual awareness. I mean, dualism is so available. Conceptual thought is so available, that people – you know, they may taste non-duality for a few moments, but then they start thinking about it. What they think is that with the grace of God, et cetera. But the guy who's – you know, I think we have to take the possibility seriously, that it's possible to be happy and loving and really well-adjusted, psychologically, and be a suicide bomber, if you believe what many of these people believe. I don't think that Osama bin Laden is a neurotic. I don't think he's mentally ill. I don't think he's a compromised personality. And I don't think he's – on some level, he may not even be – I mean, I don't know quite who I'm talking about now. Basically, I only have the little bit of information we have about him. But it's totally conceivable to me that you need not be a sadist, a cruel person. A deranged Jeffrey Dahmer type who likes to eat people and do truly malevolent things on the basis of your religious belief.

BETHANY: Right, it's called delusion.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. It's just – all you need is delusion.

BETHANY: Right. And we all have that.

SAM HARRIS: Well, no, but some delusions are worse, and more consequential than others.

BETHANY: Right. And some systems of thought promote a particular kind of delusion.

SAM HARRIS: Right. And insofar as we can discern what is delusional in any system, we have to criticize it. Particularly when it's politically ascendant, and well-armed.

BETHANY: Well, do you think that we're at war right now with Islam, or with Iraq? Or with terrorism, or what?

SAM HARRIS: Well, I think we are at war with, at minimum, Islam-ism. Which is now the word that people use for that strain of Islam that really sees no difference between religion and politics. You know, anyone who wants to restore the Muslim calibate (?), anyone who wants the entire world to be converted to Islam and is willing to fight for that goal – we're at war with those people. There's no question about that. And there's no question that there are millions of Muslims who fit that description. Now, I don't know how many millions there are. I don't think anyone does. I think the assumption by many people in the West is that there are very few Muslims who resonate with the world view of Osama bin Laden.

And I think that's completely false, and that – you know, anyone assuming that is assuming it at our peril. But – you know, how many – what percentage is it? I don't know. But I think if you just look at the numbers, any reasonable percentage is a percentage worth worrying about. There are 1.4 billion Muslims on the planet right now. If it were only 5 percent that resonated with Osama bin Laden, you know, we're still talking about 70 million people. And that's just – that is

a problem of civilizational importance. And I happen to think it's much more than 5 percent. You know? Which is to say that, there are millions – tens of millions of people in the Muslim world, who really are as sure as they can be, that the infidels are fit only for the fires of hell, and that Islam is gonna win through armed conflict. I just think that the evidence that there are millions – tens of millions of people thinking this is overwhelming.

And that's – so, yes. We are at war with those people. But this really has to be, for the most part, waged as a war of ideas. I mean, we have to find some way of inspiring a reformation within the Muslim world, where their coreligionists – I mean, the Muslims who are available to see the liabilities of religious fundamentalism, can persuade them, or through civil war, or – you know, crime-fighting initiatives, subjugate the religious lunatics in their midst. Because we can't do it by ourselves. And it's going to be a disaster for us to keep trying to do it by ourselves, because it plays right into their understanding. I mean, then it becomes a war between Crusader Armies and the true believers.

BETHANY: Oy vey.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah, depressing.

BETHANY: It's totally depressing.

SAM HARRIS: Yeah. But what's really scary is that, if you look at Western Europe at the moment. They have a real problem with Muslim radicals, and the political correctness and the multiculturalism that doesn't want to admit that there's any problem with the religion itself, is leaving those societies totally powerless to deal with these – with this extremism. And you know, then they blame themselves. Like, Hirsti Ali (?), the collaborator with Theo Van Gogh who – she just got ejected from the Netherlands, essentially, and has been blamed for her criticism of Islam. It's just unconscionable that there's a single person in the Netherlands who could – and to say nothing of being in the government there – who could criticize her for criticizing the way women are treated under Islam. I mean, women are treated under Islam, in as objectively bad a way as you can imagine. And she's simply calling a spade a spade. I mean, I view these societies that are just one –

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BEGIN SIDE B # #

BETHANY: I keep thinking about the suicide bomber feeling bliss. I'm going to think about that for a while.

SAM HARRIS: I mean, that's just to say that bliss is not good enough. Bliss doesn't prove that you're not deluded.

BETHANY: Right. But I think that because you're calling it religious ecstasy – and I have a certain idea in my head of what that means. Because to me, that kind of ecstasy is really just lust, like I said. That's not any kind of penetrating, transformative, ecstatic experience. It's actually – that's worth anything.

SAM HARRIS: Well, I don't know. It really is just the context in which you're feeling it, and what it's making you do. You know? I mean, you could just imagine a slightly different behavior, and a slightly different world view, and all of a sudden it would seem like the most ennobling state of mind that a person could feel. If the person, rather than driving to detonate himself in a crowd of innocent children, were driving to save the life of somebody who needed saving – you know, somebody drowned in a river, and he's off to help her – and he's gonna sacrifice his life in the process, and he's gonna do it because he just – you know, is certain that the creator of the universe wants him to do it – I mean, it's basically the same belief system. But here he's now saving a drowning person. You know, and if you could touch base with him in the last seconds of his life, he would say – you know, I'm completely sure of what I'm doing. This is – I've never felt better. And this is what life is about. It's about saving people.

BETHANY: Well, you know, I think maybe one of the reasons why – and this is just me thinking about this. One of the reasons why moderates, liberals, are really into saying – you know, fundamentalism is the problem. It's not the religious beliefs. It's not the dogma. It's the holding fast to a certain fundamentalism. You know, I think about my own experience, growing up in college, and really clinging to certain ideas and political beliefs. And having this – it's the adrenaline rush of feeling like you're right. And it's very juvenile, and it's very much a part of many of our development. And then we get older, and we look back, and we say, "Oh, that's not the answer. Now I'm moderate. Now I understand that that's just a way that we come to become more comfortable in the gray areas of life." And so, it seems like people really have a hard time dropping that. People really want to say that fundamentalism is the problem. And there's a kind of fear of attacking people's beliefs. I mean, obviously people are very afraid of this.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, there's two things to notice about that. One is that that entails the hidden claim that you were right that fundamentalism is a problem. I mean, at a certain point, you have the – with the full force of feeling right, you have to put your foot down and say, "Okay, honor killing is non-negotiable." You know. "You crazy bastards who want to kill your daughters when they get raped, you guys are beyond the pale. This is not relatively wrong, this is not"—

BETHANY: Right. That's what people resist. People are afraid to feel that righteousness.

SAM HARRIS: But at a certain point, they have – you know, we're not tempted to accommodate every possible religious certainty. I mean, if someone came back and said, "You know, we've resurrected yet another crazy religion, and you've got to respect this one, too. This one requires human sacrifice, and for everyone to just kill our first born." You know. But, "These are my religious beliefs. You've got to respect me." We're gonna treat those people like dangerous sociopaths. And we'll be right to. So, there is – it's just where you draw the line. And we've been so brow-beaten by our own failings and conflicts historically, over religion, that we're just now squeamish about calling a spade a spade, even when there's just nothing else to call it.

BETHANY: Right. Well, this is why conservatives say that liberals are soft on crime.

SAM HARRIS: Right. Well, you know, up to a point, it's true. I mean, it's – the irony is that in Western Europe, it's only the fascists who are speaking candidly about the threat of Islam. I mean, with a few exceptions. People like Hirsti Ali (?), probably most notably. But you know, the people who will reliably say, "This is a completely dysfunctional religion, and it's intrinsically violent. And we really have to worry about these people immigrating, because they're not adopting secular European values." All of which is perfectly reasonable to say. And then you'll look at who's saying it. And it's Lenin and other anti-Semetic lunatics whose political allegiances you want to have nothing to do with. And yet, they're the only people making sense. And that's – in our own culture, it's the religious demagogues. It's the Franklin Graham's, who will say Islam is an evil religion. And so, that's scary, when they're – the people who really are concerned about – you know, the inequalities in this world, and global poverty, et cetera, and the environment. These are precisely the people who are unable to (INAUDIBLE) how dangerous certain belief systems have grown.

BETHANY: And that is because?

SAM HARRIS: That's because tolerance is – they've made a fetish of tolerating – you know, even the most ludicrous belief systems.

BETHANY: If it's called religion.

SAM HARRIS: They think tolerance is the – is a – an all-purpose solvent, into which even the most obnoxious and arrogant ideas will finally dissolve. And you can tolerate Osama bin Laden as long as you want. He's not gonna moderate his world view. And the irony is, it's really – I mean, there is nothing more contemptible, from the point of view of the jihadist, then the weak-kneed tolerator of all things. I mean, the jihadist has a lot more respect for the person who's certain Jesus is coming down out of the clouds than he has for the – you know, the liberal, moderate – "Let's all just look at this like anthropology."