

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS AND AL SHARPTON

A DEBATE: GOD IS NOT GREAT

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Celeste Bartos Forum

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE From the New York Public Library. I'm sorry to say it again, but I wanted the good Reverend to hear this. My role at the New York Public Library with LIVE programs is to make the lions roar. And I think no better occasion could be than this one—with Al Sharpton here and Christopher Hitchens, I think they will be more than roaring. This whole library will probably be levitating. (**laughter**)

I would encourage you all to join our e-mail list, so that you might find out what we are doing in the future. You may have gotten some announcements. Alma Guillermoprieto will give three lectures on Latin America, starting tomorrow, a lecture on El Mozote Massacre, on May 15th, Carnival and Samba Overlords, on May 22nd, How to be Mexican, An Instruction Manual in Music and Song. On May 24th, I'm sure all of you would like to find out what a wedding is for. And to find out what a wedding is for, you will want to come and hear the excellent writer for the *New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead, who will be in conversation with Henry Alford. What does a wedding industry of a hundred and sixty-one billion

dollars tell us about American life today? I have not a clue. (laughter) On May 25th, you may also want

to join us and join Miranda July as she is together with David Byrne and Becky Stark. Then on June

12th, we will celebrate Vanity Fair's Africa issue, which this year and for the first time is curated and

edited by Bono. On June 16th, come celebrate Sixty Years of Magnum Photographers, and on June 27nd

we will end the year with Günter Grass in conversation with Andrew O'Hagan, but I felt that was not

quite enough so first of all you'll have Günter Grass at seven o'clock, and then at eight-thirty you will

have Norman Mailer, so a double evening, which will probably end at ten o'clock. Tickets will again go

on sale sometime in the first week of June, so you want to join our e-mail list to be able to find out. So

remember Günter Grass and Norman Mailer, they both have something in common with Hitler.

(laughter)

I encourage you all to support LIVE programs. After the event, Christopher Hitchens will sign books.

And before that, you will have the opportunity to ask questions. I insist on the notion of questions, rather

than long comments, and after that you will be able to purchase a book signed by no one else but

Christopher Hitchens.

And now to tonight's smackdown. (laughter) Christopher Hitchens and Al Sharpton. As you know,

Hitchens's book, now out 126 hours, I believe, is ranked third on Amazon. It has a benign title, which

wouldn't attract anybody. God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. I was told that when Al

Sharpton heard the title for the first time, God is Not Great, he said, "Says who?" To serve as umpire

and referee, I have asked Jacob Weisberg, the editor of *Slate*, the free online daily magazine offering

analysis and commentary about politics, news, and culture, to welcome on the stage Christopher

Hitchens and Al Sharpton. I would also like to very quickly thank not only Jacob Weisberg but Cary

Goldstein. I worked with Cary the last time to bring to this library John Hope Franklin and President

Clinton. And now it is my great pleasure to welcome Jacob Weisberg, who will serve as umpire and

referee, and Christopher Hitchens, and the Reverend Al Sharpton.

(applause)

[music: James Brown's "I Feel Good"]

JACOB WEISBERG: The entry music is always terrific here. I'm honored to be doing the officiating this evening. Thank you, Paul, for the introduction. I will be doing the referee's honors without a striped jersey, or a whistle, or red cards, or flags, because these two gentlemen, in addition to being among our most formidable debaters—you may have seen Reverend Sharpton debate already; you may not have seen Christopher Hitchens debate—are gentlemen, and I know will be very civil to each other, although I think they. . .well, I won't hold you back. (laughter) Our format tonight. Christopher is going to start out with a statement of some of the ideas in his book for about five minutes. I'm going to give Reverend Sharpton a chance to respond for about the same length of time. Should they need any prodding, which I seriously doubt, I will provide it, and we will go back and forth for about an hour and then we'll have some time for questions for about twenty minutes or so before we wrap up. We'll go to questions, I think, as soon as debate flags.

To start with, the brief introductions. In this corner, Christopher Hitchens. I would call him the devil's advocate in this debate, but he has actually played that role. If you read his book he recounts a story of when he was invited to the Vatican to argue, pro bono, I believe, *against* sainthood for Mother Teresa. (laughter/applause)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: But the old bitch got it anyway. (laughter)

JACOB WEISBERG: Of course—hold back, hold back. (**laughter**) Of course, to call him "devil's advocate" probably doesn't do him justice because to many people he actually *is* the devil, less because of his views about God than because of his views on the Iraq War, which we may or may not get into this evening. He is the author of, I believe, eighteen distinguished books, including monographs on the subjects of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and George Orwell, a book on Anglo-American relations, I won't go through all of them here, but several of them collect his literary and political essays, which you can read, among other places, in *Vanity Fair*, *Slate*, and *The Atlantic*. Last week he won yet another National Magazine Award for columns and commentary.

In this corner, Reverend Al Sharpton. He is a Pentecostal minister, a civil rights activist, and, as you know, a former presidential candidate. He also has a radio talk show, on which Don Imus recently

appeared so unsuccessfully. (**laughter**) Unlike Christopher Hitchens, he is a man of God. He was ordained as a minister at the age of nine, is that correct?

AL SHARPTON: That is correct.

JACOB WEISBEG: He grew up in Brooklyn and Queens. He has led protests. He led a protest in Vieques, in Puerto Rico, which led to the closing of the American naval base there. He led the protests after the killing of Amadou Diallo by the New York City police. He is, I should say, a leader in the campaign to eliminate homophobia in the black church, and he ran for the senate in 1988, 1992, and 1994. He ran for mayor of New York in 1997 and he ran for president in 2004, making, I should say, the Democratic primaries infinitely more interesting than they would have been otherwise and probably more interesting than they will be this time without him.

Christopher, I would like to start with you. What have you got against God?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Good grief, sir, it hadn't really sunk in on me, that as you were being ordained, when I was nine, I was just getting out of there completely. I was nine when I thought I saw through it, when my biology teacher told me that God was so good as to have made vegetation green because it was the color most restful to our eyes. And I thought, "Mrs. Watts, this is nonsense." I knew nothing about chlorophyll or photosynthesis, nothing about the theory of evolution, nothing about adaptation, nothing of the sort, I just knew she'd got everything all wrong.

And of course the argument against faith, against religion, falls into two essential halves, not necessarily congruent, but I *believe* congruent. The first is it's not true. Religion comes from the infancy of our species—I won't say race, because I don't think our species is subdivided by races—infancy of our species, when we didn't know that the Earth went round the sun, we didn't know that germs caused disease, we didn't know when we were told in Genesis, "you're given dominion over all creatures," that this did not include microorganisms, because we didn't know they were there, so you didn't know they had dominion over *us*. When diseases broke out, it was blamed on wickedness, or sometimes on the Jews, or if it was by Jews, on the Amalekites, or as you will. We didn't know *anything* about the nature of the earth's crust, how it was cooling, earthquakes, storms, all of this were a mystery. Well, we are at

least to that extent, a reasoning species. Even a conspiracy theory is often better than no theory at all. The mind searches for form. We are now stuck with the forms that we found in our infancy, in our primitive, barbaric past.

Well, that could be fine, still, no nation can be without mythology, or myth, or legend. And there are people who say, "Well, it's not exactly true, virgins don't conceive, okay, bushes don't burn forever," though why that would be so impressive, I've never understood (laughter), "dead men don't walk, and so on. Okay, all right, it's not really true, it does come from a rather fearful period of the Dark Ages, but at least it's nice to believe it. It teaches good precepts." This, I think, is very radically untrue.

I give in my book the example, which I'll give you now, of a person very much influential on my youth, and I know on the Reverend's, too, Dr. Martin Luther King. My friend Taylor Branch's book about Dr. King—I would rather call him Doctor than Reverend because I am sorry to say, I think it's a higher title of honor. Taylor Branch's trilogy about him is called *Parting the Waters*, *The Pillar of Fire*, and *At Jordan's Edge*. And everybody literate here knows the story of Exodus and understands what Dr. King meant when he demanded that his people be free of bondage, but if you think about it for a second, it's a very good thing that the good doctor was only using this metaphorically. If he'd really been invoking the lessons of Genesis and Exodus, he would have been saying that his people had the right to kill anyone who stood in their way, to exterminate all other tribes, to mutilate their children's genitalia, to make slaves of those they captured, to take the land and property of others, to engage in rather long and hideous and elaborate arguments about ox-goring and, finally, which, this is the sentence that ends that—or the verse that ends that section of the book, "should not suffer a witch to live," the warrant for witch-burning.

In other words, in these books there are the warrants for genocide, for slavery, for the torture of children for disobedience, for genital mutilation, for annexation, for rape, and all the rest of it. That it's a very *good* thing that this is manmade. There are those who say that they wish they could believe. I suppose a decent atheist could say that if only for lack of evidence, he wishes he or she could. I can't be among their number. I'm very glad it is not true that there is a permanent, unshakeable, unchallengeable celestial supervision, a divine North Korea (**laughter**) in which no privacy, no liberty, is possible from the moment of conception not just until the moment of death but until well after. I've been to North

Korea, and now I know what a prayerful state would look like. I know what it would be like to praise God from dawn till dusk. I've seen it happen, and it's the most disgusting and depressing and pointless and soulless thing you can picture, but at least with North Korea you can die and you can leave. (laughter)

Christianity won't let you do that. Because I mentioned another thing about the Old Testament. The Old Testament may have—and any Jews and Christians who like it may like this, too. They may have genocide, rape, racism, all the rest of the things I've mentioned, but it never mentions punishment of the dead. When you're done, when you're in the mass grave into which you've been thrown as an Amalikite, it's over. Not until gentle Jesus meek and mild is the concept of Hell introduced. Eternal torture, eternal punishment, for you and all your family for the smallest transgression. I have no hesitation in saying this is a wicked belief. I also have no hesitation in saying, and I mustn't trespass on the Reverend's time, that we don't need it in two senses. One is it's wicked. Two we have and always have had a much superior tradition. We know that Democritus and Epicurus worked out in ancient Athens, the world was made of atoms, that the gods did not exist, and certainly took no interest in human affairs and would be foolish to do so and would be wicked if they did. We have a tradition that brings us through Galileo and Spinoza and Thomas Paine and Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson and Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein. Men of great wisdom and insight, by all means struck by the aweinspiring character of our universe, by all means open to devotional music and architecture and poetry, by all means aware of the transcendent, but look through the Hubble Telescope if you want to see something that is awe-inspiring, and don't look to bloodstained old myths.

Now, why now? Why am I doing this now, people ask. Well, I'll tell you why now, because in the last few years it's become impossible to turn a page of a newspaper without being, as the religious would say, offended. (laughter) In other words, I don't think I sound self-pitying if I say that I'm offended that a cartoonist in a tiny democratic country in Scandinavia, Denmark, can't do his job without a death threat, and that no American magazine or newspaper would reprint those cartoons, either to elucidate the question or in solidarity. I'm offended that civil society in Iraq is being destroyed, leveled, by the parties of God. I'm offended that people in this country believe that they have the right to advocate the teaching of garbage to children under the fatuous name of "intelligent design." (applause) I believe that where—oh, I thought you'd never clap. (laughter) Just as I believe that where religion ends, philosophy begins;

where alchemy ends, chemistry begins; where astrology ends, astronomy begins and now would the

people say, well let's give equal time to astrology in the schools? It's nonsense, dangerous and sinister

and nonsense. The Pope says, "AIDS may be bad, but condoms are much worse." What kind of moral

teaching is this, and how many people are going to die for such dogma? (applause) You see what I

mean. I'll be very brief. There's an end to this, an end particularly to the cultural fringe that says that if

someone can claim to be a religious spokesman, they are entitled to respect. I have to say it in your

presence, sir, I think that the title Reverend is something people should be more concerned to live down

than to live up to. Thank you.

(applause)

JACOB WEISBERG: Thank you. We will get back to some of that. But Reverend Sharpton, in your

rebuttal, would you take a moment to correct Christopher on his misconception that religion was

somehow incidental to the civil rights movement?

AL SHARPTON: That's *all* you want me to rebut?

(laughter)

JACOB WEISBERG: No, just cover that, please.

AL SHARPTON: First of all, thank you for inviting me to have this debate. It is the first time in my

long career that I was not assumed to be the devil in a debate. (laughter) It's an unusual place for me on

this stage, so I couldn't turn down representing God and the Divine in a public encounter. But I think

that several things in rebutting what Brother Hitchens says—you don't have a problem with living up or

down to being brother, do you?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Damn right. . .I take it kindly. (laughter)

AL SHARPTON: You make a very interesting analysis of how people use or misuse God, but you

made no argument about God Himself, and by attacking the quote wicked unquote use of God does not

at all address the existence of God or nonexistence of God. We are sitting in a room that because of lights, we assume that there is electricity in the building. Electricity can light up a room or burn it down. It does not mean electricity does not exist because it burns the building down or that it is inherently wicked, it is how people use it. So, clearly, people have misused God as they've misused other things that are possibly positive, but its existence is not in any way proven or disproven by you giving a long diatribe on those that have mishandled and misused God, because there are many that you can cite that have acted in a way that shows the goodness of God.

Your book *God is Not Great* could be refuted by many that feel He is great, or She is great, whatever way you relate to God. Science, to me, does not wipe away the existence of God, because science had to start somewhere, so to pick up mankind in its evolving state does not tell me where mankind began, how it became a long story of ordered steps, or who ordered them. Why do things follow such a natural progression? Who set the progress? And in fact even the term "wicked." If there is no God and if there is no supreme mechanism that governs the world, what makes right right or what makes wrong wrong? Why don't we just go by whoever's the strongest at any given period in history, because nothing is wicked, because whoever's in power at the time would determine what is wicked and what is not wicked, because there is no real moral code because there's nobody to judge that. So at one hand we're going to argue God doesn't exist, and on the other hand we're going to call people "wicked." Wicked according to who and according to what? It would be based on whoever has the power at that time.

So I think the real thing that I'm interested in, Mr. Hitchens, is to really discuss the idea of God and the idea of a supreme being and how creatures and Creation have just by some great coincidence, an unexplained scheme, followed some order that just happened by itself, something, some force, some overruling force, had to set all of that pattern in and it continues thousands of years later. Can you give a million examples of where people have misused that, where they've distorted it, where in the name of God, or North Korea, or other tragedies have happened, yes. In terms of the civil rights movement, it was absolutely fueled by a belief in God and a belief in right or wrong. And had not there been this belief that there was a right and a wrong, the civil rights movement that you alluded to or that you referred to would not have existed. Because what *made* it wrong for people to be slaves? What made it wrong for humans to be treated unequally, because there was nobody to say that they were all equal, it was whoever had the strength. But at the end what is refreshing is that you are a man of *faith*, because

any man, that at this date still has faith that there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has more faith than any religious person I know.

(laughter/applause)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Very well, that's a very generous response. Do you mind if I take it in reverse order? The belief that there were weapons of mass destruction—or rather, the *conviction* that Saddam Hussein was interested in weapons of mass destruction, you could, I suppose, describe as an argument from design. In other words, he'd had them before, he'd known how to conceal them, he'd used them several times, he seems to be prepared to risk his entire political career on the idea of reacquiring them, I would say that was not a belief that had no evidence, and I would say that anyone who treated him as if he was innocent on the subject would be a *sap*, actually, would be my short word for it.

Second, on the civil rights movement, I expected you to be more assertive. I don't know what Dr. King's private convictions about religion were. I know that he studied Hegel, I know that he studied Marx, I know that among his very close entourage were a large number of secular socialists and communists, you know their names, too. Stanley Levinson is probably the best known, but among the black civil rights leadership, Bayard Rustin, secular socialist, Philip Randolph, secular socialist trade union leader, these were the building blocks for the March on Washington, as was Victor Reuther and many others. I don't—the belief that it is *illegal* as well as *evil* to keep black Americans in subjection does not require any supernatural endorsement. It had been proved repeatedly in law and in morality and in ethics, and demonstrated in practice. The only thing that has always been consistently justified by the churches was initially slavery, the right to hold someone as a slave, biblically warranted, and the right to keep the races separate, which is endorsed by a church that's—just to give a contemporary example—one of the current candidates for the Republican nomination is a member of a church, the so-called Mormon Church of Latter-Day Saints, that until 1965 had it as an article of faith that the Bible separates the sons of Ham and makes them lesser. I don't have to disparage a text like that because I don't think it has any authority. So in a sense, I return the question to you.

Now, I didn't say that God was misused. I hope I wasn't so poorly understood by everybody. I said that the idea of God is a dictatorial one to begin with, the belief in a supreme, eternal, invigilating Creator who knows what you think, and what you do, and cares about it, and will reward or punish you and watches you while you sleep, is I think a horrific belief, and a man-made one fortunately, I'm very glad there's no evidence for it. Let me, in case I was understood, let me assert again. I think it's *innately* an awful belief. However, the cleverest theologian, and there have been some, has never been able to demonstrate that such a person exists. It's impossible to do so. It's not possible, either, for me to demonstrate conclusively that *no* such person exists. That cannot be done, either.

But one thing *can* be done. A person who claims not to know only that this person exists—a task beyond our brain—but who claim to know his or her, I accept your correction, Reverend, mind, to say, I know, because I'm in holy orders, what this entity wants you to do, what he wants you to eat, who he wants you to go to bed with, and *how* he wants you to go to bed with them, what you may read, and what associations in private you may form, what thoughts you may have. That person is out of the argument now, it seems to me. We know that no one knows that. So the claim made by the religious that they know God and they know his mind and they can tell us what to do in his name is, I think, exploded.

Further, it is not argued by my side, at any rate, and by no one I know on it, that our presence here on the planet is something that is susceptible of the smooth, logical, reasonable explanation. To the contrary. We are still very much in doubt about precisely how we came to be human and to separate ourselves from some of our common ancestors. We also know that of the species that have been on this small planet in this tiny solar system, since the beginning of measurable time, of the number that were ever in existence, more than 98.9 percent have become extinct. A certain solipsism, I think, is required to believe that we, as a result, as a species are somehow the center of the creative cosmos. This is not modesty, as the Christians call it, it's not humility, it's an *unbelievably* arrogant claim to make. But at least it makes up for the other claim we're supposed to put with, which is well, yes, but we're also miserable sinners conceived in filth and doomed to abject our self. Both of these positions are too extreme, too strenuous, too fanatical. Both of them reinforce each other in unpleasant ways and both should be outgrown by us. Voila.

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: I think you probably had a bad Sunday school teacher, (laughter) because a lot of what you're saying is based on dogma and has nothing to do with one's belief in a supreme being. You're discussing again religions, dogmas, denominations, not the existence or nonexistence of God. I'm glad to hear you concede you can't prove He or She doesn't exist any more than you claim that those that believe— (microphone feedback) Are you going to claim that that's God speaking on my behalf? Or the devil, which you choose. But I think that, again, the basic core question of God goes way beyond any example, no matter how witty or humorous, of those that come in God's name because it is the dictates of denominations or organized religious groups that tell you what to eat and what to wear and who to sleep with and all of that—that has nothing to do with the existence of an order to the universe that is clear and evident. That science, I think, confirms that it evolved from somewhere—that's how I relate to God.

To your point, however, since I wasn't assertive enough in the first going forward and I think one guy said that the other night in Vegas, and Mayweather got more assertive, he won the fight, so watch out on that. But I'll get a little more assertive. Dr. King's organization of Brother Hitchens's name was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, so there's no question that he himself saw that the basis of the movement was God-based. Did he have some socialists that did not believe in God that associated with the movement? Absolutely. But they joined SCLC's endeavors after SCLC was formed. In fact, SCLC was formed in 1957 in New Orleans before many of them that organized the March on Washington. When Bayard Rustin, who I knew, went down South, his problem was he debated a lot with the ministers there who was the core of that group. So to try and secularize the civil rights movement is just totally inaccurate. It was a church-based, faith-based movement, there is no question about that. And Dr. King before, way before he studied Hegel and the rest, he grew up in Ebenezer Baptist Church, was an ordained minister. First went to Morehouse and then Crozier Theological Seminary, then went to Boston to study those that you have referred to. So let's not reinvent Dr. King any more than we try to reduce God to some denominational convention, and as for the one Mormon running for office, those that really believe in God will defeat him anyway, so don't worry about that that's a temporary situation. (laughter)

But I think the core, the core challenge that I would have is that I would say to you that if your argument

is that there are those that have used religion as in slavery or as even today to oppress people and use

religion to be unfair to people or have misinterpreted scriptures, you would get no debate from me. I

think that is a fact of history, and one that many of us have had to fight against. That still does not

disqualify God, any more than using anything in nature that is wrong, to say that one eats food that is

poisoned does not mean one should therefore starve because food is inherently bad. I think you're

confusing the misuse of religion with the existence of God. There are those that have no religious

affiliations at all that believe in God. There are people that don't deal with organized church at all that

still believe in God, so when you say "God is not great," let's not then debate "organized religion is not

great," or "some that have exploited organized religion is not great." You, in the title of your book—and

I have had a chance to go through your book—attack God, not those that express that they are therefore

standing in God's place or representing God.

And in your whole oratory about weapons of mass destruction, and he thought he had it and all of that.

When we found him he was in a rat trap with a .22 pistol—he knew he didn't have any weapons of mass

destruction because no one—as one that comes out of the hood—no one that has atom bombs would just

retreat with a .22 and wait on the cavalry.

(laughter/applause)

JACOB WEISBERG: Any order you like.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I think I'd better stick to the reverse order. That's why a very good

time to attack him was before he would get back what he'd lost by way of WMD—he didn't have any

then and he wasn't going to get them back, either, any more than he was going to improve his relations

with Al Qaeda. They were as good as they were ever going to get, and that was fine by me. Maybe an

argument for another time, but, believe me, I'm not reluctant to have it. Then we're of one mind,

essentially, I mean, after all, I did not deny what's common knowledge, that Dr. Martin Luther King was

the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and was indeed of the Ebenezer Baptist Church—

AL SHARPTON: I thought you said you didn't know his beliefs—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: No, no, I said I do not, I *cannot* say to you that I know that he was a believing Christian, no, I cannot, and neither can you say that to me, any more than we seem to be of one mind on this, too, that neither of us can prove or disprove the existence of God. The difference is between us that I don't say that I am an ordained minister, I don't think I could push it that far. (**laughter**) Since you're evidently an agnostic, which is a confession that I'm very welcome to have—not extracted from you—but heard you make. (**laughter**)

Now, here's the question. You say that these texts are misused, I say that they are *not*. The Old Testament says or does not say that Abraham was doing a noble thing by offering to sacrifice a son to prove himself loyal to God, or to the voices he was hearing in his head. It says that it was a noble thing for him to do, he was rewarded for it by a great posterity and a great long life. Offering to murder his son because of hearing voices in his head—this is not moral teaching to me. Is it not the case that the Old Testament says that the Amalekites must all be destroyed, down to the last child. Every one among them. Leave not one—yes, it does say that. The Bishop of Llandaff, in an argument with Thomas Paine, once said, "Well, when it says keep the women," as Paine had pointed out, he said, "I'm sure God didn't mean just to keep them for immoral purposes," but what does the Bishop of Llandaff know about that? It says, "Kill all the men, kill all the children, and keep the virgins." I think I know what they had in mind. I don't think it's moral teaching. (laughter)

To this day there are nut-bag settlers, some Israeli citizens, some of them Americans, some of them Israeli Americans, trying to settle the West Bank, in the name of this prophecy, throw other people off their land, and establish a theocracy that will bring on the Messiah and they hope Armageddon and the end of the world. Well, I think the United States Supreme Court should hear argument that not one American dime can be used constitutionally for that project. Okay? It's high time. Cut it off. (applause) These people mean to—these people mean us *real* harm, and I'm not going to dilate about what their Muslim brothers say about us. When the—the Qur'an does not say that you may be killed for changing your religion, but the Ha'dith, the so-called sayings of the Prophet, which are taken just as seriously, do say that. So when someone says, "I'm a Muslim, and I'm telling you, Mr. Rushdie, if you apostatize from this faith, you're dead," he's not misquoting the texts, sir, he's not. He's quoting them accurately. I think—I'm going to phrase it as understated as I can—I think we could do without a lot of this.

JACOB WEISBERG: Christopher—

AL SHARPTON: No, let me respond to that, I think again . . .

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I think "enough already" would cover a lot of this stuff.

AL SHARPTON: . . . again, you are debating points I didn't make. I said you keep confusing the

existence of God again with religious denominational beliefs. I'm not debating whether—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: They're not—are they separable?

AL SHARPTON: Yes, very much so.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, fine.

AL SHARPTON: I think that you're quoting the Bible. If you said everything in the Bible you rejected,

you still have not established why a belief in God—maybe a belief in God through that vehicle may be

your debate, but you're not addressing God. You're talking Qur'an, Bibles, people's interpretation of

God. That is not my debate. My debate with your book is that you're saying, "therefore, since they did

this to—since Abraham was going to murder his son, there is no God." That's like 1 + 2 = 7. I mean,

we're not—sure, Abraham may have been incorrect, if that's your point, or what they did with the

Amalekites, or what's going on the Middle East. What does that have to do with the existence of a

universe that is set on an order that I believe was set by a supreme being that continues to evolve today

that I think science has done a credible job in analyzing.

Now, you can debate which one of the Bibles, Qur'ans, religious books may have had it right or

interpreted it right, but that does not address the central question. You, sir, did not attack the Christian

church or the Muslim religion, or the Pope, you attacked God, and to attack God is a whole lot—you hit

here and you debate here. Let's talk about God. Let's not talk about those that came in His name and

you have some maybe credible arguments against whether or not you felt that they were correct or

incorrect, and again, I raise as I did in my opening statement—who decides what is wicked, what is right, what is ethical? If there's nothing there that governs humanity, whatever's ethical is whatever we decide is ethical, 'cause we're in charge. It's all up to us.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Okay, once again, in reverse order if I may. Religion gets its morality from us, I think it's very easy to demonstrate that. I do it from one from each of the two Testaments.

AL SHARPTON: You're back on Testaments. Why don't you write a book *Testaments are Not Great*?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I spent a lot of time with my, I spend a lot of time with my Bible, okay, my Bible, I do.

AL SHARPTON: I told you you had a bad Sunday school teacher.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: —or the Bable, as they call it in Dixie—I do. In the—there's a very famous parable in the New Testament where the alleged Jesus of Nazareth tells a story about a man from Samaria, we call him the Good Samaritan, who finding a fellow creature in enormous distress and pain, goes well out of his way to alleviate his suffering and to follow up to make sure that his sympathy hasn't been a waste of time, to do the aftercare, if you like. Well, we know one thing about this person from Samaria. He cannot have been a Christian. Jesus is telling this story about someone he's heard of, who acted, as far as we know, from no other prompting than elementary human solidarity. What other prompting do we need? Our species would not have survived. We wouldn't be met here if we didn't have, as well as many selfish instincts, the need—and often for our own sake—to be of use to others, to combine with them, to take an interest in them, to care for them, and to worry when they're in pain. No supernatural authority, as with the civil rights movement, is required for this. Morality comes from us, religion claims to have invented it on our behalf.

Then, okay, another example from the older Testament. Is it really to be believed that, until they got to the foot of Mount Sinai, the followers of Moses believed that up till then, adultery, murder, theft, and perjury were okay? (applause) They're suddenly told, "Hey, we've got some new ideas for you." I don't think so. It's a bit of an insult to the ancient Jewish faith, of which Jacob and I are both rather

disgraceful ornaments in our different ways. (laughter) I think our ancestors were smarter than that, and

even if they weren't smarter, they wouldn't have got that far if they'd been under the contrary

impression. The Golden Rule is something you don't have to teach a child. There's no need to say, "And

if you don't follow this rule, you'll burn in Hell forever." That's immoral teaching. Now I hope I have

made myself clear, but I'm wondering if I have because you face me, Reverend, with two very

unwelcome thoughts. Either I have been completely inarticulate in everything I've said this evening or

you have misunderstood me.

AL SHARPTON: Or both.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I have to throw myself—Or, these are not mutually exclusive, and I

should have seen that coming.

(laughter)

AL SHARPTON: Have faith, sir, you will do better.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I thought I said with common ground we cannot know there was a

Creator, whether of ourselves or of our cosmos. You may wish to assume one, but that's the best you

can do. The evidence is all that the cosmos evolved, and the evidence that there was a single mind,

purposeful creator of it, is nil. No evidence for that at all. By all means believe it, as long as you don't

try to make me believe it or teach it to my children.

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: Well, let me say—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: On that I have to insist, because that's not a difference of opinion.

AL SHARPTON: I will meet you on common ground there, but I would say that many people, I among

them, in our own lives, have had experiences that make me believe that there is a God and make me

believe that my seeking God and seeking the guidance of a supreme being is real to me. I'm not going by Moses, I'm not going by Peter, I'm not going by the man that you said was allegedly Jesus of Nazareth. I'm talking about in people's personal experiences with their interaction through their own faith with God can say that, that you or no one else can tell me that did not exist. If I was only sitting up here arguing with you over scriptures then you would have points that I would consider valid to this discussion. But I'm not here to defend scriptures. I didn't write those scriptures. I lived my life and in my life the existence of God has been confirmed to me in my own personal dealings and my own faith being vindicated and validated that had absolutely nothing to do with scriptures whether they were right or wrong.

And again I pose the question: When you raise the issue of morality, if there is no supervisory being, then what do we base morality on? Is it based on who has the might at any given time? Who's in power? What is morality based on if there is no order to the universe and therefore some being, some force that ordered it, then who determines what is right or wrong, what is moral or immoral? You use very religious terms interchangeably while you attack the idea of a God. There is nothing immoral if there is nothing in charge because everything becomes moral if in fact the species as we are is all there is. We'll determine. Let's decide every four years what's moral. Most Republicans do. (laughter) But I mean, let's do it in the sense of—let's just say, "Forget all of that, we'll decide morality based on every period of time because there is nothing up there governing it anyway." And you don't have to burn in Hell to understand that life has certain guiding posts that has been set there well beyond your own being, and I think to think that the whole world was waiting on one's birth, your birth or mine, or death to set the framework of morality, I think that is very arrogant. It's also delusional, but it is very arrogant at best.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Again in reverse order.

AL SHARPTON: Don't look for help from the referee. I'm over here.

(laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I incline in your direction, sir. Said it before. Very suggestive thing that you just said. If there was no one in charge how would we know how to act morally? This is indeed

a very profound observation. It's said in—it's argued by Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, he said, "Without God, anything is permissible." Some people believe that. Some people believe that without the fear of divine total surveillance and supervision, everyone would do exactly as they wished, and we would all be wolves to each other. I think there's an enormous amount of evidence that that's not the case, that morality is innate in us and solidarity is part of our self-interest in society as well as our own interests. And very much to the—argue the contrary, when you see something otherwise surprising to you, such as a good person acting in a wicked manner, it's very often because they believe they are under divine orders to do so. Steven Weinberg puts it very well. He says, "Left to themselves, evil people will do evil things and good people will try and do good things. If you want a good person to do a wicked thing, that takes religion. (laughter/applause)

For example, I don't believe, I simply do not believe, I do not believe that my Palestinian friends I've known for years think that to blow yourself up outside an orphanage is a moral act, or inside one, is a moral act, or in an old people's home in Netanya is a moral action, that anything in their nature makes them think this but their mullahs tell them that it is. And that the person doing this is a hero. I do not think that any person looking at a newborn baby would think, "How wonderful. What a gift. But now just let's start sawing away at his genitalia with a sharp stone." Who would give them that idea if not the godly? And what kind of argument from design is this? "Babies are not born beautiful. They're born ugly, they need to be sawn a bit, because the handiwork of God is such garbage." Well, honestly, this is what I mean when I saw that those who think there's any connection between ethics and religion have their all work still ahead of them and after thousands of years still have it all ahead of them more and more. There.

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: So you do not believe—so you do not believe, in your long and thorough research of history, that atheists ever did anything evil? These are only religious people that were driven by somebody representing God that made them do that and people that came in Satanic ways—all of that is rubbish. Only religious people reading scriptures of some sort have done wicked things in the history of the world?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I should have raised that question myself and I realize also—

AL SHARPTON: But you didn't, so I did, so let's . . . (laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: But I've never yet been at one of these meetings where it didn't come up. But I owe you yet another answer. When you say you've had this confirming emotion in your own life, of course I would not be so presumptuous as to challenge you. Indeed I believe people when they say that they have experienced miracles. I believe that they think that they have. I think I'm obliged to credit them if it comes to that. As long as they keep it to—if you like, if I can put it like this, modestly as I dare—to themselves. (laughter) If I believe that I was saved because once a baby boy was born and before mutilated had—it was made the extraordinary discovery that he had escaped the female birth canal, mother was a virgin, or at least that her birth canal was only one way. (laughter) And that thus I was—a sorry thing, by the way, religion's distaste for these regions don't you find? (laughter) And something to put you on your guard.

Suppose I thought, "Okay, now I know that. That must prove his teachings are true," which it doesn't seem to me that they do, but suppose I did, and I'm going to be saved by it. I'd think that was a wonderful secret. It would make me happy. It should make me happy, it doesn't make people happy. They can't be happy until I believe it, too. My children must be taught this stuff. No, sir, no, ma'am, no day, no way, no shape, no form. You keep your illusion private, and I hope it does make you happy. And there's perhaps some reason why it would. But we're told—the Pope's authority to say you can't have a condom comes from his ability to certify a miracle, a disturbance in the natural order. I think it was David Hume who put it slightly vulgarly, this was again about the virgin birth, I think, "Which is more likely, that the whole natural order is suspended or that a Jewish minx should tell a lie?" (laughter) There has to be an answer to this kind of question.

As to the secular bad behavior. Well. I used to be a believing Marxist. I've had this argument about Communism in different forms all my life. And I realize this is a very, you confront me with an intensely serious question and though actually secular criminality on the political level wasn't really possible until pretty much the late eighteenth century because the religious monopoly on violence and cruelty and torture and slavery and so on was so intense. (laughter) It has to be said that some of my

nonbelieving forebears seized the opportunity to behave the same way, sure, there's no question about it. And I'll put it like this.

To take the best-known case, up until 1917 the Czar of Russia was not just the absolute ruler and owner of all of Russia and all the Russian people and everything in it but he was also the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was considered by the church and the people to be something a little more than divine—excuse me, a little more than human. Not as high as Hirohito, but a bit higher than the Pope in secular and temporal power. If you were Stalin, you'd be crazy if didn't take advantage of a people who had centuries of indoctrination of that kind. Of course you would want to see if you couldn't replicate that and to see about reproducing it, emulating it, trading on it, taking advantage of it. You'd be nuts if you didn't do it. So the answer, I think, which is a very long process, will be a long cultural process is to try to move people up to a cultural and intellectual level where they are above that kind of appeal, where they're not credulous, where they don't take things on faith, where they don't make gods or idols or images out of anybody including fellow human beings and they learn the pleasures of thinking for themselves. How about that for a modest proposal?

(applause)

JACOB WEISBERG: I'd like to use my referee's power to ask you each a question before we open it to the audience for questions. Christopher, my question for you, taking up the cudgels a little bit for Reverend Sharpton. You keep coming back to various forms of biblical literalism. The Reverend, somewhat to my surprise, has not defended anything in the Bible and asks, quite reasonably, what is your problem with deism? You've written about Paine, Jefferson, you write in your book about Einstein and Darwin, who are arguably deists in a way. What is—since you say yourself you can't prove God doesn't exist, what is your problem with faith divorced from religious texts or literalism?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, religion is not the belief that there is a God, after all, religion is the belief that God tells you what to do. So if we are to talk about religion, we are not talking—theism believes in the existence of a creating being, but it has no prescriptions for morality. You cannot, a theist, cannot say, "I think that this universe is so well designed that it implies a creator, therefore, don't be going to bed with another member of the same sex." (**laughter**) Theism—deism, excuse me, did I say

theism that time? Deism, excuse me, is therefore not a religion. This is a first for me. I've never yet met someone in holy orders who has said that the words of the holy books have nothing to do with God. I know there's a lot of laxity in the churches these days, (laughter) and I've been trying to encourage it, but I mean it seems to me I could have been pushing at a slightly more well-defended door.

Jefferson, who was, who could have been a great paleontologist, a great botanist, who was, in fact, all of these things, couldn't shake the feeling that the sheer order and beauty of it implied something, but he had these great discussions with his French counterparts. "How come the shells, the seashells, you find them so high up on the mountaintops. What is that?" He had no idea. He died after 1819. The great day in 1819 is the day that Mr. Lincoln is born and Mr. Darwin is born, same day. I know which one of them was the greater emancipator, too. Jefferson couldn't see as far, we just didn't have the horizon. Now you can hold to deist belief if you choose, if you like, but the overwhelming evidence is that we *do* have an explanation for the origins of the species, ours and all others. And that each new discovery made, however, in however remote a part of the earth's surface in paleontology will confirm or not confute or not contradict the body of knowledge that we have so painstakingly erected. So everything else adding to that is a work of what the Church of England used to call supererogation, it's needless. It's unnecessary. Occam's razor disposes painlessly of it. It's gone, it's history.

JACOB WEISBERG: Turning to you, Reverend Sharpton, for a moment. I was expecting you to—I think you very eloquently made a version of the argument from design. You have argued of an idea of spirituality, but you haven't defended the Bible at all. I mean, isn't that what you do from the pulpit?

AL SHARPTON: Well, maybe I read the wrong book. I did not get the book that Hitchens wrote, *The Bible is Not Great*. I didn't get a copy of the book that *Religion is Not Great*. He said *God is Not Great* and I have yet, after several inquiries here tonight, get him to address that and when I read his book and hear him talk he makes a case against everything other than God. Maybe the name of the book should have been: *God is Not Great, I Don't Think*, or *You Have the Right to Think He's Great, If You Just Don't Tell Me*. (laughter) That might have been a more appropriate title. But I'm waiting for him to establish that God, not King James, not Muhammad, not Jerry Falwell, God is not great. So to ask me to defend who I have no personal relationship with, no belief in, is—I'm in the wrong debate. I think that we can then agree that as long as I don't bother the sedate, scholarly world of Mr. Hitchens that I can

believe in my God and he's fine, and I'm fine with that, because I am certainly not trying to convert Mr.

Hitchens, I'm just trying to have him understand that he cannot impose upon me how I relate to God by

quoting things that I may or may not believe anyway.

(applause)

JACOB WEISBERG: I'm afraid we're not going to have any conversions tonight, and I wasn't

expecting any, although you never know if Christopher is going to start speaking in tongues before

we're done. Let's take some questions from the audience. There is—

Q: Is it working? Thank you very much. Gentlemen, thank you very much for the discussion. This

question is for Mr. Hitchens. Based on your prior writings, based on most recently a *Time Out* interview

with you in which you claimed that the only time you ever prayed to God was for an erection,

(laughter) I'm going to ask you this question.

AL SHARPTON: Was that a miracle?

(laughter)

Q: The question, Mr. Hitchens, is—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: What people usually want to know was: "Was the prayer answered?"

Q: Not me, baby. (laughter) Should we normal, sane Americans continue to be so bedazzled by a

bespokes, off-cam superficialist who just wants the U.S. to pick up the many disastrous pieces of the

British Empire and whose understanding of God is much shorter than his penis?

(audience chatter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I don't mind . . .

JACOB WEISBERG: Assuming that that was not a question, let's try another one.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: But I thought it was, it sounded interrogative. I don't want anyone to think I'm dodging anything, is all.

(laughter)

Q: It might be difficult for me to follow up that one. Correct me if I'm wrong, in the beginning of the talk—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Oh, we will, we will.

Q: You expressed antipathy towards deism in principle.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Slow down, I can't hear a word you're saying.

AL SHARPTON: I can't either.

Q: In the beginning of the talk you expressed antipathy towards deism in principle, predicated along this particular interpretation of God as a supreme dictator and judge. Is that correct?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: That would be correct, yes.

Q: Now, if I could play devil's advocate for God for a moment. Could you appreciate a God who watches us and our actions eagerly and with great interest because he created a world where everything is permitted?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Yes, I can picture it, but I'm not without horror.

(laughter)

Q: Hi Christopher, my name is Linda Selbie, I came from Toronto for this.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: This isn't about my penis, is it? (laughter)

Q: No. I wanted to ask you in light of the number of intellectuals and well-educated people and Templeton Prize winners, that invoke the names of Richard Dawkins, you, and others who are speaking out and liberating us right now. Are they deluded, dishonest, or emotionally dysfunctional? And may I also ask with regards to your book you mention that at age nine that you realized that you might have been an atheist but yet had two religious weddings, one Greek Orthodox and then Jewish. Why did you do that? When my second wedding came along, I went for the justice of the peace in a real estate office under a stuffed trout.

AL SHARPTON: Now I got the problem. Two failed marriages and one failed erection, you gave up on God.

(laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: You still don't know. You still don't know how that prayer was answered, Reverend. That's what you might call a premature ejaculation on your part.

(laughter)

AL SHARPTON: Not if I had Mary to give me witness.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I'm sorry but I only have one ex-wife, and not even she in her most adamant moments would describe our marriage as failed. I will say this, by the way, hoping to encourage anyone here who might be ever in any difficulty. If you've had a child with someone, you never can really be divorced from them. And she and I are very proud of our children and they are rather happy with us. It's a pity we couldn't get along better, but—anyway, don't let me get too husky about this. On with the show, skipping lightly over the genitalia. (laughter)

Isaac Newton, Isaac Newton was a spiritualist as far as we know, he seems to have believed in a number of weird and crackpotted theories. Joseph Priestley, the great Unitarian and rationalist and defender of the American Revolution forced to flee from England to Philadelphia, after the monarchists and Tories burned his laboratory, discoverer of oxygen, believed in the Phlogiston theory, the most exploded theory that we know of. You'll find the coincidence, or coexistence of, superstition and mania of all kinds with great scientific achievement, all over the place. Walter Isaacson's brilliant book on Einstein, which I've been reading this month, said that the only Nobel prizewinner then in Germany, in physics, Einstein's great enemy, the man who didn't want Einstein to get tenure, believed that there was such a thing as Aryan physics and Jewish physics, for example. It's actually not really till Einstein that you get not just pure science but pure reason very nearly united in the same mind, as near as you're probably likely to get.

There may now be people who are real physicists. Fred Hoyle was actually one of them, the late Fred Hoyle, the man who believed in steady state and disbelieved what he contemptuously called the Big Bang was also a man of odd, intermittent faith. It doesn't matter. What you could not do is say that your evidence as a physicist or a biologist supported your private religious beliefs, it would be a coincidence. Whereas if you are Richard Dawkins the coherence between what you have found and what you've contributed to science and the extreme unlikelihood of the existence of any God is pretty striking. I hope that's clear.

Q: First of all I have no interest in anyone's sex life. Sorry. My question goes upon your response—why do so many people seem to feel such a deep need to believe things which are obviously untrue? Homeopathy, angels, UFOs, you name it. All the claptrap which fills endless magazines, television shows, etcetera?

JACOB WEISBERG: As I understood the question, it was essentially why is there such a persistent need for faith, why do so many people continue to believe if Christopher argues that the species has evolved beyond the need for it? Is that your question?

Q: Well, not quite. What is the fundamental attraction of the illogical?

AL SHARPTON: Is what?

JACOB WEISBERG: Say it again?

Q: What is the fundamental attraction of the illogical?

JACOB WEISBERG: Is it—

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Of the illogical. Yeah, I understand.

JACOB WEISBERG: Are people drawn to religion because they're drawn to superstition and things

that aren't logical?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, you first.

AL SHARPTON: Let's go in reverse.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: All right. Then, well, there's a poem by Philip Larkin called "Church Going," which I hope anyone here who has not read—this sentence is going nowhere. I hope anyone

who hasn't read that poem will let me do them a favor and look it up for themselves before this time

tomorrow, which would perfectly express my point of view. It's a wonderful statement by the greatest

English poet of this period about the experience of visiting a church, not wanting to be able to believe,

but not being able to dismiss the seriousness, the history, the tradition, the beauty of it. I couldn't do

without the poems of George Herbert or John Donne, either, which are strictly devotional poems. I think

you could fake being a devotional painter. You could be a painter who didn't believe in God and pretend

you did for patronage. You couldn't fake being John Donne or George Herbert. I couldn't do without

their work, I couldn't do without Gothic architecture or devotional music, either.

I wouldn't trust anyone who did, or who had no feeling for this, and people who don't know what the

numinous and the transcendent feel like, who don't experience anything—combinations of landscape

and music and poetry and also the melancholy of one's own life, the realization that we're going to die,

and that our children actually need us to do so, other melancholy reflections of this kind are to that extent, not poetic, not human, not literary, not civilized, but the supernatural adds to this absolutely zero, it seems to me, and in some ways subtracts from its grandeur and its seriousness. So I'm one of those who Pascal is actually thinking about, or was thinking about, when he wrote. He wrote to the person who is so made that he cannot believe. There are millions of us. There always have been. There are now, there are going to be many more of us in the future. We're just a little bit fed up of being treated like freaks in American culture.

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: I, for my belief, do not believe that everyone believes in things that are illogical. I think that, and there are different theologians that approach it differently. I guess the closest, well not exactly where I am, but Paul Tillich, that talks about a personal God, would be going in the direction that I believe. I believe in my own experiences, in my own relationship with God, and that is not based on any illogical, unbelievable act. I do not believe things that are necessarily part of dogma, and I think that Richard, you, or whoever, has the right to disbelieve it without being a freak, but I don't think that I am a freak that believes in illogical things because I believe that the reason the world operates in a certain order is because there is a supreme force that ordered it. And I don't think that—I happen to agree with Richard that I think religion has been one of the misused things in history, but I don't think that has anything to do with the existence or nonexistence of God, I think that has something to do with man's misuse or use of what is absolutely there, and that is a supreme being.

JACOB WEISBERG: Thank you. We have a lot of questions. Let's get through as many as we can. Sir.

Q: I wonder if you both might comment on this. In an age when there is so much, as Mr. Hitchens would put it, wonderful secular knowledge, that should disprove or replace the value or the importance of religion, all the modern knowledge that we have, why is it that in so much of the world religion is growing rapidly. In the global South, particularly, evangelical Christianity is growing at a tremendous rate and there are plenty of statistics to back that up. And even when people experience the most horrendous evil, they seem to turn in some strong ways towards religious belief. My brother-in-law is a

U.S. Air Force chaplain. He has served two tours in Iraq, he's presently in Afghanistan. He ministers to men and women who have seen horrendous evil and experienced it firsthand, and yet his services are overflowing. He's done many baptisms. Please help us understand—at a time when the human race should have grown out of all of this, why is it growing so dramatically? Thank you.

JACOB WEISBERG: Do you want the first go at that?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, at the risk of being callous—

AL SHARPTON: You? (laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I seem to have gone inaudible—I don't think that we should be paying for chaplains. I don't think the U.S. government should be employing any. (applause) James Madison, who was the coauthor of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom and of the First Amendment, therefore, was very adamant on the point, very clear. There shouldn't be—it's flat-out unconstitutional to pay or employ a chaplain to open the proceedings of Congress or to be in the armed forces. We can't have chaplains on our payroll. That's that. People who want to pray can't be stopped but they can do it—of all the solitary activities, apart from the search for—oh, never mind. (laughter) Surely that's one that doesn't need a paid state mediator. It's a negation of the American Revolution. So. That first.

Second, yes, modernity, involving as it does a huge exchange of technology and population and innovation in a very churning and vertiginous manner of course means that a lot of lives have to be lived in a very insecure and risky way. It's not at all unlike our nature as a species to try and cling to stability, certainty, and consolation in those cases. It explains itself, it seems to me. What is notable, though, is it hasn't come up in thousands of years with any superior explanation to the old ones, it still is going back to myths that were discredited and exploded many years ago and these of course turn out to be false consolations, whereas the consolations of philosophy and of the aesthetic and of the beauty of science and of reason and so on are available to us all the time and really able to explain why things happen. Why terrible wounds are inflicted in Afghanistan and so forth. No, no, that won't do. Let's like some absolute loser find the person who Paley means, who finds a watch on the beach, and thinks, "I don't know what this is for, but it seems to tick, it must be for something." He doesn't understand it. We find

there's a wonderful truffle and open it and look at the chocolate and throw it away and then munch on the wrapper. (laughter) I don't understand it, but I am one of those who are not made this way.

AL SHARPTON: I think the core of your question—I think that the more mankind learns, the more mankind understands that it does not have all the answers. And that's why people continue to reach and seek answers that is beyond what even in this age we have been able to discover. I think that is why and I think that there is also the innate emptiness in mankind to always go back to the core of what made mankind in the first place and that to me is a supreme being. I think that answers the question of why I think the— (**some disturbance on stage/laughter**) I thought you got the Holy Ghost or something.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Throwing myself around. I was ready to shout and holler or something.

AL SHARPTON: I think that's why you see the rise of evangelism—whether I agree with the rise or not is another question, but I think the quest is inspired because of the increased knowledge has not answered the question of where it begins and what governs all of the things that obviously operate in some order and with some precision and I must say, at the risk of my sounding callous, it amazes me that it doesn't bother you that we spend two trillion dollars in a war we should have never been in, you just worry about paying the chaplains to pray over it?

(applause)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Yeah, well, you see, I don't love our enemies. And I don't love people who do love them. I hate our enemies and I think they should be killed (**applause**) and I think that they want to kill me. And I think we could do it maybe with half the budget or maybe twice. But I'm absolutely sure that there should be no country that has a budget that could threaten ours, and I'm not sentimental about the point. I wanted to have another whack at that very good question—

AL SHARPTON: So the people that preach God and love should shut up and remain private but you killers ought to just go and just kill people that they call their enemies. That's very ethical.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: The people who preach Allah-hu Akbar, the people who preach Allah-hu Akbar, had better find out that there's a stronger force than them, and one that also has unalterable convictions and principles and that can also be offended, and that they're offend it at their peril. That's what I think. Now, to the last question, I just want to have one more run at it.

AL SHARPTON: You already answered it.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I know, but if you don't mind.

AL SHARPTON: You trying twice?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: When I started hurling myself around like a shout and holler person, that was because I suddenly—

AL SHARPTON: There is no right or wrong with you, so go ahead, answer it three times.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: The questions that they come and ask these chaplains are, "Why, why, why? Why does it happen? The nicest guy in my unit just took a round through the throat," you know, that, "I've just been in this village where all the children are being killed." And where . . .you can fill in this for yourself. "Why, why, why, why?" That's what the question is, isn't it? Well, have you ever heard any spokesman of any religion give an answer to that question? They've had thousands of years to think about it. No, they haven't come up with an answer, at all. Unless to say, as they used to when it was a plague or a war or a tsunami, well it's probably a sign of sin, you're being punished. The Archbishop of Canterbury in England two years ago says he really, really worries how God could be so mean as to unleash a tidal wave towards Christmastime in Asia. Now, you can't believe you're listening to this stuff.

Now, if you ask me, okay, I'll say, "Why did this happen? Why did the best guy I know get cancer of the throat, or get mugged, or slaughtered or whatever?" I'll say, "Because we belong to an imperfectly evolved species where the adrenaline glands are too big, the prefrontal lobes are too small, and we bear every sign of the stamp of our lowly origin. And only by realizing the fact that we are mammals are we

likely to be able to talk any sense about it." And if you say, "Well, why did that city fall down or be overcome by waves, or that volcano kill all those children?" I'll say, well, "I hate to break it to you, but we live on a cooling planet, whose crust hasn't quite settled yet, and these are to be expected, and there is no other explanation for them, and don't believe anyone who says there is." Well, this is not perfect ethical instruction, but it does conform to the Hippocratic injunction "primo no nocere." At least I'm not lying to these people, at least what I say can do them no harm, and at least it cannot increase the illusions they already have. Usually when you go that village and ask, "Why are the children being killed?" it's because someone who believed in God thought that they had it coming.

(applause)

JACOB WEISBERG: Next.

Q: Thank you, I'll be brief. The question of where to find morality, with or without God, is one which I think is certainly too large for either side of this debate to settle or resolve, certainly within the space of a few hours—you can't hear me?—however, I think Mr. Hitchens has made a start at at least offering a possibility of how we might find morality.

JACOB WEISBERG: Could you, I'm sorry, just get through a question because we have a lot of people waiting.

Q: Okay, I'm sorry. Reverend Sharpton has resisted Mr. Hitchens's attacks on the institutions that relate or claim to relate God's will but expresses doubt as to how we can have morality without God, so I'm wondering if criteria such as personal experience are all we have without the legislature of shared religious texts, how are we to move on from moral solipsism and actually find morality?

AL SHARPTON: I think that, well—it is Mr. Hitchens that says that we found morality in ourselves, that we know morality. I would argue that the reason you can find it within yourselves is because of a sense of God in a pattern in human character that was there. There is no scientific evidence offered by nonbelievers as why this morality would be there other than, what? It just evolved somewhere that we

would have this sense of morality. I don't think that it has to be governed by organized religion, that's all.

Q: Hi. First of all I just want to say, I'm writing a book, and it's called *An Atheist Defends Religion:* Why Religion Succeeds and Atheism Fails, so I am an atheist but I defend religion.

JACOB WEISBERG: Really splitting the difference here.

Q: I know, I just lost it, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. My question is to Christopher is how you can justify, why do you take something away from people—from 95—that gives meaning to 95 percent of the American people and replace it with something that gives meaning to just 5 percent of the American people?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Ha! Well, what an incredibly stupid question. (laughter/applause) First, I've said repeatedly that this stuff *cannot* be taken away from people, it is their favorite toy, and it will remain so as long, as Freud said, in *The Future of an Illusion*, and it will remain that way as long as we're afraid of death and have that problem, which is I think likely to be quite a long time. Second, I *hope* I've made it clear that I'm perfectly happy for people to have these toys and to play with them at home and hug them to themselves, and so on, and share them with other people who come around and play with the toys. So that's absolutely fine. They are not to make me play with these toys. Okay? I will not play with the toys. Don't bring the toys to my house. Don't say my children must play with these toys, don't say my toys—might be a condom, here we go again—are not allowed by their toys. I'm not going to have any of that. Enough with clerical and religious bullying and intimidation. Is that finally clear? Have I got that across? (applause) Thank you.

Q: Yes, Mr. Sharpton. If morality comes from whatever God tells people to do, or whatever God says is right and wrong—

AL SHARPTON: I never said that.

Q: —rather than the objective requirements of human life, then how is God any different than Stalin?

AL SHARPTON: But I never said that. I think that—I think that Mr. Hitchens said that God tells these

people this. I said that God—if there is no supreme being that sets a framework for a world that has a

framework of right and wrong, then what do we base it on? Do I think God calls the leaders of the

church every morning and tells them what's right and wrong after they read the New York Times? No. I

think that there is a framework based on what is right and wrong in humanity by the force that created

humanity, and that is not God sending you an e-mail every day or a revelation on a mountain. I did not

say that. I think that was his concept of what had happened to some that had professed that. So I can't

defend what I didn't say.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I am of one mind with the Reverend in saying that there has been no

divine revelation, that there could not be such a thing, but I'm a little disappointed in you.

AL SHARPTON: I know you are. (laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Just a fraction disappointed.

AL SHARPTON: I know you are.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: But you can live with it.

AL SHARPTON: I'll try. (laughter)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: You're man enough, you're man enough.

AL SHARPTON: I'll try.

Q: This is a follow-up, I guess, to the last question, but if you need God or religion or spirituality or

whatever to have morality, then how do you explain the high crime rate in the U.S., which is the most

religious industrial country in the world, versus Japan and Sweden and other countries that are almost

entirely secular?

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: Well, I think—I think you confuse two things in your question. There first of all is a

distinct difference between spiritual and religious. You kind of intermingled the two. And I think that

those that commit crimes, and I hate to disagree with Mr. Hitchens, are not all believers in God. I mean,

to say that that question is logical is to say that every criminal is a God-fearing person that commits

crime. I have a feeling—I certainly don't have the data at my disposal as my good friend Brother

Hitchens, but I would suspect atheists commit crimes, too.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I can absolutely vouch for that.

(laughter)

AL SHARPTON: We are of one mind. We are coming together.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: We are of one mind. I mean, look, I daresay the question was supposed

to be helpful to my side, but I don't find it so, for two reasons. One, it's too approximate. I mean, just as

you hear people say something I think is really fatuous—"there are no atheists in foxholes"—you've

heard it? There are very few atheists on death row, either, but I wouldn't make that a case for my side,

it's just not the way I argue. I do notice that Christians and other believers tend to say that if a baby falls

twenty-five floors and lands with a bounce on the lawn and is unharmed, they attribute it to divine

intervention, and if it falls two feet off a table and cracks its skull and dies, they just say that's bad luck.

I have noticed that tendency, and this is I think a version of that.

The burden of proof in any case is not on our team, if you will. We don't say disbelief in God will make

you a better person, will make you more moral. We are arguing against those who say that a belief in an

unprovable supernatural will make you more moral. Now, that, we know is not true. That we know is not

true, because there's not just a lot of ordinary crime committed by the faithful, but there's a lot of

extraordinary crime, such as suicide bombing and genital mutilation and many other things that's

committed because of and only because of faith. I rest my case.

AL SHARPTON: So the way to get the crime rate down would be to increase atheism and disbelief?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: There is no corollary, as I was careful, I think scrupulous in saying, there is no corollary on the atheist side to that . . .

AL SHARPTON: Oh, okay.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: . . . but those who argue that religion is a source of morality have as yet as always and as so far this evening all their explaining still ahead of them. And that's with two thousand years of failure to chalk up. Pretty wet performance, isn't it?

AL SHARPTON: I must say this and I know we have some more questions. Atheism has been here for thousands of years, too. And I think that just as there is a lot going forward to look for answers from those of us that believe, those that have made thousands of years of careers and books in disbelief haven't answered much, either.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, if you think that Spinoza, say, or Democritus, is just the equivalent of, I don't know who—did you say Paul Tillich? I just think you're not comparing like with like. I think our tradition beats yours every time, intellectually.

AL SHARPTON: Of course you do.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: And our tradition has never—we've never had to take anything back. We've never had to say, "Look, we were teaching the children that the world was flat for too long, we'll have to change this now." We never said you're going to Limbo if your child dies unbaptized. We have nothing of this sort on our conscience, and every discovery made by independent corroborative disinterested research tends to support what we suspected in the first place.

AL SHARPTON: But I would argue that those of us who believe in our own relationships with God and believe prayers are answered, does disbelieve that. It's hard to lose something if you put nothing there but just argue against whatever's there is not there. So you start with an undue advantage.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: That went straight past my bat, I have to say.

AL SHARPTON: I know.

(laughter)

JACOB WEISBERG: I want to take just two more questions. Sir. Please.

Q: Mr. Hitchens, does man have an innate need for ceremony and ritual and if so how does he satisfy it without religion?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I believe that we do for the most part have an innate need for ceremony and ritual, yes. I think that seems to be a common finding of all anthropologists in all societies at all times. This doesn't mean that they have to take the form of say, human sacrifice, though some of the better and more elaborate ones have taken that form. Or, say, the investiture of a monarch where one would be better off with a republic, and so forth. The knowledge of these needs or innatenesses is also an awareness that they have—these impulses must be so to say domesticated, civilized. Actually, the best argument I know for religion which is, perhaps I owe an apology to the gentleman I was rude to a few moments ago, which is in a way an atheist argument, that is that religion, though it's based on complete falsity and fantasy does at least give a form and a shape to people's atavistic and superstitious and barbaric and other worshipping tendencies. It domesticates and organizes them. That's what many people believe the Roman Catholic Church has been doing for a while and I would be prepared to concede that if it wasn't for the teachings on virginity, the denial of the right of contraception, and many other horror shows. But they can put on a good ritual, I'll give you that. (laughter) But don't go believing that if you put a wafer on your tongue you're going to change the cosmos, because you know, there's no truth to that at all.

JACOB WEISBERG: We're honored to have Ayaan Hirsi Ali here this evening. (applause) And I'm going to give her the honor of the last question.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes, thank you. I've become an atheist and if Brother Sharpton answers my question I might go back to faith. (laughter)

JACOB WEISBERG: Well, there's at least one persuadable person here tonight.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Mr. Sharpton, you repeated many times tonight that you do not want to talk about religion, you wanted to talk about God. Is it unfair, then, to ask you to give us the evidence of his existence? Is it, for instance, unreasonable for you to tell us if He or She or It created this world order, who created him then?

AL SHARPTON: Who created?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: God, what was before him. Let me finish all of my question.

AL SHARPTON: I thought you only had one. This is a long conversion. Go ahead.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Well, it's important. And finally isn't it odd that you carry a Christian title and that you refused even for once tonight to defend the church and the content of the Bible?

(applause)

AL SHARPTON: Because we are here—we are here to discuss Mr. Hitchens's book, and Mr. Hitchens's book attacked God and I wanted him to defend his book. His book, unfortunately for your question, did not attack the Bible or Christianity. (audience chatter) And I would not want—well, you have to read the book. It does when you get inside. (laughter) But I think that what you must—what I wanted to convey is that there all kinds of people that relate to God other than the ways Mr. Hitchens may address a certain religion that I respect. You don't have to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu or a Buddhist to believe in God or worship God. So that is not a defense against those that say that God

does not exist, because that would have reduced the debate to just part of the framework of the book. So that is why I wanted him to discuss with us his whole attack, not just his dogmatic attack, though he clearly does. And I do encourage people to buy the book. It's well written. I don't believe what it says, but it's well written. He's a very eloquent and well-versed person.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, that's extremely handsome of you. (laughter)

AL SHARPTON: But in answer to your first question. I think that again to say that one does not exist because I cannot say for sure how it was brought into being. I'm sitting on this stage, you don't know how I was born. Answering, "God's not there because we don't know who God's father was or how God came into being," I don't think deals with the existence that is clearly confirmed by some of the scientific data in Mr. Hitchens's book that I again encourage you to get and get it autographed. Is that a ritual when you sign autographs? (**laughter**)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Yes, it is. It's more like a sacrament, actually.

(laughter)

AL SHARPTON: I think, again, that the existence of God—it's a sacrilege?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: It's more like a sacrament. This is America, baby.

AL SHARPTON: Don't put a wafer on your tongue when you get an autograph.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I'm only going to be nice to people with receipts from now on. That's how moral I am.

JACOB WEISBERG: I'm afraid we're ending the evening with no conversions, but with a lot of eloquence, and I want to, please join me thanking both of our debaters.

(applause)