

## The Science Studio Interview With Sam Harris

**ROGER BINGHAM:** My guest today on The Science Studio is Sam Harris, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and co-founder and director of The Reason Project. He's also completing a doctorate in neuroscience at the University of California, Los Angeles. Sam, welcome.

**SAM HARRIS:** Thank you Roger.

**BINGHAM:** Sam is here for the third annual Beyond Belief meeting. You were here for the first one and the second. We've gone through a lot of territory in those two meetings, but I'm thinking of this larger sweep, going back to *The End of Faith*. You said in the book that you started writing it on 9/12/2001, the day after the attacks. And from there, to almost the current issue of *Newsweek*, perhaps last week's *Newsweek*, where you're impaling Palin, that's quite a sweep. Did you expect to be traversing that kind of territory when you sat down to do this book?

**HARRIS:** No, I definitely didn't. There's no way to really visualize the outcome of writing a book. In fact, I started writing it before I knew it was going to be published as a book; I just couldn't do otherwise. In the moment, I felt that we were meandering into a, essentially, a religious war, without calling it such. I started writing that book and, yeah, I had no expectation, frankly, I just thought it was just going to slide off the printer's press and into oblivion. I mean, at each stage of its reception, I was surprised by the kind of conversation it was inspiring.

**BINGHAM:** Where were you on 9/11?

**HARRIS:** In Los Angeles.

**BINGHAM:** So watching this on television.

**HARRIS:** Yeah.

**BINGHAM:** And... I mean, not everybody suddenly rushes to do this. I mean, Don DeLillo eventually sits down and decides to write a novel called *Falling Man*, but that's years later. I mean, what was going on?

**HARRIS:** Well I was doing my Ph.D. in neuroscience, and essentially *The End of Faith* was what happened, was the collision of my intellectual career at that point with the events of 9/11. I was strangely placed to respond to it because I had been studying religion on my own for the better part of fifteen years, and then my interest in consciousness and in altered states of consciousness and religious experience brought me in to finish my degree in philosophy. And I was going to do a Ph.D. in philosophy, and at the last minute decided, well I really want to know more about the brain. So I was two years into my coursework at UCLA in neuroscience, and so I was someone who was spending a lot of time thinking religion and religious experience, someone who was thinking about the difference between scientific objectivity and all of the absurdity and fallacious reasoning that we see in the name of religion.

And then people started flying planes into our buildings, obviously based on what they believed to be true about the nature of the universe, based on no evidence that anyone should credit. And we on our own side, based on our own attachment to religious mythology, couldn't find any other way to console ourselves but to invoke our own religious myths, and couldn't really call a spade a spade with respect to Islam and articulate what the problem was. The problem is that a majority of human beings believe the unbelievable, and really believe it, really are motivated to live by the light of Iron Age philosophy.

So I just found myself well positioned to respond because I'd been reading the literature for long enough, I knew what Islam was and I didn't have to get up to speed the way most people did in this country. And I also knew that most of what people think they're getting out of religion, and

certainly the best and most esoteric things, like altered states of consciousness and unconditional love and some of the rarified psychology that you get from the best of religious literature, that can be had without presupposing anything on insufficient evidence. You don't have to believe things on faith in order to go into the laboratory of your own life and see what the consequences are of using your attention in different ways.

And having spent at least a decade doing that before 9/11, studying meditation, and I had a psychedelic phase, I knew it was possible to perturb the nervous system in ways that – some of which are normative, I mean it's also possible to be a psychotic, but it's possible to change your moment to moment perception of your life in ways that really lie at the heart of religious experience, or ostensibly at the heart of religious experience. But you don't have to believe anything on faith in order to look into that, and that's the real perversity of religion in probably any age, but certainly in our current age, is the fact that most of its subscribers, most of the people who want to become like Jesus, think they have to believe the preposterous in order to be a part of that journey.

**BINGHAM:** We'll come back to that in a minute, but let's just gloss that a little bit more; you'd been reading this on religion for fifteen years, why?

**HARRIS:** Well because I'd had certain experiences in my teens and early twenties that, for which religious thinking seemed to be the only context, or religion and more eastern philosophy than –

**BINGHAM:** [Interposing] Mystical experiences of some kind, or what would be called "mystical experiences"?

**HARRIS:** Yeah.

**BINGHAM:** Of what nature?

**HARRIS:** Well both through meditation and through my first experiences with psychedelics, probably at age 19. The very first experience was with MDMA, which is Ecstasy, which is now this very popular club drug, but when I took it back in... '86 I think it was, it hadn't been discovered by the culture in that way, and it was, there were certain people using it in research, and...

It was just an incredibly simple experience in the context in which I took it. It was just feeling so much neuroses drop away in a way that you never thought was possible. It was just a sense of being much more nakedly aware of your experience than you have ever been. And many of the things that you've always been trying to get rid of without knowing you want to get rid of them, like anxiety and fear and judgment and apprehension about the future, all of that was just dropped away. And it was, it suggested that there really was a path, whatever it is, whether it's pharmacological or attentional or through happenstance or whether you just have to have good genes, whatever it is, there's a difference between how I was tending to feel and how it was possible to feel. And religion really has been the only game in town when it comes time to talk about that.

In a way, in western philosophy, you don't have to be wise to be a great philosopher. In eastern philosophy it's still, there still is a eudaemonic basis to having credibility. So the great philosophers of the east, whatever we may think of their philosophy when they talk about epistemology and other nitty-gritty facts, at the very least they had at least advertised a kind of wisdom of living. I mean they had transcended their ordinary neuroses to some significant degree and their philosophy was about that possibility. In the west, you can have a Wittgenstein or somebody, who's clearly brilliant, clearly doing interesting work that we call philosophy, but there is no burden upon him to be anything other than a florid neurotic.

And so, looking into western philosophy for the wisdom that will transform a human life, you really have to pick and choose, and pick and choose so acrobatically that it's a bit of a fool's errand.

Hopefully that will change, I think that should change, and there are thinkers who have pointed that out. Owen Flanagan, I know, is coming to this conference; he's someone who I think has also made noise of this sort. There's got to be a marriage between thinking clearly about the human circumstance and actually liberating unnecessary human suffering, actually liberating the kinds of confusion that causes so many of us to waste our lives.

**BINGHAM:** So that, I think it's written, this is helping acknowledge it, that you espouse Buddhist principles, right?

**HARRIS:** Yeah, without...

**BINGHAM:** I mean, I read somewhere that you were a bodyguard for the Dalai Lama or something of that sort?

**HARRIS:** Well, for a month I was.

**BINGHAM:** Oh, for a month.

**HARRIS:** Just a fun way to hang out with the Dalai Lama, as it turns out. He had real bodyguards, happily, but – although ironically, the fake bodyguards got into much more conflict with the world, because the real bodyguards just stood behind us and pushed us out to the barricades. But I don't call myself a Buddhist; I've studied with many Buddhist meditation masters in India, Nepal and elsewhere, mostly Burmese and Tibetan teachers of meditation.

But I wrote an article and published it in the *Shambhala Sun*, which is one of the more well read Buddhist magazines, called "Killing the Buddha," and there I talked about how the wisdom of the Buddha is really buried in and obscured by the religion of Buddhism. If you're fond of what the Buddha taught, you have to get out of the religion business. And I'm not at all interested in the perpetuation of Buddhism as a religion. I think the Buddha has to be looked at like any great thinker and we use what's useful out of his corpus and we throw away the rest, in the same way we use what's useful in Einstein's work and throw away the rest.

**BINGHAM:** So when you talk about getting out of the religion business, were you ever in the religion business? What's the family background here? *End of Faith* is dedicated to your mother, I don't know what your parents, is there any religious background there, any science background, what was the story there?

**HARRIS:** No, actually neither. It was a totally secular upbringing. My mother is Jewish, and my father, who died about 20 years ago, was Quaker, but there was no, I mean he also left early, so I basically grew up with my mother, with a single parent. And there was no religious indoctrination that I was, that I'm reacting against. I was always just encouraged – I wasn't discouraged, I mean she was not an identified atheist either, but there was no God talk in the house.

**BINGHAM:** All right so I'm still a little confused. There's still something that happens on 9/11 that produces – you are now known as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, okay, there's you, there's Hitchens, there's Dan Dennett and there's Richard Dawkins. You've also been dubbed "The New Atheists". There's a huge amount of attention being attracted to that. It's a very, in some ways very forceful, in your face kind of movement that's produced quite a push back as well. That's the technique that you decided was the best way to go with this, right?

**HARRIS:** Well I actually never use the word "atheist" in *The End of Faith*. And I never thought to not use it; I simply didn't think of myself as an atheist. I didn't use the word, I mean, in the same way I don't think of myself as a non-astrologer. No one has to wake up in the morning and repudiate astrology by accepting the identity as a non-astrologer. And there's no one who, virtually

no one believes in Zeus, and we haven't defined ourselves in opposition to paganism, we're not non-pagans.

And I think it's also useful to point out that every devout Christian stands in the same relationship to Hinduism or to Islam as I do. Christians look at what's going on in Muslim discourse, they look at the claim that the Qur'an is the perfect word of the creator of the universe, and they are not persuaded. And that's all my atheism consists of, I am not persuaded by these patently ridiculous claims, and I am persuaded by the evidence that these people are part of a culture that is designed to not look critically at its own discourse. And so Christians can see that of Islam, they can point out the errors of thinking there, they just don't point it out in Christianity.

So from my point of view, and this is where I may differ from some of my colleagues, I don't think the word "atheism" ultimately is necessary, or even useful, and I think it's actually, in the end, harmful, because the rejection of absurdity is much bigger than atheism – it is science. Reason is much bigger than atheism. And having standards of evidence and argument is much bigger than atheism, and that's all we need to repudiate most of what most people do most of the time in the name of religion.

Really, on my account, religious faith is really the permission people give one another to believe things strongly without evidence. And we recognize that to be pathological in every other area of our lives, we just simply have been lulled into thinking that the game must change when you talk about meaning and values and morality and what happens after death, and I think we're paying the price for that in rather astonishing ways.

**BINGHAM:** Now you said, "A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life."

**HARRIS:** Insofar as it's actually believed, yeah.

**BINGHAM:** Do you actually subscribe to...?

**HARRIS:** Yeah. And this is, again, there's a difference between professing to a belief and really believing what you profess, and we have to acknowledge that. The poll results, that are almost all we have to go on, are astonishing. The fact that 71% of Americans believe that Satan literally exists and leads people to sin; a similar number thinks Jesus is going to return physically and rapture all the good people. The fact that – it can't be that 71% really, really believe these things, but some significant percentage do. But the distance between what people profess and what actually moves them moment to moment in their lives, we just have to acknowledge that it's there, and we're more concerned about the people who really are making decisions on the basis of the notion that prayer works, for instance.

I mean, you take the current nominee for the vice presidency on the Republican ticket, Sarah Palin, what does she believe about the efficacy of prayer? It really matters. If she believes that it works on any level, that seems to me to be a bad thing when it comes time to decide when to go to war or not to go to war. And I think many Americans clearly believe that it works on some level, and we know a lot about the way they cherry pick evidence and the kinds of selection biases that allow them to, in their own lives and reading the newspaper, come to believe that prayer is working. But we know it doesn't work.

Hurricane Katrina came in and wiped out a community, 90% of whom believe in the power of prayer, and after this devastation, people were polled asking whether this only confirmed their belief in God, and 89% of people said their belief in God went up as a result. It's a kind of credence that is so elastic that it will suffer any possible collision with reality if we don't point these contradictions out.

And that's really the problem that worries me the most, is that even people who don't believe these things have been collaborating in this conspiracy to keep people living and speaking and reasoning as though all of these beliefs were justified. And so we have atheist scientists keeping religious people safe in their sanctum sanctorum of wishful thinking because they think everyone else needs this stuff. You know, "I, the atheist scientist, don't need this stuff, but these poor people, they've got nothing else." To my mind, most scientists actually espouse a view like that, whether or not they have any religious beliefs themselves, and it's profoundly condescending and unimaginative. And it's actually coming at quite a cost to us, I think, culturally.

**BINGHAM:** So what about the issue of religious scientists, then?

**HARRIS:** Well it's one thing to acknowledge, and this is part of the power of cultural context, is that it's almost uniquely an American problem. I mean if you look at the rates of belief amongst scientists in the U.S. versus the U.K., they're skewed by this basically American propensity for religious belief, to a great degree.

It's also worth pointing out that science, even in America, really does knock down religious belief considerably. I mean we have 90% of people believing in God in the general population and 40% of scientists. And depending on what your scientific specialization is, it gets knocked down further. Doctors, 60% of doctors believe in God of some form, and I think that's not an accident that doctors are the most full of faith because doctors are having to deal with people who are dying, who are confronting their mortality in the context of their own faith. And it's got to be easier, in some way, emotionally, to meet them in that language game, in some way that seems appropriate to their circumstance. And the burden is upon the secular reasonable person, the atheist, to find a way of dealing with those moments, a moment of someone dying in a hospital, say, without repudiating something that's actually necessary for us to get through that in a way that is optimal for human well being.

**BINGHAM:** The debates you've had with people like Francis Collins and so on and so forth, who...

**HARRIS:** I actually haven't debated him; Richard did. We've collided in print, but I've actually never met him.

**BINGHAM:** Okay, but you have exchanged views in print, right?

**HARRIS:** I have given him a tongue-lashing and he didn't respond, so it was hardly an exchange.

**BINGHAM:** Well, that's very Christian of him, isn't it? So, but you've heard this criticism all the time – why just not use a little strategic humility, just let them be fine, the moderates are fine, they're not doing any damage, they just go to church, they sing some songs, it's a nice place to go on a Sunday. Why the, what people would call the sort of the smugly elitist aggressive campaign to make these people feel uncomfortable at the same time?

**HARRIS:** Well, a few reasons. One is, everyone else is playing that game of "good cop," I mean everyone else is handling these overtly crazy ideas with kid gloves and giving the religious commitments of their neighbors a very wide berth. And that has gotten us to where we are now. I actually recognize the role for kind of a "good cop, bad cop" role, for instance Dan Dennett doesn't make the same noise as I make and he's much more of a good cop in this context, and he's able to say certain things that I can't say. And the op-ed page of *The New York Times* will publish his repudiation of intelligent design, under some duress, but they won't publish me on that subject, so there's a utility in that approach.

But I think, frankly, ultimately it's intellectually dishonest to not acknowledge the causal linkages here between what people believe and certain actions. For instance, the Jihadi who blows himself up in a pizza parlor or on an airplane, and we have his video, and in his suicide video he is

espousing his certainty of getting into paradise and the 72 virgins and all the rest, and we have surveillance tapes of his behavior for the months preceding his martyrdom operation, and we know that he is as devout a Muslim as you can find and that he was spending all his time in the mosque and listening to tapes of radical imams, et cetera, et cetera, we know so much about the character of this person's mind, right. To then come away from that experience and say, "well this isn't really Islam, this is a perversion of a great faith," it's, one, it's intellectually dishonest. Two, it's not equipping us with the facts we need to actually make the kinds of decisions we need to make to protect ourselves. Now the problem of Islam is sort of uniquely difficult, I would say, and there may in fact be a role for some intellectual dishonesty, strategic intellectual dishonesty, to pretend that it is better than it is in certain circumstances. And I acknowledge that. But someone has to call a spade a spade. Otherwise we're just, we're being spun and we're not addressing actually the causes of, in this case, terrorism.

Domestically, religion is playing a role in almost every public policy decision we have to make, in terms of how we allocate our resources, the kinds of claims upon the kinds of wars we fight, the people we promote to positions of power. The fact that you can't possibly get elected without pretending to believe in the God of Abraham, if you don't, or believing in the God of Abraham if you do. If you openly doubt that one of our books was dictated by the creator of the universe, that's the end of your political career in this country. That, in and of itself, is having a terrible effect on our national discourse and on the kinds of people who we promote to the greatest responsibility in human history.

**BINGHAM:** Okay, so you're in a somewhat privileged position now, in the sense that you actually are putting some science to use in working on the doctorate and so on. What would you be able to say to somebody like Sarah Palin, or anybody, about what you think are the lineaments of and the sources of belief, and her sense that prayer is efficacious and so on and so forth?

**HARRIS:** Well that might be setting the bar rather high. I don't think there's anything coming out of the lab that is going to convince someone like Sarah Palin that her faith is an error. The problem is much worse than that, because I debate physicists who are bible-beating Christians. It's quite possible to have a thorough grounding in science and to not feel that the last 500 years of human inquiry has put your basic religious beliefs in check.

**BINGHAM:** Well let me just interject here. I can understand that with physics, actually, I mean I can understand somebody. At Beyond Belief conferences I've asked people if they could explain to me, really good Nobel Prize-winning physicists, if they could explain what John Stewart Bell's nonlocality theorem means and whether David Bohm had any sense and whether there is an undivided universe and is there some sort of physics equivalent of the Spinoza stick, everything connectedness that you probably experienced when you were doing MDMA. And I can't get an answer from them. So it's fairly easy, I think still, at this point, to scurry into a corner of physics.

**HARRIS:** But in that corner also believe that Jesus was the Son of God, raised from the dead, and will be returning to earth. I mean the hook, line and sinker of Christianity. I get those emails all the time. I've got an email from a biophysicist, a graduate student in biophysics who was at a conference and in a room with three other physicists, Ph.D. physicists, and he was the only one in the room who didn't believe that Christ was the risen lord. I mean this is, this I would think is a uniquely American predicament, but it is possible.

And it's not an accident that it's possible to get put into the machine of a Ph.D. program and come out the other side with your ridiculous religious ideas intact, because it is considered uncivil ever to put them in play in the process of getting a scientific education. You can't. Part of it is the problem of specialization, you can specialize in such a way that the intellectual endeavor of becoming a first-rate scientist in your area of specialization doesn't really have implications for the rest of what you believe, politically, socially, and in fact religiously. But it seems to me that we could have an

educational system that really committed people to a type of intellectual honesty that we really do not have in this society, and the moment you met a standard of basic intellectual honesty, you would recognize that there have been thousands of gods, most of whom are dead, they're dead for precisely the same reasons, and the God of Abraham has no different stature.

And if we were teaching the Bible and the Qur'an the way we teach *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and we looked closely at this claim that these books are somehow inerrant, and the source of, sourced by some omniscient being, all of this would break down in a single generation. You just can't, the Bible cannot sustain a real critical look at the proposition that, okay, maybe this is authored by some omniscient being. There's not a single sentence in there that could not have been written by a denizen of first century. There's nothing about DNA or electricity or computation or anything that, I mean, if anything like that were in there, then we would have a conundrum on our hands, but there's nothing like that in there. And what is in there is not even a serviceable morality. Slavery isn't even criticized.

And so if teenagers were forced to confront this, and we took – the problem is that in the U.S. we feel that on some level parents own their children and can hammer into them their first 15 years of life the most ridiculous and insupportable worldview, and the educational system then has to kind of work around that. I mean you shouldn't be able to practice your own brand of dentistry on your children, you can't decide you're going to be a frontier dentist, and it would be unethical. It is unethical to push your children into the world believing that the universe is 6,000 years old and that all the good people are going to be raptured at some point in the near future. And if enough of us in this society realize that, then our educational system would be more intrusive with facts and with critical argument. And I think it would be, I mean it's essential that it be so, because look who is voting. We have to live with the consequences, these children become adults and they become adults who, a significant percentage of whom, probably 50% of whom are waiting for the end of the world with something like gleeful expectation.

**BINGHAM:** Well you don't think people's minds change? I mean I, same as probably Anthony Grayling, went to school and there was a morning service, and there was a reading and hymns were sung, went to church, so on and so forth. We don't do it anymore. So, it doesn't sound like one is condemned to a past.

**HARRIS:** Well no, people lose their faith and people without faith occasionally glide through a system where the iconography and the architecture and the paraphernalia of bygone belief systems are still there to be appreciated. So you listen to the music and you don't really spend much time thinking about what it means, you enjoy the beautiful church. I think we need rational and non-embarrassing equivalents of that on some level. I mean it would be great to have a place to go with beautiful architecture where profound thoughts are spoken and real problems thought about and we spoke about ethics and moral wisdom and we brought the power of silence into our lives so we're not just continuously on our Blackberries and filling our minds with trivia. There's a place for the profound in our lives.

The question is, do you ever have to lie to yourself or to your children in order to bring the profound into your life? And I think it's obvious that you don't. And yet religion, faith-based western religion certainly, to a unique degree, is predicated on the idea that you do, that you must lie to yourself, you must stifle doubt, doubt is not a tool, it's the obstacle to you believing the right things until the moment of death. And that's, we have to find some way of undercutting that.

**BINGHAM:** We read a story on *Wired* magazine about a week ago about somebody who had been inspired by one of the Beyond Belief, the first Beyond Belief conference, where there was this discussion about where are the places of awe and reverence that are not attached to some god figure. And somebody in fact has, this was a story about somebody who has actually created some

stained glass windows and built a place that's just completely secular, based on achievements of science.

Let's go back to the work you're doing in the lab right now. What exactly is that about and what's the burden of it?

**HARRIS:** Well right now we're running a study on religious belief, we're doing fMRI work on atheists and fundamentalist Christians scanned on the same paradigm, looking specifically at whether or not believing religious propositions and disbelieving them is the same as believing and disbelieving propositions about tables and chairs and terrestrial facts. And we haven't analyzed the data yet; we're still acquiring it, so unfortunately I can't say anything about what the results are. We had done a pilot study on belief initially –

**BINGHAM:** [Interposing] Something's been published, I've seen it

**HARRIS:** Yeah, we published it in *The Annals of Neurology* last year, and that was intriguing. We unfortunately were not powered statistically to pull out the religious belief per say, we went for belief across the board, so we had religious and geographical and mathematical and ethical and many different categories of belief. And what we did was we just put someone in the scanner and had them read propositions and mark them as true, false or undecidable, from very diverse categories. And we were able to see in that study that ethical belief, believing that cruelty is wrong, say, or that it's a good thing to be kind of children, was very similar in invoking reward areas in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, to mathematical belief, believing that two plus two equals four versus two plus two equaling five. So there's, which is to say the subtraction between belief and disbelief in both categories was very similar. And so that was tantalizing, and we'll see if a study of religious belief per say will give us a similar result.

**BINGHAM:** So you have atheists and fundamentalist Christians coming in on the same day.

**HARRIS:** Yes, and you can judge which is the control population.

**BINGHAM:** Is that what you, I mean is the doctorate in service of something, or do you think you might, do you even have a vision of a career as a research scientist of some kind?

**HARRIS:** I have more experiments I want to run, I don't know in what, where I'll be sitting when they're run in terms of an appointment at a university, I don't know if that's actually my goal. I really, I want to keep writing books and lecturing, and I seem to be able to do that now. It's inconvenient that the tool I need to use to do this research costs \$4 million, so it would be good to have access to a lab, but that may in fact be possible without going the tenure track route.

I mean I really view myself as more of a philosopher who needs to know about the brain in order to think and say what he wants about the mind. So I don't take the distinctions between disciplines very seriously at this point. I mean, Pat Churchland is a neuroscientist and a philosopher, Joshua Greene is a philosopher and a neuroscientist; I mean there's people who acquire an ability to talk a certain talk and can remember where the amygdala is, they're part of the conversation. So anyway, you know.

But my interest in the brain is not the sort of interest that is going to cure anyone's disease. It's very much philosophical, and my concern is really how our growing understanding of ourselves at the level of the brain is going to change our sense of what it is to be a human being, and how that is going to impact public policy. How it should impact public policy, and inevitably will.

**BINGHAM:** Yeah, because I'd like to know where you see this positively going. The subtitle of this meeting, of course, is *Candles in the Dark*, so I mean, after a certain number of times you've been to meetings and atheist alliance gatherings and drunk the Kool-Aid and done all that sort of stuff, it



must get a little bit old. And it must be nice to not have to be forever refuting Islamic practices and so on and so forth.

What do you console yourself with, what do you refuel yourself with in terms of a positive way of going, rather than having to spend this lifetime on the barricades?

**HARRIS:** Yeah, well it's an interesting question because it's pointing to all of this work that shouldn't be necessary. Basically, you are describing my career up to this point as an unfortunate waste of time, which is the way I view it. I mean, you know, we have a meeting of the minds there. It shouldn't have been necessary to write or think or say any of this stuff. And so this is one of the costs of religion in my view, is the fact that so many people, so many very smart people, so many reasonably smart people, have to sink their attention into these problems.

But yes, I'm happy to be moving on to more positive questions in terms of, it's not what it's not, but what is it. And at the moment in my dissertation, in my next book I'm trying to bridge this divide between facts and values, which actually is related to the criticism of religion because it is the thing that is holding religion in place in this society. It is the issue that Dan Dennett runs into with his belief in belief bit, the fact that people think religion is necessary because there is no other source of meaning and morality and value. And that is clearly an illusion, but it is an illusion that most people, even most atheist scientists, it seems to me, don't see.

Many of the people who are studying morality at the level of the brain and human well being at the level of the brain still don't see that we are going to move into a period where science is going to be able to make scientific claims about good and evil and right and wrong. If those words mean anything, they are going to mean something that is meaningful in the context of a scientific understanding of human well being at the level of the brain. And so we are going to collide with popular opinion on the subject of morality and meaning, in the same way that we've collided on the subject of evolution. And so that's what I've been thinking about recently.

**BINGHAM:** Do you want to elaborate a little bit on the facts-values issue?

**HARRIS:** Well I just, I think, and I'll talk about this tomorrow once the conference starts, but morality, in my view, and this is a moral realist and consequentialist view, if there are truths to be known about human well being, and broader still, there are truths to be known about the well being of conscious creatures, then there are moral truths to be known. That if morality refers to anything it refers to that. It refers to the ways in which our thoughts and actions and intentions and emotions affect our well being, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. And it seems to me that is a domain of facts, it is not just made up, it's not culturally contingent in any real way that we need to worry about. There aren't a million different ways to have a perfectly happy brain. It's not like cruelty works just as well as kindness in every context.

And so insofar as science is on track, and I believe science is on track to understanding more and more about the basis of human well being, we're going to know more and more about morality, we're going to know more and more about the kinds of behaviors and intentions and thoughts and economic systems and political persuasions that lead people to be unnecessarily miserable and the kinds that foster everything that is positive for human well being, whether it's compassion or intuitions of fairness, et cetera. And once that discourse reaches some level of maturity, I think we're going to feel ourselves quite visibly on a moral landscape, where there are peaks and valleys, and not all directions are equivalent and not all cultures are located, not all cultures, not all sub-cultures, are located in the same place on that moral landscape.

And this is, to my eye, moral realism, this is right and wrong answers to moral questions. And right and wrong answers whether or not we can always find them in every context. I'm not suggesting, this is not a utopian view where we're going to have a machine that, you know, turn the dial and

we're not democracy as practiced by the United States in the year 2017 is exactly the optimal political system. But there will be certain criteria that will no longer be up for grabs, and anyway, that's the general area I'm thinking about.

**BINGHAM:** I seem to remember, I think Paul Churchland in *The Engine of Reason, The Seat of the Soul*, has some nice descriptions of how these things can be thought about in terms of landscapes like that, so that's an interesting connection there. Although many of the sessions that we'll be dealing with deal with things like fMRI, the neural underpinnings, as best as we can understand them, of economic decisions, trust, all those sorts of things as well, law, how that... there is nevertheless going to be, it's a hard row here for most people in the sense that they see this initially as being immensely reductionistic and de-humanizing. I actually think it's enlarging to think in these ways, to have some sort of sense of evidence like that, which underpins what your folk psychological understanding of things are. Don't you find, though, that it's a hard sell?

**HARRIS:** Well this whole issue of what is de-humanizing I think deserves some unpacking. Because it's not, if you reduce enough, you see that your boundaries are fluid, you don't get reduced to a point where you are diminished; you get reduced to a point where you are permeable to the rest of culture. I mean your mind, in some sense, isn't just what your brain is doing.

I mean there are many examples of this, but just take for instance you know, I forget which philosopher pointed this out, but your accent, your speech accent; to explain that phenomenon, you can't really explain it at the level of your brain. You can't really explain it just at the level of your personal experience. It is the consequence of your embeddedness in a culture; it was brought, it was imported into you as a system. And there's so much about what we do, so much about our mind, so much about what we feel as meaning and value that is a result of our entanglement with others.

So it's not that if we understood ourselves perfectly at the level of the brain the result would be a total diminishment in our view of ourselves as wondrous and wondrously made. I think it would be, in some sense it exalts our circumstance, and it would give us, whatever is true about us ultimately, it would give us the power to change our circumstance in ways that benefit us. I mean people want to be happier. People want to be less burdened by unnecessary psychological suffering. How can we bring that about? Is delusion the only remedy? I mean, delusion has its place. Delusion actually works for some people some of the time, but it's actually not, it's a fragile remedy, you know, reality intrudes and then your delusions are no longer helping you.

And so, it seems to me that we're continually going to be in a better position to figure out how to be happy together, and to see that our collaboration with one another is not zero sum. I mean it's not like my happiness is predicated on your losing happiness. For the most part as human beings, our happiness is predicated on us recognizing more and more of the time that we have a common project. And it seems to me that one of the challenges of science is to figure out how to focus us on that common project with the least amount of friction, with the least amount of unnecessary divisive sectarian loss of resources, essentially.

And when you look at the difference between science and religion, in the way they break down or fail to break down boundaries between people, I mean science is the greatest force for the removal of conversational barriers we have ever hit upon. There is no such thing as American science versus Japanese science, there's no such thing as Jewish science versus Hindu science, there is just science. And there has, at some level that has to be true of ideas generally; it has to be true of ideas that cache out our moral intuitions and our deepest goals in life.

**BINGHAM:** So what's the mission statement of the Reason Project, which you're just starting, briefly?

**HARRIS:** It really is along these lines; the goal is to spread secular thinking and scientific knowledge in society, and to do that in a very multidisciplinary way. To do it in terms of organizing conferences and funding scientific research, but also to create documentaries and media events. We have a very diverse board, from scientists like Steven Weinberg to entertainers like Bill Maher and writers like Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie.

I mean, my image is, this is a problem of transforming the way people think about the human project, and transforming the kind of expectations we have of our neighbors for making sense in public discourse. And so I see a role for business and entertainment and also hard laboratory scholarship to come at this from all angles, because we all have to start talking the talk from all sides very quickly here, it seems to me.

**BINGHAM:** So what are the most salient mistakes you've made, and what did you learn from them?

**HARRIS:** Well I didn't learn much, because one salient mistake was to talk about MDMA in an interview. So yes, I had an interview with the *LA Times*, and it was on track to be a standard interview, and the mention of MDMA became "the atheist has his mind blown on MDMA" interview. So don't do that again.

**BINGHAM:** Yeah, okay, well I'm glad you avoided doing that again.

**HARRIS:** You know what, I think it's going well. There's many things I would probably, I could rethink, but I'm very grateful for how it has unfolded, and I feel like I've done everything in the wrong order. I've published two books before I've finished my Ph.D. and it's a weird position.

**BINGHAM:** That's what your advisor said to me as well.

**HARRIS:** So there's clearly a better way, and a more efficient way to do some of these things, but I can't really complain.

**BINGHAM:** On the MDMA thing –

**HARRIS:** [Interposing] This is why you don't bring it up. It's irresistible.

**BINGHAM:** I think it's also the case that an awful lot of people were very grateful to Sasha Shulgin for actually synthesizing it as well, actually. Who would you have liked to have had a conversation with? Anybody from history, anybody at any time.

**HARRIS:** Well, just out of curiosity's sake, I would have to pick some of these religious patriarchs, I mean I would have to say Jesus would be on my short list just to see what all the fuss was about.

**BINGHAM:** You'd like to have a last supper with Jesus?

**HARRIS:** Yeah, I think he would make the top five, certainly. Maybe Samuel Johnson. I guess Newton; I would probably try to thrash some of his theology out of him. That's one of the paradoxes, Newton, the prototypical genius above all other geniuses, certainly squandered a third of his intellectual energy on things that many of his contemporaries could see to be bogus, so it's an interesting case study in the partitioning of reason, in some sense.

**BINGHAM:** Yeah. I usually ask people who's the smartest person you know and who's the wisest person you know.

**HARRIS:** That is, smartest is difficult, because I see Newton as the great example. You see so many smart people who are smart in the quintessentially smart ways that we all value in science, I mean certainly quantitatively smart, who believe the unbelievable. I mean, you just have to debate a few

physicists and astronomers on the virgin birth of Jesus to see that something about Howard Gardener's thesis of multiple intelligences has got to be true. So I don't really have one person.

Wisdom, for me, is quite a different thing. And this is actually born of my experience in meditation and studying with some of these great meditation masters, because it seems to me that wisdom is a separable psychological trait that need not imply smarts in any other sense. I mean there's nothing about spending 20 years in a cave meditating and developing your experience of compassion that equips you to have conversations like we have at this meeting or gives you the slightest inkling about the scientific worldview.

But there's something about, wisdom for me is an ability to no longer suffer unnecessarily. I mean, you have your priorities straight emotionally in such a way that you really are, your attention is free not to be a schmuck. You're not neurotic, you're not worried what people are thinking about you; there's a kind of groundedness in just your witnessing of the flow of your experience which is liberating, and very few people have it to a degree that's salient. But you meet some of these guys who have spent 20 years in a cave meditating, and they weren't just wasting their time. There may be a much more efficient way of getting what they got, let's hope.

But someone, the Dalai Lama, I'm talking about the kind of people he would go to to learn how to meditate, but he also strikes me as someone who is remarkably wise in this way. I mean you follow him on his schedule where he's got it parsed out in seven minute increments, and he's been up since four in the morning, and you see a kind of flexibility of mind that I have for about five minute on my best day, and the full armamentarium of Sasha Shulgin was required to get me there, you know? Overstates it slightly, but I think wisdom is hard won and need not entail smarts.

**BINGHAM:** One last thing, because we're apparently about to run out of tape, which would be as follows. In January of next year you will become a father, so you have an investment in the future. So I assume you're optimistic about something. What are you optimistic about?

**HARRIS:** Yeah, maybe I should have thought about that more. I can't say I'm optimistic; I've never been convicted of optimism. I just, I don't see what else to do in terms of; I mean none of my efforts are predicated on a sense that the battle is about to be won. I don't know, I mean there's something about having a child, or deciding to have a child, which I think forces, who was it, Bacon, who said you give hostages to fortune. And I feel that very deeply, that you are implicated in history in a way that you weren't a moment ago. And that seems to me to be a good thing, I think we should all be all in, because it matters, you know. So I'm looking forward to worrying more and having more reasons to worry.

**BINGHAM:** Sam Harris, thank you very much.

#### [Question & Answer Session]

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I enjoyed your talk very very much, and I've ended up liking you lots more than I did the first time I came to one of these.

**HARRIS:** We're moving in the right direction.

**BINGHAM:** Maybe.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So I appreciate that. I was struck by your part of the conversation about politicians, and the impossibility of getting elected without professing some kind of belief. And I find myself in a kind of dilemma. I saw an interview with the Democratic nominee a while back where he suggests, he said that every day he talked to Christ, prayed to Christ, and sometimes he heard an answer and sometimes it was faint. And so I have a dilemma. I either take him at his word, or I have to think, how cynical could you be to profess such a thing. And that would bother

me. So I'm kind of in the middle in thinking, well maybe he does believe part of that. How do you react to what we hear from politicians talking this way?

**HARRIS:** Well, part of it is that, certainly that's possible that someone is cynically just saying what they think they need to say in order to pander to the religious commitments of their neighbors that they don't share. And there are certainly some people who I think are just kind of connecting the dots there, and often doing it badly, and people sense that they're not – ironically, I think McCain is probably doing that more than anyone in this election. He's probably the least honest in espousing his religious commitment. But I think the deeper problem is that we just, we never push on those utterances when normal people, psychologically healthy people talk about talking to God. I mean people are just thinking, and they think, they get this warm glow in certain contexts, and they associate it with some religious truth.

And we've never demanded any kind of sophistication in how people talk about the flow of their own experience, and we never recoil when people make obviously unsupported claims about the veracity of religious belief using data of that sort. People say, you know, I just felt the grace of Jesus, I was praying, I just felt God's grace. What exactly do you mean? I mean, let's talk about oxytocin, let's talk about the Muslim who's sitting beside you who's feeling a different grace; let's come at this from many sides. There's got to be a – all that gets a pass. People can just talk.

Worse still, I don't know if you saw the Compassion Forum with Obama and Hillary Clinton, but this was the meeting that was organized by Jon Meacham of *Newsweek*, where they were just asked questions like "do you experience the holy spirit?" And Hillary Clinton was led to say in that context that the tears she shed in a New Hampshire diner was evidence of the Holy Spirit. And received no opposition from anybody. This is kind of just like, what kind of epistemology do we have, where Hillary Clinton can get away with that?

So that's the situation we're in. It's a complete vacuum of critical intelligence when the conversation turns to God talk.

**REX KERR:** I'd like to ask a question about a place where there ought to be a presence of critical reason, which is Christian apologetics. So there's a long Catholic tradition and a shorter Protestant tradition of Christian apologetics, and I'm wondering what your views are on that. And I assume you think that they've gone badly awry, and how did they manage to do it when supposedly they were using reason to underpin their faith?

**HARRIS:** Well the problem is just, are you going to hold certain claims off the table when you start playing the reason game. And it seems to me that most Christians, many very smart, intellectually sophisticated Christians from Aquinas on down, can play a language game that is, that certainly attempts to be self-consistent and has all the features of rational discourse that we admire, but is in the context of, we're going to take as axiomatic the fact that the Bible was the sacred word of the creator of the universe. So how do we square the evidence of paleontology and all the rest with the fact that the Bible is the word of God and Jesus is the son and he rose from the dead on the third day? That's the game that most Christians are playing. The Bible is never put into play.

We never see Christians looking; we don't see this because they tend to cease to be Christians if they actually do this. We never see them looking at the fossil record and at the wealth of evidence of evolution coming from molecular biology and the distribution of animals across the earth's surface. They never look at those facts and then come back to the Bible and say, well what's, given that this is the way the world is, what's the likelihood that an omniscient being described it this way? Then the Bible just falls apart, because the Bible is not even close to being something we should admire as a manual for existence in this place.

And so too with morality. Given what we now expect of our fellow human beings, gender equality and repudiation of slavery, now that we have people like John Rawls and Thomas Nagel and Derek Parfit really thinking clearly about ethical problems, not that they all agree, but now that we know what it's like to really parse ethical issues. Now let's look at the Bible and see, let's look at Leviticus and see just what God was up to. I mean it's an embarrassment, I mean how could you do it with a straight face. It's not like there was nothing good in there, but I mean things have gotten so much better. And so it's what you keep off the table. And it's useful to point out that Muslims are able to do their reason game, and it's nullifying of Christianity. I mean they have their whole story about why Jesus could not be the Son of God. That's right there, those are mutually incompatible worldviews and they're playing the same game.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'd like to get your educated guess, how far into the future will religions disappear, if ever?

**HARRIS:** That human beings disappear?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Religions.

**HARRIS:** Yeah, I think it's one or the other, actually. I don't know. I mean if you take – I mean I'm not particularly optimistic that it's going to happen in any short timeframe, but if you take this, my suite of concerns, and map them onto the kinds of predictions you get from someone like Ray Kurzweil, I don't know if you know Ray Kurzweil's work on the singularity and justice, and how the doubling time of technological innovation getting shorter and shorter. If the implications of this on his, on anything like his projections are true, it's something like we're going to have 20,000 years of cultural progress in this century, as measured at the rate progress in the year 2000.

That could be crazy, but if something analogous to that is true, then our ability to perceive just how quickly things can change, I mean there is a curtain blocking the future there, or an event arrives or something. So I can barely imagine what it was like before we had cell phones and the Internet, and it's been like 5,000 days or whatever. So it seems to me things could change very, very quickly. But still, embedded as I am in the present and seeing how intractable these belief systems seem to be in the present, I can't say I'm hopeful that it's going to happen in any of our lifetimes.

**JONATHAN GLOVER:** I hugely applaud the campaign you're part of to change the uncritical acceptance of often very crude and very dangerous religious beliefs in the United States. And I have always been a bit puzzled about how it can be that a society which is so leading intellectually in some things like science and philosophy can also have this extraordinary tale of feeble thinking. But while I am hugely on your side, I want to express a bit of disagreement with your take on 9/11. Because while, in a way, I'm glad you had the take on 9/11 you did because it led you to write these books, but I have a rather different take on it.

You're struck by the fact that it was people who believed they were doing what the prophet told them to do; I'm struck by the fact that lots and lots of people who believe in doing what the prophet says, believe in that religion, weren't in favor of this kind of terrorism. If one looks at the actual things said, the statements made by bin Laden, it seems to me that while religion is undoubtedly part of the thing in the background, the deep sense of humiliation that many Islamic people feel because of things like American military presence in the Middle East, in places they regard as sacred, seems to me of much greater importance in understanding why they did what they did. And I see it as rather parallel to the way in which George Bush's foolish military adventures in response to it, sadly backed up by my former Prime Minister; these also seem to me, if you look at George Bush standing at the site of the Twin Towers after the wreckage, it seems to me that he's articulating a sense of humiliation that characteristically leads people to want to get back.

Now after the much smaller episodes in London, where about 50 people were killed in the bombing of the London Underground in the London bus system by Islamic suicide bombers, I was shocked to find, there was a public opinion polling in one of the British newspapers that showed that about a third of British Islamic people thought that western civilization was decadent and should be brought to an end. Now that's about half a million people.

Now my response was to write an article in *The Guardian* saying, a society where people are so deeply divided to this degree, we should start talking to each other, and we need a kind of Socratic dialogue between western values and Islamic values. And I got a lot of denunciation from crackpots in the United States who felt that I was like Neville Chamberlain, being willing to talk to the enemy. But I also got a response from an Islamic imam of a London mosque, and we had a debate together. And we discussed what it was that we westerners worry about or are offended by in Islam, I talked about the position of gays, the position of women, he talked about what he saw as moral decadence of various kinds, toleration of crime.

But the sense I came away with – we didn't reach agreement – the sense I came away with was that to try to attack terrorists, or try to undermine terrorism by undermining the whole system of religious beliefs is an incredibly long slow strategy. And I applaud you for taking a part of that, but as a response to terrorism, it seems to be much less effective than discussing what values we share, how we can live together, and trying to understand and criticize each other, but not going quite so deep as you want to go.

**HARRIS:** Right, well it's a good question, and very eloquently put. I think that it's not incompatible with my approach or how I view this. Clearly there are, I just imagine concentric circles of religious infatuation, and in the center we have people who are really, really, down to their toes, committed to religious principles. And these religious principles actually are different as you move from religion to religion. I mean, as I've said before, no matter how fanatical someone becomes as a Jain, the core principle of which is nonviolence, they're not going to fly an airplane into a building over their humiliation or grievances, because it would be a repudiation of everything that they've organized their life around.

And so it matters that at the core of Islam there are principles like martyrdom and Jihad. It really matters that Islam views itself as a religion that will be victorious in this world, politically and materially, there will be a true Islamification of the planet. That people will either convert or die, or Christians and Jews will live as, it's called Dhimmi, as some kind of apartheid situation where they pay a protection tax, this is the view of moral order that you get from Islam. And it really is, it's not the crazy Al-Qaeda, I just went to a training camp in Afghanistan Islam, it is mainstream Islam.

And one of the problems we have is that many Muslims, for understandable reasons and some for really deplorable reasons, are playing hide the ball with the articles of faith, and are eager to have the conversations of the sort you have had from a very cynical and manipulative perspective. We're just going to keep having big families, and eventually it's going to be Eurabia, and the war will be won. There are people who really think in those terms, and they're not necessarily just the people in the center of the bull's-eye of Islamic infatuation. They can be several cantos out, just the kind of people who would never blow themselves up, but who think it's a good thing that some people will, and they don't really care if they blow up non-combatants. And they view Danish cartoonists drawing images of the prophet as a moral offense equivalent to dropping bombs on people or flying planes into buildings. And these are theological grievances.

And much of the humiliation you talk about, which I think is worth worrying about, much of the humiliation is mediated by theological claims and beliefs and priorities, and certainly everything bin Laden was ranting about prior to 9/11 is best seen as a theological concern. I mean he was concerned about the proximity of infidel troops to Muslim holy sites. He's concerned about the caliphate; he's concerned about apostate, bad Muslim rulers in Saudi Arabia and other countries,

insufficiently devout rulers. He's not, only as a political opportunist has he become concerned about the fate of the Palestinians. And obviously, he hates the Jews and he hates the existence of Israel.

But these are all, through all of this, it can be sort of bent into the language of humiliation and equal rights and a repudiation of colonialism, and it's entangled with our energy policies, and there's a lot that we should get straight. But we have to realize that there is a subset of the Muslim world that takes the idea of conquering the world for Islam very, very seriously, and we deny that at our peril. And it is different than Buddhists who we might mistreat.

The Buddhists are being mistreated by the Chinese in Tibet. Buddhism doesn't have – it's possible to get Buddhist violence, and we had Buddhist violence in World War II, Zen Buddhism was very flexible in helping to inspire the Kamikaze pilots, Zen Shinto national war ethic, but it's harder to bend Tibetan Buddhism into a death cult. We don't have Tibetan Buddhist suicide bombers blowing themselves up on Chinese buses. It's not, it wouldn't be impossible, but it's much less likely, and it's less likely because of what they believe.

So my argument is, beliefs matter, and let's talk honestly about the logical consequences of beliefs.

**DEVIN POWELL:** Sam, thank you for sharing your perspective with us today. I remember when I was nine years old and I was starting to depart from my Presbyterian upbringing, and my sweet Southern grandmother said to me, have you found a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; this line kind of remains with me today. And so I wonder, is there any evidence kind of emerging from any of these studies that religious beliefs are different in that they, in some way, connect to an emotional side of us, a side of us that wants to feel comforted by the universe or some kind of personal aspect? And if so, how do things like, say, MDMA or meditation or substituting a more scientific philosophy, how can they kind of overcome that border of being seen as cold and impersonal and not connecting to that kind of...?

**HARRIS:** Yeah, I don't know of any research that has looked at that. And I'm not sure that the research we're doing now is going to be able to answer that first question. I think that if there's a difference between believing Jesus is the Son of God versus believing that we're at the Salk Institute, it could be that we'll see areas of emotional processing that we normally don't see in the case of ordinary beliefs. But the way we have it set up, I'm not sure that we'll be able to give a full answer to that question.

But clearly, religious experience, we don't really need neuroimaging results to know that religious experience is a major driver of emotion and reward, and fear is kind of the backstop against which people keep hurling their faith. It is the context of faith, and fear about bad things happening to you in the afterlife is the overarching belief that keeps all of this together. And so hope and fear and the pleasures of certain religious practices are clearly a large part of the reasoning that you find in religious thinking.

And it's why there's so much self-deception and wishful thinking and a lack of real encouragement to jettison false beliefs. It's how we see people's beliefs being compatible with anything happening to them, because they are, it's not just that they're non-falsifiable, it's that they are apparently confirmable by any outcome. If you pray for someone who gets better, that's a sign that God listened to you and saved that person's life, and if you pray for someone who dies, it's a sign that God, for his mysterious reasons, wanted that person to come back to Jesus. I mean it works in either case, and people, for obviously deeply felt emotional reasons, take refuge in it in either case.

But ultimately, I think if you could give someone a pill that primes their poor blissful religious grace feeling experience, and you give it to a Christian, you give it to a Muslim, you give it to an atheist, you are going to find it driving their incompatible ideology in the same way. So the Muslim will



have an Islamic account of what this is, the Christian will have a Christian account of what this is. It seems to me that if we ran this experiment in a sufficiently clever and public enough way it would cause people to doubt the way in which they're framing their experience. Physiology may trump ideology if we ran an experiment that way. Or not.

**BINGHAM:** Okay, it's 5 o'clock. Thank you very much for being here, and thanks again to Sam.

**HARRIS:** Thank you.