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Christopher Hitchens vs. Tony Blair: the full transcript

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"Be it resolved, religion is a force for good in the world"



You may need to set aside the rest of your Saturday to get through this, but here in full is the transcript of the [long-anticipated Munk debate](#) between Christopher Hitchens and former prime minister Tony Blair. The motion: "Be it resolved, religion is a force for good in the world". No prizes for guessing who was arguing for and against.

The debate was hosted last night in Toronto, Canada before an audience of 2,600. [Reports suggest](#) that touts were selling tickets for up to five hundred Canadian dollars.

According to post-debate voting on the [Munk debate website](#), Hitchens won the argument against the motion by 68 per cent to 32 per cent. A pre-debate poll showed that 57 per cent were against the motion and 22 per cent were for it -- demonstrating, I guess, the impressive debating skills of both men.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much to the Munk family, great philanthropists for making this possible. Seven minutes, ladies and gentlemen, for the foundational argument between religion and philosophy leaves me hardly time to praise my distinguished opponent, in fact I might have to seize a later chance of doing that!

I think three and a half minutes for metaphysics and three and a half for the material world won't be excessive, and I have a text, and I have a text and it is from, because I won't take religious texts from a known extremist or fanatic, it's from Cardinal Newman, recently by Mr Blair's urging beatified, on his way to canonisation, a man whose Apologia made many Anglicans reconsider and made many people join the Roman Catholic church and is considered rightly a great Christian thinker. My text from the Apologia.

"The Catholic church holds it better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail and for all the many millions on it to die in extremist agony than one soul ... should tell one wilful untruth or should steal one farthing without excuse."

You'll have to say it's beautifully phrased, but to me, and this is my proposition, what we have here, and picked from no mean source, is a distillation of precisely what is twisted and immoral in the faith mentality. Its essential fanaticism, it's consideration of the human being as raw material, and its fantasy of purity.

Once you assume a creator and a plan, it makes us objects, in a cruel experiment, whereby we are created sick, and commanded to be well. I'll repeat that. Created sick, and then ordered to be well. And over us, to supervise this, is installed a celestial dictatorship, a kind of divine North Korea. Greedy, exigent, greedy for uncritical phrase from dawn until dusk and swift to punish the original since with which it so tenderly gifted us in the very first place.

However, let no one say there's no cure, salvation is offered, redemption, indeed, is promised, at the low price of the surrender of your critical faculties. Religion, it might be said, it must be said, would have to admit makes extraordinary claims but though I would maintain that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, rather daringly provides not even

ordinary evidence for its extraordinary supernatural claims.

Therefore, we might begin by asking, and I'm asking my opponent as well as you when you consider your voting, is it good for the world to appeal to our credulity and not to our scepticism? Is it good for the world to worship a deity that takes sides in wars and human affairs? To appeal to our fear and to our guilt, is it good for the world? To our terror, our terror of death, is it good to appeal?

To preach guilt and shame about the sexual act and the sexual relationship, is this good for the world? And asking yourself all the while, are these really religious responsibilities, as I maintain they are? To terrify children with the image of hell and eternal punishment, not just of themselves, but their parents and those they love. Perhaps worst of all, to consider women an inferior creation, is that good for the world, and can you name me a religion that has not done that? To insist that we are created and not evolved in the face of all the evidence. To say that certain books of legend and myth, man-made and primitive, are revealed not man-made code.

Religion forces nice people to do unkind things, and also makes intelligent people say stupid things. Handed a small baby for the first time, is it your first reaction to think, beautiful, almost perfect, now please hand me the sharp stone for its genitalia that I may do the work of the Lord. No, it is -- as the great physicist Stephen Weinberg has aptly put it, in the ordinary moral universe, the good will do the best they can, the worst will do the worst they can, but if you want to make good people do wicked things, you'll need religion.

I've got now 1 minute and 57 seconds to say why I think this is very self-evident in our material world. Let me ask Tony again, because he's here, and because the place where he is seeking peace is the birthplace of mono theism, so you might think it was unusually filled with refulgence and love and peace. Everyone in the civilised world has roughly agreed, including the majority of Arabs and Jews and the international community, that there should be enough room for two states for two peoples in the same land, I think we have a rough agreement on that. Why can't we get it, the UN, the US, the quartet, the PLO, the Israeli parliament can't get it, why not? Because the parties of God have a veto on it, and everybody knows this is true. Because of the divine promises made about this territory, there will never be peace or compromise, there will instead be misery, shame and tyranny and people will kill each others' children for ancient books, caves and relics, and who is going to say this is good for the world? That's just the example nearest to hand.

Have you looked lately at the possibility we used to discuss as children in fear, what will happen when Messianic fanatics get hold of an apocalyptic weapon? We are about to find that out as we watch the Islamic republic of Iran and its party of good allies make a dress rehearsal for precisely this. Have you looked lately at the revival of Tsarism in Russia, where ... draped over an increasingly xenophobic tyrannical expansionist and aggressive regime? Have you looked lately at the teaching in Africa and the consequences of it of a church that says, AIDS may be wicked but not as wicked as condoms. That's exactly no seconds left, ladies and gentlemen. I have done my best. Believe me, I have more.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Christopher, thank you for starting our debate. Mr Blair, your opening remarks, please.

TONY BLAIR: First of all, let me say it is a real pleasure to be with you all this evening, to be back in Toronto, it's a particular privilege and honour to be with Christopher in this debate. Let me first of all say that I don't regard the leader of North Korea as a religious icon, you will be delighted to know.

I am going to make seven points in my seven minutes, that's a biblical seven. The first is this, it is undoubtedly true that people commit horrific acts of evil in the name of religion. It is also undoubtedly true that people do acts of extraordinary common good inspired by religion.

Almost half the healthcare in Africa is delivered by faith based organisations, saving millions of lives. A quarter of worldwide HIV/AIDS care is provided by Catholic organisations. There is the fantastic work of Muslims and Jewish relief organisations. There are in Canada thousands of religious organisations that care for the mentally ill or disabled or disadvantaged or destitute. And here in Toronto, barely one and a half miles from here, is a shelter run by covenant house, a Christian charity for homeless youth in Canada.

So the proposition that religion is unadulterated poison is unsustainable. It can be destructive, it can also create a deep well of compassion, and frequently does.

And the second is that people are inspired to do such good by what I would say is the true essence of faith, which is along with doctrine and ritual particular to each faith, a basic belief common to all faiths, in serving and loving God, through serving and loving your fellow human beings. As witnessed by the life and teaching of Jesus, one of love, selflessness and sacrifice, the meaning of the Torah. It was Rabbi Hillel who was once famously challenged by someone that said they would convert to religion if he could recite the whole of the Torah standing on one leg. He stood on one leg and said: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. That is the Torah, the rest is commentary, now go and do it.

The message of the prophet Mohammed, saving one life is as if you're saving the whole of humanity, the Hindu searching after selflessness, the Buddhist concepts of Kuruni ... which all subjugate selfish desires to care for others, Sikh insistence on respect for others of another faith. That in my view is the true face of faith. And the values derived from this essence offer to many people a benign, positive and progressive framework by which to live our daily lives. Stimulating the impulse to do good, disciplining the propensity to be selfish and bad.

And faith defined in this way is not simply faith as solace in times of need, though it can be; nor a relic of unthinking tradition, still less a piece of superstition or an explanation of biology. Instead, it answers a profound spiritual yearning, something we feel and sense instinctively. This is a spiritual presence, bigger, more important, more meaningful than just us alone, that has its own power separate from our power, and that even as the world's marvels multiply, makes us kneel in humility not swagger in pride.

If faith is seen in this way, science and religion are not incompatible, destined to fight each other, until eventually the cool reason of science extinguishes the fanatical flames of religion. Rather science educates us as to how the physical world is and how it functions, and faiths

educates us as to the purpose to which such knowledge is put, the values that should guide its use, and the limits of what science and technology can do not to make our lives materially richer but rather richer in spirit.

And so imagine indeed a world without religious faith, not just no place of worship, no prayer or scripture but no men or women who because of their faith dedicating their lives to others, showing forgiveness where otherwise they wouldn't, believing through their faith that even the weakest and most powerless have rights, and they have a duty to defend them.

And yes, I agree, in a world without religion, the religious fanatics may be gone, but I ask you, would fanaticism be gone? And then realise that such an imagined vision of a world without religion is not in fact new. The 20th century was a century scarred by visions that had precisely that imagining in their vision, and at their heart, and gave us Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot. In this vision, obedience to the will of God was for the weak, it was the will of man that should dominate.

So I do not deny for a moment that religion can be a force for evil, but I claim that where it is, it is based essentially on a perversion of faith, and I assert that at least religion can also be a force for good, and where it is, that it's true to what I believe is the essence of faith, and I say that a world without religious faith would be spiritually, morally and emotionally diminished.

So I know very well that you can point and quite rightly Christopher does to examples of where people have used religion to do things that are terrible. And that have made the world a worse place. But I ask you not to judge all people of religious faith by those people, any more than we would judge politics by bad politicians. Or indeed journalists by bad journalists. The question is, along with all the things that are wrong with religion, is there also something within it that helps the world to be better and people to do good, and I would submit there is. Thank you. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Well Tony, your training in parliament had you perfectly landing that right on the seven minute market. Ladies and gentlemen, we're moving into our rebuttal rounds and I'd like the audience to get engaged, to applaud when they hear something the debaters say when they like, also to help me enforce our time limit, when you see that clock ticking down, start applauding and that will move us through this in an orderly fashion. Christopher, it's now your opportunity, in our first of two rebuttal rounds, to respond to Mr Blair.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: There are four, is that right?

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Two rounds of rebuttals. Each of us has the opportunity to go back and forth. Yes, four minutes for each speaker in each of those rounds.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: So I've got four minutes?

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Yes, good. Then hold your applause, for heavens' sake. Well now, in fairness, no one was arguing that religion should or will die out of the world, and all I'm arguing is it would be better if there was a great deal more by way of an outbreak of secularism. Logically if Tony is right, I would be slightly better off, not much, but slightly, being a Wahabi Muslims or a Jehovah's witness than I am wallowing as I do in mere secularism.

What I am arguing is what we need is a great deal more of one and a great deal less of the second. I knew it would come up that we would be told about charity, and I take this very seriously, because we know, ladies and gentlemen, as it happens, we're the first generation of people who do really, what the cure for poverty really is. It eluded people for a long, long time. The cure for poverty has a name, in fact. It's called the empowerment of women. (Applause).

If you give women some control over the rate at which they reproduce, if you give them some say, take them off the animal cycle of reproduction to which nature and some religious doctrine condemns them, and then if you throw in a handful of seeds, the floor of everything in that village, not just poverty, but health and education, will increase. Try it in Bangladesh and Bolivia, it works all the time. Name me one religion that stands for that, or ever has. Wherever you look in the world ... stupidity from women, it is invariably the clerisy that stands in the way, or in the case of ... (Applause).

Furthermore, if you are going to grant this to Catholic charities, I would say, which I hope are doing a lot of work in Africa, if I was a member of a church that had preached that AIDS was not as bad as condoms, I would be putting some conscience money into Africa too, I must say. I'm not trying to be funny. If I was trying to be funny, you mistook me. It won't bring back the millions of people who have died wretched deaths because of that teaching, that still goes on.

I would like to hear a word of apology from the religious on that, if it was on offer, otherwise I would be accused of judging them by the worst of them, and this isn't done, as Tony says wrongly, in the name of religion, it's a direct precept, practice and enforceable discipline of religion, is it not, sir, in this case? I think you'll find that it is. (Applause). But if you're going to say, all right, the Mormons will tell you the same, you may think it's a bit cracked to think Joseph Smith found another bible buried in upstate New York, but you should see our missionaries in action; I'm not impressed. I'd rather have no Mormons, no missionaries and no Joseph Smith.

Do we grant to Hamas and Hezbollah, both of whom will tell you, and incessantly do, without us, where would the poor of Gaza and Lebanon be, ... it's nothing compared to the harm that they do, but it's a great deal of work all the same.

I'm also familiar with the teachings of Rabbi Hilel, I also know where he plagiarised the story from, the injunction not to do to another ... of Confucius, if you want to date it, but actually it's found in the heart of every person in this room. Everybody knows that much. We don't require divine permission to know right from wrong. We don't need tablets administered to us ten at a time in tablet form on pain of death to be able to have a moral argument. No, we

have the reasoning and the moral persuasion of Socrates and our own abilities, we don't need dictatorship to give us right from wrong, and that's my lot, thank you.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: In the name of fairness and equity, Mr Blair, I'm going to give you an additional 25 seconds for your first rebuttal.

TONY BLAIR: First of all, I don't think we should think that because you can point to examples of prejudice in the name of religion, that bigotry and prejudice and wrongdoing are wholly owned subsidiaries of religion. There are plenty of examples of prejudice against women, against gay people, against others that come from outside the world of religion. And the claim that I make is not that everything the church has done in Africa is right but let me tell you one thing it did do, and it did it while I was Prime Minister of the UK, the churches together formed a campaign for the cancellation of debt, they came together, they succeeded, and the first beneficiaries of the cancellation of debt were young girls going to school in Africa, because for the first time, they had free primary education.

So I agree that not everything the church or the religious communities have done around the world is right, but I do say at least accept that there are people doing great work, day in, day out, who genuinely are not prejudiced or bigoted, but are working with people who are afflicted by famine and disease and poverty and they are doing it inspired by their faith. And of course it's the case that not everybody -- of course it's the case that you do not have to be a person of faith in order to do good work, I've never claimed that, I would never claim that. I know lots of people, many, many people, who are people not of faith at all, but who do fantastic and decent work for their communities and for the world. My claim is just very simple, there are nonetheless people who are inspired by their faith to do good.

I mean, I think of people I met some time ago in South Africa, nuns who were looking after children born with HIV/AIDS. These are people who are working and living alongside and caring for people inspired by their faith. Is it possible for them to have done that without their religious faith? Of course it's possible for them to have done it. But the fact is, that's what motivated them. So what I say to you is at least look, what we shouldn't do is end up in a situation where we say, we've got six hospices here, one suicide bomber there, how does it all equalise out? That's not a very productive way of arguing this.

Actually, I thought one of the most interesting things that Christopher said is that we're not going to drive religion out of the world, and that's true, we're not. And actually, I think for people of faith to have debates with those who are secularist is actually good and right and healthy and it's what we should be doing. (Applause).

I'm not claiming that everyone should congregate on my space, I'm simply claiming one very simple thing, that if we can't drive religion out of the world because many people of faith believe it and believe it very deeply, let's at least see how we do make religion a force for good, how we do encourage those people of faith who are trying to do good, and how we unite those against those who want to pervert religion and turn it into a badge of identity used in opposition to others. (Applause).

So I would simply finish by saying this: there are many situations where faith has done wrong, but there are many situations in which wrong has been done, without religion playing any part in it at all, so let us not condemn all people of religious faith because of the bigotry or prejudice shown by some, and let us at least acknowledge that some good has come out of religion, and that we should celebrate. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Christopher, your second rebuttal, please.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Do I have a second one? What an amazing test of audience tolerance. All right, how splendidly you notice we progress, ladies and gentlemen. Now it's okay, some religious people are sort of all right. I think I seem to be bargaining one of the greater statesmen of the recent past down a bit. Not necessarily opposed to that. Just to finish on the charity point, I once did a lot of work with a man called Sebastian Selgado, some of you will know him, great photographer, the UNICEF ambassador on polio questions, I went to Calcutta with him and elsewhere. Nearly got rid of polio, nearly made it join smallpox as a disease, a thing of the past a filthy memory, except for so many religious groups in Bengal, Afghanistan, don't go and take the drops, it's a conspiracy, it's against God and his design. By the way, that argument isn't terribly new, when smallpox was a scourge, Timothy Dwight, head of Yale, said taking Dr Jenner's injection was an interference with God's design as well.

That's sort of by the way, you need something like UNICEF to get major work done if you want to alleviate poverty, misery and disease, and for me, my money will always go to organisations like Medicins Sans Frontiers, like Oxfam, and many others, who strangely enough go out into the world, do good for their fellow creatures, for its own sake. They don't take the bible along, as people do to Haiti all the time, we keep catching them doing it. Their money is being spent flat out on proselytisation. It is a function of the old thing hand in hand with imperialism. It's the missionary tradition. They can call it charity if they will, but it doesn't stand a second look.

So much on the business of doing good, except perhaps to add, since I have you for some extra minutes, Mr Blair and I at different times gave quite a lot of our years to the Labour movement, and if the promise of religion had been true, right up until the late 19th century in, say, Britain, or North America or Canada, if good works should be enough, and those who give charity should be honoured, those who receive it should be grateful, two rather revolting ideas in one, I have to say, there would be no need for human, social and political action, we could rely on being innately good, which we know we can't rely upon, and I never suggested we could or should.

I'm intrigued now, so religion could be a good thing after all, sometimes, we think, is now the proposition. What would religion have to do to get that far? I think it would have to give up all supernatural claims. It would have to say no, you are not to do this under the threat of reward, heaven, or the terror of punishment, hell. No, we can't offer you miracles; find me the church that will say forget all that. Faith healing, no, it would have to give that up. It would have to give up the idea of an eternal, unalterable authority figure who is judge, jury and executioner, against whom there could be no appeal and who wasn't finished with you even when you died. That is quite a lot for religion to give up, don't you think? But who would say it would be ... like it to be, an aspect of humanism, an aspect of compassion, an aspect of the realisations of human solidarity, the knowledge we are all in fact bound up with one another, that we have responsibilities one to another, and as I do when I give blood, partly because I don't lose the pint forever, I always get it back, but there's a sense of pleasure to be had in helping your fellow creature. I think that should be enough, thank you. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony, it must feel like the House of Commons all over again.

TONY BLAIR: I don't know, so far they're a little politer actually!

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Your final rebuttal, please.

TONY BLAIR: It all depends, I guess, what your experience of religious people is. My experience of the people I was with last week in Africa, that include deeply religious people; not actually that they're doing what they're doing because of heaven and hell, they're doing it for love of their fellow human beings, and that's, I think, something very fine. What's more, that they believe that this love of their fellow human beings is bound up with their faith, so it's not something, you know, yes, of course, it is absolutely true, they might decide to do this, irrespective of the fact that they have religious faith, but their faith, they feel, is an impulse to do that good.

And you know, I don't recognise the description of the work that they do in what Christopher has said. In Sierra Leone, where I was, you have Christians and Muslims working together to deliver healthcare in that country. That's religion playing a positive role. They're working across the faith divide and doing it, because they again believe that their faith impels them to do that.

When we look back in history, yes of course you can see plenty of examples of where religion has played a negative role. You can see great example, for example in the abolition of slavery, where religious reformers joined with secular reformers in order to bring about the abolition of slavery.

Let's get away from this idea that religion created poverty. There are bad things that have happened in the

world outside of religion. And when you look at the 20th century and you see the great scars of political ideology, around views that had absolutely dramatically at their heart fascism, the communism of Stalin, absolutely at their heart was the eradication of religion, and what I would say to you is, get rid of religion, but you're not going to get rid of fanaticism or the wrong in the world. (Applause).

The question is, how then do we make sense of religion having this vital part in the world today, since it is growing and not diminishing, how do we make sense of this? This is where yes, there is an obligation on the people of faith to try and join across the faith divide with those of other faiths, that's reason for my foundation. We have people of different religious faiths, we have a programme where young people team up with each other of different faiths and work together in Africa on malaria, back in their own faith communities, and here in Canada, we have a schools programme that allows schools to link up using the technology so that kids of different faiths can talk to each other across the world.

Here's the thing, when they start to talk about their faith they don't actually talk in terms of heaven and hell, and a God that's an executioner of those that do wrong, they talk in terms of their basic feeling that love of God can be expressed best through love of neighbour and actions in furtherance of the compassion and help needed by others.

In 2007, religious organisations in the US gave one and a half times the amount of aid that USAID did, not insignificant. My point is very simple, you can list all the faults of religion, just as you can list the faults of politicians, journalists and any other profession, but for people of faith, the reason why they try to do good, and when they do it, is because their faiths motivates them to do so and that is genuinely the proper face of faith.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Gentlemen, thank you for a terrific start to this debate, the time has now come to involve you the audience here at Roy Thomson hall, those written questions have been coming in and some have been passed on to me, and our folks in the control room. Also, we're going to bring on our online audience through questions that have been debated on our discussion boards and I'm going to take some live questions from some younger audience members here on the stage.

In that regard, Christopher, we're going to start with a question for you, a young woman like here who would like to address you personally, tell the audience your name and question, please.

FLOOR: My name is Mega, I'm a recent graduate from the University of Toronto, my question is in regards to globalisation. This century, globalisation will bring together as never before nations and peoples divided by wealth, geography, politics and race. So my question is: instead of fearing faith, why not embrace the shared values of the world's major religious as a way of uniting humankind?

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Great question. Christopher? Unity out of faith or disunity?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Perfectly good question, but seemed to be phrased as a call for common humanism. I didn't hear anyone say, wouldn't it be better if everyone at least joined some church or other, not a bit of it. Common humanism is, I think, not made particularly easier by the practice of religion, and I'll tell you why, there's something about religion that is very often, at any rate, in its original monotheistic and Judaistic form, is ab initio an expression of exclusivism. This is our God, the God who has made a covenant with our tribe. You find it all over the place. It isn't always as sectarian as ... sometimes still is but it's not unknown.

It's always struck me as slightly absurd that there would be a special church for English people, although I can sort of see the point. It strikes me as positively sinister that Pope Benedict should want to restore the Catholic church to the claim it used to make, which is it is the one true church, and all other forms of Christianity are, as he still puts it, defective and inadequate. How this helps to build your future world of co-operation and understanding is not known to me.

If you tell me in the Balkans what your religion is, I can tell you what your nationality is. You're not a Catholic, you know less about Loyola than I do. But I know you're a Croat, and a Croat nationalist. Religion and in fact any form of faith, because it is a surrender of reason, it's a surrender of reason in favour of faith, is a fantastic force multiplier, a tremendous intensifier, I was trying to say, of all things that are in fact divisive rather than inclusive and that's why its history is so stained with blood, not just of crimes against humanity, womanhood, reason and science, attacks upon medicine and enlightenment, all these appalling things that Tony kept defending himself from and I didn't even have time to bring up.

No, but if you would just look at the way the Christians love each other in the wars of religion in Lebanon, or in former Yugoslavia, you will see that there is no conceivable way that by calling on the supernatural, you will achieve anything like your objective of a common humanism which is, I think you're quite right to say, our only chance of -- I won't call it salvation, thank you. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony, what I'd like you to do, there's another question on the stage, someone in a sense that's an inverse question for you, and it would be a great opportunity for to respond to Hitchens at the same time. So let me go to a scholar at Oxford University, who has a question for you, Mr Blair.

FLOOR: Thank you very much. My research is in armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa so the question is: how do you argue that religion is a force for good in the world when the same faiths that bind peoples and groups also deepen divisions and exacerbate conflict?

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Great question.

TONY BLAIR: To which my answer is they can do, and there are very many examples of that, but there are also examples, let me give you one from the Northern Ireland peace process, where people from Protestant and Catholic churches got together and the religious leaders tried to bring about a situation where people reached out across the faith divide.

What I would say to you is this exclusivism is not -- you know, this type of excluding other people because they're different, let's just nail the myth that this is solely the prerogative of religion. I'm afraid this happens in many, many different walks of life. It's not what true religion is about. True religion is not about excluding somebody because they're different, true religion is actually about embracing someone who is different. That is why, you know, in every major religion, this concept of love of neighbour, and Christopher is absolutely right, Confucius did indeed say exactly something similar to rabbi Hillel, of course Jesus said love your neighbour as yourself, if you look at Hinduism, Buddhism, the religion of Islam, after the death of the prophet Mohammed, Islam was actually at the forefront of science, and introducing proper rights for women, for the first time, in that part of the world.

So the point is this, and this is really where the debate comes to, Christopher says, well, humanism is enough, and what I say to that is: but for some people of faith, it isn't enough. They actually believe that there is indeed a different and higher power simply than humanity, and that is not about them thinking of heaven and hell in some sort of old-fashioned sense of trying to terrorise people into submission to religion, they actually think of it as about how you fulfil your purpose as a human being, in the service of others.

So when we say, well, that could be done by humanism, yes, it could, but the fact is for many people, it's driven by faith, and so yes, it's true, you can find examples of where religion has deepened the divide in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. You can also find examples of where religion has tried to overcome those divides by preaching what is the true message of religion, one of human compassion and love.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Hitchens, let's have you come back on that, not just Northern Ireland but Iraq, a war you supported, religion played an important role arguably in the success of putting together post invasion Iraq.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: I only think we should do this because the two questions were in effect the same, both very well phrased, and because I never like to miss out a chance to congratulate someone on being humorous, if only unintentionally, it's very touching for Tony to say that he recently went to a meeting that bridged a religious divide in Northern Ireland; where does the religious divide come from? 400 years and more, in my own country of birth, of people killing each others' children, depending on what kind of Christian they were, and sending each others' children in rhetoric to hell, and making Northern Ireland the place, the most remarkable in Northern Europe for unemployment, for ignorance, for poverty and for, I would say, stupidity too. And for them now to say, maybe we might consider bridging this gap; well, I should bloody well think so. (Applause). But I don't see how.

If they had listened to the atheist community in Northern Ireland, which is a real thing, and if they had listened to the secular movement in Northern Ireland, which is a real thing and I know many people who have suffered dreadfully from membership in it, not excluding being pulled out of a car by a man in a balaclava and being asked, are you ... are you a Protestant Jewish atheist or a Catholic Jewish atheist? You laugh, but it's not so funny when the party of God has a gun in your ear at the same time.

And that was in Britain, and still is, to some extent, until recently. Rwanda, do I say that there would be no quarrel between Hutu and Tutsi, people in Rwanda. Belgian colonialism made it worse, but there are no doubt innate ethnic differences ... most Christian country in Africa. In fact, by one account -- that's to say, numbers of people in relation to numbers of churches, it's the most Christian country in the world, and the Hutu power genocide at any rate was preached from the pulpits, actually the pulpit of the Catholic church, as many of the people we are looking for wanted in that genocide are hiding in the Vatican, along with a number of other people who should be given up to international justice, by the way, quite a number of people.

So since Tony seems to like religious people best when they are largely nonpractising, but just basically faithful, I will grant him that much. I will say it is not entirely the fault of religion that this happened in Rwanda, but when it's preached from the pulpit as it was in Northern Ireland and Rwanda, it does tend to make it very, very much worse. Thank you. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony briefly come back on that, because you were intimately involved in the search for peace in Northern Ireland and I presume you have a very different perspective of the role faith played in the resolution of that conflict.

TONY BLAIR: Yes, and I now do work in Rwanda. First of all, I think it really would be bizarre to say that the conflict in Rwanda was a result of the Catholic church. I mean, Rwanda is a perfect indicator of what I'm saying, which is you can put aside religion, and still have the most terrible things happen. This was the worst genocide since the holocaust, it was committed on a tribal basis. Yes it's true there were members of the Catholic church who behaved badly in that context of Rwanda, there were also, by the way, members of the Catholic church and others of religious denomination who stood up and protected and died alongside people in Rwanda. So you -- and as for Northern Ireland, yes, of course, Protestant and Catholic, absolutely right, but you couldn't ignore the politics of the situation in Northern Ireland, it was to do with the relationship

between Britain and Ireland going back over many, many centuries.

So my point is very simple, of course religion has played a role and sometimes a very bad role in these situations, but not only religion. And what is at the heart of this is we wouldn't dream of condemning all of politics because politics had led to Hitler, Stalin or indeed what has happened in Rwanda, so let us not condemn the whole of religion or say that religion, when you look at it as a whole, is a force for bad, because there are examples of where religion has had that impact.

So my -- I think actually Rwanda and Northern Ireland are classic examples, even the Middle East peace process, I mean yes, I agree, you can look at all the religious issues there but let's not ignore the political issues either, and frankly at the moment the reason -- and I can tell you this from first hand -- well, but I can tell you from first hand experience, the reason we don't have an agreement at the moment between Palestinians and Israelis is not to do with the religious leaders on either side, it's a lot more to do with the political leaders, so it's my branch that has to take the blame for that.

Therefore, what I would say is I actually think that yes of course a lot of these conflicts have religious roots, I actually think it's possible for religious leaders to play a positive part in trying to resolve those, but in the end, it's for politics and religion to try and work out a way in which religion, in a world of globalisation that is pushing people together, can play a positive rather than negative role, and if we concentrated on that, rather than trying to drive religion out, which is futile, to concentrate instead on how we actually get people of different faiths working together, learning from each other and living with each other, I think it would be a more productive mission. Thank you.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Okay, let's -- we like the applauding, so please continue that throughout the debate. Let's take a written question, my producers are telling me we have a written question, we'll get that on the screen, Christopher this is for you to start with, interesting one: America is both one of the most religious countries in the world and also one of the most democratic and pluralistic, both now and arguably through much of its history. How do you explain that seeming paradox?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Relatively simply, the United States has uniquely a constitution that forbids the government to take sides in any religious matter, or to sponsor the church, or to adopt any form of faith itself. As a result of which, anyone who wants to practise their religion in America has to do it as a volunteer. It's what Dick Hotfield wrote about so well in his democracy in America, ever since Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Baptists of Connecticut during his tenure of president, you'll be familiar with the phrase I'm sure -- they had Britain to him out of their fear of persecution in Connecticut: rest assured there will ever be a wall of separation between the church and the state in this country, but the maintenance of that wall, which people like me have to defend every day, against those who want garbage taught in schools and pseudo science in the name of Christ and other atrocities, the maintenance of that wall is the guarantee of the democracy. By the way, for a bonus, can anyone tell me who the Baptists of Dan bring Connecticut thought was persecuting them? The congregationalists of Danbury, Connecticut, well done. That argues by the way for the existence of a very small but real fan base of mine somewhere here.

It doesn't seem to matter very much now but it mattered them, give those congregationalists enough power, as they had in Connecticut, and just you see ... now we have disciplined them, thank you.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony, same question. Is it a case of American exceptionalism, or is this balance between pluralism and faith being achieved in America either something that ... or a model that can be exported globally?

TONY BLAIR: I think what most people want to see is a situation where people of faith are able to speak in the public sphere but are not able to dictate, and that is a reasonable balance, and I think that most -- you know, most people would accept.

But I think, you know, again what I would say about examples of where you get religious people that are fanatical in the views that they want to press on others, fanaticism is not -- as I say, it's not a wholly owned subsidiary of religion, I'm afraid, it can happen outside of religion too. So the question is, how do people of, if you like, good faith, who believe in pluralist democracy, how do we ensure that people who hold faith deeply are able to participate in society, and have the same ability to do that as everyone else, without being kind of denigrated, but at the same time have to respect the fact that ultimately, democracy is about the will of the people and the will of the people as a whole.

So I think that most people can get that balance right, and we are very lucky actually in our countries, because we are in a situation where people of different faiths are free to practise their faith as they like, and that is in my view an absolutely fundamental part of democracy, and it's something that people of religious faith have to be very clear about and stand up and do.

One of the reasons why for me I think it's -- it's actually important for people of religious faith to have people like Christopher challenge us and say, okay, this is how we see religion, now you get out there and tell us how it's different, and where it isn't different, how you're going to make it so, and I think that's a positive and good thing.

All I ask for is that where people of faith are speaking in the public sphere, and people accept that we have a right to do that, and sometimes we do that actually because we believe in the things that we're saying, and we're not trying to subvert or change democracy; on the contrary, we simply want to be part of it, and our

voice is a voice that has a right to be heard alongside the voice of others. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: I see Christopher writing furiously so I'm going to ask him to come back on that point.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, I hadn't anything specially to add there, I think I would rather give another person a chance for a question.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: It's a question that was debated for you, Christopher, on Munk debates.com in the lead-up to this evening, on our discussion board, many people saying that religion provides a sense of community, in modern societies we're immersed in a consumer culture, more often than not living alongside fellow citizens who are more maybe self-directed than other-directed. What do you say about the pure community function of religion? Isn't that a valid public good of religious belief?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Absolutely, I say good luck to it. The way I phrase it in my book, available at fine bookstores everywhere, is that I propose a pact with the faith, the faithful, I'll take it again, quoting from the great Thomas Jefferson, I don't mind if my neighbour believes in 15 gods or in none, he neither by that breaks my leg or picks my pocket. I would echo that, and say that as long as you don't want your religion taught to my children in school, given a government subsidy, imposed on me by violence, any of these things, you are fine by me. I would prefer ... (Applause).

I would prefer not even to know what it is that you do in that church of yours, in fact, if you force it on my attention, I will consider it a breach of that pact. Have your own bloody Christmas, and so on. Do your slaughtering, if possible, in an abattoir. And don't mutilate the genitals of your children! Because then I'm afraid it gets within the ambit of law.

All right, don't you think that's reasonably pluralistic and communitarian of me? I think it is. Why is it a vain hope on my part? Has this pact ever been honoured by the other side? Of course not. It's a mystery to me, and I'll share it with you. If I believed that there was a saviour who had been appointed or sent, or a prophet, appointed or sent by a God who bore me in mind, and loved me, and wanted the best for me, if I believed that, and that I possessed the means of grace and the hope of glory, to phrase it like that, I think, I don't know, I think I might be happy. They say it's the way to happiness. Why doesn't it make them happy? Don't you think it's a perfectly decent question? Because they won't be happy until you believe it too, because that's what their holy books tell them.

Now I'm sorry, it's enough with saying in the name of religion; do these texts say that until every knee bows in the name of Jesus, there will be no happiness? Of course it is what they say. It isn't just a private belief. It is rather, and I think always has been, and that's why I'm here, actually a threat to the idea of a peaceable community, and very often, as now, and frequently, a very palpable one. So I think that's the underlying energy that powers the friendly disagreement between Tony and myself. (Applause).

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony, would you like to come back on that topic of religion and community or move on to another question? Let's move on. Also on our website, big discussion around the topic of religion and its role in the invasion of Iraq. Mr Blair, the question is for you, and it's about something that many people posted about something you said once about the interplay of religion and politics, and to quote you directly, you said: "What faith can do is not tell you what is right, but give you the strength to do it". The question being: what role did faith play in your most important decision as Prime Minister, the invasion of Iraq?

TONY BLAIR: I think we can nail this one pretty easily. It was not about religious faith. You know, one of the things that I sometimes say to people is, look, the thing about religion and religious faith is if you are a person of faith, it's part of your character, it defines you in many ways as a human being. It doesn't do the policy answers, I am afraid. So as I used to say to people, you don't go into church and look heaven ward and say to God, right, next year, the minimum wage, is it £6.50 or £7? Unfortunately, he doesn't tell you the answer. And even on the major decisions that are to do with war and peace that I've taken, they were decisions based on policy, and so they should be, and you may disagree with those decisions, but they were taken because I genuinely believed them to be right.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: So Christopher, the natural follow-on question to you is how did you square the circle, maybe you didn't, between your support for the Iraq war and the current then president, George W Bush, in his very public evocation of faith in terms of his rhetoric around the invasion.

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Well, I don't remember, in fact I don't think you can point out to me any moment where George Bush said he was under divine order or had any divine warrant for the intervention in Iraq. In fact, I'm perfectly certain -- he might not have mind at some points giving that impression, he wanted to give that impression about everything that he did. George Bush is someone who, as with his immediate predecessor, after various experiments in faith, ended up in his wife's church, most comfortable place for him to be, she's after all the one who said to him, if you take another drink, you scum bag, I'm leaving and taking the kids, which is his way of saying he found Jesus and gave up the bottle. (Applause).

We know this to be true. And like a good Methodist, I was in Methodist school for many years myself, he says the following ... from now on, all is in God's hands. That's quite different, I think. It would have made him a perfectly good Muslim, as a matter of fact. A combination of fatalism with a slightly sinister feeling of being chosen. Anyway. Surely what is strike most to the eye of those who ... agree to call the liberation of Iraq is the unanimous opposition of the leadership of every single Christian church to it, including the

president's own and the Prime Minister's own, the Methodist church of the United States adamantly opposed, the Vatican adamantly opposed, as it had been to the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, not the first time in the world that a sickly Christian passivity has been preached in the faces fascist dictatorship, and of course I was very surprised by the number of liberal Jews who took the same about a regime that harboured genocidal thoughts towards them, and if it comes to that, although I'm not ... given the number of Muslims put to the sword by Saddam Hussein's regime, quite extraordinary to see the extent to which Muslim fundamentalists flocked to his defence, but I don't expect integrity or consistency from those quarters. But those of us who worked with people with -- with Iraqi intellectuals, with the Kurdish leadership, the secular left opposition of the popular -- excuse me, the patriotic union of Kurdistan, the Iraqi Communist Party, you have to give it credit for this ... very proud of our solidarity with those comrades, those brothers and sisters, we are still in touch with them, we have nothing to apologise for. It's those who would have kept a cannibal and a Caligula and a professional sadist in power who have the explaining to do. Thank you.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: I want to be conscious of our time and go to our two final onstage questions. I believe the first one is for Mr Blair, a student at the Munk School of global affairs, introduce yourself and ask your question of Mr Blair.

FLOOR: Good evening, my name is Jonah, my question pertains to something that has come up earlier this evening. Religion on both sides is often seen as an obstacle to peace in the Middle East, and I was wondering what role you believe faith can play in a positive manner in helping to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

TONY BLAIR: Well, I remember a few months ago, I was in Jericho and when you go out from Jericho, they took me up to -- we went to visit the mount of temptation, which is where I think they take all the politicians, and the guide that was showing us round, the Palestinian guide, suddenly stopped at one point, and he said, this part of the world, he said, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, why did they all have to come here? I sort of said, well, supposing they hadn't, would everyone be fine? He said, well, probably not.

But you know, the religious leadership can play a part in this, for example, I don't think you will get a resolution of the issue of Jerusalem, which is a sacred and holy city to all three Abrahamic faiths, unless people of faith are prepared to try and find common ground, so they are entitled to worship in the way that they wish.

And the correct that in both Israel and Palestine, you see examples of religious fundamentalism and people espousing and doing extreme things as a result of their religion, but I can also tell you that there are rabbis and people of the Muslim faith on the Palestinian side who are desperately trying to find common ground and ways of working together, and I think part of the issue and the reason indeed for me starting my faith foundation is that we can argue forever the degree to which what is happening in the Middle East is a result of religion or the result of politics, but one thing is absolutely clear, that without those of religious faith playing a positive and constructive role, it's going to be very difficult to reach peace, so my view again, and I think this is in a sense one of the debates that underlies everything we have been saying this evening, that if it is correct that you're not going to simply eliminate religion, you're not going to drive religion out of the world, then let's work on how we make those people of different faiths, even though they believe that their own faith is the path, so they believe, to salvation, how they can work across the faith divide in order to produce respect and understanding and tolerance, because believe it or not, amongst all the examples of prejudice and bigotry that Christopher quite rightly draws attention to, there are also examples of people of deep religious faith, Jewish, Muslim and Christian, who are desperately trying to search for peace and with the right political will supporting that who would play a major part in achieving peace.

So I agree, religion has to one degree created these problems, but actually people of different religious faiths working together can also be an important part of resolving these problems, and that's what we should do, it's what we can do, and in respect of Jerusalem, it is absolutely imperative that we do do. (Applause).

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: A visitor goes to the Western wall -- anything he can do. A visitor goes to the Western wall, sees a man tearing at his beard, banging his head on the wall, shoving messages in at a rate of knots, watching with fascination ... I couldn't help noticing you were being unusually devout in your address to the wall, to the divine, do you mind if I ask you what you're praying for? He was saying, I was praying for peace, that there should be mutual love and respect for peoples in this ... ah, it's like talking to the wall. But there are people who think talking to walls is actually a form of divine worship, and it's another instance, not that I didn't bring it up laboriously myself, but I don't mind it again, of the difference between Tony and myself, when he uses his giveaway phrase "in the name of religion", rather than "as a direct consequence of scriptural authority", which is what I mean when I talk about this.

No one is going to deny, are they, that there are awards of real estate made in the bible, by none other than Jehovah himself. That land is promised to human primates over other human primates, in response to a divine covenant. Do excuse me, sorry, this sometimes happens. No, that can't be denied. When David Ben-Gurion was Prime Minister of what he still called a secular state he called in Israeli archaeologists, professional guys, and said: go out into the desert and dig up the title deeds to our statement. You'll find our legitimate -- that was instruction to the department of archaeology. They went, after they conquered Sinai and west bank, even further afield looking for some evidence Moses had ever been there. They didn't find

any, because there never has been and there never will be any, but you cannot say that the foundational cause, *causus belli* in this region, the idea that God intervenes in real estate and territorial disputes, isn't inscribed in the text itself.

Not only in the Jewish text but thanks to a decision taken in the early Christian centuries where it was decided not to dump the new testament, and start again just with the Nazarene story, great Christian theologians were in favour of that, why do we want to bring the darkness, tyranny, terror, death ... surely we should start again? No, we're saddling ourselves with all that. So this is a responsibility for the Christian world too.

Need I add that there is no good Muslim who does not say that Allah tells us we can never give up an inch of Muslim land and once our mosques are built, there can be no retreat, it would be a betrayal, it would lead you straight to hell. In other words, yes, yes, they gibber and jabber, all of them, the three religions, yes, God awards land, it's just you've got the wrong title. This is what I mean when I say religion is a real danger to the survival of civilisation, and it makes this banal regional and national dispute ... a nothingness, if it makes that, not just lethally insoluble, but is drawing in other contending parties, who really wish, openly wish, for an apocalyptic conclusion to it, as also bodied forth in the same scriptural texts, in other words that it will be the death of us all, the death of humanity, the end of the world, end of the whole suffering veil of tears, which is the ... not something that happens because people misinterpret the texts, it is because they believe in them, that's the problem, thank you.

RUDYARD GRIFFITHS: Tony, can I move on to the final question? Great, we have the perfect final question, it's from another student at the Munk School for global affairs, Dana.

FLOOR: A big part of this issue is our inability to stand in another's shoes, with an open mind to understand a different world view. In this regard, can each of you tell us which of your opponent's arguments is the most convincing? Thank you.

TONY BLAIR: This definitely never happened in the House of Commons! I think that the most convincing argument is -- and the argument that people of faith have got to deal with is actually the argument Christopher has just made, which is that the bad that is done in the name of religion is intrinsically grounded in the scripture of religion. That is the single most difficult argument.

Since I've said it's a really difficult argument, I suppose I had better give an answer to it. My answer to it is this: that there is, of course, that debate that goes on within religion, which is the degree to which, as it were, you look at scripture abstracted from its time, you pick out individual parts of it, you use those in order to justify whatever view you like, or whether, as I tried to do in my opening, you actually say, what is the essence of that faith, and what is the essence of scripture? Of course, then what you realise is that yes of course if you believe, as a Muslim that we should live our lives according to the 7th century, then you will end up with some very extreme positions, but actually there are masses of Muslims who completely reject that as a view of Islam, and instead say no, of course, the prophet back then was somebody who brought order and stability and actually, for example, even though we today would want equality for women and many again, despite what people say, many Muslims would agree with that as well, and many Muslim women obviously, back then, actually what he did was extraordinary for that time, and also when you look at Christianity, yes of course you can point to issues that of that time now seem very strange and outdated, but on the other hand, when you take Christianity as a whole and ask what it means, what draws people to it, you know, what is it that made me as a student come to Christianity, it wasn't to do with some of the things that Christopher has just been describing, and you know, I understand that's -- there are those traditions within religion, I understand that, I accept that, I see how people look at certain parts of scripture and draw those conclusions from it, but it's not what it means to me, it's not the essence of it. The essence of it is through the life of Jesus Christ, a life of love, selflessness and sacrifice and that's what it means to me. So I think the most difficult thing for people of faith is to be able to explain scripture in a way that makes sense to people in the modern world, and one of the things that we have actually begun recently is a dialogue called the common word, which is about Muslims and Christians trying to come together and through scripture find a common basis of co-operation and mutual respect, so, you know, yes, it is a difficult argument, that is the most difficult argument, I agree, but I also think there is an answer to it, and I think one of the values actually of having a debate like this, and in a sense, having someone making that point as powerfully as Christopher has made it, is that it does force people of faith to recognise that we have to deal with this argument, to take it on, and to make sure that not just in what we are trying to do, but in how we interpret our faith, we are making sure that what I describe as the essence of faith, which is serving God through the love of others, is indeed reflected not just in what we do but in the doctrines and the practice of our religion. (Applause).

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: Admirable question, thank you for it. The remark Tony made that I most agreed with this evening, I'll just hope that doesn't sound too minimal, was when he said that if religion was to disappear, things would by no means, as it were, automatically be okay. I mean, he phrased it better than that. But it would be what I regard as a necessary condition would certainly not be a sufficient one, at any rate religion won't disappear, but the hold it has on people's minds can be substantially broken and domesticated. ... to have argued to the contrary, I come before you after all as a materialist. If we give up

religion, we discover what actually we know already, whether we're religious or not, which is that we are somewhat imperfectly evolved primates, on a very small planet in a very unimportant suburb of a solar system that is itself a negligible part of a very rapidly expanding and blowing apart cosmic phenomenon. These conclusions to me are a great deal more awe inspiring than what's contained in any burning bush or horse that flies overnight to Jerusalem or any other of that -- a great deal more awe inspiring, as is any look through the Hubble telescope at what our real nature and future really is. He was quite right to say that, and I would be entirely wrong if I implied otherwise.

I think I could say a couple of things for religion ... the apotropaic, we all have it, the desire not to be found to be claiming all the credit, a certain kind of modesty, you could almost say humility. People will therefore say they will thank God when something happens they are grateful for. There is no need to make this a religious thing, the Greeks had the concept of hubris as something to be avoided and criticised, but what the Greeks would also have called the apotropaic, the view that not all the glory can be claimed by primates like ourselves is a healthy reminder too.

Second, the sense that there is something beyond the material, or if not beyond it, not entirely consistent materially with it, is, I think, a very important matter. What you could call the numinous or the transcendent, or at its best, I suppose, the ecstatic. I wouldn't trust anyone in this hall who didn't know what I was talking about. We know what we mean by it, when we think about certain kinds of music perhaps, certainly the relationship or the coincidence but sometimes very powerful between music and love. Landscape, certain kinds of artistic and creative work that appears not to have been done entirely by hand. Without this, we really would merely be primates.

I think it's very important to appreciate the finesse of that, and I think religion has done a very good job of enshrining it in music and architecture, not so much in painting in my opinion, and I think it's actually very important that we learn to distinguish the numinous in this way, I wrote a book about the Parthenon, I will mention it briefly. I couldn't live without the Parthenon, I don't believe every civilised person could, if it ... much worse than the first temple had occurred, it seems to me. And we would have lost an enormous amount besides by way of our knowledge of symmetry, grace and harmony. I don't care about the cult of palace Athena, it's gone, and as far as I know ... the sacrifices, some of them human, that were made to those gods, are regrettable but have been blotted out and forgotten, and Athenian imperialism is also a thing of the past. What remains is the fantastic beauty ... the question is how to keep what is of value of this sort in art in our own emotions ... I will go as far as the ecstatic, and to distinguish it precisely from superstition and the supernatural which are designed to make us fearful and afraid and servile