

Q & A with Sam Harris

1. *In your book you seem to argue for a kind of religious intolerance. Do you mean to suggest that we need not respect a person's religious beliefs?*

Yes. Our history of religious conflict had led us to be very cautious about criticizing the religious beliefs of others. We are right to be wary of religious intolerance, but it is time we recognized that our religious identities have themselves become an increasingly potent source of human conflict. The notion that God wrote one or another book has always been a source of dangerous and unnecessary divisions in our world. Given the spread of modern weapons and other disruptive technology, these divisions are fast becoming antithetical to civilization itself.

Notice that no one is ever faulted in our culture for not “respecting” another person's beliefs about mathematics or history. When people have reasons for what they believe, we consider those reasons, and when they are good, we find ourselves believing likewise. When they have no reasons, or bad ones, we dismiss their beliefs as a symptom of ignorance, delusion, or stupidity. Except on matters of religion.

2. *Yes, but isn't religion different?*

Only in so far as we treat it differently. We have been lulled into ignoring just how strange and insupportable many of our religious beliefs are. How comforting would it be to hear the President of the United States assure us that almighty Zeus is on our side in our war on terrorism? The mere change of a single word in his speech—from God to Zeus—would precipitate a national emergency. If I believe that Christ was born of a virgin, resurrected bodily after death, and is now literally transformed into a wafer at the Mass, I can still function as a respected member of society. I can believe these propositions because millions of others believe them, and we have all been taught to overlook how irrational this picture of reality is. If, on the other hand, I wake up tomorrow morning believing that God is communicating with me through my hairdryer, I'll be considered a nut, even in church. The beliefs themselves are more or less on a par—in so far as they are in flagrant violation of the most basic principles of reason. The perversity of religion is that it allows sane people to believe the unbelievable *en masse*.

3. *And what is the link, as you see it, between religion and violence?*

It's quite simple and direct. And inevitable. If you truly believe that your neighbor is going to hell for his unbelief, and you believe that his ideas about the world are putting the souls of your children in peril, it is quite sensible to drive him from your community, or kill him. Religion, by promising an eternity of supernatural rewards and punishments, raises the stakes enormously. Which is worse, a child molester or a heretic? If you really believe that the heretic can endanger your child for all time, there's simply no contest.

4. *Doesn't the fact that no one is being killed for his religious beliefs in our country suggest that religion, in a democracy, can become a benign and even ennobling social force?*

It only suggests that we have come to our senses on so many fronts that killing people for heresy—when you need these people to collaborate with, to sell your goods to, to employ, etc—is no longer an option. This does not mean, however, that no one is dying on account of American-style religion.

Consider the fact that we have allocated a third of our budget for AIDS prevention in the developing world to the teaching of abstinence. Rather than provide as many condoms as possible, we have elected to spend millions of dollars on a program of bogus and ineffectual moral instruction. This is catastrophically stupid. Given that millions of people could be infected with AIDS unnecessarily, this is an example of Christian morality literally herding people into mass graves. Inadvertently, perhaps—but innocent people will die all the same.

5. *Why is it that you think religious moderates bear some responsibility for the religious conflict in our world? It would seem that religious moderates are precisely the people who abhor violence in the name of faith.*

Yes, but their indulgence of religious faith perpetuates an attachment to religious texts and to religious identities that, in turn, perpetuate human conflict. Religious moderates may ignore or overlook the more barbaric passages in their religious books, but by venerating the books in general, they leave us powerless to really oppose the belief systems of fundamentalists. And because moderates tend to ignore the most lunatic parts of scripture, they lose touch with how dangerous these books are when taken literally. In fact, they have trouble believing that anyone *does* still take these books literally, and so they tend not to recognize the role that faith plays in inspiring human violence. Religious moderates are blinded by their own moderation. When college-educated jihadists stare into a video camera and declare that “we love death more than the infidels love life,” and then blow themselves up along with dozens of innocent bystanders, religious moderates rack their brains wondering what motivated these killers to do what they did. The respect that moderates accord to religious faith has blinded them to the fact that the atrocities of September 11th were a *religious* exercise. Religious moderates seem incapable of realizing that our problem is not terrorism, but Islam.

6. *But isn't our conflict just with Muslim fundamentalists?*

The distinction between “fundamentalists” and “moderates” has not really emerged in the Muslim world. Most Muslims are “fundamentalist” in the sense that they really appear to believe that the Koran is the literal and inerrant word of God. In any case, Islamic fundamentalism is only a problem for us because the *fundamentals of Islam* are a problem for us. There is a pervasive piece of wishful thinking circulating among religious moderates, and it could get a lot of us killed. The idea is that all religions, at their core, teach the same thing. This is myth. The principal tenet of Jainism is non-harming. Observant Jains will literally not harm a fly. Fundamentalist Jainism and fundamentalist Islam do not have the same consequences, neither logically nor behaviorally. Read the Koran. Osama bin Laden is playing it more or less by the book. Anyone who says that there is no basis for his worldview in the doctrine of Islam is either dangerously ignorant or just dangerous.

We must hope that the Muslim world is full of moderates who abhor the worldview of Osama bin Laden. But where are they? We cannot just assume that they exist. And the horrible truth is that if they do exist, they will be easily marginalized by their coreligionists.

7. *But we've all seen moderate Muslims in the news, disavowing the actions of Islamic militants.*

Have we? We've seen the occasional Muslim disavow the actions of Osama bin Laden, saying things like “Islam is a religion of peace,” but this is not a sign of Muslim moderation. We'll know there are Muslim moderates in this world when they get on television and say things like: “There is much in the doctrine of Islam that should not be taken literally. It is, for instance,

unacceptable to believe that people can get into Paradise by killing infidels and dying in the process. In fact, we're not even sure Paradise exists. Nor are we sure that the Koran was written by the Creator of the universe. The Koran is an ancient book of religious wisdom, some of it applies to our modern circumstance and some of it does not." Find a Muslim who can talk this way, and you will have found a Muslim moderate. You will also have found someone who is guilty of blasphemy and liable to be killed in almost any Muslim community on this earth. This is the problem with Islam.

8. *This is all pretty inflammatory.*

Yes. There really is a deal-breaker lurking here, and there is no use denying it. We should all be genuinely shaken by the knowledge that an entire civilization appears to think that the Koran is the wisest book ever written. How we have a conversation with 1.3 billion people about the dangerousness and illegitimacy of their core beliefs is a problem for which there may be no easy answer. But we must come to terms with the fact that the spread of technology has moved us to a crisis point. There is no possibility at all of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime that has acquired long-range nuclear weapons. More importantly, moderate Muslims, wherever they are, must come to terms with this. And they must find some way of marginalizing and containing the cult of death and martyrdom that has emerged in the Muslim world.

9. *But some would say that it is not religion, but history, that explains Muslim—and specifically Arab—intolerance. Doesn't the Israeli occupation play a role here?*

You cannot deny that the Israeli occupation is at least part of the problem. The Israelis settlers are themselves religious extremists who are putting us all in danger. Their notion of God as some omniscient real-estate broker is one of the principal sources of conflict between the West and Islam. But anyone who thinks western or Israeli imperialism solves the riddle of Muslim violence must explain why we don't see Tibetan suicide bombers killing Chinese children. The Tibetans have suffered every bit as much as the Palestinians. Over a million of them died as a direct result of the Chinese occupation of their country. Where are the Tibetan suicide bombers? Where is their cult of martyrdom? Where are the throngs of Tibetans seething with hatred, calling for the deaths of the Chinese? They are not likely to exist. What is the difference that makes the difference? Religion.

10. *This brings us to one of the other implications of your book: you argue that not all cultures are morally equal, and that those that are morally superior have the right to impose their cultural values on others.*

Yes. I think the civilized world has the duty, ultimately, to rescue the poor people in the developing world who are living under tyranny. It does not much matter if this tyranny is imposed from the top, by a dictator, or from all sides, by the tyranny of ignorance. This should really be viewed as a problem of education. People who don't understand how diseases like AIDS spread must be educated. People who don't understand that women should be accorded all the civic and moral privileges of men must be educated. People who think you can get to heaven by flying planes into buildings must be educated. Whether they must be conquered first and then educated is for them to decide.

11. *What would you say to someone who has had a profound religious experience and simply knows that there is a God?*

I would have to know the details of the religious experience. Such experiences rarely suggest anything at all about the structure of the universe. What they do prove, beyond any possibility of doubt, is that it is possible to have extraordinary experiences. We have to realize that there is no conflict between spiritual experience and reason. The conflict is between reason and those who make unreasonable claims to knowledge on the basis of such experiences—or worse, on the basis of books that recount the experiences of men who have been dead for centuries. Spiritual experience is arguably the most important human pursuit. But nothing needs to be taken on faith for us to pursue it.

12. *You seem to have focused on all that is wrong with religion and overlooked all that is right with it. Religion has inspired some of the greatest art, architecture, moral teachings, and humanitarian acts.*

The fact that people do wonderful things in the name of faith does not suggest that these things are *best* done in the name of faith. There is nothing to suggest that similar acts of beauty would not occur in the absence of religious dogmatism. There are very good reasons—which is to say justifiable, rational reasons—to create art, to build beautiful spaces for people to inhabit, and to treat other human beings well.

13. *Do you really think that we can apply rational standards to religion? Isn't the whole point of faith that it is not bound by reason?*

I happen to think that the so-called “leap of faith” is a myth. Beliefs have a certain logical relationship to one another, to language, and to sensory experience. We are not free merely to believe whatever we want about the world. In any case, the leap of faith is doubly a myth because people of faith rely upon reason whenever they can. The moment something in their experience appears to corroborate their faith, they seize it with both hands. The moment prayer actually seems to *work*—the tumor shrinks, the child is pulled from the wreckage unscathed—people of faith are elated to find their faith confirmed. The problem is that they are not inclined to view the totality of the evidence with an open mind. Any honest appraisal of the state of our world, or of human history, will lead you to conclude that the evidence for an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent Creator who takes an interest in the affairs of men and women is impossible to find.