

Ten Myths – and Ten Truths – About Atheism

A Response to Sam Harris

by *Bruce Phillips*

[NOTE: The following is a collection of informal responses to an op-ed piece published by the atheist advocate Sam Harris in the *LA Times* on December 24, 2006 that was sent to me by a longtime friend with whom I had been out of touch for many years. When we reconnected, we found that we were on the opposite sides of most issues, although he doesn't subscribe to all of Harris's points. We had exchanged several e-mails prior to his sending me this piece, so you catch us here in mid-flight. Some comments will be clearer when you know that my friend's father was a very successful scientist. Hopefully, you will enjoy the "conversation" – and perhaps gain some new insights as well. – Bruce Phillips]

SAM HARRIS: Several polls indicate that the term "atheism" has acquired such an extraordinary stigma in the United States that being an atheist is now a perfect impediment to a career in politics (in a way that being black, Muslim or homosexual is not). According to a recent *Newsweek* poll, only 37% of Americans would vote for an otherwise qualified atheist for president. Atheists are often imagined to be intolerant, immoral, depressed, blind to the beauty of nature and dogmatically closed to evidence of the supernatural.

Even John Locke, one of the great patriarchs of the Enlightenment, believed that atheism was "not at all to be tolerated" because, he said, "promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bonds of human societies, can have no hold upon an atheist."

That was more than 300 years ago. But in the United States today, little seems to have changed. A remarkable 87% of the population claims "never to doubt" the existence of God; fewer than 10% identify themselves as atheists — and their reputation appears to be deteriorating.

Given that we know that atheists are often among the most intelligent and scientifically literate people in any society, it seems important

to deflate the myths that prevent them from playing a larger role in our national discourse.

1. Atheists believe that life is meaningless

HARRIS: On the contrary, religious people often worry that life is meaningless and imagine that it can only be redeemed by the promise of eternal happiness beyond the grave. Atheists tend to be quite sure that life is precious. Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived. Our relationships with those we love are meaningful now; they need not last forever to be made so. Atheists tend to find this fear of meaninglessness ... well... meaningless.

RESPONSE: Well, Sam Harris may think so, but better minds than his have reached very different conclusions. One such follows...

Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental

collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. [Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," *Mysticism and Logic and Other Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 41.]

From William Lane Craig's book, *Reasonable Faith*, we have the following:

About the only solution the atheist can offer is that we face the absurdity of life and live bravely. Bertrand Russell, for example, wrote that we must build our lives upon "the firm foundation of unyielding despair." Only by recognizing that the world really is a terrible place can we successfully come to terms with life. Camus said that we should honestly recognize life's absurdity and then live in love for one another.

The fundamental problem with this solution, however, is that it is impossible to live consistently and happily within such a worldview. If one lives consistently, he will not be happy; if one lives happily, it is only because he is not consistent. Francis Schaeffer has explained this point well. Modern man, says Schaeffer, resides in a two-story universe. In the lower story is the finite world without God; here life is absurd, as we have seen. In the upper story are meaning, value, and purpose.

Now modern man lives in the lower story because he believes there is no God. But he cannot live happily in such an absurd world; therefore, he continually makes leaps of faith into the upper story to affirm meaning, value, and purpose, even though he has no right to, since he does not believe in God. Modern man is totally inconsistent when he makes this leap, because these values cannot exist without God, and man in his lower story does not have God. [William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 65.]

You will hear me say many times that the atheist adopts, when it suits his/her argument, the categories and distinctions that come from a God-directed world view. They always pretend that these are simply *natural* ideas that somehow come with the programming with which we are equipped. That somehow these things have come about through some kind of evolutionary development connected with the survival of our species. Things like categories of right and wrong.

There's an old joke about a group of magicians who challenged God saying that creating life was not such a great trick after all and that they could do the same. God took them up on the challenge. The magicians reached down and took a handful of dirt at which God called: "Stop. Get your own dirt!"

And that's what's going on. Atheists tell you that you can create your own meaning. Sam Harris, bless his shallow soul, says: "Life is imbued with meaning by being really and fully lived." Now, what in the world does this mean? Really lived? Fully lived? And so if I don't Really and Fully live my life, even Sam Harris doesn't think it should have meaning? Talk about absurd. Please excuse me if I opt for some other standard by which the meaningfulness of my life is judged.

But I'll tell you what it means. Sam had made a leap into the upper story. He has borrowed the very concept of there being a meaning for life from the God types, and claims that he can construct some reasonable facsimile relying solely on his own reason. In the silence of the night, when Sam really thinks about these things, I wish him well. Without God there is no *there* there.

And as much as I think I should stop, I can't help but touch on several of Sam's other misapprehensions. Religious people do not worry that life is meaningless, they *believe* that without God it is meaningless. It is the atheist who struggles to construct alternatives that give his/her life meaning. And just where, pray tell, does Sam get the idea that atheists as a group "tend to be quite sure that life is precious?" How many million abortions do we commit in this country? You'll need to wait to hear my remarks on Communism and the like (where Sam is once again thoroughly misguided), but these do not look like regimes that understand that life is precious. And as to the meaningful aspect of current love relationships, I agree that they are meaningful. But they derive that meaning from being a reflection of the love that God has for

us. If I were told that ultimately they were to be meaningless, what sacrifices would I be willing to make for them today? Why would I persevere? Why not just bail out? (Which of course is exactly what we see in our contemporary society.)

So there are lots of issues. Sam is glib. And he charts a course that allows people to escape accountability for their actions. That's the modern Holy Grail. Let me define myself – and the rest of you can go you know where. Good luck with that! Amen.

2. Atheism is responsible for the greatest crimes in human history

HARRIS: People of faith often claim that the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were the inevitable product of unbelief. The problem with fascism and communism, however, is not that they are too critical of religion; the problem is that they are too much like religions. Such regimes are dogmatic to the core and generally give rise to personality cults that are indistinguishable from cults of religious hero worship. Auschwitz, the gulag and the killing fields were not examples of what happens when human beings reject religious dogma; they are examples of political, racial and nationalistic dogma run amok. There is no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable.

RESPONSE: Surely Harris is smarter than this paragraph. He may squirm at the thought, but atheism is itself a *belief system*. It too functions as a religion. It purports to give answers to where we came from, what our purpose is in life, why things are in a mess, and how we can hope to recover from that state. You will recall that those are the same questions I began our dialog with many months ago. They form the framework of a worldview – most (if not all) of which are religious in nature.

So his proposal that communism and fascism are “too much like religions” buys him no debate credits. They are indeed like religions, just like his beloved atheism. The point he either misses, or has failed to realize, is that it is not the religious approach to something that is the problem, it is the *object* on which the faith is focused that is the issue. Traditional religions focus on God. Contemporary political philosophies focus on Man. And while the God side is far from perfect (no human organization ever was or ever will be), the Man side has been responsible for some of the

most blatant and intentional crimes in history.

His final claim that “no society in human history ever suffered because its people became too reasonable” is just fiction. The first problem is who gets to decide what counts as reasonable? Marx was a philosopher who argued his case to death. Was he unreasonable? When the powers in revolutionary France instituted the Terror, were they not the cream of the Enlightenment applying reason to the mechanics of state? Is eugenics reasonable? It makes sense to get rid of the weak and less productive, doesn't it? But again, who decides? I'm afraid I know the answer. Sam Harris gets to decide. I'm sure *he* knows what is reasonable and what's not, doesn't he? But that's just the problem with reason unconstrained by a higher morality. In the end it is naked preference, and the win goes to the stronger.

And from a debating perspective let me just add that it has never been the original agenda of people of faith to paint atheists as responsible for mass murder, state-sponsored genocide and the like. Rather the atheist side opened this front (as you did in an earlier email) by dragging in the Inquisition, Crusades and the Thirty Years War. Pointing out the dirty linen on the atheist side was a reaction to their trying to make every contemporary person of faith feel personally responsible for the sack of Jerusalem in 1099.

3. Atheism is dogmatic

HARRIS: Jews, Christians and Muslims claim that their scriptures are so prescient of humanity's needs that they could only have been written under the direction of an omniscient deity. An atheist is simply a person who has considered this claim, read the books and found the claim to be ridiculous. One doesn't have to take anything on faith, or be otherwise dogmatic, to reject unjustified religious beliefs. As the historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) once said: “I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.”

RESPONSE: It must be wonderful to be Sam Harris. Humility becomes optional. The religious beliefs he holds (see 2 above) are obviously justified to his mind – though as we have remarked, he has no proof. And so he holds them by faith. Yet he can freely characterize other beliefs as “unjustified” while at the same time remaining untouched by the accusation of being

dogmatic or in thrall to some competing faith himself. It's sort of a cosmic "get out of jail free" card for Sam.

I can't speak for the Koran, but the Hebrew/Christian Bible is a very unusual document. Isn't it interesting that several thousand years later the Ten Commandments are still at the center of political/cultural battles! And I note that no one says they are "wrong." The resistance seems to come from their having a supernatural source – from their having true authority. That's what the modern world rejects. They would accept the Commandments if they were the product of the World Court. Because then they could safely ignore them! But these might just have come from God – and that would mean we probably should pay attention! But I digress.

I'd like Sam to support his fact that atheists are people who have read the Holy Scriptures and rejected them. If you found one in a thousand who had done so you'd be doing really well.

And finally, I don't know who Stephen Henry Roberts is, but what a (pardon the expression) stupid quote. Again, it's not having faith that is the issue – it's what that faith is invested in that is important. Christians for their part believe that their faith stems from a historical event (the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) that bore testimony to the message Jesus himself brought. I reject other Gods because there is insufficient evidence for them, and I accept Christ because there is, I believe, compelling evidence. (There are, of course, other reasons. But that's a topic for later discussions. If you reject the "physical" evidence, there's little reason to go into the more subjective side.) So I dismiss other Gods because of lack of evidence while Roberts dismisses Christ despite the evidence. I don't see his point.

4. Atheists think everything in the universe arose by chance

HARRIS: No one knows why the universe came into being. In fact, it is not entirely clear that we can coherently speak about the "creation" or "beginning" of the universe at all, as these ideas invoke the concept of time, and here we are talking about the origin of space-time itself.

The notion that atheists believe that everything was created by chance is also regularly thrown up as a criticism of Darwinian evolution. As **Richard Dawkins** explains in his marvelous book, *The God Delusion*, this represents an utter misunderstanding of evolutionary theory.

Although we don't know precisely how the Earth's early chemistry begat biology, we know that the diversity and complexity we see in the living world is not a product of mere chance. Evolution is a combination of chance mutation and natural selection. Darwin arrived at the phrase "natural selection" by analogy to the "artificial selection" performed by breeders of livestock. In both cases, selection exerts a highly non-random effect on the development of any species.

RESPONSE: Ha ha ha ha ha. Sorry, I couldn't help it. "We don't know *precisely* how the Earth's early chemistry begat biology...." That's an interesting spin to put on the fact that all we have is vague speculation as to how this might have happened. I've recently been over this ground in discussions with a biology professor. My research uncovered an unclaimed million-dollar prize for a peer-reviewed paper that only *suggests* how this might have happened.

It's also worth noting that I've never heard a thinking Christian confuse random mutations with natural selection. We actually do understand the difference. So that's nothing more than a straw man, and an unconvincing one at that.

As to Dawkins and his assessment of evolutionary theory, he lost me when he stated: "It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)." Nice touch, Richard. I wonder what your father would have made of such a statement from a supposed scientist?

I do wonder what these people think about sometimes. Artificial selection is intelligence operating in a purposeful manner. Natural selection is the luck of the draw – first, that the initial mutation takes place; and second, that beneficial mutations will in fact have their survival value confirmed by the environment. The two couldn't be more different. Good mutations can just as easily be wiped out by, say, an earthquake. And so even Natural Selection has a significant component of chance in it. Which is one reason why critics of Darwinian evolution refer to it as a tautology. If you survive, you are by definition fitter. And if you are fitter, you by definition survive. There is no way to prove this scenario wrong. Funny, I always thought that a hallmark of science was falsifiability. Hmmm.

5. Atheism has no connection to science

HARRIS: Although it is possible to be a scientist and still believe in God – as some scientists seem to manage it – there is no question that an engagement with scientific thinking tends to erode, rather than support, religious faith. Taking the U.S. population as an example: Most polls show that about 90% of the general public believes in a personal God; yet 93% of the members of the National Academy of Sciences do not. This suggests that there are few modes of thinking less congenial to religious faith than science is.

RESPONSE: Sam needs to review his history. Science as we know it is a child of theology. (Now there's a claim for you.) The "facts" of the matter are that modern science owes its philosophical foundation to the Judeo-Christian, and specifically the Christian worldview. It was Christians (primarily – I don't mean to leave out Jews here, but there are some important contributions that were alien to the Hebrew worldview) who saw the world as a creation – a thing. It was not animate as human kind had thought for eons (river spirits, tree gods etc.). It did not have a purpose as Aristotle declared – in that a seed wasn't fulfilling its "destiny" in becoming a tree. But it *was* regular – because it was the creation of a logical, intelligent (not to mention omniscient and omnipotent) God. As a result it was, in theory, comprehensible. (The Chinese and the Greeks both believed that the world was fundamentally capricious – and hence had no science in the sense that we know it.) And *because* we were made in the image of God (also taught to us by the Hebrew and Christian scriptures), there was a good chance our tools (senses, reason, intellectual faculties) would be up to the task of figuring it out. Psalm 19:1 says:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech; night
after night they display knowledge. There is
no speech or language where their voice is
not heard. Their voice goes out into all the
earth, their words to the ends of the world.

That is, of course, the Hebrew Bible. Likewise, in Romans 1:20 the apostle Paul writes:

For since the creation of the world God's
invisible qualities – his eternal power and
divine nature – have been clearly seen, being
understood from what has been made, so
that men are without excuse.

This is, of course, from the New Testament, but written by a deeply religious Jew who became a convert to Christ.

Scientists living between 1500 and 1800 inhabited a very different world. In fact the term "scientist" was not even coined until 1834. Prior to that time a scientist was likely to be a churchman. Why? For the reasons set out above. These men (and sometimes women) wanted to understand God's creation. And because both the observer and the observed were God's creation, it was presumed to be understandable.

The list of Christian scientists is long and glorious. Here's a sample of some of the players:

- **Francis Bacon** – father of the scientific method;
- **Robert Boyle** – chief founder of modern chemistry;
- **Charles Babbage** – creator of the computer;
- **John Dalton** – father of modern atomic theory;
- **Rene Decartes** – philosopher and inventor of analytic geometry;
- **Michael Faraday** – discoverer of electromagnetic induction and field theory;
- **James Joule** – discoverer of the first law of thermodynamics;
- **William Thomson Kelvin** – first to clearly state the second law of thermodynamics;
- **Johannes Kepler** – discoverer of the laws of planetary motion;
- **Gotfried Wilhelm Leibnitz** – co-inventor of calculus;
- **Carolus Linnaeus** – father of taxonomy;
- **Joseph Lister** – founder of antiseptic surgery;
- **James Clerk Maxwell** – formulator of the electromagnetic theory of light;
- **Gregor Mendel** – father of genetics;
- **Isaac Newton** – discoverer of the universal law of gravitation;
- **Blaise Pascal** – founder of probability studies;
- **Louis Pasteur** – formulator of the germ theory of disease; and
- **Bernhard Riemann** – formulator of non-Euclidean geometries.

But in the late 19th century, in an effort to secularize society, **Thomas Huxley** and others began to propound the "battle" between science and religion. Two virulent works (**John William Draper's *History of the Conflict Between Religion***

and Science and **Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*** had a great influence on their period but were ultimately rejected by the likes of the famous mathematician and logician **Alfred North Whitehead** (Bertrand Russell's teacher and later collaborator on the *Principia Mathematica*).

Without belaboring the point, you can Google **Robert Jastrow** – agnostic astronomer, physicist and cosmologist who has been at the forefront of developments in his field in the last century (Chief of the Theoretical Division at NASA, Founding Director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies – that sort of thing). He ends his book *God and the Astronomers* in which he contemplates the meaning of the Big Bang as follows:

For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.

Just because Sam Harris doesn't know doesn't mean you shouldn't. There is a quiet revolution going on in the sciences – especially in the so-called “hard” sciences. The astronomers, physicists, cosmologists etc. are all becoming aware that the materialistic explanation of the world – pushed like a religion by the Huxleys and their followers – is at best a sophisticated description of a subset of creation. There appear to be more things than science bargained for that are beyond its reach. But what it certainly is not is a philosophy to live by.

[This is less true of the biologists, who are still in the grip of the Darwinian conjecture. But that's a subject for another installment. To understand the “hard” science side, see *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* by **Stephen Barr**. You'll need to don your best thinking cap.]

So back to Sam. It's not so much engagement with scientific thinking that's corrosive, as with the philosophic drivel served up by **scientism** (the concept that there is no truth outside the laboratory). It's not the mode of thinking that is uncongenial to religious belief, but the socially enforced party line that materialism is all there is. But that, of course, is a philosophical statement and not a statement of science (that materialism is the only acceptable approach to reality.) If it is a statement of science, it should be scientifically demonstrable. So I asked you in an earlier email

what scientific experiment is done to show that only material explanations of reality have any merit? I don't recall an answer. But don't feel bad – no one has that answer.

And just one final rhetorical point. Whenever someone tries to make a point and submits as evidence a set of poll numbers – I just cringe. (E.g., How many members of the NAS believe in God, etc.) We are talking about right and wrong – not about how many people believe some truth or untruth. How right our parents were when they harped, “If Bobby jumped off a bridge, would you jump too?” You need to make your own decisions. TRUTH IS NOT AN ISSUE OF CONSENSUS. And of course to the extent that science deals with a subset of truth (which I fervently believe it does), this is true of science as well.

6. Atheists are arrogant

HARRIS: When scientists don't know something — like why the universe came into being or how the first self-replicating molecules formed — they admit it. Pretending to know things one doesn't know is a profound liability in science. And yet it is the life-blood of faith-based religion. One of the monumental ironies of religious discourse can be found in the frequency with which people of faith praise themselves for their humility, while claiming to know facts about cosmology, chemistry and biology that no scientist knows. When considering questions about the nature of the cosmos and our place within it, atheists tend to draw their opinions from science. This isn't arrogance; it is intellectual honesty.

RESPONSE: *Au contraire.* That *used* to be the case with science. But today when scientists don't know something they shout louder and attack their critics. How else is one to understand the hysteria over global warming? How else to understand someone like Richard Dawkins saying “...biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.” This has nothing to do with admitting you don't know something – it has to do with pushing an agenda. If I took the time, I could get you great quotes of noted scientists saying that their facts don't support their beliefs, but that they're going to believe anyway. (Usually this is belief in the absence of an intelligent source behind the world.)

The problem is that science has precious little to say about the nature of the cosmos, if by nature we mean things like beginning, purpose and end. It may have lots to say about the material aspects of the universe. And while these are very interesting, they typically say nothing about ends. If you do draw your understanding of the nature of the universe solely from science, then we are a random accident with no purpose. Do you honestly know anyone who wants to teach that to their children?

Christians believe that we have been given a certain amount of revelation in two sources. First in the material world as I discussed in the last section. And second in the Holy Scriptures. The nature of these scriptures is open to some debate in that parts can be viewed allegorically or factually. [Were Adam and Eve real people (factual), or would we have it right if we view mankind's plight and condition as if we descended from an original source that defied God? (allegorical).] We can certainly hold these revelations in our hearts and minds while at the same time being humble. You see, Sam thinks that knowing something automatically means you must be proud. But we as Christians are all too aware of the sin of pride. After all, it was pride to which the Serpent in the Garden appealed, inviting Adam and Eve to give in to their desire to be like God! And while we often fail, we try to identify pride in ourselves and defeat it whenever we can. The Christian position is hardly Sam's "monumental irony."

Since we seem to have such a science bias, I have to add one additional perspective. Much of modern physics can be understood as arguing against the purely materialistic – by which I mean deterministic – view of the world. This was a great blow to science. It meant that their tools might no longer reign supreme.

This is particularly evident in science's efforts to understand the implications of quantum mechanics. Under one interpretation, it seems to say that there are no events until observed by a human consciousness. Until an event is observed, it is only a probability. And that once an event is observed, the probability function is said to collapse – meaning a particular outcome moves to 100% probability while others move to 0%. But that if you try to make the human consciousness part of the system you are modeling, the ability to identify the existence of an event goes away. That means that human consciousness is outside the

ability of science to describe! (I love it.)

So one alternative explanation that gets a lot of attention today is the so-called multiple universe interpretation of quantum mechanics. This says that all events, whatever their probability, happen somewhere in some universe, and we just happen to be in the one that harbors the events we see. I love this too! Here scientists (no less) are basing an interpretation on an infinite number of universe-sized entities for which there is not one tiny shred of evidence! Ah, but we have great problems with Christians accepting supernatural revelation. How irrational.

I rest this part of my case.

The second installment is that the arrogance of atheism is its refusal to see itself as the religious system it is while it accuses people of faith of all manner of supposedly unacceptable views and attitudes. But I'll leave that for another time.

7. Atheists are closed to spiritual experience

HARRIS: There is nothing that prevents an atheist from experiencing love, ecstasy, rapture and awe; atheists can value these experiences and seek them regularly. What atheists don't tend to do is make unjustified (and unjustifiable) claims about the nature of reality on the basis of such experiences. There is no question that some Christians have transformed their lives for the better by reading the Bible and praying to Jesus. What does this prove? It proves that certain disciplines of attention and codes of conduct can have a profound effect upon the human mind. Do the positive experiences of Christians suggest that Jesus is the sole savior of humanity? Not even remotely — because Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and even atheists regularly have similar experiences.

There is, in fact, not a Christian on this Earth who can be certain that Jesus even wore a beard, much less that he was born of a virgin or rose from the dead. These are just not the sort of claims that spiritual experience can authenticate.

RESPONSE: Isn't God great! He even allows atheists to experience love, ecstasy, rapture and awe! But what does He get in return? The atheist takes in all these experiences, and then makes his own unjustified (and unjustifiable) statement that despite the "overwhelmingness" of these experiences, that everything we see just came about by chance. Beauty by chance. Love by chance. Ecstasy by chance. (And of course, Sam

Harris by chance.) And yet I've never heard an explanation from the natural selection crowd as to why these attitudes should exist. (Yeah, I know, to help perpetuate the "selfish gene." There's the universal "science of the gaps" explanation if I ever heard one!) I'm still in the dark about the survival value of "awe."

Sam is, as usual, unaware of what Christians actually believe. They don't believe that reading the Bible and praying to Jesus transforms their lives for the better. God transforms their lives for the better. Perhaps some, maybe many Christians, don't actively grasp the difference – as they are often co-terminus events. But the causation runs from God to man – not man's activity to man.

While we're delving into what Sam doesn't understand, I've never heard Christians say that their personal experience lead them to belief that Jesus is the sole savior of humanity. They experience Jesus' power to save. And that is often – though not always – an intense personal experience. But it doesn't express itself as a theological proposition about the exclusiveness of salvation through Christ.

For that, Christians turn to the Bible. The reliability of Scripture is a long discussion that's beyond my energy to undertake in this forum. But in John 14:6 Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Now there may be other options that we don't know about. But here and now – this is what I understand and believe.

Sam's trump card is to play the "certainty" concept. People critical of religion love to do this. As if they are "certain" of all the things they purport to know. We know very little for "certain" that isn't so by definition. So I'm certain in a sense that $2+2=4$. But that's how the numbers are defined. I'm much less certain as to whether there truly is no solution to Fermat's Last Theorem.

There is a very corrosive choice that came to us from the explosion of "science" in the last two centuries – and that is that there are only two positions – certainty and skepticism. But any human being knows that is not true. The really important things in life are seldom known with certainty. The most important of course being knowledge of someone else's heart. Does my wife really love me? Are my friends being honest with me? But we see enough evidence to have a position – we don't live our lives as skeptics just because certainty eludes us. But maybe Sam does

– and maybe that's why he's ticked off at Christians.

So I don't know with scientific certainty that Christ rose from the dead. But I do know that incredible things happened in the world at that time, and that people close to the event were willing to die for something that they clearly believed. If it were humanly possible to have refuted the resurrection, there were powerful forces afoot that would have done so in a heartbeat – the Jewish infrastructure and the power of Rome. But within a mere three hundred years, with no secular power and subject to murderous persecution, Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire. And all this through a band of disheartened disciples with little formal education. Hmmm. Something was going on. Don't suppose they actually saw the resurrected Christ, do you?

And one final thought. Of just what does Sam's (and other atheists') spiritual experiences consist? (I know, the evolutionary biologists tell us that our spiritual side is an adaptation to the uncertainty and cruelty of the natural world – once again the universal explanation.) But these experiences can't be connecting us with anything else, because according to them there *isn't* anything else. Carl Sagan can preen all he wants about our having the impression "of having fallen from a great height." But from where? To what end? He has no answer. It's just blatant borrowing of spiritual experience dressed up in secular garb with a heavy dose of scientism thrown in. (Or maybe Sagan thought the SETI program would provide the answer.)

You may recall I talked about that in an early installment – the borrowing of Christian or religious concepts. In fact, let me quote myself! (Sam has no corner on the market for hubris!)

You will hear me say many times that the atheist adopts, when it suits his/her argument, the categories and distinctions that come from a God-directed world view. They always pretend that these are simply *natural* ideas that somehow come with the programming with which we are equipped. That somehow these things have come about through some kind of evolutionary development connected with the survival of our species. Things like categories of right and wrong.

Well, here I am saying it again. Sam wants spiritual experiences without spirituality. My guess is it's because his world is too bleak without

them. But he doesn't want to admit God, because then he would be accountable. And that's the deepest fear of every atheist.

8. Atheists believe that there is nothing beyond human life and human understanding

HARRIS: Atheists are free to admit the limits of human understanding in a way that religious people are not. It is obvious that we do not fully understand the universe; but it is even more obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding of it. We do not know whether there is complex life elsewhere in the cosmos, but there might be. If there is, such beings could have developed an understanding of nature's laws that vastly exceeds our own. Atheists can freely entertain such possibilities. They also can admit that if brilliant extraterrestrials exist, the contents of the Bible and the Koran will be even less impressive to them than they are to human atheists.

From the atheist point of view, the world's religions utterly trivialize the real beauty and immensity of the universe. One doesn't have to accept anything on insufficient evidence to make such an observation.

RESPONSE: I must confess that I didn't really read through all of the ten points very carefully – at least not to take the arguments on board, maybe to look at the “titles.” But this is the most inane yet. I'm happy to “argue” with Sam if he has thought about some things and wants to bring some evidence to the table – but when he trails off into unsubstantiated “everyone agrees that...” statements, he loses my interest. First of all, that leave nothing to argue against. Herewith my complaints.

From the first sentence, there is no substantiation. In just what way are atheists in a better position to admit the limits of human understanding? If Sam spent any time whatsoever with thinking Christians, he would be well aware that if he were to have a complaint against us, it would be that we have too narrow a view of the potential of human understanding. We are, if anything, painfully aware of the shortcomings (rationalization vs. rational nature) of human reason. So point one is a gross misunderstanding of his subject.

“It's obvious that neither the Bible nor the Koran reflects our best understanding of (the universe).” Obvious? How so? Only if Sam has

decided that materialistic science is the only source of truth. He might like to reflect on the fact the Bible has “preached” creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) for several thousand years but that the scientific community mocked it and preached a “steady state” universe until well into the 20th century. Let alone the insight Biblical text (I can't speak for the Koran and have no intention to do so) gives into the human heart and how we should live our lives. Just what does science tell us about that? Hmmm, let me think. Is the answer *nothing*?

And what is this drivel about advanced civilizations? The Bible says nothing about such issues. If an all-powerful God chooses to make/allow other advanced civilizations – that's His prerogative. Again, if Sam spends any time with thinking Christians, he will not want to pursue this line of argument. The message of the Bible is to God's people here on earth. Nothing more (though that in itself is a big thing). And who says, except of course that paramount intellect Sam Harris, that these extraterrestrial civilizations will share his cramped idea of the Bible? What in the world is the connection between an enhanced understanding of the material world and a critical attitude toward revealed Scripture? We have already established that Scripture addresses an entirely different realm – the human heart, morality, salvation, relationship with God – to which science does not speak. Is Sam suggesting that better science will be able to effectively address these issues?

“The world's religions trivialize the real beauty and immensity of the universe?” Again, I'm not in a position to speak for other religions. But Christianity *created* modern science because Christians believed that the world was a rational and well-ordered place of inestimable beauty – not some random conglomeration of a set of competing gods that would not be susceptible to rational investigation. Atheists once again “borrow” the Christian view and pretend that it is the base case. But to the extent that they are “non-Christians” their heritage is a pagan view that the world cannot be known.

Really, I expected better from Sam. But he is increasingly demonstrating a lack of thought and analysis – things he would, I have no doubt, claim to be hallmarks of his “enlightened” atheistic view of the material world. There may be interesting and challenging arguments to be made on the atheist side. But Sam is either unfamiliar with

them or thinks that his audience (other atheists – because surely thinking Christians aren't listening to him) won't notice, don't care, or couldn't follow them.

9. Atheists ignore the fact that religion is extremely beneficial to society

HARRIS: Those who emphasize the good effects of religion never seem to realize that such effects fail to demonstrate the truth of any religious doctrine. This is why we have terms such as “wishful thinking” and “self-deception.” There is a profound distinction between a consoling delusion and the truth.

In any case, the good effects of religion can surely be disputed. In most cases, it seems that religion gives people bad reasons to behave well, when good reasons are actually available. Ask yourself, which is more moral, helping the poor out of concern for their suffering, or doing so because you think the creator of the universe wants you to do it, will reward you for doing it or will punish you for not doing it?

RESPONSE: A Christian who defends his or her faith based on its good effects has a weak grasp of that faith. Sam is right (amazing, I said it!) that good effects don't demonstrate truth. But then of course he must agree that his “good reasons” such as “helping the poor out of concern for their suffering” don't do so either. These are not the way to truth.

And of course, Sam is as usual far from the truth. With no supporting evidence we have “good effects” turned into “wishful thinking” and “self-delusion.” And why isn't Sam's “good reasons” just *his* particular form of “wishful thinking” or “self delusion?” Why can't it be that *his* self-defined “good reasons” are in reality an effort to curry favor with a third person while in fact there is no true “concern for the suffering?”

Christianity has it right when it takes these issues to their source – the human heart (supported of course by the human mind). Because humans are intrinsically of great value, it is our duty to care for them. That we don't always do so is not a condemnation of the principle, but a result of the fallen nature of man. We do it because it gives God pleasure – not to mention the recipients who are themselves God's handiwork.

As to Sam's “which is more moral” attempt, once again he misses the point. Like the good liberal he is, what is important is what one “feels.” I can just hear it. “I have concern. I *feel*

it.” And in the liberal cosmology, if you feel it, it must be right and you must act on it. (Think Nike's “Just do it!”) Doesn't matter if there are unintended consequences (like the years of dysfunctional welfare we lived through). If the “feeling” were for a good cause it didn't matter. No amount of evidence of the destruction wreaked on the African-American family in this country could separate a liberal from his/her enchantment with doing something that felt good – giving a handout to people who would have been better off with the motivation to get a job.

Sam appears to have no concept of right and wrong – or at least how these categories bear on the kind of activities he is considering. Christians perform acts of compassion because it is the right thing to do. And we get that category and many of its members from God. Yet Sam claims to be able to determine the “more moral” position by the human feeling involved. What does Sam do with people who feel something else – who feel like kicking some suffering person while they're down. If feelings are our guide, how do we tell the difference between a good and a bad feeling, or a right and wrong one? From what Sam sets out as important, these concepts don't even enter his consideration. Pretty impoverished if you ask me.

10. Atheism provides no basis for morality.

HARRIS: If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible or the Koran – as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. We do not get our morality from religion. We decide what is good in our good books by recourse to moral intuitions that are (at some level) hard-wired in us and that have been refined by thousands of years of thinking about the causes and possibilities of human happiness.

We have made considerable moral progress over the years, and we didn't make this progress by reading the Bible or the Koran more closely. Both books condone the practice of slavery – and yet every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination. Whatever is good in scripture – like the golden rule – can be valued for its ethical wisdom without our believing that it was handed down to us by the creator of the universe.

RESPONSE: I don't know about the Koran. But I would like to know just where Sam finds "celebration" of cruelty in the Bible. Where are we told that it is a positive moral value to perpetrate cruelty? Surely if it is "celebrated" it must be recommended.

[This suggests to me two asides:

- I wonder whether those who find cruelty in the Bible don't suffer from that typically modern hyper-sensitivity that, for example, sees giving Guantanamo detainees over fifty years of age compulsory colonoscopies as torture; and
- That I am actually somewhat offended by Sam's lumping of the Bible and Koran into the same category. It tells me he knows little of either.]

"We do not get our morality from religion." It's funny, you know, that for essentially all of human history this has not been an issue. We knew that morality and religion were closely intertwined. When the Enlightenment came along, we decided that we could ditch religions and revelation and build a moral structure on our own. But even as late as the Founding Fathers of this country (almost 1800 after all), it was still assumed that morality rested on religion.

What happened? I personally think modern science confused the issue with what appeared to be provable truth. Now I love science. And there are no doubt lots of "scientific facts." I don't think there is anything wrong with relying on the "fact" that the sun is 93,000,000 miles away or that light travels at 186,000 miles/second. Science, in the form of technology and engineering, proceeded to produce miracle after miracle: cures for disease, revolutions in agriculture and transportation, comforts that went way beyond the grasp of even the most affluent of only a century before. That was all a great success.

But the success was morphed into the idea that whatever science said was truth. There's a name for this. It's scientism. We've touched on this before. Carl Sagan says: "The cosmos is all there is, was or ever will be." And it's taken as truth. The hard-core evolutionists claim we are the result of purely random events sorted out by a survival test, and that becomes our truth. Believe me, they have no idea.

But knowledge became confused with scientific knowledge. And since we were able to produce scientific knowledge, we thought we should be able to produce other kinds of

knowledge as well – such as knowledge of morality and ethics. But this is not an area susceptible to the techniques of science. There is no lab test for right vs. wrong. But we act as if simply by sitting quietly and thinking, we can come up with a moral system.

The problem is that we can come up with lots of moral systems. What we can't do is come up with *one* moral system. And so Hitler thinks it's a virtue to get rid of the Jews by whatever means is at his disposal. And since the contemporary thinkers can't find a way to condemn Hitler's moral system, we end up by saying with the post-modernists and relativists that everybody makes up his or her own. But that's exactly what I said. We can't come up with just one. In response to this, the modern sensibility is to let all do their own thing in a benighted quest for some kind of meaningless tolerance.

Sam thinks our moral intuitions are somehow "hard-wired" in us. When I hear that I imagine he thinks he's overthrowing some God-myth and replacing it with something concrete. But in fact he has nothing but speculation to support his position.

As to moral progress, I haven't really done my homework on this issue. But if forced to a position I would take refuge in agnosticism. We have improved in some ways, and have degenerated in others. I can't say that the state of sexual relationships we have built for ourselves is going to do us a lot of long-term good. I applaud the ending of slavery (by Christians, of course) and the advent of a much-improved system of civil rights in this and other countries. But I note we terminate millions of pregnancies each year, killing the most innocent among us. Most wars are more clinical, and we have the ability to fight only opposing soldiers. But we have nuclear weapons capable of mass annihilation of non-combatants. So I suspect it's a draw. Because while the human mind has changed back and forth, the human heart has not. Jeremiah 17:9 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

And a final note on the slavery thing. It's a complicated question. It was an institution that was rife throughout the Middle East and Biblical lands. Sad to say it's still too easy to find it there even today. I hold no brief for the ownership of human persons. But in America it has been confounded with forced physical labor. In ancient

Rome, your scribe and your barber might have been your slave. I'm not suggesting it was a benign institution – only that the American version was perhaps one of the more oppressive. The New Testament, built on the life and message of Jesus Christ, appears to accept slavery as an institution. But it says that there is no difference in intrinsic value before God. Not between the sexes. Not across ethnic boundaries. Not across socio-economic lines. In Galatians 3:28 the apostle Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

And from that humble beginning – not from independent thinking by secular rationalists – came something like a William Wilberforce. (See the movie, *Amazing Grace*.) Not just the idea, but the idea and the heartfelt determination to make it a reality. The slave trade was ended in the British Empire, and the slaves were set free. Ultimately, of course, the United States fought what was likely the bloodiest war up to that time over the issue. Lincoln mused that perhaps God would let the war continue until *all* of the value created by the subjugation of slaves in America was destroyed. That's truly the meaning of the word "holocaust."

And finally, we gotta get Sam an etymological dictionary. I once heard a reliable source say that the word ethics has as its derivation "from God" from something like "e-theos." It would certainly make sense. Consequently, I find it humorous that Sam will use his "ethical wisdom" to sort out the value of a behavioral prescription without any interference by some pesky God – when the very word "ethical" invokes that very God. (I just think God has the greatest sense of humor, don't you?)

Final Thoughts

I find it a little daunting that I have lavished so many pages in responses to Sam. But I didn't do it for Sam. I did it for anyone who wants to look at these issues from a Christian perspective. I admit that I used to be misled by arguments like Sam's, even after I became a Christian. But the more I read, think and pray, the more I understand the truth of the Christian message. And it is a truth of the heart – not of the head. That's not to say it cannot be defended with head knowledge.

But it is ultimately about relationships: God to man, and man to man. These are the most profound truths of our lives – and truths to which

all other truths (scientific, philosophical, ethical, etc.) must be subservient. That's why we test things against Scripture – so that in our fallen state we do not get distracted by purely human attempts to rewrite God's truth.

And so it's a noble undertaking to answer the criticisms of the world. I hope I've made some sense in that effort.

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