

POISON OR CURE
RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN THE MODERN WORLD

PRESENT:

Tom Bancauf

Michael Cromartie, Moderator

SPEAKERS:

Christopher Hitchens

Alistair McGrath

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I will not take time just now to give an extensive introduction of our speakers, because you have in your brochure elaborate biographies of each of these gentlemen and of course I know you're here because you know their reputations and that's why you've come.

So I would like to begin my introduction of Christopher Hitchens this way, by calling your attention to this cartoon. In an issue this past June, the *New Yorker Magazine* ran the following cartoon. I'll describe it to you, a woman, the wife is sitting on the couch, reading, the husband is walking in the door and just as he's coming in the front door a bolt of lightning is striking him right in the back and the wife says I begged you not to buy that book by Christopher Hitchens.

Ladies and gentlemen, he bought the book and so have many others. Christopher's book, *God is Not Great*, has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list now for over 20 weeks.

In introducing Christopher Hitchens, I should at least mention what some others have said about him and his gifts. Here's the *London Observer* who has said "he is one of the most prolific as well as brilliant journalists of our time," where the *Los Angeles Times* has said "he is a political and literary journalist extraordinaire," and the *New Yorker Magazine* has said "he's an intellectual willing to show his teeth in the cause of righteousness."

And finally, Christopher, you will be interested to know that our mutual friend, the political philosopher Peter Berkowitz who is here tonight, recently said this about you: "Whether you agree or disagree with what he says or writes, Christopher is utterly incapable of ever being boring."

Christopher, thank you for coming, we trust you will not be boring.

(Applause)

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, thank you Georgetown, thank you ladies and gentlemen for coming. Thank you, Michael, for that suspiciously terse introduction.

Thank you, seriously, to the Ethics and Public Policy Center for your work in conceiving this idea, for encouraging me to do it, for bringing us, Dr. McGrath, all the way from our common alma mater of Oxford and for the regular seminars that you may not know that Michael does all the time on these matters of faith versus reason which is, after all, the ground on which we are meeting this evening.

I always come before events like this with antagonists like Dr. McGrath with a slight sense, a very slight sense, I hope it doesn't sound self-pitying, of inequality.

My views, if I say it for myself, are tolerably well advertised and if they're not, it's partly your fault because what I say is fairly intelligible, very plainly stated, and you know what I think if you care to find out.

When I debate with Jews and Muslims and Christians, I very often say, “well, do you really believe there was a virgin birth, do you really believe in a Genesis creation, do you really believe in bodily resurrection?” I get a sort of Monty Python reply. “Well, there's a little bit of metaphorical, really.”

I'm not sure—I'm going to find out—I'm determined to find out this evening which line on this my antagonist does take and I want you to notice and I want you to test him on it because I think it's fair and I'm going to talk to him and to you as if he did represent the Christian faith.

I can't do all three Monotheisms tonight. I might get a whack at the other two in the course of the discussion, I can only do his and I'm going to assume that it means something to him and that it's not just a humanist metaphysics and I think I'm entitled to that assumption.

The main thing I want to dispute this evening is this, you hear it very often said by people of a vague faith that, while it may not be the case that religion is metaphysically true, its figures and its stories may be legendary or dwell on the edge of myth, prehistoric, and its truth claims may be laughable.

We have better claims -- excuse me, better explanations for the origins and birth of our cosmos and our species now, so much better so, in fact, that had they been available to begin with, religion would never have taken root. No one would now go back to the stage when we didn't have any real philosophy, we only had mythology, when we thought we lived on a flat planet or when we thought that our planet was circulated by the sun instead of the other way around, when we didn't know that there were micro-organisms as part of creation and that they were more powerful than us and had dominion over us rather than we, them, when we were fearful of the infancy of our species.

We, we wouldn't have taken up Theism if we'd known now what we did then, but allow for all that, allow for all that, you still have to credit religion with being the source of ethics and morals: “where would we get these from if it weren't from faith?” I think, in the time I've got, I think that's the position I most want to undermine.

I don't believe that it's true that religion is moral or ethical, I certainly don't believe of course that any of its explanations about the origin of our species or the Cosmos or its ultimate destiny are true either. In fact, I think most of those have been conclusively, utterly discredited, but I'll deal with the remaining claim that it is moral. Okay, and I can only do Christianity this evening. Is it moral to believe that your sins, yours and mine, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, can be forgiven by the punishment of another person? Is it ethical to believe that?

I would submit that the doctrine of vicarious redemption by human sacrifice is utterly immoral. I might, if I wished, if I knew any of you, you were my friend or even if I didn't know you but I just loved the idea of you (compulsory love is another sickly element of

Christianity, by the way), but suppose I could say, “look, you're in debt, I've just made a lot of money out of a God-bashing book, I'll pay your debts for you, maybe you'll pay me back some day, but for now I can get you out of trouble.”

I could say if I really loved someone who had been sentenced to prison if I can find a way of saying I'd serve your sentence, I'd try and do it. I could do what Sydney Carton does in a Tale of Two Cities, if you like, I'm very unlikely to do this unless you've been incredibly sweet to me, I'll take your place on the scaffold, but I can't take away your responsibilities. I can't forgive what you did, I can't say you didn't do it, I can't make you washed clean. The name for that in primitive middle eastern society was scapegoating. You pile the sins of the tribe on a goat, you drive that goat into the desert to die of thirst and hunger. And you think you've taken away the sins of the tribe. This is a positively immoral doctrine that abolishes the concept of personal responsibility on which all ethics and all morality must depend.

It has a further implication. I'm told that I have to have a share in this human sacrifice even though it took place long before I was born. I have no say in it happening, I wasn't consulted about it, had I been present I would have been bound to do my best to stop the public torture and execution of an eccentric preacher. I would do the same even now.

No, no, I'm implicated in it, I, myself, drove in the nails, I was present at Calvary, it confirms the original filthy sin in which I was conceived and born, the sin of Adam in Genesis. Again, this may sound a mad belief, but it is the Christian belief.

Well it's here that we find something very sinister about Monotheism and about religious practice in general. It is incipiently at least and I think often explicitly totalitarian, because I have no say in this. I am born under a celestial dictatorship which I could not have had any hand in choosing. I don't put myself under its Government. I am told that it can watch me while I sleep. I'm told that it can convict me of, here's the definition of totalitarianism, thought crime, for what I think I may be convicted and condemned.

And that if I commit a right action, it's only to evade this punishment and if I commit a wrong action, I'm going to be caught up not just with punishment in life for what I've done which often follows action systematically, but, no, even after I'm dead. In the Old Testament, gruesome as it is, recommending as it is of genocide, racism, tribalism, slavery, genitalia mutilation, in the displacement and destruction of others, terrible as the Old Testament Gods are, they don't promise to punish the dead. There's no talk of torturing you after the earth has closed over the Amalekites. Only toward when gentle Jesus, meek and mild, makes his appearance are those who won't accept the message told they must depart into everlasting fire. Is this morality, is this ethics?

I submit not only is it not, not only does it come with the false promise of vicarious redemption, but it is the origin of the totalitarian principle which has been such a burden and shame to our species for so long.

I further think that it undermines us in our most essential integrity. It dissolves our obligation to live and witness in truth. Which of us would say that we would believe something because it might cheer us up or tell our children that something was true because it might dry their eyes? Which of us indulges in wishful thinking, who really cares about the pursuit of truth at all costs and at all hazards?

Can it not be said, do you not, in fact, hear it said repeatedly about religion and by the religions themselves that, well it may not be really true, the stories may be fairy tales. The history may be dubious, but it provides consolation. Can anyone hear themselves saying this or have it said of them without some kind of embarrassment, without the concession that thinking here is directly wishful, that, yes, it would be nice if you could throw your sins and your responsibilities on someone else and have them dissolved, but it's not true and it's not morally sound and that's the second ground of my indictment.

On our integrity, basic integrity, knowing right from wrong and being able to choose a right action over a wrong one, I think one must repudiate the claim that one doesn't have this moral discrimination innately, that, no, rather it must come only from the agency of a celestial dictatorship which one must love and simultaneously fear.

What is it like, I've never tried it, I've never been a Cleric, what is it like to lie to children for a living and tell them that they are an authority, that they must love compulsory love? What a grotesque idea and be terrified of it at the same time. What's that like? I want to know.

And that we don't have an innate sense of right and wrong, children don't have an innate sense of fairness and decency, which of course they do. What is it like? I can personalize it to this extent, my mother's Jewish ancestors are told that until they got to Sianai, they'd been dragging themselves around the desert under the impression that adultery, murder, theft and perjury were all fine, and they get to Mount Sinai only to be told that's not kosher after all.

I'm sorry, excuse me, you must have more self-respect than that for yourself and for others. Of course the stories are fiction. It's a fabrication exposed conclusively by Israeli Archaeology. Nothing of the sort ever took place, but suppose we take as metaphor? It's an insult, it's an insult to us, it's an insult to our deepest integrity.

No, if we believed that perjury, murder and theft were all right, we wouldn't have got as far as the foot of Mount Sinai or anywhere else.

Now we're told what we have to believe and this is, I'm coming now to the question of whether or not science, reason and religion are compatible or I would rather say reconcilable. The late, great Stephen J. Gould said that he believed they were non-overlapping magisteria, you can be both a believer and a person of faith.

Here's why I, a non-scientist, will say that I think it's more radically irreconcilable than it is incompatible. I've taken the best advice I can on how long Homo sapiens have been on the planet. Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins and many others, and many discrepant views from theirs reckon it's not more than 250,000 years, a quarter of a million years. It's not less, either. I think it's roughly accepted, I think. 100,000 is the lowest I've heard and actually I was about to say, again not to sound too Jewish, I'll take 100,000. I only need 100,000.

For 100,000 years Homo sapiens were born, usually, well not usually, but very often dying in the process or killing its mother in the process at life expectancy probably not much more than 20, 25 years. Dying probably of hunger or of micro-organisms that they didn't know existed or of events such as volcanic or tsunami or earthquake types that would have been wholly terrifying and mysterious as well as some turf wars over women, land, property, food, other matters. You can fill them in, imagine it for yourself what the first few tens of thousands of years were like.

And we like to think learning a little bit in the process and certainly having Gods all the way, worshipping bears fairly early on, I can sort of see why, sometimes worshipping other human being, (big mistake, I'm coming back to that if I have time), this and that and the other thing, but exponentially perhaps improving, though in some areas of the world very nearly completely dying out. And a bitter struggle all along.

According to the Christian faith, heaven watches this with folded arms for 98,000 years and then decides, whew, it's time to intervene and the best way of doing that would be a human sacrifice in primitive Palestine where the news would take so long to spread that it still hasn't penetrated very large parts of the world and that would be our redemption of human species.

Now I submit to you, ladies and gentlemen, that that is, what I've just said which you must believe to believe the Christian revelation is not possible to believe, as well as not decent to believe. Why is it not possible? Because a virgin birth is more likely than that. A resurrection is more likely than that and because if it was true, it would have two further implications. It would have to mean that the designer of this plan was unbelievably lazy and inept or unbelievably callous and cruel and indifferent and capricious. That is the case with every argument for design and every argument for revelation and intervention that has ever been made. But it's not conclusively so because of the superior knowledge that we've won for yourself by an endless struggle to assert our reason, our science, our humanity, our extension of knowledge against the priests, against the Rabbis, against the Mullahs who have always wanted us to consider ourselves as made from dust or from a clot of blood, according to the Koran, or as the Jews are supposed to pray every morning, at least not female or gentile.

And here's my final point, the final insult that religion delivers to us, the final poison it injects into our system. It appeals both to our meanness, our self-centeredness and our solecism and to massochism. In other words, it's sadomasochistic.

I'll put it like this: you're a clot of blood, you're a piece of mud, you're lucky to be alive, God fashioned you for his convenience, even though you're born in filth and sin and even though every religion that's ever been is distinguished principally by the idea that we should be disgusted by our own sexuality. Name me a religion that does not play upon that fact. So you're lucky to be here, originally sinful and covered in shame and filth as you are, you're a wretched creature, but take heart, the Universe is designed with you in mind and heaven has a plan for you.

Ladies and gentlemen, I close by saying I can't believe there is a thinking person here who does not realize that our species would begin to grow to something like its full height if it left this childness behind, it emancipated itself from this sinister, childlike nonsense.

And I now commit you to the good Dr. McGrath. Thank you.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, Christopher. Well besides what you can read in his bio in your program, I should let you know that Professor McGrath holds two Oxford Doctorates, one a Doctor of Divinity for his work on historical theology and systematic theology and another Doctorate of Philosophy for his work on molecular biophysics.

Here's what Publisher's Weekly said recently about his work. "Dr. McGrath has distinguished himself as a historical theologian and as a generous and witty writer who brings to life topics that would turn to dust in others hands."

We're especially grateful that Professor McGrath has traveled all the way from Oxford last night to join us for this evening. Thank you, Dr. McGrath.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well thank you very much, indeed. It's a huge pleasure to be here at Georgetown this afternoon.

If someone were to say you're taking part in a debate about atheism, I would have assumed I would have been on the atheist side, because certainly as a young man that was what I believed.

I grew up in Northern Ireland studying the sciences, wanting to go to Oxford to take this further and it was very clear to me that the sciences disproved God, they completely eroded the ground on which faith stood and of course there was violence between Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland. Therefore my logic was infallible: no Catholics, no Protestants, no violence between Catholics and Protestants. So it seemed to me to be very straightforward. And certainly when I went up to Oxford to begin to study the sciences in much more detail, it seemed to me really I had sorted things out and could relax for a while.

But I found myself being challenged by a number of things. One was beginning to read the history and philosophy of science and reading that the kind of scientific positivism I had imbibed wasn't quite as straightforward as I had suggested. And also beginning to

realize actually that the evidential basis for atheism was much weaker than I had realized. I began to find myself being excited intellectually and stimulated far more than I dared to think by the Christian faith.

And so in the end I came to faith swapping my old faith of atheism for my new one of Christianity. I don't think I did so as any kind of wish fulfillment, of any kind of psychological need, it was much more just a profound intellectual conviction that this was right, that this made sense in itself and this made sense of things, as well. It was like someone I suppose who had known only water suddenly discovering champagne.

So for me this was really a very significant event and indeed to this day I still look back to my atheist days with great nostalgia, even though I no longer actually hold to those positions. And so it's a very great pleasure to be able to interact this afternoon with Christopher Hitchens. I wanted to make it very clear that what he is saying today needs to be respected and I hope I will behave respectfully towards him.

I want to offer some points of disagreement, some points of challenge, some points of agreement and also some genuine points of curiosity to try and get our conversation underway.

And so I want to refocus on his main argument which I think you've heard very clearly, that religion is immoral and leads to immorality, and that in some way it is toxic. These seem to me to be very significant arguments, very significant claims and, therefore, I want to try and engage with them. I apologize to him and indeed I also apologize to you in that in the time available I will not be able to interact with him properly, but at least I hope I can begin to get this conversation moving forward.

So an obvious question I find myself asking as I both read Mr. Hitchens' book and also listened to him speak is that I think there are aspects of this that I would have loved to have heard more about. For example, in recent years, especially the last 15 years, there's been a very substantial body of scientific research into the empirical affect that religious commitment actually has on people. And as someone who was a scientist and still remains wedded to evidence-based thinking, I wondered if this might actually come into Mr. Hitchens' presentation.

To give you an example, if we look at Koenig and Cohen's very famous book published in 2001, *The Link Between Religion and Health*, we find that the overwhelming body of empirical studies to look at this find a positive correlation between religious commitment and well-being. Now that does not prove that there is a God and certainly it does not prove that all forms of religion are good for you.

Now I will gladly concede because I think Mr. Hitchens is right on this that there are some forms of religion that are pathological, that damage people. But there's a need I think for a real discussion about what is pathological and what is normal, about what is the center and what are the fringes.

And that, I think, also extends to Mr. Hitchens' analysis of the impact of religion in general. He makes the point, and I think I want to say he is right to make this point, that religion has done much damage in history. I regard that point as being beyond contradiction and it seems to me that every one of us here this afternoon needs to say that is right.

But I think we need also to go further and begin to explore the kind of questions I would like to open up for discussion would include these.

Yes, religion has done damage. But is this typical or is this a fringe element? Who are the normal people, who are the fanatics? And it seems to me there's a real need to try and make this kind of adjudication. I grant the history is there, that there have been some awful things done, but as Michael Shermer, who is President of the Skeptics Society, wrote in the book *How We Believed* some years ago, for every one of these atrocities which must cause all of us deep concern, there are 10,000 unreported acts of kindness, generosity and so forth arising from religious commitment. And trying to get this balance right seems to me to be of enormous importance. What is the fringe? What is the center?

So that's one point I think I'd like to open up for further discussion.

But I'd also like to try and just make a more general point. I think that worldviews in general, whether they are religious, irreligious, whatever they are, have the capacity to animate people to the extent that they feel they must go and do things which many of us would regard as morally reprehensible. We see this in the Soviet Union, a rather grim period in modern history where we find, for example, Lenin having said basically that there is no higher authority by which he may be judged, feeling able to "authorize the protracted use of brutality against religious believers."

Now it seems to me we have here an ideology, a world view which basically is sanctioning violence, in this case anti-religious violence.

Now I would not argue from that that this shows that atheism in general or atheists in particular are violent people. It's much more about what movements do to people, about the damage that world views can cause when they begin to take over and begin to really animate people to want to do things. Again, look at the period under Stalin. There are many other examples we could give of world views that may well have begun with great excitement, great enthusiasm, a commitment to ideals that we can all identify with, but something happens and they go wrong.

The French Revolution, I believe, began with an outburst of energy for liberty, but by 1793 it de-generated into the reign of terror in which an appeal to liberty sanctioned the most dreadful acts of violence. And many of you all know the tragic story of Madame Roland who was brought to the guillotine on trumped-up charges in 1793 and as she was led to the guillotine, she pointed to a Statute of Liberty in the Place de Revolution and said, "Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name."

History I think discloses a complex judgment here. I do not believe that it simply points to religion as being the cause of evil. I think it points to the capacity of all worldviews to begin to do this. It's not so much religion or, indeed, anti-religion. It seems to be something actually about human nature itself, which means that acts of kindness can be accompanied by acts of violence. There's something about us, I think, that really needs to be addressed here.

So I don't think it's religion that poisons everything. It can do so, but so can other things, as well.

The real problem I think is extremism, the kinds of ideologies that force violence upon us and those it seems to me do need to be challenged and on that, I'm at one with Mr. Hitchens.

But is it God that's doing this? Let's move on and talk about this. Clearly a very important question here is how we know what God is like. Can you imagine God saying, go and do violence to someone. Well I think some could, quite easily.

But I speak from a specific perspective, namely, that of a Christian theologian and for Christianity. The identity, the nature of God is disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the image of the invisible God, he is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets.

And when we look at Jesus of Nazareth, we see something that I think is very, very challenging. We have one who refuses to do violence, even in Gethsemane, when some want to raise swords to defend him as he's about to be betrayed, he bids them to put their swords down. Jesus does not do violence, but he has violence done to him. And the point I want to make is that your vision of what God is like has a profound impact on what you think God is urging you to do.

And it seems to me that if one is a good Christian, then one is going to take the vision of what God is like and what God wants us to do from what we find disclosed in Jesus with the utmost seriousness.

Now let me make it absolutely clear, I concede and I may well be one of these that there are many bad Christians around who fail to live up to this vision, but I want to draw a clear distinction between the assertion that "some Christians are bad" and "Christianity is bad." There is an aspiration, an inspiration and norm and that means one can challenge those who want in some way to use violence in the name of God.

And of course you can see this impacting on the way which people behave. In an episode that happened a year ago here in the United States, there was the Amish schoolhouse killings of October 2006.

Many of you know of these and some of you may have been affected by them. A crazed gunman broke into an Amish schoolhouse and shot I think it ten Amish school girls, of

whom five died. The Amish, as I'm sure you all know, are a very conservative Protestant sect who wear 17th Century clothing, who won't drive cars, they use horse buggies, and they also regard the ethical example of Jesus as absolutely normative.

For them, there would be no retribution of any kind. The cycle of violence was broken instantly because for them, Christ ordered them and commanded them to show forgiveness. That's a very important point.

Religion, or at least in this case Christianity, contains within itself the capacity for self-criticism. This is not the way God is, this is not the way we should be behaving. I fully concede there are those who fail to live up to that, but there is a challenge that can be issued to them: why behave like this when there is the norm before you authorized as to what God would like us to do?

Now Mr. Hitchens made some very interesting points about the relationship of science and faith. For me there has never been this opposition between science and faith.

Certainly some say there is. But I would want to make this point building on what Stephen J. Gould says. Gould in his book *Rocks of Ages* makes the point, I think fairly, that although in his case he's an atheist, he was not an atheist on account of his science, that in many ways his atheism was already there and he brought it to his science. And he makes this point: that science by its legitimate methods cannot adjudicate the God question.

Certainly we can read nature in an atheist way, we can read nature in an agnostic way, and we can read nature in a Christian way. But nature in itself and of itself does not force us to any of those positions.

I will simply say that I find my Christian faith gave me new intellectual energy both to engage the natural order, and I found to engage nature is to learn more about God and also to energize my understanding of what I was observing.

And I find this summed up in a quote from C.S. Lewis which I am in the habit of quoting, "I believe," he writes, "in Christianity, as I believe the sun has risen, not simply because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

In other words, it gives you an intellectual lens or framework through which you can look at the world, our selves and our culture and see it in a new light. So for me science and religion, there may be tensions, but is also a very powerful synergy which I believe to be both welcomed and also something that can be developed further.

But let me move on and make a further point. Mr. Hitchens makes some very significant criticisms of religion, but I wonder, what does he offer in its place? In his book he talks about, especially the beginning and the end of the need for a new enlightenment. And I find this puzzling, though nevertheless extremely interesting.

I find it puzzling because for me as an intellectual historian, the Enlightenment really had been left behind us as being in the view of many post modern critics a world view that led to intolerance and a world view that actually generated the potential of a conflict in violence. You all know why post modernity moved away from modernity on that point. And, people like Alistair McIntyre, and other critics of modernity make the point that its foundational judgments about the nature of reason, the nature of what is right actually cannot be sustained on the basis of an appeal to history and reason itself. For McIntyre and for many others, the enlightenment offers us a vision of a rationality and morality which actually are unattainable in practice.

Now again, we might want to have a discussion about morality and I fully accept that Mr. Hitchens is very committed to the moral vision as a real sense of what is right and what is wrong. But I wonder if one can sustain that without some sort of metaphysical basis. The point I would want to raise is this: is an evolutionary account of morality actually adequate to do the job? Richard Dawkins (with whom I disagree on many things) in his *The Selfish Gene* makes the point that we alone have the capacity to react against our genes to offer something better than we are genetically handed, and it seems to me that is a very significant position.

Moreover, I discovered that both Mr. Hitchens and I are lapsed Marxists. To take Antonio Gramsci's point, Gramsci made the point that in culture, moral values are manipulated by interest groups. How on earth can we defend ourselves against this?

My real question to Mr. Hitchens is can one have a viable moral system without some sort of transcendent basis of morality. I make this point not to challenge him as a moral thinker, but simply to ask whether one can actually do this.

So I must end and I do so, if I may, by telling you a story based on my own Northern Ireland. The story is told of two Catholic nuns who were driving along one night when they ran out of gas. They realized they passed a gas station about 100 yards back, so they decided to walk back and fill up with gas. They rummaged about in the back of the car and they found a glass container which would do the job. Unfortunately it was a medical specimen jar with the word "urine" written all over it. That is all they had.

They went back, filled it up and went to the car and started to pour this into the gas tank. A Protestant farmer drove by on his tractor and he looked at them in utter astonishment and he said, "Ladies, I don't think much of your religion, but I certainly admire your faith."

And as I hear Mr. Hitchens speak, I find myself wondering if he, too, is a man of faith, a man who believes that even though we can't absolutely justify certain beliefs, nevertheless, we can trust them.

He says our beliefs are not beliefs, but I think they are and the real question for me is in

a world where reason and science do not deliver what we once thought they did, on what can we base our lives if we are to know that we are truly living the good, the beautiful and the true life.

Thank you very much.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Mr. Hitchens will take the podium again.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I'm going to take the Doctor's excellent points in order, if I may, and you will I'm sure have minds orderly enough to recall the order in which he made them.

On the empirical evidence so-called adduced that a religious faith can lead to greater health and well-being, I, in a sense, do not doubt it. In other words, I can easily imagine those who think they are the special object of a divine design, feel better for thinking so. I just think it's going to be very important for anyone claiming this to see the dismaying trap door that is right under their feet.

If you're going to claim this for one, how are you not going to claim it for all? Do we not hear incessantly that the Hamas organization in Gaza is a provider of welfare to the poorest of the poor? Have we not heard this? Do we not hear that Louis Farrakhan's crackpot racist organization, the Nation of Islam, gets young people off drugs? For all I know, it's true. It not only says nothing about the truth or validity of their theology, but it must say a certain amount at least about our willingness to think wishfully or cultishly, which was, if you like, part of my point to begin with.

As to the center versus the fringe, I get this all the time. Don't judge religion by its fundamentalists and its extremists. No, why should I? I don't have to. I judge it by its foundational texts and I judge it by the statements of its authorities.

Take a case from the Muslim foundational documents, the Hadith, which have equal conical authority. They say if someone becomes an apostate, leaves or changes their religion, they must be killed. The sentence is death.

Don't anyone be telling me that's a metaphor. Oh, it's just intended as just a sort of admonition. No, it means what it says and it's been applied to a couple of people who now have to live, friends of mine, as a matter of fact, as political refugees in Washington, D.C., who know how true the impact of that Hadith is.

There's no wiggle room there, so the question for a Muslim must be asked, do you think this is the word of God or don't you? Because if you don't, you're saying that God shouldn't be able to tell you to do an evil thing and if you do, you're saying he should. In either case, faith falls as a reinforcement of ordinary morality.

Dr. McGrath is a member of the Church of England, the Anglican communion, the

Episcopalian communion, but what George Herbert, my favorite religious poet after John Donne called the sweet mediocrity of our native church. "The sea of Canterbury, everyone thinks it's the mildest of all, and it not only calls itself a flock, it looks very sleep-like.

However, the Bishop of Carlisle recently tapped I'm told to be the next Arch Bishop of Canterbury, said that the floods in Northern Yorkshire that devastated a large part of England in the Summer and killed and dispossessed a number of people were a punishment for homosexuality. Now to connect meteorology to morality seems to me, I have to say, flat out idiotic, whichever way you do it.

If there was a connection between meteorology and morality, which religion has very often argued that there is, I don't see why the floods hit Northern Yorkshire. I could think of some parts of London where they would have done it a lot more good.

You have to make up your mind on this, you either think God intervenes or he doesn't. I'm clear, I say I don't think so. Will Dr. McGrath say that he does intervene and that we can tell when he does or will he not say so? You have to ask him, you have to hear his answer, does he say "sometimes intervenes" or does he say "moves in mysterious ways"?

My position is clear, his remains I think distinctly opaque. It was the Arch Bishop of Canterbury, Jeffrey Fisher, who said the following: that a thermal nuclear war would only hasten our transition into a more blessed state into which we were bound to eventuate anyway.

If I had told you that remark and asked you to guess, you could have said Mahmoud Ahmadinajad said it or some other fanatical ceremonious Mullah. No, the Archbishop of Canterbury said it and why shouldn't he, because another immoral and sinister thing about religion is that lurking under it at all times in every one of its versions is a desire for this life to come to an end, for this poor world to be over.

The yearning, the secret death wish that's in all of it, let this be gone, let us move to the next stage. Unless it's repudiated, which I invite Dr. McGrath to do. But if he does so, I don't see what eschatological sense he can claim to remain a Christian.

And he can't take it a lá cart. If you claim or accept the one version, you have to accept the other. If it's true in general that religion does one thing and some people do good from it, then you have to accept all the wicked acts that are attributable to it as well. I think you'll find that those don't quite equal as at the margin, depressing though that conclusion would be.

I have a challenge which I have now put in print on the Christianity Today Website and in many other places. It's this: if it's to be argued that our morality or ethics can be derived from the supernatural, then name me an action, a moral action taken by a believer or a moral statement uttered by one, that could not have been made or uttered by an infidel, a non-believer.

I have tried this everywhere, and I've not yet had even one reply. But if I was to ask you can you think of a wicked action that could only have been performed by someone who believed they were on an errand from God, there isn't one of you who would take 10 seconds to give an example.

And what does that tell us? I would say it tells us a lot. And here's the bogus answer to it that was only very gently mentioned by Dr. McGrath this evening. "Well what about atheist nihilism, what about atheist cruelty, what about 20th Century totalitarianism?" I take this seriously enough to have put a chapter in my book about it, and I can only summarize it now and I will do it so very tersely as I can.

First, Fascism, the original 20th Century totalitarian movement, is really another name for the political activity of the Catholic right wing. There is no other name for it, Francoism, salazarism, what happened in Croatia, in Austria, in Barbaria and so on, the church keeps on trying to apologize for it, can't apologize for it enough, it's the can't quite say that about Hitler, national socialism, because that's also based on Nordic and Pagan blood myths, leader worship and so on, though Hitler never repudiated his membership at the church and prayers were said for him on his birthday every year until the end on the orders of the Vatican. And all of these facts are well known and the church still hasn't found any way to apologize for that enough. Whatever it is, you can call that, you can't call it secular. You may not call it secular.

By the way, Joseph Gobles was ex-communicated from the Catholic church, 50 percent, according to Paul Johnson the Catholic historian (inaudible) would confess any Catholics, none of them was ever threatened with ex-communication, even threatened with it for taking part in the final solution.

But Joseph Gobles was ex-communicated for marrying a Protestant. You see, we do have our standards.

Now, moving to Marxism, and to Leninism. In Russia in 1917, for hundreds of years millions of people have been told the head of the State is a supernatural power. The Czar is not just the head of the Government, not just a king, but he stands between heaven and earth. This has been inculcated in generations of Russians for hundreds of years. If you're Joseph Stalin, himself a seminarian from Georgia, you shouldn't be in the totalitarianism business if you can't exploit a ready-made reservoir of credulity and civility that's as big as that. It's just waiting for you to capitalize on.

So what do you do? Well we'll have an Inquisition, for one thing. We'll have miracles, for another, like Sancho's biology will produce four harvests a year, we'll have harvestry hunts, we'll tell everyone they must be grateful only to the leader for what they get and they must thank him and praise him all the time and that they must be aware all the time of the existence of the counter-revolutionary devil who waits to -- you see where I'm going with this. That's not secularism.

I'll tell you my North Korea stories another time. Here's -- it's surrogate, it's at the very best and the very worst the examples I've been talking about are a surrogate for Messianism for the belief in ultimate history and the end of days and the conclusion of all things which is, I've tried to argue, I hope with some success, the problem to begin with. The replacement of reason by faith, the discarding of the one thing that makes us important and useful and different from other primates in favor of something that requires no evidence and just requires incantation.

If Dr. McGrath or anyone else could come up with an example of a society which had fallen into slavery and bankruptcy and beggary and terror and misery because it had adopted the teachings and the precepts of Spinoza, and Einstein and Pierre Bayle and Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, then I'd be impressed. That would be a fair test on a level playing field, but you will find no such example.

Indeed, the nearest such example that we do have is these great United States, the first country in the world to have a Constitution that forbids the mention of religion in the public square, except by way of limiting it and saying that the State can take no interest in establishment of faith.

Best known under the rubric is the wall of separation. My new slogan is "Mr. Jefferson build up that wall."

Very quickly in my last minute, yes, Dr. McGrath, you're right, there is something about us as a species that is problematic, and it isn't just explained by religion. Something about us that tempts us to do wrong. It's pretty easily explained, I think. We are primates, high primates, but primates. We're half a chromosome away from chimpanzees and it shows, especially shows in the number of religions we invent to console ourselves or to give us things to quarrel with other primates about.

If anything demonstrates that God is manmade, not man God made, surely it is the religions erected by this quasi-chimpanzee species and the harm that they're willing to inflict on that basis.

Thank you.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well Mr. Hitchens posed quite a few questions for me in his opening address and so let me just begin to wrestle with them.

What do I think about the resurrection? Do I think about this being metaphorical? I think the resurrection is a historical event, something that happened in history, was seen as intriguing but not obviously interpreted as something of dramatic significance. The key question was not simply the history, but also its meaning.

And so in the New Testament, for example, we see debates taking place around the time of the resurrection which are primarily concerned with "what does this mean?" In other words, something seems to have happened, but it's a historical event, what is the overall

meaning of this event? And so for me that, that second question begins to emerge as being of major importance.

And in the New Testament we see a number of ideas beginning to emerge, the most important of these is that in some way Jesus had been demonstrated to have some sort of relationship with God that validated his teaching; in other words, that authorized him to speak with authority on what God was like.

It's a bit like, you know, interpreting something like Ceasar crossing the Rubicon. You can think of that as having two different elements. On the one hand there is the physical element, the crossing of a river which of course in this case is not particularly difficult, but then there is its historical significance in that the Rubicon marked the boundary between the Roman colonies and Rome itself. To cross that with an army was, in effect, a declaration of war.

So for me a historical event with a deeper theological significance and that significance is articulated by the New Testament in terms of first of all who Jesus Christ is. But secondly also what the implications of this might be for human nature. And of course the Christian hope of eternal life, the very strong New Testament declaration that we are people who have hope is very much grounded on that particular idea.

Now Mr. Hitchens moved on and began to talk I think very interestingly about God as a celestial dictator. Again, I think that is a very significant idea. Now certainly I hear what he is saying, but for me God is a celestial liberator. I wonder if we have a very different perspective on this same event. Is there a real difference here which we can justify in terms of metaphysics or is this simply a different perspective on how we see things?

Mr. Hitchens clearly is emphasizing that religion can do some bad things and I want to say I believe he is right to alert us to that and to avoid any uncritical evaluation of religion. But there is this deeper side which I do want to just emphasize.

The New Testament talks about the truth setting you free, it talks about the glorious liberty of the children of God and maybe we've lost that. Maybe somehow we've bound this up with all kinds of rituals and so we have lost sight of it.

But as you read the New Testament, I think there is this outburst of energy, of liberation that something has happened which has transformed the human situation, brought hope and at the same time liberated us from fear of death and also to do some very good things.

Certainly we fail, certainly we fall. But for me I think the idea of God as a celestial dictator is one that I don't really recognize myself, although I can see where it's coming from.

Mr. Hitchens then went on and issued a very powerful challenge against religion as any form of wishful thinking that provides consolation. Again, he makes a number of points

that I think are perfectly fair. One of these is that wishful thinking is precisely that. It's what we would like to be the case, it bears no relationship to what actually is the case. Also he makes a point that consolation is, well, I'll put it like this, it's for losers, isn't it?

Certainly when I was an atheist myself I very much took the view that religion was for mad, bad or sad people and certainly you can see that emphasis on consolation would correspond very well with that third group.

But I think there are some points we need to look at. The historical roots of this argument go back to Ludwig Feuerbach's in the year 1841 when he wrote his very famous book dealing with *The Essence of Christianity*. In that book he argues very lucidly along the lines Mr. Hitchens indicated, that people believe in God because in some way this is about their aspirations, their hopes, their longings being actualized when of course there is no God to believe in.

It's simply we wish it were like this, but we know it's not and we're in denial. So a belief in God is seen as the projection of some imaginary figure on some transcendent's screen. Now I think Feuerbach does make an important point. But I want to make two points in response.

Number one: the fact that we might wish something to be true certainly does not make it true, but the facts that we wish to be true does not make it false for that reason.

But I think more interestingly is this: I wonder if atheism might also be a form of wishful thinking.

Now again, those of you who have studied cultural history will know that one of the points very often made is that the emergence of atheism as a significant historical phenomenon in the 18th Century was this deep desire to change things.

If there were no God, we could do as we please. You all know Dostoyevsky's possessed were, and Kreloff makes this following comment, "If there is a God, I must do what God wants, but if there is no God, I do what I want." And again, you can see with atheism a kind of ethic of liberation. I'm able to do what I please, there are no limits.

And again, you may have come across a very interesting essay by Czeslaw Milosz in the *New York Times* book review about 10 years ago called "The Discreet Charm of Nihilism" where he says look, what has captivated us today is not the idea of religion as an escape from reality, but the idea that there is no God and, hence, no accountability. So we are going to do what we please, and we are accountable to nobody.

So I wonder if this argument actually works both ways. I think it's certainly a very interesting possibility to explore.

Now Mr. Hitchens then moved on to talk about Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai, he said, changed everything. Are we to understand that people had no moral sense before this, that somehow this brought morality into being?

And I think what I would say and I think most Christian theologians would say something like this: both the Old and the New Testaments are very, very clear that there was human wisdom around long before Sinai, that to use Paul's imagery that we are judged on the basis of what we do know where there is no knowledge of the law.

What I would want to say is that the Old Testament and indeed the New Testament do not kind of way throw something down and say "there, that's it, you didn't know about this before." But grace does not abolish nature, but rather perfects it.

In other words, it brings to fulfillment these basic human instincts about what is right and what is wrong, correcting them when necessary, but still fulfilling these longings for righteousness, this desire to do what is right, which I believe to be so fundamental a part of human nature.

And, therefore, for me the Christian faith, for example, does not throw down a series of arbitrary dictats, but rather it builds on what is already there precisely because for Christianity we are all God's creation and God has planted, if you like, signals or reminders of what he is like. Or to use that wonderful phrase from Gerard Manley Hopkins, in some way nature and humanity is infused with the likeness of God.

Mr. Hitchens talks about the tension between science and faith. I think I may have touched on that in my own talk, so I won't repeat that now, only to say that for me there is a very healthy convergence and mutual enrichment between science and faith.

But, finally, he also made a point which is basically that it seems very unjust that Christianity teaches that redemption depends on an explicit response to a gospel that's preached when so many haven't heard it.

And I would certainly agree that that does seem very unjust. But again, the Christian tradition down the ages has been that the proclamation of the gospel brings these to fulfillment, but where it has not been heard, we are judged on the basis of what we do know and how we respond to it.

Again, grace does not abolish nature, but perfects it.
Thank you.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well, thank you, gentlemen, this is where we now have a conversation and I have got some questions from the audience. Now the first question is for you, Christopher. I will put the question to you which is if God does not exist, on what basis can anyone say this action is right or this action is wrong?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: So whoever asked that clearly just came into the room, right?

I mean I can't believe that I didn't say what I thought about it, but I won't repeat it because actually what Dr. McGrath just said I thought was unusually good on this point. You'll recall what he said on the Dostoyevskian matter. If God exists, we have to do what he says, if he doesn't, we can do what we like.

Now just apply this for a second in practice and in theory. Is it not said of God's chosen people and is it not said, to them by God in the Pentateuch that they can do exactly as they like to other people? They can enslave them, they can take their land, they can take their women, they can destroy all their young men, they can help themselves to all their virgins, they can do what anyone who had no sense of anything but their own rights would be able to do, but in this case with divine permission. Doesn't that make it somewhat more evil.

In Iran where I've been—I've been to all three axis of evil in those countries—by the way, you are not allowed to sentence a woman who is a virgin to death even though she may have committed in the eyes of the Mullahs a capital crime, perhaps by showing her hair too often or her limbs. She can't be sentenced to death.

But religious law means she can be raped by the revolutionary guards, then she's not a virgin anymore, then they can kill her. Do what though wilt shall be the whole of the law used to be considered the motto of Satanism, as I recall. Divine permission given to people who think their God is on their side enables actions that a normal, morally normal non-believer would not contemplate.

The mutilation of genitalia of children, who would do that if it wasn't decided that God wanted it? Just as when a poet in England gets the poet laureateship they start to write drivel instead of poetry.

Morally normal and intelligent people find themselves saying fatuously wicked things when this subject comes up. The suicide bombing community is entirely faith based. The genital mutilation community is entirely faith based. Slavery is mandated by the Bible. You keep hearing how many abolitionists were Christians. Well it was about time that they took a stand against it, having mandated it for so long.

So it's not even a tautology, I think, to say that there's a relationship between the human impulse to do evil, to be selfish, to be self-centered, to be greedy and a contrast between that and faith because given only faith, mountains can be moved and millions of people who would never normally acquiesce in evil are brought to it straightaway with ease and with self-righteousness. There, that's my answer to that.

And the question I did not answer is my challenge: name an ethical statement made or action performed by a believer in the name of faith that couldn't have been by an infidel.

And name, if you can (this is easier) a wicked action that could only be mandated by faith and then you'll see how silly your question was, whoever you were.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well let me ask it, then, Christopher. You heard Professor McGrath, also, though, condemn any form of religious violence.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: That's easy to do, I mean I could say look, an atheist could be an abolitionist.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: No, I think there's room for agreement here between the two of you.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I'm not looking for consensus, baby, I'm just not in the mood. I'm not in the vain, as King Richard said, I'm not in the vain.

I'm glad he condemns religious violence. Does he condemn the promise of other peoples territory to the chosen people, for example? Does Jesus say or does he not say, I come to bring not peace, but a sword. He does say that. Should I take that literally or metaphorically? Is genital mutilation of a small boy as mandated by Jews and is it often mandated by Muslims, or not? Is there a paradise to which people can hope to get by dying for their faith or isn't there? Has holy war been proclaimed by both the Pope and by the Mullahs or not? These are problems not for me. For me it's simple, we're primates. This is what we would expect to happen if there was no God. It's what we would expect to see if faith was pointless, but it's an endless mystery where none exists. If you think there's an intervening finger from on high, then it becomes mysterious.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: For Professor McGrath, here's a question: I would like to hear you expound on Mr. Hitchens' claim that the idea of vicarious sacrifice is immoral or unethical. What is Christianity's explanation of this?

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well the phrase vicarious sacrifice isn't actually a Biblical phrase. It's a phrase that's used by some writers to refer to a particular interpretation of a Biblical teaching. The key idea in the New Testament is that in some way the death of Christ, again violence done to Christ, not violence done by Christ, is seen as having a transformative potential for human beings and this transformative potential is articulated using a range of models, some of which are drawn from the Old Testament.

For example, there's an analogy drawn with animal sacrifice and that is seen as in some way establishing a link between Christ's death and the bringing of possibility of purity to someone. That is one of the images used. Others include, for example, the whole idea of healing, the idea of being set in the right relationship with God. There are a wide range of these.

Now, Mr. Hitchens' particular criticism --

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Which of them is yours? I'd really like to know.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: I'll tell you right now.
For me, the death of Christ on the cross means that something that I could never gain for myself has been done for me and offered to me.

In other words, it is something that by myself as a human being I could never hope to achieve, is achieved on my behalf and offered to me and I am asked: will you accept what has been done for you? In other words, it's about the possibility of transformation being offered to me but not being imposed upon me. And for me, that is about a God who offers but does not demand that I respond to him in this way. I find that to be a very good summary of what the Christian faith is trying to say about a God who offers but does not impose.

And again, those of you who are familiar with the New Testament will think of the imagery of Revelation, chapter 3, which speaks of Christ knocking on the door and asking us to open the door but leaving that action up.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Okay. Mr. Hitchens?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Not imposed, did you really say not imposed? What if you reject this offer, what are you told? What have you been told by centuries of Christians if you reject this offer that took place by means of a torture to death of a human being that you didn't want and should have prevented if you could. What if you reject the offer? And if you accept it you have eternal life and your sins are forgiven. Oh, great.

What a horrible way to abolish your own responsibility and get your own bliss. I don't want it. Oh, you don't? Well then you can go to hell. This is not imposed? This hasn't been preached to children by, by gruesome elderly virgins backed by force for centuries? This hasn't poisoned whole societies?

No, of course it's not voluntary. The Pope of Rome, Mr. Ratzinger, has recently said actually it's worse than that: only my version of Christianity can get you salvation, there is only one way.

I say it in Georgetown. You presumably don't believe that because you're an Anglican, but on what basis do you tell the Pope that he's a heretic? Once you grant this stuff, once you start with this white noise chat about redemption, where's it going to end?

Of course there's nothing voluntary about it and I must say the book of Revelations seems one of the less voluntary texts of the New Testament— all it does is look for, gleefully, is to Apocalypse, to the passing away of this veil of tears into our ultimate destruction. This is morality? I don't think so.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Your response?

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well I think I can just build on that because I think a very interesting line of discussion has opened up here. Number one, I think I do challenge your reading of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is very much saying to Christians who are being persecuted for their faith by a secular authority who are in effect being victimized that this is not the way it's going to remain, that one day there will be an inversion of the world order. It's in effect an encouragement to those who are suffering.

And again, I make my point that Christianity is saying look, here is an offer, it is yours to accept or not. I take it you do not believe in hell or anything like that and, therefore, I don't see what the difficulty is for you personally. It is not about imposition

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: You were in the right church but the wrong pew.

Yes, of course I've emancipated myself from all that nonsense and I wish you would do so, too. I'm saying when you say it's voluntary, it's up to you, it's entirely optional, I don't think it's any more optional than Abraham saying to his son do you want to come for a long and gloomy walk, because God seems to be telling me to do something that had better be moral. Otherwise, it would have to be said that God had taken a perfectly normal person and asked him to commit an atrocity. Now where else could that have come from?

Millions of people every year celebrate this act of sadomasochism as if it proved that God loved us so much that he'd make us kill our own children and then he decides to love us so much he'll kill one of his own.

You said in a debate with Richard Dawkins that the great thing about God is he knows what it's like to lose a son.

Now I want you ladies and gentlemen to ponder that expression for just a moment. First, it's self-evident of, if the story is true, which I don't think it is, it's self-evidently not the case, even in the narrative. He doesn't lose a son, he lends one.

He doesn't offer one because no one's demanded it. There's no problem that has so far been identified in the human species that demands a human sacrifice. For what problem, for what ill is this a cure? There's no argument, it's imposed upon you -- I'm doing this because the prophets said I would and I'm going to have the boy tortured to death in public to fulfill ancient screeds of bronze age Judaism. But wait, I don't want it. I don't need it. I don't feel better for it. I feel very uneasy about it. Well that's a pity, because then you're going to be cast into eternal fire.

This is no way to talk. I don't like to be addressed in that tone of voice. I don't want torture, don't want human sacrifice, don't want authoritarian blood lettings, smoking temples and alters, incantations of priests around, don't want it, can't think of a single thing it will make better about our veil of tears.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Let me see if Professor McGrath has a response.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: I don't want those things either, and I think that nobody here really would. I think that one can interpret these things in these ways you do and I appreciate that, but I want to make the point there are many other ways of looking at these within the Christian tradition and that it is very important to say that you know there are other ways of making sense of this.

And I think we need to get some of them on the table. For me, and again, I'd want to emphasize this point, the Christian vision of God is not a God who leaves us on our own, but a God who chooses to enter into time and history where we are in order to make possible for us if we want it a transformation of our situation. I don't see any need to say this leads to torture or anything like that.

If it does, that needs to be challenged, but the point for me is this is about something being offered to us with enormous potential for change.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Let me ask a question of Mr. Hitchens.

As someone who considers himself a high primate, it seems strange that you would consider loving and witnessing the truth an obligation. Would you explain how a soulless primate can have any obligations?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well it's a question one often asks ones self. For example, why do I care, why do I mind about other primates? I think I know that, because I hope that they will, at the very lowest, as I said, because I hope they'll mind about me in return. I'll give you an example.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Why should they?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Why, indeed. Why does one do the right thing or what one hopes is the right thing when no one's looking? Why does a Muslim cab driver go to all the trouble to come back to my apartment building when I didn't have his number to return a large sum of money I left on his back seat, said it was his religious duty. But if I allow him to say that that's his religious duty, what am I going to say when he says it's his religious duty to veil his wife or to blow himself up? Or to impose sharia law. If you grant it once, you have to grant the whole thing, you can't do it "a lá cart."

Now I'll give you an example of my old socialist days, and this will bring moisture to the eyes of Dr. McGrath, as well. It was our favorite example, Professor Peter Townsend's book on the gift relationship, you will remember. Why does the British national health service never run out of blood, though you're not allowed to charge for it, you have to give it free, and it never runs out of blood? Because people like to give blood. They want to feel useful. I like to do it, I like it very much and I'm not a masochist and I don't particularly like being stuck, but someone gains a pint and I don't lose one because I

replenish it quite quickly. Someone's instantly better off, I haven't had to abnegate myself by giving anything away. I like the fact that I'm helping someone who I don't know and as it happens I have a very rare blood group, and indeed, and one day I'm going to have to count on other people feeling the same way.

So, human solidarity will get you quite a long way ethically and there's every reason why that should be in our genes, in our, so to speak, inscribed, we wouldn't have gotten this far if we didn't have these qualities.

To say we couldn't have them without celestial permission seems to me to be simply slavish. And if we're all made in God's image, then how come there are so many sociopaths who don't notice the existence of other people or so many psychopaths for whom it's a positive pleasure to inflict pain?

None of these -- all of these are easily, easily solved questions if you make the assumption of the evolution by natural selection and consider us as an animal species. If you detect the finger of God in all of this, you invent a myriad of problems that do not exist and cannot be solved and that are actually a waste of our mentality.

Ockham's Razor disposes of all the supernatural assumptions that have ever been made. We have better and more elegant explanations for everything that happens in our cosmos and in our biology now and if we had had these to begin with, there would never have been the foothold for the death cult of Christianity or Islam or Judaism.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well, perhaps I could just take this on the stage further. I mean I think what you seem to be saying is that we are able to offer a complete scientific account of things which eliminates anyplace for the transcendent and I want to find --

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: No, no, sorry, if I may, I wanted to speak to this and I wanted to later, transcendent and the nomenclature are very important, but they are not to be confused with the supernatural.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: I would want to say that the word transcendent means a number of different things and certainly the supernatural can be one of those. But it can also mean some sort of sense that there's something beyond us and I don't think we need to use the word supernatural. I'm thinking of Iris Murdoch's idea in, for example, *The Sovereignty of Good* which he tries to posit something which, though beyond us, nevertheless elicits a response to us. For example, in trying to articulate what the notion of good actually is.

And it seems to me that science actually is extremely good at clarifying the relationship between the different levels of material order, but when it comes to questions of meaning or value, which might well include transcendent meanings, it actually doesn't really help us very much.

And so I would want to suggest that actually science offers us one level of explanation of the way things are, but it does not prevent us from adding extra levels of meaning on top of that. And it seems to me that that is one of the reasons why one can talk about the dynamic interaction between science and religion because they are certainly engaging the same reality, but they are offering different perspectives or different levels of engagement for that same thing.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Professor McGrath, here's the next question. You said that acts of violence in the name of God come from the fringes of religion, but God has ordered many acts of violence, for instance, in the Old Testament that killed thousands. Is God on the fringe of his own religion?

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well clearly the way that question is phrased actually, in effect, answers itself. I'd like to try and offer an answer which goes like this. I'm a Christian, and, obviously I read the Old Testament and one of the questions is how on earth do I make sense of those passages which seem to, at least on the face of it, authorize acts of killing and so on which I personally find very disagreeable.

And for me as a Christian, as I was saying, a fundamental theme here is that Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. In other words, not simply that he brings to fulfillment their intentions, but that in some way he is authorized to show us what these are really meant to be like. In other words, that there are other interpretations, but these are relativized or placed to one side because of who Jesus is and what he did.

And, therefore, I would want to look at the Old Testament through this lens and say that I believe it allows us to look at these passages and challenge the most natural interpretations.

For me one of the great themes of Christian history is the idea of what I call progressive revelation, that we gain a further understanding of what God is like, a firmer understanding of what God is like as time goes on and above all, for example, through the revelation of Christ and, again, whether you're a Protestant or a Catholic, you might talk about the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit or indeed continued reflection on the part of the church, but the engagement of the scripture is dynamic and ongoing. It's not really something that's been ended in the past.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Sorry, can I comment on that briefly?

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yes, you can.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, I mean some of the early Christian church fathers I think, you'll correct me if I'm wrong, I think Masian was among them did contemplate starting a movement that was just basically Christian based on what was understood or believed about the apparent, very opaque, brief life of Jesus of Nazareth and not inherent, not forced upon themselves as St. Paul had suggested the ghastly gruesome Jewish books of the Old Testament. I think they might have done better to do that

because having decided that they inherit all of that, they do inherit in particular the most wicked and immoral doctrine of the lot which is original sin in Adam and the expiation by the sacrifice of children, human sacrifice of children, then which I don't think any morally normal person can think of anything more repulsive. So that it is, I'm afraid, innate that there is to be cruelty and violence and fanaticism in the religion and the responsibility is not expiable.

Bizarrely, I mean many people think, well, the Old Testament, it's true it's full of blood letting, it recommends genocide, extermination, slavery and all the dispossession, all of these things. The New Testament is more meek and mild. I've given you my comment on that. It's the first time that hell is mentioned, but it is in the Christian version that another called different kind of immorality is proposed, the worst kind of immorality yet, which is the, the wicked idea of non-resistance to evil and the deranged idea that we should love our enemies.

Nothing, nothing could be more suicidal and immoral than that. We have to defend ourselves and our children and our civilization from our enemies. We have to learn to educate ourselves in a cold, steady dislike of them and the determination to encompass their destruction.

Who here heard anyone after September the 11th in Holy orders actually say, oh, well we must turn, learn to love these people. Did they dare say that then; of course not. They saw the emptiness and the futility and the immorality of what they would have been caught saying if they even tried it. We have to bear all this stuff in mind.

This is not moral teaching at all. We have to survive our enemies, we have to learn to destroy them, especially because they, too, are motivated by the hectic, maniacal ideas of monotheism which really seeks and yearns for the destruction of our planet and the end of days.

That's why it's not moral. That's why we have to outgrow it and defeat it.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I have a feeling you want to comment.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well I'd like to comment. First of all, I do not think that that principally trying to love your enemies leads to these things at all. I think if anything it leads to the obviation of violence. It does not mean we have to ignore moral issues. It means that we see people as human beings, as someone who in effect bears the same flesh and blood as us.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Fellow primates.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: And it may mean that we want to try and resolve the issue saying we believe you are wrong, but it's also trying to avoid dehumanization. And it seems to me this really is a very significant question I'd like to pursue. I mean I may have misunderstood you, but what you seemed to be proposing is to see your enemies in

dehumanized form and for me as a Christian, I couldn't do that because I have even my enemies as those who God has made and loved and, therefore, even though I may dislike them intensely, I have to show that love and compassion towards them and see them as human beings, not as the other, the enemy. I think really there's more to this idea than you suggest.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: There's no need to dehumanize people who are set on dehumanizing themselves and on the murder of others and on a cult of death. There's no need to dehumanize them—they've done all that for themselves.

Like someone once accused me of trying to assassinate his character and I said no, your character committed suicide a long time ago. They've done the dehumanizing work for us, thanks, and they are fellow primates. Of course there's no question of re-defining them as another species, but there is a very important question of whether we intend to assert our own values as superior to theirs and is worth defending against them.

And Christianity with the sickly relativism that you've stressed too often this evening disarms us for this very important struggle, that's why the Arch Bishop of Canterbury is this evening groveling at the feet of the Mullahs in Iran saying we should leave them alone and let's try not to hurt their feelings. As he groveled at the feet of Saddam Hussein, as actually every Christian church has been doing in the recent past saying well, you know, faith is better than no faith, any faith is better than none.

They all agreed to condemn Solomon Rushdie for blasphemy rather than the people who tried to kill him for money for writing a novel. For example, they all condemned the Danish cartoons because blasphemy against any faith is an offense to all.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Yes, Christopher, I've heard you, yourself, at one of my own conferences expound at great length on the Christian, at the Christian just war tradition, you seemed to have left that whole rich tradition out of what you just commented on.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Yeah, but I think Christian, I think the Christian just war tradition, a nonsensical tautology, it says that you can only go to war when you're, when you're sure you're in the right, when you're sure you can win, when you're sure that the violence is going to be proportional. And so you can't know any of this, Aquinists couldn't have known, nor could the later thinkers about it like Grotius, they couldn't have known, they said wouldn't it be nice, it's just wishful thinking again.

I know a just war when I see one.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Well we are getting a little off course here, but --

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I know.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: I had a feeling it might come up, though.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I wanted this to come up.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Question for you, Christopher. I'll tell you what, I'll let you comment on this and then we'll let Professor McGrath make some final comments. Why would scientific discoveries about the origin of the universe obviate the existence of God?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well they don't in and of themselves, but I just would submit the likelihood that what Edwin Hubbel saw through that telescope, the red light escaping at speeds that none of us here are really capable of imagining towards the ultimate expansion and collapse of the universe—that all that happened so we could be sitting here is to me in the very, very highest degree, improbable.

That a process of evolution by natural selection just on our own tiny little planet which in its own tiny little solar system is the only one on which life can be supported, everywhere else just in our little system, all the other rocks are either much too hot or much too cold to support life as is much of our planet which we know has for a long time been, not recently either, on a climatic knife edge and which is still cooling, only one, and on this planet, 99.8 percent of every species that ever evolved died out. This is an extraordinary way I think to make sure that Homo sapiens come to Georgetown.

It is the, only the most extraordinarily self-centered species, could imagine that all this was going on for our sake, that's why I don't like people saying that their religious faith is modest or humble. It's the reverse, it's unbelievably soliphistic and that's why you get people apparently abject, much too abject for my taste like Mother Teresa. Oh, I'm so humbled I can hardly bother to feed myself, but out of my way because I'm on a mission from God. No, this is arrogance, as a matter of fact, and it claims to know what it cannot know.

I could say that Einstein was right when he said the miracle is, of the natural order, the miracle is there are no miracles. Understand this paradox: the natural order doesn't interrupt itself. The sun doesn't stand still at midday. God doesn't catch a child as a kid falls out of a window or heal lepers around him and none of that ever happens.

The miracle is there's a force that holds it altogether, that's consistent and unvarying. That's wonderful. Okay. He may show there's a mind somewhere in the universe, but to say we know what that mind is, to move from the deist position to the theist one, we know what God wants us to eat or not eat, we know in what positions he wants us to make love or with whom. We know his instructions on it is -- unbelievable piece of conceit and in my opinion it's the reason why I may be a very poor spokesman for my side of this argument, but I think anyone that who thinks about it has to vote that given the amount of uncertainty that we have and given how much we now know, how much more we know about how little we know, the definition of education in our civilization, the only people who have to lose in this argument are those who say they do know and who claim, yes, I do know what God wants, I do think he sent his Son, I do think there

was a resurrection, I do think there's salvation, claiming to know things they cannot conceivably know.

I mean to put it differently in a mild way, if Dr. McGrath has such extraordinary sources of information as the ones he's claimed to have available to him, I can't understand why he's only occupying a chair at Oxford University --I'm afraid you don't know any more than I do about whether there was ever a Jesus of Nazareth, a resurrection, a miracle, a virgin birth or anything. You couldn't know any more than I do, you can't.

You just claim that you do, and I'm afraid that means, I think, that you lose this round.

ALISTAIR McGRATH: Well, if I could respond.

To deal with the first point before we came on to that second one, I don't think it's all solipshistic to say let's reflect on why we are here, let's reflect on why there is something rather than nothing, it's to ask a very important question about how the universe came into being, why is there something rather than nothing. I mean for Wichtenstein that was a hugely important question and it seems to me to be entirely right to answer that question or at least to try and answer it.

On my own status, I mean I appreciate very much the compliment you pay, but I, I'm simply making the point that all of us are interpreters of what we observe. I made it very, very clear I was not making any claims to special knowledge, I was looking at what I saw, what others say. I interpreted it in this way.

I claim no privilege. I say it is my judgment that this is the best explanation and it means this, and I'm open to challenge on this, as you have challenged me, but I am not claiming anything special. I'm saying there are public events there, they are open to interpretation, as they were at the time, and the issue really is what is the best explanation of those.

And I think that is a legitimate debate. I've made it very clear what my conclusion is. I made it clear it is a matter of faith and I cannot prove this, but I'm also suggesting that whatever judgments we make on this is actually a matter of faith and therefore while I'm very happy to be challenged on this, I think I'm still entitled to say that this seems to me to be the best way of making sense of it and live my life out on its basis.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you.

(Debate concluded).