
God Debate: Sam Harris vs. Rick Warren

At The Summit: On a cloudy California day, the atheist Sam Harris sat down with the Christian pastor Rick Warren to hash out Life's Biggest Question: is God real? A NEWSWEEK exclusive.

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April 9, 2007 issue - Rick Warren is as big as a bear, with a booming voice and easygoing charm. Sam Harris is compact, reserved and, despite the polemical tone of his books, friendly and mild. Warren, one of the best-known pastors in the world, started Saddleback in 1980; now 25,000 people attend the church each Sunday. Harris is softer-spoken; paragraphs pour out of him, complex and fact-filled— as befits a Ph.D. student in neuroscience. At NEWSWEEK's invitation, they met in Warren's office recently and chatted, mostly amiably, for four hours. Jon Meacham moderated. Excerpts follow.

JON MEACHAM: Rick, since you're the home team, we'll start with Sam. Sam, is there a God in the sense that most Americans think of him?

SAM HARRIS: There's no evidence for such a God, and it's instructive to notice that we're all atheists with respect to Zeus and the thousands of other dead gods whom now nobody worships.

Rick, what is the evidence of the existence of the God of Abraham?

RICK WARREN: I see the fingerprints of God everywhere. I see them in culture. I see them in law. I see them in literature. I see them in nature. I see them in my own life. Trying to understand where God came from is like an ant trying to understand the Internet. Even the most brilliant scientist would agree that we only know a fraction of a percent of the knowledge of the universe. **HARRIS:** Any scientist must concede that we don't fully understand the universe. But neither the Bible nor the Qur'an represents our best understanding of the universe. That is exquisitely clear.

WARREN: To you.

HARRIS: There is so much about us that is not in the Bible. Every specific science from cosmology to psychology to economics has surpassed and superseded what the Bible tells us is true about our world.

Sam, does the Christian you address in your books have to believe that God wrote the Bible and that it is literally true?

HARRIS: Well, there's clearly a spectrum of confidence in the text. I mean, there's the "This is literally true, nothing even gets figuratively interpreted," and then there's the "This is just the best book we have, written by the smartest people who have ever lived, and it's still legitimate to organize our lives around it to the exclusion of other books." Anywhere on that spectrum I have a problem, because in my mind the Bible and the Qur'an are just books, written by human beings. There are sections of the Bible that I think are absolutely brilliant and poetically unrivaled, and there are sections of the Bible which are the sheerest barbarism, yet profess to prescribe a divinely mandated morality—where do I start? Books like Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Exodus and First and Second Kings and Second Samuel—half of the kings and prophets of Israel would be taken to The Hague and prosecuted for crimes against humanity if these events took place in our own time.

[To Warren] Is the Bible inerrant?

WARREN: I believe it's inerrant in what it claims to be. The Bible does not claim to be a scientific book in many areas.

Do you believe Creation happened in the way Genesis describes it?

WARREN: If you're asking me do I believe in evolution, the answer is no, I don't. I believe that God, at a moment, created man. I do believe Genesis is literal, but I do also know metaphorical terms are used. Did God come down and blow in man's nose? If you believe in God, you don't have a problem accepting miracles. So if God wants to do it that way, it's fine with me.

HARRIS: I'm doing my Ph.D. in neuroscience; I'm very close to the literature on evolutionary biology. And the basic point is that evolution by natural selection is random genetic mutation over millions of years in the context of environmental pressure that selects for fitness.

WARREN: Who's doing the selecting?

HARRIS: The environment. You don't have to invoke an intelligent designer to explain the complexity we see.

WARREN: Sam makes all kinds of assertions based on his presuppositions. I'm willing to admit my presuppositions: there are clues to God. I talk to God every day. He talks to me.

HARRIS: What does that actually mean?

WARREN: One of the great evidences of God is answered prayer. I have a friend, a Canadian friend, who has an immigration issue. He's an intern at this church, and so I said, "God, I need you to help me with this," as I went out for my evening walk. As I was walking I met a woman. She said, "I'm an immigration attorney; I'd be happy to take this case." Now, if that happened

once in my life I'd say, "That is a coincidence." If it happened tens of thousands of times, that is not a coincidence.

There must have been times in your ministry when you've prayed for someone to be delivered from disease who is not—say, a little girl with cancer.

WARREN: Oh, absolutely.

So, parse that. God gave you an immigration attorney, but God killed a little girl.

WARREN: Well, I do believe in the goodness of God, and I do believe that he knows better than I do. God sometimes says yes, God sometimes says no and God sometimes says wait. I've had to learn the difference between no and not yet. The issue here really does come down to surrender. A lot of atheists hide behind rationalism; when you start probing, you find their reactions are quite emotional. In fact, I've never met an atheist who wasn't angry.

HARRIS: Let me be the first.

WARREN: I think your books are quite angry.

HARRIS: I would put it at impatient rather than angry. Let me respond to this notion of answered prayer, because this is a classic sampling error, to use a statistical phrase. We know that human beings have a terrible sense of probability. There are many things we believe that confirm our prejudices about the world, and we believe this only by noticing the confirmations, and not keeping track of the disconfirmations. You could prove to the satisfaction of every scientist that intercessory prayer works if you set up a simple experiment. Get a billion Christians to pray for a single amputee. Get them to pray that God regrow that missing limb. This happens to salamanders every day, presumably without prayer; this is within the capacity of God. [*Warren is laughing.*] I find it interesting that people of faith only tend to pray for conditions that are self-limiting.

WARREN: That's a misstatement there.

HARRIS: Let's go back to the Bible. The reason you believe that Jesus is the son of God is because you believe that the Gospel is a valid account of the miracles of Jesus.

WARREN: It's one of the reasons.

HARRIS: Yeah. It's one of the reasons. Now, there are many testimonials about miracles, every bit as amazing as the miracles of Jesus, in other literature of the world's religions. Even contemporary miracles. There are millions of people who believe that Sathya Sai Baba, the south Indian guru, was born of a virgin, has raised the dead and materializes objects. I mean,

you can watch some of his miracles on YouTube. Prepare to be underwhelmed. He's a stage magician. As a Christian, you can say Sathya Sai Baba's miracle stories are not interesting, let's not pay attention to them, but if you set them within the prescientific religious milieu of the first-century Roman Empire, suddenly miracle stories become especially compelling.

Sam, what are the secular sources of an acceptable moral code?

HARRIS: Well, I don't think that the religious books are the source. We go to the Bible and we are the judge of what is good. We see the golden rule as the great distillation of ethical impulses, but the golden rule is not unique to the Bible or to Jesus; you see it in many, many cultures—and you see some form of it among nonhuman primates. I'm not at all a moral relativist. I think it's quite common among religious people to believe that atheism entails moral relativism. I think there is an absolute right and wrong. I think honor killing, for example, is unambiguously wrong—you can use the word evil. A society that kills women and girls for sexual indiscretion, even the indiscretion of being raped, is a society that has killed compassion, that has failed to teach men to value women and has eradicated empathy. Empathy and compassion are our most basic moral impulses, and we can even teach the golden rule without lying to ourselves or our children about the origin of certain books or the virgin birth of certain people.

Rick, Christianity has conducted itself in an abjectly evil manner from time to time. How do you square that with the Christian Gospel of love?

WARREN: I don't feel duty-bound to defend stuff that's done in the name of God which I don't think God approved or advocated. Have things been done wrong in the name of Christianity? Yes. Sam makes the statement in his book that religion is bad for the world, but far more people have been killed through atheists than through all the religious wars put together. Thousands died in the Inquisition; millions died under Mao, and under Stalin and Pol Pot. There is a home for atheists in the world today—it's called North Korea. I don't know any atheists who want to go there. I'd much rather live under Tony Blair, or even George Bush. The bottom line is that atheists, who accuse Christians of being intolerant, are as intolerant—

HARRIS: How am I being intolerant? I'm not advocating that we lock people up for their religious beliefs. You can get locked up in Western Europe for denying the Holocaust. I think that's a terrible way of addressing the problem. This really is one of the great canards of religious discourse, the idea that the greatest crimes of the 20th century were perpetrated because of atheism. The core problem for me is divisive dogmatism. There are many kinds of dogmatism. There's nationalism, there's tribalism, there's racism, there's chauvinism. And there's religion. Religion is the only sphere of discourse where dogma is actually a good word, where it is considered ennobling to believe something strongly based on faith.

WARREN: You don't feel atheists are dogmatic?

HARRIS: No, I don't.

WARREN: I'm sorry, I disagree with you. You're quite dogmatic.

HARRIS: OK, well, I'm happy to have you point out my dogmas, but first let me deal with Stalin. The killing fields and the gulag were not the product of people being too reluctant to believe things on insufficient evidence. They were not the product of people requiring too much evidence and too much argument in favor of their beliefs. We have people flying planes in our buildings because they have theological grievances against the West. I'm noticing Christians doing terrible things explicitly for religious reasons—for instance, not fund-ing [embryonic] stem-cell research. The motive is always paramount for me. No society in human history has ever suffered because it has become too reasonable. WARREN: We're in exact agreement on that. I just happen to believe that Christianity saved reason. We would not have the Bill of Rights without Christianity.

HARRIS: That's certainly a disputable claim. The idea that somehow we are getting our morality out of the Judeo-Christian tradition is bad history and bad science.

WARREN: Where do you get your morality? If there is no God, if I am simply complicated ooze, then the truth is, your life doesn't matter, my life doesn't matter.

HARRIS: That is a total caricature of—

WARREN: No, let me finish. I let you caricature Christianity. If life is just random chance, then nothing really does matter and there is no morality—it's survival of the fittest. If survival of the fittest means me killing you to survive, so be it. For years, atheists have said there is no God, but they want to live like God exists. They want to live like their lives have meaning. HARRIS: Our morality, the meaning we find in life, is a lived experience that I believe has, to use a loaded term, a spiritual component. I believe it is possible to radically transform our experience of the world for the better, very much the way someone like Jesus, or someone like Buddha, witnessed. There is wisdom in our spiritual, contemplative literature, and I am quite interested in understanding it. I think that meditation and prayer affect us for the better. The question is, what is reasonable to believe on the basis of those transformations?

WARREN: You will not admit that it is your experience that makes you an atheist, not rationality.

HARRIS: What in your experience is making you someone who is not a Muslim? I presume that you are not losing sleep every night wondering whether to convert to Islam. And if you're not, it is because when the Muslims say, "We have a book that's the perfect word of the creator of the universe, it's the Qur'an, it was dictated to Muhammad in his cave by the archangel Gabriel,"

you see a variety of claims there that aren't backed up by sufficient evidence. If the evidence were sufficient, you would be compelled to be Muslim.

WARREN: That's exactly right.

HARRIS: So you and I both stand in a relationship of atheism to Islam.

WARREN: We both stand in a relationship of faith. You have faith that there is no God. In 1974, I spent the better part of a year living in Japan, and I studied all the world religions. All of the religions basically point toward truth. Buddha made this famous statement at the end of his life: "I'm still searching for the truth." Muhammad said, "I am a prophet of the truth." The Veda says, "Truth is elusive, it's like a butterfly, you've got to search for it." Then Jesus Christ comes along and says, "I am the truth." All of a sudden, that forces a decision.

HARRIS: Many, many other prophets and gurus have said that.

WARREN: Here's the difference. Jesus says, "I am the only way to God. I am the way to the Father." He is either lying or he's not.

Sam, is Rick intellectually dishonest?

HARRIS: I wouldn't put it in such an invidious way, but—

Let's say Rick's not here and we're just hanging out in his office.

HARRIS: It is intellectually dishonest, frankly, to say that you are sure that Jesus was born of a virgin.

WARREN: I say I accept that by faith. And I think it's intellectually dishonest for you to say you have proof that it didn't happen. Here's the difference between you and me. I am open to the possibility that I am wrong in certain areas, and you are not.

HARRIS: Oh, I am absolutely open to that.

WARREN: So you are open to the possibility that you might be wrong about Jesus?

HARRIS: And Zeus. Absolutely.

WARREN: And what are you doing to study that?

HARRIS: I consider it such a low-probability event that I—

WARREN: A low probability? When there are 96 percent believers in the world? So is everybody else an idiot?

HARRIS: It is quite possible for most people to be wrong—as are most Americans who think that evolution didn't occur.

WARREN: That's an arrogant statement.

HARRIS: It's an honest statement.

Rick, if you had been born in India or in Iran, would you have different religious beliefs?

WARREN: There's no doubt where you're born influences your initial beliefs. Regardless of where you were born, there are some things you can know about God, even without the Bible. For instance, I look at the world and I say, "God likes variety." I say, "God likes beauty." I say, "God likes order," and the more we understand ecology, the more we understand how sensitive that order is.

HARRIS: Then God also likes smallpox and tuberculosis.

WARREN: I would attribute a lot of the sins in the world to myself.

HARRIS: Are you responsible for smallpox?

WARREN: I am responsible to do something about it. No doubt about it. I am responsible to do something about the 500 million who get malaria every year and the 40 million who have AIDS, because I will be held accountable for my life. And when I say, "God, why don't you do something about this?" God says, "Well, why don't you? You were the answer to your own prayer."

HARRIS: I totally agree with Rick: it is our responsibility to help bridge these inequities, but I think you become even more motivated, potentially, to help people when you realize there is no good reason, certainly not a supernatural good reason, for the fact that I have so much and my neighbor has so little.

Do you think that religiously motivated good works are actually harmful?

HARRIS: The thing that bothers me about faith-based altruism is that it is contaminated with religious ideas that have nothing to do with the relief of human suffering. So you have a Christian minister in Africa who's doing really good work, helping those who are hungry, healing the sick. And yet, as part of his job description, he feels he needs to preach the divinity of Jesus

in communities where literally millions of people have been killed because of interreligious conflict between Christians and Muslims. It seems to me that that added piece causes unnecessary suffering. I would much rather have someone over there who simply wanted to feed the hungry and heal the sick.

WARREN: You'd much rather have somebody—an atheist—feeding the hungry than a person who believes in God? All of the great movements forward in Western civilization were by believers. It was pastors who led the abolition of slavery. It was pastors who led the woman's right to vote. It was pastors who led the civil-rights movement. Not atheists.

HARRIS: You bring up slavery—I think it's quite ironic. Slavery, on balance, is supported by the Bible, not condemned by it. It's supported with exquisite precision in the Old Testament, as you know, and Paul in First Timothy and Ephesians and Colossians supports it, and Peter—

WARREN: No, he doesn't. He allows it. He doesn't support it.

HARRIS: OK, he allows it. I would argue that we got rid of slavery not because we read the Bible more closely. We got rid of slavery despite the profound inadequacies of the Bible. We got rid of slavery because we realized it was manifestly evil to treat human beings as farm equipment. As it is.

Rick, what is your role as a pastor in encouraging reformation of other faiths?

WARREN: All of the great questions of the 21st century will be religious questions. Will Islam modernize peacefully? What's going to happen to the influx of Muslims into secular Europe, which has lost its faith in Christianity and has nothing to counteract this loss in religious terms? What will replace Marxism in China? In all likelihood it's going to be Christianity. Will America return to its historic roots—will there be a Third Great Awakening, or will America go the way of Europe?

HARRIS: I think the answers, in spiritual and ethical terms, are going to be nondenominational. We are suffering the collision of denominations, specifically the collision with Islam. Whatever is true about us isn't Christian. And it isn't Muslim. Physics isn't Christian, though it was invented by Christians. Algebra isn't Muslim, even though it was invented by Muslims. Whenever we get at the truth, we transcend culture, we transcend our upbringing. The discourse of science is a good example of where we should hold out hope for transcending our tribalism.

WARREN: Why isn't atheism more appealing if it's supposedly the most intellectually honest?

HARRIS: Frankly, it has a terrible PR campaign.

WARREN: [*Laughs*] It's not a matter of PR.

HARRIS: It is right next to child molester as something you don't want to be. But that is a product, I would argue, of what religious people tell one another about atheism.

Sam, the one thing that I find really troubling in your arguments is that I am guilty, to quote "The End of Faith," of a "ludicrous obscenity" when I take my children to church. That is strong language, and it doesn't exactly encourage dialogue.

HARRIS: To some degree the stridence of my writing is an effort to get people's attention. But I can honestly defend the stridence because I think our situation is that urgent. I am terrified of what seems to me to be a bottleneck that civilization is passing through. On the one hand we have 21st-century disruptive technology proliferating, and on the other we have first-century superstition. A civilization is going to either pass through this bottleneck more or less intact or it won't. And perhaps that fear sounds grandiose, but civilizations end. On any number of occasions, some generation has witnessed the ruination of everything they and their ancestors had built. What especially terrifies me about religious thinking is the expectation on the part of many that civilization is bound to end based on prophecy and its ending is going to be glorious.

WARREN: I believe that history split into A.D. and B.C. because of the Resurrection. And the Resurrection is not only the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is the hope of the world: it says there's more to this life than just here and now. That doesn't mean that I do less, it means that this life is a test, it's a trust and it's a temporary assignment. If death is the end, shoot, I'm not going to waste another minute being altruistic.

HARRIS: How do you account for my altruism?

WARREN: You have common grace. Even in people who don't believe in God, there is a spark God has put in you that says, "There's got to be more to life than just make money and die." I think that that spark does not come from evolution.

Sam wrote that without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable.

WARREN: Because we were made in God's image, we were made to last forever. That means I'm going to spend more time on that side of eternity than on this side. If I did not believe that there is a Judgment, if I believed Hitler would actually get away with everything he did, that would be a reason for great despair. The fact is, I do believe there will be a Judgment Day. God is not just a God of love. He is a God of justice. So death is a factor. On the other hand, even if there were no such thing as heaven, I would put my trust in Christ because I have found it a meaningful, satisfactory, significant way to live.

HARRIS: How is it fair for God to have designed a world which gives such ambiguous testimony to his existence? How is it fair to have created a system where belief is the crucial piece, rather than being a good person? How is it fair to have created a world in which by mere accident of birth, someone who grew up Muslim can be confounded by the wrong religion? I don't see how the future of humanity is in good care with those competing orthodoxies.

Rick, let's be blunt. Is Sam's soul in jeopardy, in your view, because he has rejected Jesus?

WARREN: The politically incorrect answer is yes.

HARRIS: Is that the honest answer?

WARREN: The truth is, religion is mutually exclusive. The person who says, "Oh, I just believe them all," is an idiot because the religions flat-out contradict each other. You cannot believe in reincarnation and heaven at the same time.

Sam, let's be blunt as well. Has Rick, in your view, wasted much of his life on behalf of a Gospel that you think is a first-century superstition?

HARRIS: I wouldn't put it in those stark terms, because I don't have a rigid view how someone should spend their life so as not to waste it.

WARREN: What's your politically incorrect answer?

HARRIS: I think you could use your time and attention better than organizing your life around a belief that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and the best book we're ever going to have on every relevant subject.

How would the ideal world work, in the Sam Harris view?

HARRIS: Right now, we have to change the rules to talk about God and spiritual experience and ethics. And I'm denying that that is so. You can have your spirituality. You can go into a cave and practice meditation and transform yourself, and then we can talk about why that happened and how it could be replicated. We may even want, for perfectly rational reasons, to say we want a Sabbath in this country, a genuine Sabbath. Let's realize that there's a power in contemplating the mystery of the universe, and in reminding yourself how much you love the people closest to you, and how much more you could love the people you haven't met yet. There is nothing you have to believe on insufficient evidence in order to talk about that possibility.

WARREN: Sam, do you believe human beings have a spirit?

HARRIS: There are many reasons not to believe in a naive conception of a soul that kind of floats off the brain at death and goes somewhere else. But I do not know.

WARREN: Can you have spirituality without a spirit?

HARRIS: You can feel yourself to be one with the universe.

WARREN: OK, then why can't you just take the next step? Because right now you're talking in extremely nonrational terms.

HARRIS: There's nothing irrational about it. You can close your eyes in meditation and lose the sense of your physical body, totally. Many people draw from that the metaphysical conclusion that "I'm just spirit, and I can transcend the body." That's not the only conclusion you have to draw from that experience, and I don't think it's the best conclusion.

WARREN: You're more spiritual than you think. You just don't want a boss. You don't want a God who tells you what to do.

HARRIS: I don't want to pretend to be certain about anything I'm not certain about.

Rick, last thoughts?

WARREN: I believe in both faith and reason. The more we learn about God, the more we understand how magnificent this universe is. There is no contradiction to it. When I look at history, I would disagree with Sam: Christianity has done far more good than bad. Altruism comes out of knowing there is more than this life, that there is a sovereign God, that I am not God. We're both betting. He's betting his life that he's right. I'm betting my life that Jesus was not a liar. When we die, if he's right, I've lost nothing. If I'm right, he's lost everything. I'm not willing to make that gamble.

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