

Sully and Hitch

After Dark

A Late-Night Conversation

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*What follows is the transcript of a 2006 conversation between
Andrew Sullivan and Christopher Hitchens.*

Andrew: That is some strong coffee.

Hitch: You prefer weaker?

A: No, no, I should have some wine as well, or else I'll be all jacked up.

H: Of course! What color would you like? Would you like...

A: I'll have some of this, if this is okay, I'll just get a glass.

H: Sure.

A: The Oakeshott conference— the reason I didn't get around to telling you— because my dissertation, basically, was about [Oakeshott's] theory of practice. And there were hints and guesses in his early work and his very later work that he viewed religion as a part of practical life—he didn't think of it in a sense of— it was *philosophy* which was beyond, but *religion* was actually a way of living in the world—

H: Yes.

A: —it was a way of overcoming the “deadliness of doing,” as he put it, and it enables you to have some sublime acquiescence to it. And I was um... But tiny shards, and I read for my dissertation everything he'd ever written. And my fifth chapter I hadn't written when I went to see him, because I wanted the fifth chapter to be on religion. And this is why this conference is so exciting to me, because almost everything—a lot of what they've discovered since he died—is about religion. He just didn't publish it.

H: Oh, I'd be very interested to know about that.

A: But the reason you reminded me of him was because I said to him—it's a very

difficult subject to bring up with somebody—and I said, “you seem to talk of Christianity as the critical, one of the critical elements of Western civilization.” He was a big fan of Augustine, hugely interested in and influenced by Augustine. And he said, “Well, my problem with Christianity has always been salvation. After all, who would want to be saved?”

H: He was very much like [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing.

A: Right. Yes, exactly.

H: It's also like being of the devil's party, all of these things. I mean, what puts one off is the thought that it could be true, which I think is, in a way, the final condemnation of religion. It's, when people contemplate its victory, can't stand it; it's much better as a private consolation or faith against the material world and its misery.

A: That is what Oakeshott's understanding is.

H: It's also what Daniel Dennett is effectively saying, is that it has its utility and can't possibly die out, or let alone be repressed. But that the real, the actual claims it makes as a church are not just false but... sinister, really.

A: I think that what [Oakeshott] would say, and what I would say, is that what's sinister is the deployment of dogma as certainty. If one takes Lessing and Oakeshott's view of Christianity, which is ultimately: God is unknowable—

H: Then don't pretend to know.

A: Then we cannot know. Or, what we can know, we will hold with a certain humility and provisionality. I mean, one can know, for example, that the Gospels exist and that they represented a human being whose life can be either honored or dishonored.

H: You can do so, yes, you can. But the further implication of this is that if you admit or concede or even claim that it's unknowable, then the first group to be eliminated from the argument are those who claim to know.

A: Yes.

H: Because they must be wrong.

A: Yes.

H: Well, that lets off quite a lot of people at the first floor of the argument, long before the elevator has started moving upwards, or downwards. Those who say they know, and can say they know it well enough to know what God wants you to eat or whom he wants you to sleep with—they *must* be wrong.

A: That is proof itself that they are wrong.

H: Yes. As well as being impossibly arrogant, coming in the disguise of modesty, of humility, simplicity. “Ah, I’m just a humble person doing God’s work.” No, excuse me, you must be either humble or doing God’s work, you can’t know what God’s work would be. Don’t try your modesty on me. And once one’s made that elimination, then everything else becomes more or less simple. My problem only begins there.

A: But it’s still a religion. But it’s still a religion.

H: Or maybe a faith or a cult.

A: Yeah, faith.

H: But my problem begins only when that’s out of the argument and we agree that’s nonsense.

A: That is nonsense.

H: But then one can start arguing: I would say it would be wrong to *wish* it were true. In other words, those who tell me, “If only you would be accepting, you would see that the Prophet Muhammad brought a final revelation that needs no improvement.” Why would I *want* that to be true? There’s no need for any further discussion. They tell me with bright eyes, looking at me, “You’d be so happy if you’d agree!” And I’d be so *miserable*—

A: Well, the truth is, that they are... The truth is that a certain kind of person is deliriously happy upon hearing that certainty and persuading himself that he’s saved. I mean, empirically, the experience of the saved is unquestionably, deliriously happy.

H: Yes but why are people trying to drive one toward the position of Ayn Rand? And thus to regard religion as a crutch for the pitiful and the inadequate, and those who have no real mind and no personality and who must depend on a form of serfdom—

A: Well you could say a certain form of religion—

H: They're claiming Ayn Rand is right.

A: No, they're not, they're saying that a certain kind... they're being more complicated than that and saying that a certain *kind* of religion is like that and appeals in the same way that secular religions and ideologies of various sorts dispense with people's need to figure things out for themselves.

H: Voila, they do. Or abolish it. Again, hateful. Not... One can't be neutral about it. One can't just say it's wrong—one has to say it's a wicked thing to desire. I mean, why would anyone want it to be true that one was subject to permanent round-the-clock supervision, and surveillance, and possibly even intervention, all of one's waking and sleeping life, *and* one couldn't escape it by dying. It's worse than any kind of totalitarianism; it means you're absolutely held as property, that you have no autonomy, that you throw yourself permanently on the mercy of somebody. That is the description of the servile condition; that's why both Islam and Christianity were both perfectly adapted, and still are in many ways, to feudalism or to absolute monarchy, which of course is one of feudalism's counterparts.

A: But the kind of Christianity that someone like Jefferson espoused—

H: He had no Christianity.

A: Well, he constructed his own Bible.

H: Yes, but only by snipping out—

A: I know!

H: Or razoring out, actually, every single supernatural and immoral claim. It left him with, as you know, a very slender volume.

A: Yes, still, he...

H: And even that he didn't dare to publish. And I think that if he had been in a position where he did dare to publish—and this is after his retirement from public life—if he felt free to say what he really thought, I'm confident that he would've been at the least, or most, whichever that is, a deist. No more than. Certainly not a subscriber to any one monotheism. And in his braver moments, I think it was very

clear from his correspondence and his reflections that he, he had the experience of being an unbeliever and had not been able to forget it.

A: But a lot, a lot of people of faith have that experience. Of unbelief.

H: Of unbelief? Of course. There's a famous prayer, "Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." It's an old paradox, in this case a Christian one.

A: There's also this sense that, that if you strip religion of dogma, i.e. its big truth claims... and stick to it as a—I wish there were another word—as a... If one understands mystery to be at the core of it—in other words that one is worshipping something one cannot understand, which requires a certain letting go of it—and in which its best expression is something like ritual. Wordless. Then it's reconciliation to immortality.

H: Then you end up where Simon Blackburn, whom I think we both know, slightly or we know his work... I know he was published in *The New Republic*, perhaps not in your time—a professor of philosophy at Cambridge, author of a very good recent study of Plato. He puts it: religion is fossilized philosophy, it's philosophy with the questioning left out. It's something that becomes instated and no longer is subjected to any further philosophical inquiry. Well, why would that be, from any point of view, a desirable thing?

A: No, because philosophy doesn't help you live.

H: It's the *only* thing that helps one live. It's the reflection on why—well, philosophy's three main reflections or questions are why are we here, what would be justice and what, if we can answer those two questions, would be a just city or just republic?

A: But philosophy can continue, can add...

H: One can be a philosopher and maintain that those are imponderables...

A: And may also say that discussing them and understanding them does not make it easier to live.

H: By no means, but it's not supposed to be.

A: No, it's not supposed to be, its goal is its own sake.

H: Religion's is to make it easy.

A: Religion is the practical impulse, it is how do we live, how do we get through the day knowing that we could die tomorrow, knowing that we are mortally—

H: But how does the belief that Jesus was born of a virgin help you to do that?

A: That particular belief may not.

H: I would say *cannot*. It obscures the view of the question. It negates questioning because it depends upon certainty and upon acceptance of unbelievable evidence with no reasoning. It's a corruption of the whole idea of having a mental process or an inquiring mind.

A: No, it's a recognition that at some point there are some things that are beyond our understanding and an acceptance of that. And then there is a content to that acceptance that can vary from faith to faith.

H: Well now you remind me of what Dr. Johnson said to somebody, I forget who it was, who said, "well I'm willing to admit the existence of the external world," and Dr. Johnson said, "Well you'd *better!*" For someone to say, "Yes, I accept that there are some things that can't be known or accept that some things are impossible to know"—yeah, well they *should!* What choice do they have? The choice they have offered by religion is not to accept, and to say, "No, actually, we know. We know there was a creation moment. We know why it was, we know what was intended by it. We know that its reigning deity knows what we should eat, how we should mutilate our genitalia, how we should... it's a claim to an extraordinary level of—"

A: It can be. But there are differences in degree and kind in religious experience. And one of them is... the kind of thing you're talking about I would understand as a fundamentalist version of religion. But I absolutely refuse to believe that is the only form of religion imaginable, or the only form of religion that actually exists, or the only form of Christianity that exists.

H: It makes me laugh when people say "fundamental," because what it means is you believe that these books are the word of God. That's what fundamental means, fundamentalist means. If they're not, then in what sense are you religious? If I ask you—

A: You can say that they are inspired—

H: If someone says to me, “I’m a Catholic,” I say, fine: Does this mean that you believe in the following: in the transubstantiation of bread and wine, etc. On the whole they’ll say, “Well, you don’t have to believe all of them...” Now excuse me, that may be possible now, but there would be no such thing as the Catholic Church if people had not been forced to believe this, and compelled to believe it, or—though I doubt it myself, I really do doubt it—may actually *have* believed it at the time. Without it, what’ve you got but some menu of spirituality options that you might as well have as a Hindu?

A: Well you can have it as a Hindu, I think, in some respects. Although, the kind of way of life that one might describe as being portrayed in the Gospels as a way to live is a little different than Hinduism for example, or Buddhism. Although I think, you know, I think there are overlaps.

H: But Andrew, I wouldn’t bother with this, I would let these beliefs exist in a parallel universe except for argumentative purposes and dialectal purposes. It’s nice, I enjoy discussing with Jesuits, nothing could be more agreeable [*Andrew laughs*—no, I’m serious—as I would with a Hegelian or a Randian or any of the above. But much more than Hegelians and Randians, these people want to influence my life. It’s not that I believe— That I’ll be saved by— They say I want your children to be taught things that aren’t true.

A: No, no, my point is that the kind of religion I’m talking about—because it is much more aware of the provisionality of its own knowledge—is a much humbler approach to the divine. And certainly, if someone like me would say, “This is what I believe but even I, at some level, cannot give you reasons for this; I cannot explain it entirely; I think this is how I’m trying to figure it out for myself—the last thing on Earth such a religion would do is try to tell you how to live your life. Now I understand most religions are not that way, but I am trying to say that at some level, some way of being at peace with one’s own mortality and have some understanding of why we’re here, does not necessitate—even though it’s often accompanied by—the desire to control anybody else’s life. I don’t see Jesus trying to control anyone else’s life.

H: Why don’t you let me make the assumption, or make the claim, that I take the words and the positions of a true believer seriously and that I respect them. When I examine these beliefs I find that they cannot be private. It is not possible for someone to really believe this, and especially its redemptive character, and watch me go straight to hell. They would be failing in their duty, they must save me, even if it means killing and burning me would be best.

A: Not if what stops them is their understanding of their own doubt. Doubt and faith

can co-exist.

H: How can this be allowed if you know God's will?

A: You don't know it, you think you know it.

H: When I was a Marxist I used to think, or sometimes was tempted into thinking, "Look, people may not realize they need this, but they really do and the consequences of not adopting—"

A: Well, there you are, that was a religion you had.

H: Well, it was not a religion in the sense that I accept but I'll take it as a dogma.

A: Right

H: The feeling one had was, "many don't seem to want what we're telling them, but the consequences of not adopting an international socialist program would be so bad that one might have to give people the occasional nudge. It's for their own good. In fact... Marxism has its glories, but its principal failing must have to be accepted as that, the idea of false consciousness, that people just haven't realized this.

A: Ratzinger has this concept, too. He gave this astonishing talk in Dallas in 1991—I put it in my book—where he describes what he understands to be conscience. And the Second Council—I mean it took two millennia—but the second council did actually make a significant shift to say that we do recognize that the individual conscience alone is the ultimate arbiter of one's own faith. Ratzinger, I think having pioneered that idea with Kuhn... subsequently sort of pulled back from its implications.

H: Which are obviously heretical and incompatible with true belief.

A: Well his argument, in Dallas of all places, was that, uh... [*Laughs*] "Ratzinger in Dallas."

H: God is everywhere.

A: It's like "Dusty in Memphis."

H: God is everywhere. All is decided by Heaven, all praise belongs to Allah. Doesn't

matter from where it arises.

A: His argument was: If your conscience tells you one thing, and the Holy Father through the authority of the Magisterium has determined something else, then it is not your conscience against the hierarchy; there is actually, beneath what you think is your conscience, your *real* conscience, which must, because you're made by God, understand already, that you're wrong. It's the false consciousness mode, again. You may not realize that you need their authority, but you do. But that is not the obliteration of conscience altogether...

H: I could, in a Platonic sense—in the proper sense of the word, deriving from Plato—I could concede, or even concur, that that might be true. What I could not accept is that Ratzinger would know and not me. That he had the right to interpret it. Who is this Herr Ratzinger? By what right does *he* arbitrate it? Do these people want power in *this* world or the next? *It's always this world*. That's how religion strikes me as absolutely material, nothing to do with the spiritual or after-existence. They want power now and they're very wise too—when else would you want to have power?

A: Well of course, there's no other place to have power.

H: Now, now, they want it now! It could be that astrology was true. It could be, for example that—I can't prove it isn't—that the movement of the planets determine my future—

A: Right

H: —and that that's what they're there for; they know that I'm Aries. Though why and how they manage to cover the shift between the Julian and Gregorian calendar would still be a mystery to me—it wouldn't be the main mystery—but okay, let's agree: the planets know my future and they determine it. I could agree to that, and I could agree that there could be a computer in a building that I had never seen that was running this permanent experiment: there's my life, being lived by me, and there's a computer predicting it, day by day, before I could see it. Once I could see the computer, it wouldn't be true. Once I'd read my horoscope, it wouldn't be true, by definition. So all the other perfectly brilliant arguments against astrology—such as identical twins don't have the same future, most of the planets weren't discovered when the Zodiac was drawn, many other such objections—are nothing to me: No one can tell me that they know what the planets are doing.

So there couldn't be astrological priesthood. So, ever since I had learned to think in the least, and among other things, see through astrology I saw through everything

else in much the same way. It could be the case, I'm not, and no one else is, clever enough to tell me it isn't, but no one is clever or moral enough to tell me that it is. So I return to my point, we begin by excluding those who claim to know. And I think that is Occam's Razor, the greatest medieval schooler, in practice.

A: Well it does make religion much more private, meditative... I mean Gandhi, for example, was not going around seeking that much power, at least in his religious mode.

H: I wish that was true.

A: Jesus, specifically, does not seem to be interested in actually acquiring power in the Gospels, to any degree.

H: No, a very modest guy. Unassuming, as long as you accept him as in some way, the son of God. He never claimed to be exactly that, but spoke rather loquaciously about his father and suggested that he knew the way to paradise. As long as you accept these incredibly arrogant claims on his part, he's a very modest guy, almost unassuming, self effacement...

A: [*Laughs*]

H: He's not like the Prophet Mohammad, really interested in material gain, warfare, spoil, conquest. No, he's not like that.

A: At all.

H: Gandhi, I think, was a bit more ambitious than you allow.

A: But, these arrogant claims nevertheless do not, were not, by him at least, turned into a doctrine or a church as he lived.

H: Well, his disciples couldn't have been Christians, for one, because they had not read any of the Gospels. They couldn't have been able to, among other things, they were written long after they were around. So, they can be excluded as non-Christian. And he too, because there is really no evidence—and this is conceded by most serious Christians, too—that he desired to found a church or have one founded in his name. It's very plain that he expected his followers to see him again in their own lifetimes.

A: And it's very clear that they expected to see him again in their own lifetimes.

H: And they were wrong, weren't they?

A: Yeah.

H: So every time people say "Christ is risen" at Easter for the next 2,000 years they're wasting their time, and other people's. It's just not gonna happen and to sow the false hope that it will, though I don't think—

A: Well, the Christ has risen thing is not about the Second Coming, it's a reference to something that has already occurred. I mean, the Second Coming is another doctrine...

H: Yes but it's a promise. If you can do it once...

A: I think you could shear, if you were, Christianity of the Second Coming.

H: All you have to believe in then is resurrection, which in the Bible occurs routinely. It's a commonplace.

A: [*Laughs*] I didn't expect to be talking about this but since we are—

H: No but according to the Gospels, the graves are opened all around Jerusalem at around the time of the crucifixion and many strode out of their tombs and greeted people in the streets. At least two people are resurrected on request by the Nazarene, Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, who nobody interviews about their extraordinary experience and nobody finds out about their subsequent life. Did they die again? We don't even know. Were they resurrected in the form of the body that had previously died on them? We're not even told that. Resurrection, however, was not considered particularly remarkable at that time. But never mind, I concede all this: Jesus was born again, or rather Jesus rose again from the dead. It doesn't prove one thing about the truth of his doctrines.

A: No.

H: Resurrection's an old myth. It doesn't vindicate the claim of someone who makes it.

A: Well in my mind the big—and you know I'm committing heresy throughout this entire conversation—

H: And you're better for it.

A: For me, the Incarnation is a much more central doctrine than the Resurrection. The Resurrection, in some ways, is the necessary consequence of the Incarnation, because it's hard to think of God dying a mortal death.

H: Not for me.

A: As a...

H: Actually, I take that back, it's hard for me to think of him living.

A: Right. Well, it's hard for me to think of him dying. [*Laughs*]

H: Alright, that's one difference I'd split.

A: But that's part of them mystery we're supposed to understand, or at least accept. But anyway, we're not gonna get anywhere particularly...

H: Well, it's the origin of all other arguments, I think. People who want it to be true, are to me, among other things, materialist.

A: The last four years, or five years—the last ten years, I could say, more generally—to any believing Christian, observant Christian, like myself, have been a sort of reading period in the dangers of religion. I don't think in my lifetime this has ever been more, to any observer, in world history, for a very long time, clearer how dangerous this is. When was the last time we had this kind of religious terror?

H: We're not now speaking just of Christianity's fanatics.

A: No, we're not, we're talking about Islam.

H: Just when people had begun to think that the age of totalitarian ideology had gone—

A: This one emerged to fill the vacuum in a way...

H: —the idea of the one leader, the one supreme...

A: The one truth—

H: ...the one truth, the one party—just when one thought one had left that all behind...

A: It comes back like Glenn Close out of the bathtub.

H: I once did a calculation: I was in Romania in 1989 and in Hungary, at the end of communism. I saw the end of Ceausescu. I thought, “Alright, that’s it, in Europe anyway—but it seemed globally—the idea of the absolute leader, the absolute party, the indisputable truth is over. And maybe our future will be a little bit banal. I remember reading the Fukuyama stuff and thinking, probably true, but a little tedious.

A: I could live with it. I could absolutely live with it.

H: How bad is the idea of, you know, essentially a market economy and essentially a political pluralism?

A: Right

H: You know, as someone who had once had utopian opinions, I didn’t feel pumped up by it but I thought, “hmm, doable.” And people talked about at that stage, “the peace dividend”—remember that expression?

A: I do.

H: “Now think of all the money we’ve been spending on the Cold War, we don’t have to spend it anymore, on the weaponry. Think, furthermore, which we now can, on the better uses for it; the long neglected crisis in Africa, the problem of AIDS, the general problem of poverty and degradation and of failure of other societies to have caught up with whatever we want to call it. The market-pluralist model, at a minimum. We have all this chance now!” That, I calculated once, I don’t remember how many days it went on, but I think it was 120 days of this illusion. Not very long before Slobodan Milosevic invaded Bosnia—we’d overlooked this little dictator in the Balkans—and Saddam Hussein abolished the existence of Kuwait; not invaded it, as some people say, but annexed it and said, “a member state of the United Nations, of the Arab League and the Islamic Conference no longer exists, it belongs to me personally, and my crime family.” Ah, how interesting!

A: Yes, but two mafia bosses, one in the Balkans and one in Iraq, do not make a new wave of ideology.

H: No, they don't, but both of them were supported by their local religious authorities, in Milosevic's case the Orthodox Church and in Saddam's case by at least the Sunni *ulema* in Baghdad. And while all this was going on, and we were confronting it, coming up on another track slightly to the outside, something that had been noticeable before '89, but had become actually noticeable on February 14th of that year—the fatwa against Salman Rushdie by the theocratic head of a foreign state offering money in his own name for the murder of a novelist in England—became an aspect of this, too.

A: Right.

H: And an extra totalitarian ideology suddenly became very menacing and, without us paying anything like enough attention, took over at least one state, namely Afghanistan and probably Sudan as well.

A: Does that make one, in some ways, more aware of the fact that maybe human beings want this? They can't live without it? The possibility of their daily ordeal of consciousness, of figuring out what the hell one's life means and what the world is, is not as attractive to many people as surrendering to some ideology or some dictatorship or some mass movement. In other words, since we have not seem to have had a period of history since the French Revolution, really, in which something like this hasn't been abroad in the world, is it not simply a permanent fact of the human condition?

H: Well, if one stops talking about that immediate period, I remember there was a very old anarcho-socialist slogan that says, "The problem is not the will of some people to command. It's the will of so many people to obey."

A: Right.

H: And that there is, in some sense, an innate capacity in human mammals, human primates, to be wished to be told what to do. To be asked to be given security in that form. And of course there are people in countries like Iraq or Serbia—and it would be true of anywhere else—

A: And here, for God's sake.

H: —who, if they were asked, if offered the chance to help themselves to the treasure and property of a helpless neighbor will say, “well, how bad could that be?” That’s, yes, that will always be a problem. But the recrudescence of the totalitarian idea in that period made me realize that there was, apart from the general fact that we are a poorly evolved mammalian species—we prove that every day without being totalitarian or without being rapists or conquerors or fascists—a specific, locatable problem which has preoccupied me ever since. Namely that all of these regimes—Saddam Hussein’s regime is very sectarian, based on a minority of a Sunni minority; Milosevic’s regime was based on a Serbian Orthodox minority trying to kill Muslims in Bosnia; and al-Qaeda’s friends in the Taliban in Afghanistan hated, probably more than anything else, the Shi’a, and acted accordingly in butchering them as you can tell by seeing what happened to the Hazara population in Afghanistan. Or, to move it outside the world of Islam, to the Bamiyan statues, the Hellenic-Buddhist sculptures of Afghanistan’s antiquity. But for all these discrepancies between and among themselves they have absolutely one thing in common: visceral loathing of the United States. For its pluralism, for its secularism...

A: For its constitution, primarily, right?

H: Well, no, I would say...

A: They can’t dislike America for its religious principles.

H: No, it is done, people do say, “Ah well, because George Bush believes in God he’s as much of a theocrat as Osama bin Laden,” let’s leave all that crap to one side. No, I think one would also have to say for its hedonism. Not only is [the US] a dominant power in the world, and a global force...

A: But it’s enjoying it too much.

H: Yeah, it’s having such a good time it barely notices how other people live. By the way, I think that’s a very powerful force of resentment. But it’s phrased by these people as, “well [the US] is basically run by a load of Jews and dykes and faggots and entertainment moguls and heartless tycoons.” A sort of Brechtian parody of an opulent, plutocratic state.

A: “Weimar.”

H: But certainly also a disgust of that kind accompanied by a hatred for its existence, not for its policy but for its existence in the world. Now at that stage, I began to

realize that many of the criticisms I had myself made of the United States—none of which I would take back—or of its policies or many of its statesmen, were no less valid than they have been but were to be considered in this light. And I think that's the lesson, successively, of what happened in the Balkans, in the Gulf, in the Hindu Kush and beyond. Because these ideologies, especially the latter one, are potentially toxic everywhere. I mean by that the Islamic Jihad ideology. It doesn't exist in absolutely every country in the world, but it is a threat in a large number of countries beyond the zone of historical Islam itself. Including in our country of birth.

A: Yes. More so, it seems, almost. I read this Pew poll about the attitudes of Muslims in Europe and in Britain; they seem to be more hostile to Western pluralism in Britain than they were even in Germany or France.

H: Yeah, I believe I have an explanation for that, too, though I could well be wrong. There's a wonderful essay by Sigmund Freud called, "The Narcissism of the Small Difference," and it has to do with the way in which divisions that are invisible to the outsider—as between, say Sinhala and Tamil in Sri Lanka, or Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland—are *everything* to the people who live there. The least thing is the one that divides them. If you were a Zulu, say, or Han Chinese and you go to Belfast... "What are they fighting about? This seems preposterous!" But to them it's everything, in many ways it's all they know, it's what gives them identity.

A: Right, it's like when someone asks me, "Why don't you become an Episcopalian?" and I say, "You have no idea."

H: [Laughs]

A: "I could sooner become a Muslim." I mean, in a way...

H: Yes, and this translates, I think—I'm only translating fairly roughly in the present state—that those who are far from the action, as say is a Muslim in Belgium or Norway...

A: Or Coventry.

H: Or Coventry. He feels he has a great deal more to prove. He doesn't live in Chechnya, he only reads about it. He doesn't live in Kashmir. He has to be more affirmative the further he is from the field.

A: There is a dynamic between modernity itself and the primordial resistance too it,

right? I mean, some of what we're talking about in terms of this religious fundamentalism and its political ambitions seems to have intensified in modernity. The hijackers were—it's not as if bin Laden had no knowledge of the United States, it's not as if Mohamed Atta was not aware of what this was like, it always like, the closer they get to it, the more they're repelled, the more they have to force it out of their consciousness and destroy it.

H: This is famously true of Sayyid Qutb, one of the founders, who appears to have been, it's actually very fascinating, originally drawn to the United States precisely by the magnetic elements that draw everybody to it. But when he got there he was appalled by its immorality, and its amorality as well, and its hedonism. And when you look up the events he attended and the scenes that he witnessed you find that it's some university in the Midwest, I forget where it was: he was invited to a party where women mingled openly and I think perhaps smoked cigarettes and wore what he thought was provocative apparel.

When one goes back to check what that party was like... [*Andrew laughs*] it was a sort of mixer on some rather dull campus where I don't believe *anyone* was showing any cleavage and there was no alcohol served, even! It was one of those, sort of fruit juice, "maybe we'll be really daring and put a disc-sized record on a gramophone and maybe someone will dance if we, if one couple starts maybe we"—a pretty deadly evening. For him, profanity to the utmost extent.

I mention it for two reasons: 1) anecdotally I think it's very important, 2) it shows that there isn't a way of being that one could adopt that would be less provocative. Many are saying "We are offending them, we've upset them, we disrespected them," and so on. Well, exactly what would you have to do to *not* to incur their wrath? This man, Sayyid Qutb, was no mild critic of the United States; he came back having seen this profane campus mixer, that neither of us would've bothered to go to, determined to destroy the United States and as far as he could the whole concept of "Western civilization" as we know it, whatever cliché you like. It was no mild critique he was making of this Babylon. What I object to the most I think, at present, in our culture is the masochism of people who say, "Well if only we hadn't upset them." They have no idea of how strenuous a condition this is.

A: No, no, well they don't understand the fundamentalist psyche. Well, the fundamentalist psyche is rather like the totalitarian psyche; it cannot tolerate any deviation at all. And therefore the very concept of a society that's constructed upon a constitution and the pursuit of happiness is at least its declared object, is itself anathema, right?

H: Well of course it is, because who doesn't know that happiness is available to you by opening one book, The Recitation, the Qu'ran? Who doesn't know that? Isn't it obvious that all you need is one book? One book itself is there to tell you it's the only book you need. And that it's the literal word of God, and not only that—because there've been other books that claim to be that—but the final, unalterable word of God. With this book, inquiry and anxiety end, you have everything you need. How could anyone be so wretched and so ungrateful as to reject this gift? It's like spitting in the communion showers, it's like adding to the misery of Calvary. It's even worse than...

A: It is translating neutrality towards it as hostility towards it, which is what I mean by the fundamentalist-totalitarian link. It was impossible under Stalin to be neutral, you know?

H: Hannah Arendt made a brilliant remark about Stalinism and she said that its great success among the intellectuals—and not just the Russian ones, I mean, among its intellectual adherents around the world—was that it had replaced all questions of validity or testability or objectivity with the question of motive. In other words, “Comrade x has written this attack on our collectivization policy and says it's not working”

A: “Why would he do such a thing?”

H: “And why *now*? Why would he do it, and who put him up to it?” And that mentality you can find still strongly exemplified.

A: And what is the origin of that mentality?

H: The origin of that mentality is religious.

A: Yes, so what is religion, in your view—

H: That's the inquisitional mentality: if you can't find heresy, you must go and look for it.

A: Right. But what—leaving me out of this for a minute—in your view, is the human need that that is fulfilling that you seem to have no use for?

H: The need for certainty. And therefore for security.

A: Which means that they are insecure. Which means that they are afraid. I mean I do think there is a connection between a sense of dislocation, a sense of beleaguerment, a sense of loss, and an attempt to repair it with absolute certainty. I think there is a relationship between those two things.

H: Common to all such systems, including the secular ones—I would exempt fascism because it had no canonical texts, besides the turgid garbage of *Mein Kampf*—

A: Right. Or some crazy 19th century racial eugenics.

H: Or with Gobineau, or Lapouge, or others. Am I right in saying Lapouge. Sorry, strike that. Or with... certainly with Gobineau, Rosenberg, ethnic theorists and crackpots, people measuring bumps in people's skulls. Phrenologists. Crackpots. I mean, fascism is unbelievable intellectual degradation. But certainly with communism, with the Catholic Church—well, the Christian Church to begin with, before the schism—any revisiting of the canonical texts makes people extremely nervous. Great attempts are made to either bury things in libraries or to burn them.

A: Except I think you are ignoring large sections of—I'll speak about Christians—in which this is not: for example, the monastic life, in which one can see people having no interest in controlling the world whatsoever, and in withdrawing from the world to pursue what they think is God's will. In which they seem to be abnegate. Or, a figure like St. Francis, who one cannot even begin to accuse of seeking power, or even to control anybody else's life. And, similarly, Jesus, I mean, you have to concede there are two forces. I completely agree with you that this element in religion is integral to it, it's part of it, it's a constant—but I don't think it exhausts the entire arsenal of religious activity or thought.

H: I've no knowledge of the real existence either of Jesus of Nazareth or of St. Francis of Assisi, who may very well have been a great avian demagogue— [*Andrew laughs*] But I do know that it would be quite false to say that the Franciscan order sought no influence over the world, along with all the other orders: First, in the accumulation of property, second in the administration of local government and third in the promulgation and proselytization of the faith. I don't think they at all renounced the world. I believe it may have been their ambition, but in point of fact, the world cannot be renounced. The world is as it is.

A: Yes, but insofar as it can be, many have tried. And to dismiss them as not religious, or to conflate all of them with the Grand Inquisitor seems to me to miss a very large swath of religious experience.

H: I don't conflate *all* of them with the Grand Inquisitor but if Christianity wants to be identified with St. Simeon of Stylite—the site of whose supposed pillar I once visited in the original territories of early Christianity, eastern Christianity, which is the real original one, in northern Syria—who decided to mortify himself and withdraw from the world by standing on top of a pillar for forty years...It doesn't bother me, it seems like a waste of life and a waste of mind and a terrible waste of energy.

A: But why would you care? Why would you even go that far?

H: Well, exactly. If that's what it was, it's fine, let him go do that just as I don't mind if some hippie goes off to start a commune and live entirely on nature and have his wife have her baby on a wooden table. It doesn't bother me at all. But Christianity does not give me that option! It wants to save my soul; it wants to tell me that my children must be taught garbage in the schools in the 21st century, in the United States; it wants to tell people that condoms are worse than AIDS—

A: Some of them do. Not all of them.

H: I'm sorry, the authoritative ones do, the leadership does. The others who've become, I have to say, I'll agree with you— the Church of England, for example, has become more or less a humanist, bleating organization that stands for nothing... Fine!

A: No I think that's way too dismissive. I mean, it's perfectly possible to say—

H: I think it's way too lenient.

A: It's perfectly possible to say that one believes in the teachings of Jesus; that one attempts to inculcate them in oneself; that one appreciates and has come to terms with the mystery of his incarnation; one wishes to commemorate it through the sacraments...

H: I'm not hearing this for the first time.

A: I'm sure you're not—without attempting to control anybody else, without attempting to impose it on a single other soul, and without even... I mean, for example, I think of many of my lay-Catholic peers or friends or family and I do not think that the fact they're not running around trying to convert every single human being they meet—and they're not, Christopher, they're just not—to them, their faith

is for themselves and the people they love, and for them it is the truth, but it's held with much less certainty and much less intolerance than some other people.

Now, I think that comes, to some extent, from being able to live with doubt. The psychological and spiritual reserves that allow one to live in the middle of confusion, and yet not to abandon faith. It is a sign of weakness that one has to translate religious experience into a set of inviolable doctrines which must, by necessity—and I understand the point you're making, by *logic*—be required to be applied to everybody else with whom one comes into contact. But it's not the only form of Christianity. It's not the only form of faith.

H: But just to respond to those in reverse order: It would very surprising if Christians were not assailed with constant doubt because the worldview of their church has been repeatedly challenged and overthrown ever since Galileo and extending to our own day with Stephen Hawking. And including—

A: And of course, Darwin.

H: To say nothing of Darwin—and including matters that are not to do with the magisterium of the spiritual at all, that are to do with actual questions, such as whether the sun goes round the Earth or not, whether we live in a man-centered or an Earth-centered universe. These things have been decided. Christianity could not now, I think, be invented. So, that they're doubtful is to their credit, and furthermore, their attempts to evangelize their world have failed, I think rightly and I also think inevitably. They were cruel, most of them, and additionally ineffective.

A: They're succeeding very well right now in Africa as we speak.

H: The attempt will never stop, but I thought you said that one should consider Christianity as a skeptical movement, you can't have that both ways.

A: No, I'm not having that both ways. I'm saying that inevitably, the kind of faith I'm talking about is not going to [inaudible]...

H: Of course they're never going to give it up because there's no point to them if they do, but just to finish my reverse: the other reason without which we would've never heard about Christianity is that it happened to be adopted as the official state ideology of the Roman Empire in a rather great stroke of luck.

A: Right.

H: Which made it semi-compulsory for people, well, entirely compulsory for many. Going back to your view about the transcendent refulgence of the Nazarene: I don't believe a word of that. He quite plainly thought the world was going to end quite soon, rather looked forward to the prospect, thought that he would be a big feature of that event, and inculcated this belief in other people. That is...

A: No, we do not know that. We know that the people who wrote— Christopher, we know that the people who wrote the Gospels attributed that to him.

H: Well, look, you're not gonna trap me into saying the Gospels are true. I don't think they're true at all, I don't think there's a word of truth in them.

A: You think it was entirely made up. He didn't even exist.

H: I think the entire thing—whether he existed or not—the Gospel account of his life is of course an absolute fiction—

A: Absolute?

H: Well, an absolute confection. A jamming together of mutually inconsistent and weird accounts. If you now tell me, “hey, are you resting yourself on the Gospel,” I'm saying, Andrew, please don't make my point for me. That is what Christianity, however, does depend upon. And there is one thing on which they certainly agree that makes no sense at all: moral advice such as “take no thought for the morrow.” Don't care about clothes, or wealth, or investment, or your children, or anything for the future, why bother? This is immoral advice. Anyone who took it would be highly irresponsible at best.

A: Yes.

H: It only makes sense if you believe that there is no point in doing this, if you take the James Watt view of the national parks: why preserve anything when it's all coming to an end? This is wickedness.

A: Well, because it *will* come to an end, because you are going to die.

H: [*Lights cigarette*]

A: And you and I are not going to be here in 50 years' time, neither of us. We will end.

H: Well I'm holding out for stem cells, myself.

A: *[Laughs]*

H: Particularly embryonic ones, because apparently they last longer. No, no of course, no one argues more strongly than me that we're born into a losing struggle, as is our cosmos, certainly our universe. Of course. For all we know, the heat death of the universe certainly might occur before we die!

A: Is it a more logical thing to surrender to that and accept it rather than to fight it?

H: Not as long as one... Not as moral advice, no. To say, "in that case, what is the point in preserving a surplus from the harvest and trying to make sure that the next one will be larger," because one has children, say, or because there are other people to be fed.

A: But Jesus, of course, did not have children, and instructed his disciples to abandon their own children and abandon their own families...

H: Immoral advice.

A: ...and abandon their own wealth.

H: Does the Church do an imitation of Christ in this way?

A: No. No, they do not—it's an impossible doctrine. It is an absolutely impossible doctrine.

H: Andrew, you're doing my work for me.

A: No I'm not, I'm actually doing my work.

H: It's either morally incoherent or it's actually wicked, but as a precept of morality it's utterly void, null.

A: Or it is truer than anything you've said. Or it is the only sane response to living as a mortal. Now it may be that we are, as mortals, incapable of it.

H: It's too manmade, and it's too obviously manmade for that to be true. And it bears, as Darwin says about our species, the lowly stamp of its origin. You can tell its

manmade, as you call tell with the Qu'ran as well, as with the Torah and the Talmud. This is the work of fallible mammals, and it shows.

A: Of course.

H: Well, that's all there is to be said about it.

A: No, that isn't. The people who wrote down the oral history of this figure that they knew—

H: Copied down from other fragments, inserted later. Have you read Bart Ehrman's book?

A: I haven't read it but I know of it.

H: Well, it's quite extraordinary, much more than I thought.

A: The *Misquoting Jesus* book?

H: It's called 'misquoting' which is a very mild statement of its title, and I hope I don't interrupt you but I just want to say this: the story, say, the famous story of the woman taken in adultery and the very interesting and odd behavior of Jesus on that occasion that everyone remembers in their childhood—

A: Was put in a hundred and fifty years later, yeah.

H: And it isn't in the same kind of language that the other Gospels are in, it's to Professor Ehrman's shock—and I mention him because he had become the chief spokesman of the Biblical fundamentalists, was their most skilled and most multilingual and sincere and scholarly advocate. His realization that this is *at best* a legend, I consider to be significant. I'm taking Bertrand Russell's test of "evidence against interest."

A: Well yes, in his case—although I think you're exaggerating a little his previous stature. I mean I don't think he would claim that he was *the* most important fundamentalist scholar.

H: He would be too modest for that, but he was being advanced by them as such and had been to, first to Wheaton I believe and then to the college that looks down on Wheaton as slightly too secular...

A: Namby-pamby.

H: Yes, and undoubtedly entered this vocation mastering all the relevant tongues in the hope of vindicating Biblical literacy.

A: No, his story is an absolutely riveting one, and what I find fascinating in terms of the church—and not just my Church but other churches, what we're seeing the Episcopal Church as well—is, I think, the impact of a lot of this. And I think *that* part of what you see in popular culture is the sort of dreck of the *Da Vinci Code*, it's a kind of ghastly...I'm not going to get into the content of it, I'm just saying purely as an anthropological, sociological phenomenon, it seems to me without the awareness that scholarship has essentially destroyed the notion of a single, inerrant text.

H: I think the difference between us may be this, then: I don't believe scholarship is necessary for that. It's interesting, but I'm so made—and I think I'm not the only one, but if I was I wouldn't mind—as to be certain that there wouldn't be an infallible text dictated by God to men. That the idea is impossible to begin with, *ex hypothesi*, by definition, it cannot happen, there will be no revelation, there never has been one and if there was, why wasn't it made to everybody to judge whether it's true or not? Why was it made to a group of Bronze Age villagers who then have to pass it on, who would be incapable of passing it on in its original form?

A: Well, it has to be made to somebody—

H: Of that we can be absolutely certain.

A: Yes.

H: So it's not that there wasn't a revelation, it's that there *can't* be a revelation.

A: Or the truth that would be imparted would be extraordinarily hard to translate. I mean, what Jesus speaks in are these mysterious parables that are subject to all sorts of interpretation. It's not as if what Jesus is saying is the kind of doctrine that one would read in the catechism of the Catholic Church. The revelation... I mean, if Jesus was the son of God, then it's certain the God speaking through him spoke in paradoxical, mysterious—

H: Contradictory

A: —contradictory dialogues.

H: I wouldn't say paradoxical. Contradictory, incoherent. And very often wicked, the injunctions are very often evil. They say all other tribes must be destroyed physically and—

A: I don't recall Jesus saying any of those things.

H: Jesus doesn't say that—

A: Well let's stick to Jesus, then.

H: Alright, let's stick to Jesus, then.

A: And let's stick to Jefferson's Jesus.

H: I'd be happy to do so.

A: Because if Jefferson, for example, who you believe had no interest—why was he so interested? What drew Jefferson to the Gospels?

H: It was compulsory to be interested...

A: No it wasn't, he kept this privately. Why did he privately construct his own Bible?

H: In order: if I can't mention, I won't dwell on the evil instructions of genocide and enslavement and rape that are mandatory in the Old Testament except to say that nowhere in the Old Testament is there any mention of Hell or punishment of the dead, the most evil doctrine of Christianity, I think of them all. It's only until gentle Jesus, meek and mild makes his appearance, or only when, rather, he does so, that the idea of eternal torment is introduced. The Old Testament contains no warrant, at least, for that. Slavery, yes, genocide, yes, racism, yes, rape, all of that, certainly. Human sacrifice, and its equivalents. But no Hell. That has to come with the gentle, more modest New Testament. But Jefferson cuts all that out of the Bible as best he can...

A: Because why? What is his justification for that?

H: Jefferson... died in I think 1826. Darwin and Lincoln were born on the same day in 1819, Jefferson is just at the point where there isn't quite enough science to disprove the Bible or to utterly negate religion. He's a man of enormous curiosity, he wanders, goes on expeditions and has debates with French naturalists about the

topography of Virginia. “How can it be the shells, the sea shells, are so high up on the mountain?” He’s just below the summit, he can’t see over—bit like Moses—but he really wants to know. And he knows that religion is, in its clerical form, nonsense, but he feels, can it really be all untrue? Well, it might be truer if I cut out all the things that are self-evidently untrue. Well, this is a very primitive pre-Darwinian almost pre-modern view. Because he was trying his best, he was one of the precursors. One looks at the Jefferson Bible with interest but one doesn’t learn anything from his amendment of it. Except that it can’t be the word of God.

A: When you read Jefferson’s Bible, does it say anything to you? Are the sayings of Jesus, insofar as they reflect upon the way one should be among one’s fellow human beings, do they strike you as...

H: What’s left over is just as wicked as it was to begin with, it seems to me.

A: It’s wicked to love one’s neighbor?

H: It doesn’t ask one to love one’s neighbor. That was said by Rabbi Hillel, in fact, long before. It says, “Love the neighbor as oneself.” An impossible—you see, the real wickedness of Christianity, or one of many, is it demands the impossible: To ask me to love you, Andrew, sometimes seems too easy...

A: [*Laughs*]

H: But to ask me to love you as I love *myself* is an impossible demand, I cannot possibly, cannot conceivably do that, and it would be wrong of me if I did because I have other things I have to do. I have a wife, children, others.

A: But as an aspiration—

H: No, absolutely not, it’s a dissolution of the personality, it’s the abolition of the individual.

A: No it’s not.

H: Of course I’ll have enough self-respect to like myself more than I love you. I’ll have to do it. It’s a morally impossible demand. The demand to give up all possessions and to forget the future is not just unlivable and impossible, but would be, if it could be done, cruel and stupid.

A: Because it would abrogate responsibility.

H: It would mean there'd be no investment, no thrift, no thought about subsequent generations. There's no saving Christianity from the charge, it seems to me, that as stated even at its strongest by its warmest believers that its recommendations, its precepts, are rather nonsensical or evil. Sometimes both.

A: I just find that the aspiration to treat others as one treats oneself, you know, which could be rendered in secular terms.

H: No, not treat, it doesn't say "treat," Andrew.

A: Love.

H: It says "love" as yourself. Rabbi Hillel comes up with the Golden Rule.

A: I'm just trying to grapple with the idea that that aspiration is evil or wicked. It strikes me as preposterous.

H: No, because it's too strenuous, I mean to say. Because it's impossible it means that anyone falling short of it is in a state of sin.

H: To do to others what you want done to yourself doesn't mean "always be nice to me," because it would be banal, as well as tautological. It be mean you have to be very hard on someone, could be you have to use force on them, as you would hope they would to stop you committing a crime, for example, or a theft. So it's—

A: It could be, except there's also the doctrine of forgiveness and—

H: Forgiveness?

A: Yes, forgiveness.

H: Yeah, that doesn't completely work for me either but...

A: [*Laughs*] I know, none of it's gonna work for you, Christopher!

H: No, just as the donor, excuse me, I mean not just as the donor but as a recipient. Why should I deserve forgiveness from someone else, let alone have the power to offer it? Who gives me this right? It's a social question. It's to be decided by law and

by even utilitarianism, I suppose.

A: It can be, it may not be. It can also be a sense that—and again, I have to say things like this—in ways we do not understand...

H: You do have to say that.

A: Yeah, well, that is a premise of every religious statement, okay?

H: Then agree that you are one of those who doesn't understand.

A: In which case... To some extent we can argue, as we are, about whether this doctrine makes sense in the way that one lives one's life, or whether it's inherently dangerous or inherently wicked or, indeed, inherently totalitarian. But at some level, what matters therefore is the level of certainty with which one holds certain truths. There is a fundamentalist mindset in which this ideal is always the enemy, the perfect is always the enemy of the good and in which the human being thrashes around in guilt and condemnation and judgment. And the *last* thing one sees in another human being in the sway of this religion is serenity or calm or benevolence. One sees insecurity, anger and a frustration that the world as it should be is not as it is. And an attempt to close the gap, somehow, in your own life and everybody else's.

H: Well, it doesn't want everyone reconciled to the status quo. But the human discontent with the way things are has been a great spur to invention and innovation, usually waged against the priests and against religious dogma ever since we have records.

A: But they will also die, and you will die. And whatever achievements you have managed will no longer be available to you.

H: Well that's *a priori* true. It doesn't give an inch to religion. It doesn't advance the case for a spiritual belief.

A: No, what religion does is ask, "What is a human being's best response to that fact —

H: Well the first is to accept that it's true...

A: —of completely mortality of not just our lives but everything we do in our lives?"

H: Well to borrow a phrase from you, acceptance.

A: Right.

H: The first thing is to realize that that is the case, that we are born into a losing struggle, that we're from a poorly evolved species that now understands rather better its cosmology and its DNA. To do the best we can with that, but not to deny it, or to make up stories that appear to pretend that it isn't so.

A: No, but at some point to understand also that there may be some capacity that is not our rational capacity, but that is what one might call one's spiritual capacity, to be in touch with what one cannot know. And to have what one cannot know be in touch with us.

H: See that sounds like white noise to me, I have to say. And you don't normally talk white noise. Religion has the effect on you, as it has on many intelligent people, of making you appear to be dumber than you are. I have to tell you this.

A: [*Laughs*]

H: Just as religion will often make people accede to immoral acts that they would never, ever consider, if they weren't under the warrant of Heaven in some way. No decent Catholic is going to go around saying "I'd rather have AIDS than condoms"; it's the Church that makes them, makes good people say wicked things. And you just asked me a piece of pure babble that you wouldn't have thought of, it's so well below your usual standard, because you feel that religion in some sense makes you have to do it. It's like people stop writing poetry when they become poet laureate. Something about the monarchy kills the poetry. [*Laughs*]

A: No, that is not—let me just protest, for a second.

H: Please, my dear chap. Do you want some coffee? I'm not sure there is any.

A: If I have any more coffee I'll never sleep at all.

H: Well, we've strayed from Mesopotamia.

A: We have. Except we haven't, in a way, because of course...I think one of the things that happens when you blog every day or you read the news every day and you're obsessed with news stories and news cycles is you can forget that the reason we're in

Mesopotamia in the first place, the context in which any of this makes sense is a fundamentalist religious movement that attempted to kill us and does want to destroy us and everything we stand for. So in some ways we are not digressing from the war; we are talking about it, aren't we? Isn't this the origin of this war? It's like talking about the fight against Soviet communism without talking about totalitarianism.

H: Well in a way that's true. As you know, there's a huge argument that has, I wouldn't even call it a half-truth, but a partial truth in it that says the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime has little or, some people say, nothing to do with the quarrel with fundamentalist Islam. I would say I'd give this much to it: the decision to remove Saddam Hussein—the realization that our existence was incompatible with his regime, or international law was incompatible—was made in 1998 by the Senate in a unanimous vote, and *that* was a bit too late. It could've been made in 1991. Saddam Hussein's regime is evil and it has broken all the laws governing genocide, weapons of mass destruction, aggression against neighboring states. But it was also, as it happens in my opinion, flirting with and helping to incubate jihadist groups and that became part of the case against it.

But I regard it as a war on two fronts with Saddam Hussein and his regime and his followers. As we've now seen the Ba'athists and the jihadists have fused on the battlefield, and they began doing that before his regime was overthrown and anyone who's cared to look knows this. But I think this general quarrel with the totalitarian, one-party, one-leader state that needs to be pursued in any case. So, I agree they're aspects of each other but they can just as happily be considered separate.

A: But the cost-benefit analysis shifts when one also understands that such a state can also sponsor entities outside of itself with access to technologies.

H: Voila.

A: I mean, one of the things, one of the more fundamental issues that you raised is this: human *homo sapiens* at this stage of evolution. For me, if I ask myself this question in the dark of the night, "has our technological power vastly outpaced our capacity to handle it as human beings in terms of our ability of self-restraint, our understanding of toleration, et cetera. It seems to be quite self evident it has, and it's a miracle in some ways that it hasn't led to worse...

H: Oh my God, one has—well, you and I are both simians but we can look down on some apes, some primates as inferior to ourselves and you see people, the tapes of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan testing chemical poisons on dogs and so forth. You realize, boy.

Here you have the nightmare. A subhuman—

A: With superhuman powers.

H: With technology that was developed by people like Albert Einstein, who restore one's faith in the species to which we all belong. But who did it, in an awful paradox, for humanitarian reasons so that the real sadistic primates didn't get a hold of it first.

A: Right.

H: So, does AQ Khan suffer from these scruples? No. He invents nothing, he does no real scientific work; he's a plagiarist, he's a thief, and he cannot wait to spread what Einstein was hoping against hope to keep confined. This is a huge difference, yes, it's all the difference in the world. But it doesn't free us from the knowledge that we're all primates, mammals.

A: Right: and as primates, mammals, as you say, we increasingly understand are subject to certain patterns of behavior that were formed over millennia and millions of years of behavior which lead to awareness of history as a constant violent struggle on some level or other. We're certainly not progressing morally at the same pace as we're progressing technologically, which leads one to a certain prediction of catastrophe, right? Is it not a matter of time?

H: It's come back to me a lot, lately. I mean, when I was a kid—I'm older than you, a lot; when I was 15 or 14—a particularly objectionable and conceited primate John Kennedy considered that his own vanity in a quarrel that he'd helped to pick with another thuggish mammal, Nikita Khrushchev over Cuba, among other things, was worth risking the destruction of the human race for. And I remember the evening when we all thought it would happen. And so intense was that memory that, when it was over, I think a lot of people forget how bad it had been. We began to think, "well, maybe there were other things, and maybe deterrence will hold up and maybe there are other things we should be concerned with..." And there were, too. But it's come back to me a lot lately, that 60s feeling of the imminence of the mushroom cloud.

A: And the 50s feeling, too. I mean, the thing that the intellectuals of their time are obsessed with is the bomb. Not just its existence, but that it was a paradigm shift, the paradigm shift to astonishing destruction.

H: Or, let's not say the bomb as a summa of human achievement, as nuclear physics is, but the return to the age of Biblical plagues. The idea of spreading, deliberately,

terrible violence, toxic...

A: Why do you think this hasn't happened? I mean, obviously it hasn't happened because they can't have got it, right? Otherwise it would've happened.

H: I don't believe they'd have it and be hoarding it, no. Though I could be wrong about that, though: it seemed to me that upon acquisition, Saddam Hussein as a regime or al-Qaeda as a movement would use it at once, or as soon as possible, in a way that, oddly, I don't think the Iranian regime would. I think they would have it to hoard it and use it as a threat. But, this is a very short gap of time between acquisition and use and it comes to the same thing.

A: But what we saw on 9/11 was sort of the existential fact that these people have been sanctioned, partly by their own eschatology, to believe that it is in fact a sign of the coming apocalypse. That they can act like the zealots acted in ancient Israel under the understanding that the end of the world was imminent—

H: And desirable.

A: And desirable, and that one's actions were therefore...

H: Yup, they have that in common with all religions. They got the idea from perfectly respectable holy books that are available everywhere and are given to schoolchildren.

A: But at no point in human history have those kinds of people been able to access this kind of power, of destructive power. One isn't even talking about the need to construct something difficult and enduring like a state or a civilization. One isn't even talking about the ability to invent these things, it is to copy them or to steal them and deploy them in the crudest manner fashionable to kill as many—

H: To bring on the end, to prove that death is more adorable than life.

A: Yes.

H: Again a necessary religious belief.

A: The one thing I just want to come back to is how does one summon up the energy to fight this knowing it's inevitable?

H: That's an excellent question. Well, in the same way as one seeks, knowingly, to

stave off or postpone death while accepting its inevitability. In the same way as one has, in some sense, a conscience. Because we, without these faculties, wouldn't have progressed to the point where you and I could be talking and it could be on tape. Hah, "tape." See how primitive I am.

A: Yes.

H: That it could be recorded and transmitted.

A: On some .mp3 file.

H: All we know is that without these qualities we wouldn't have advanced the small distance that we have. I'm content to leave it at that. The mystery to me is that those who are impatient for it to be all over on the illusory belief that the next world, which by the own definition will be created by murder and torture—the transition to it will be accomplished by this apocalyptic, indifferent, pitiless destruction—will be better than the one we've got. I have no idea what it's like to believe this sort of thing, I think, but I think I can recognize evil when it's staring me in the face. And so my resolution, to answer your question, would be not to not give an inch to it and in particular, not to make any excuses for it, not to say, "this is a protest against real human deprivation or suffering"—I won't have it said that Osama bin Laden is a spokesman for the poor. I'm not having that.

A: We're not going to have the slightest scintilla of disagreement about that. And I think it's partly because I actually understand—in some ways, I think, your understanding of religion comes from a hostile point of view, mine comes from a less hostile point of view—but I do understand it. I do understand its power. I do understand why it can lead people to do these things.

H: I understand its power. But whereas I can—in a debate with, say, any kind of Republican or any kind of Leftist—I can back myself to be able, if I had to, or for money, or for a joke, or just as demonstration, to put their case for them, to make their speech, if I had to...I cannot imagine what it is like—

A: To like actually believe it.

H: No. Well, in some cases, I can, but in the case of the religious believer, I cannot. I don't think it's a limitation, either, on my curiosity or my mental power.

A: But in this country the biggest selling book is the *Left Behind* series, the biggest

selling series.

H: But I'm sure the least read. It's totally unreadable.

A: I know, I can honestly testify to seeing people reading it on planes, in airports,

H: Do you see them turning the pages?

A: [*Laughs*] Yes!

H: Are they holding it the right side up?

A: You read this stuff and it's like a terrible, terrible, sort of hackneyed, cribbed version of a Frederick Forsyth novel.

H: I'm serious, Andrew, actually, it's torture for a literate person to read. And I don't think that by making it written by illiterates it makes it easier for people who don't read for pleasure to read. I say it's technically unreadable; they may be holding it and looking at and they may put it back reverently on the shelf when they get home—it's *not* possible they've read all but eight words. It can't be done.

A: Why can't they—

H: The *Da Vinci Code* is bad, but at least you want to find out what happens next. It's bad beyond description...

A: Well of course—the *Left Behind* plot is riveting! Because, you know, you're on an airplane then suddenly your best friend has disappeared...

H: Once. I can read that once. On a plane, particularly, or on a Greyhound bus. I presume the same is true on a bus or on a camel train.

A: [*Laughs*] But what I'm saying is, in this country—let's say they haven't read them. For the sake of argument I concede they haven't read the whole bloody thing. They certainly *bought* it, that requires a certain commitment to the worldview that this thing represents, and what this thing represents is that, not only is the end of the world coming but it is a very desirable thing for it to come. I mean, you see these people rushing to a red heifer in Israel.

H: Indeed, they're trying to grow the red heifer and in Iowa, now, they find a pseudo

or corrupt geneticist who thinks he can grow one without a single white hair. But I hope it succeeds, I hope they get the heifer that doesn't have a single white hair and it's pure red, and I hope they do sacrifice it and scatter its ashes. It'll be the same as every other messianic enterprise, it will end in a hideous disappointment for the morons.

A: No, you know what happens then! What happens then, is there's a dictatorship of the proletariat and what happens then, is there has to be a vanguard of people who ensure that it occurs!

H: But Andrew, I've got to tell you that none of this would occur, even if all the preconditions are met, it will not happen—the temple will not come down from Heaven, the rapture will not take place, the Messiah will not come. The Messiah will not come and will not even call. This is axiomatic to me. The other form, in the secular right in the 50s, which you were recalling also: the John Birch Society was really quite strong, and it was made up of people who believed that President Eisenhower was a conscious agent of the communist conspiracy, that he was a paid enforcer of the Kremlin. Now, okay, you get up in the morning and you believe that, and then you still have to go down and get the groceries.

A: Right.

H: You still have to page through the newspaper. You still have to go and keep your doctor's and dentist's appointments. It doesn't matter what you think, you can believe that if you like. That's what Omar Khayyam says, "And do you think that unto such as you / a maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew / God gave the Secret, and denied it me? / Well, well, what matters it! Believe that too." It doesn't matter what they think. Unless they're willing to use deadly force to try and advance the process. Well, the same would be true if they were a secular movement, like fascism. I'm sorry, we're not gonna be talked to in that tone of voice. We won't negotiate at gunpoint, if you declare war on us you'll be sorry, your people will be killed at a greater rate than ours. We promise it. We guarantee.

A: When you say, "your people"—let us say that Osama gets a suitcase, or some al-Qaeda group gets a suitcase.

H: We'd lose a city. We'd lose a city in a war against fascism.

A: And who do we fight Where do we go? Who do we attack? I mean, that's—who suffers for this? Do you take out the entire Middle East? What do you do?

H: No, that is indeed the worst aspect of the new situation. It's—

A: Well it's not just the worst aspect, it's the *central* aspect, it's the central conundrum.

H: Well, I said it's the worst, I wasn't saying it wasn't central. For the moment, if we're talking just about technology it's actually very unlikely that anyone or any group could manage such a thing without at least a state machine that had at least some background to it or was willing to be a host or patron, perhaps deniably. That gives one a certain leverage. But ultimately, one has to face the thought of a small group, perhaps even born and raised in the country, could acquire at least the material, say, to poison the reservoir or release a virus.

A: I mean, you can download from the Internet the 1918 flu virus. It's there. Presumably, if you have a smart enough biologist or somebody somewhere, you know, this is an ideology we're talking about that is capable—I mean the 7/7 bombings, were not... they were organized by people from Yorkshire...

H: No, this is and will be, as long as long as I live—however long that is, and I don't want it shortened by these riff-raff, but it's possible they can do that—a continuing source of anxiety. Because it proceeds from an anti-human ideology, which, in the name of God, can be replicated like a plague anywhere in the world.

A: Now, we could talk about this the way we are, but let's say you're president in the United States—

H: Things will never be that, no.

A: [*Laughs*] This astonishing, amorphous, constant, changing, invisible, largely, potential threat is never ending. You can, presumably, construct surveillance systems, there are all sorts of things maybe one can permanently set up. And let's face it, the structure of self-defense, the war we're talking about is permanent, it seems, at least to my mind as far as I can see, endless. There is no point at which these people—maybe there will come a point at which this thing will...

H: This is not a new thought to me though, Andrew, because the struggle against religion is a perpetual one, and against the toxins that it spreads. So it's—

A: Nevertheless, you would equate the kind of struggle we're dealing with here with the struggle against something like Soviet communism as ideology, right? It's the

same mindset, right?

H: No, I would not. The struggle against communism as an ideology is a quite separate thing in my mind, and still is, from the struggle against the Soviet Union as an imperial superpower, which wasn't in fact able to use its agents and supporters in other countries to any such effect. And, actually it has to be said, it didn't wish to do so in such a way as to spread random terror and disease. No, this is entirely different. This is the way in which fanaticism knows no law; it's the way in which no one knew for several decades what to do about the so-called *assassin* movement because it appeared to be impermeable to deterrence or retribution. That it was terrifyingly irrational and for that reason very strong.

A: Right, we're talking about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

H: No, no I'm talking a period much earlier than that, about which nobody knows very much because the story is somewhat legendary but the *assassin*—the *hashishin* as they're sometimes called, because it was believed they were influenced by narcotics—who were able to kill monarchs and political rulers at will in the area roughly we would now call Turkey, Persia, Armenia, and so on. Controlled by a fanatical leader, in the end put down actually by a Muslim authority. But the terrifying thing about them was that they knew no fear, they believed they would go to heaven if they died, they were impervious to deterrence, impermeable to retribution and spread fear and trembling then for the same reason these people do now. There was nothing to bargain with, in rather the same way as the terror of Hitler and national socialism—somewhat different, I think, than that from the threat of Stalin and Stalinism—was that it was, in the literal sense, unappeasable. It was self-destructive; it secretly desired its own death and the death of others.

A: Except we now have the technological factor. Which multiplies, exponentially, the damage that can be done. We're not just talking about the occasional assassination, we're talking about the destruction of great cities, we're talking about what would be the collapse, or at least an astonishing decline in the world economy, we're talking about the end of trade as we know it, to some extent.

H: Well, yes, of civilized, trusting life. Everyday life. That's why I've written a book saying faith is our enemy.

A: But you're also saying that faith is eternal so, I mean, you can rail against this, but it won't disappear off the face of the Earth. I mean, Jefferson believed that within a hundred years or so, the kind of religious faith that he talked about, the founders

believed it would become a kind of Episcopalianism, they predicted that.

H: No, no, Jefferson went further than that; he said, “there is not a boy living now,” I think he said, “in America who will not die a Unitarian.” Amazing. Though, if you actually asked, absent a few centers of extreme biblical literalism in the country, what most people’s belief really is, whatever church they attend or whatever faith they profess, something not unlike a vague spiritual, humanitarian Unitarianism wouldn’t be far from it. Most secular Jews adopt a view not unlike that. Extreme tolerance, no insistence on monotheism...

A: We know that the form, by far the strongest element of American religion at this point in time is a much more severe form of inerrant biblical scriptural fundamentalism. By far.

H: I think you say that in error.

A: How?

H: And, well, I think you register them more because they have you in their...

A: In their sights?

H: Yes. It’s impossible to govern the United States, or even a state in the United States with this group, they’ll never win even a state government, and if they try it they’ll lose.

A: They already run every single state south of the Mason-Dixon line. They run the Republican Party!

H: No, they don’t. No, this, you see, this is just your gay paranoia. Your bum-banging paranoia.

A: No it’s not!

H: There’s no possibility these people can run a state let alone the Republican Party.

A: The president is one of them!

H: The president is not one, any more than any of his advisors or ministers are.

A: That's what they say they are.

H: This is the way the Democrats scare people into sending them money.

A: No, it's what Fred Barnes is telling me. It's not what the Democrats are telling me.

H: I'm sorry, I've been hearing it for 25 years, since I heard that they ran the Ronald Reagan administration, which is more near, by the way, to being true because Reagan was a bit nearer to being one of them. No, this is a threat inflation of diminishing returns. What there is in this country, though, is a very large centrist swamp of people who essentially believe that religion is good for you, some faith is better than none, that religion should be charitable, should raise money for the poor, should look with kindness on the less fortunate and so forth. Jefferson wasn't, in that sense, that wrong. But when the country is confronted with people who really are free of all doubt and all pity, such as those who attacked our civil society in September five years ago, it's Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson who come out at once to say, "yes, they are God's verdict on us," as you know they did. Indeed, they attributed this to sodomy and divorce, this attack. Well, that should surely have allowed American society to rally toward secularism and say, "we're not having any of that talk."

A: But they didn't.

H: They did not. It's a great opportunity missed. I've been spending the last five years of my life trying to repair that breach.

A: Well maybe it's because you have actually missed the fact that America's experienced an extraordinary religious shift in the last fifteen years.

H: You can't tell me the Falwell, Robertson supporters, such as they are, really believe that al-Qaeda is God's judgment on the country. They incline to believe very much the contrary. They perhaps don't listen to what their leaders say. The sad thing —no, for me the tragedy is quite other, Andrew, and the crisis is quite other than what you mention. It's certainly a disgrace and a defeat, morally, politically, ethically, that the *secular* forces in the country have a sneaking sympathy for jihadists and believe and say that these people represent the unheard or the Third World or their grievances.

A: That's your paranoia.

H: So it's much more to me a crisis of secular than it is religious attitude.

A: Well you're obsessed with those to your left and I'm obsessed with those to my right.

H: Well, we might converge on that but I don't think, I'm sure I'm not overstating—

A: But I must say, the forces to my right are far stronger than the forces to your left. In this country, in 2006.

H: It's proved a very satisfying disappointment to me over at least the last quarter century and I see no sign of their increasing growth or tenacity: Look what's just happened with the most recent attempt to teach rubbish in the schools with respect to evolution—so-called, I refuse to call it this, "Intelligent Design," "ID," I won't give it that name; creationism. Ridiculed, exposed everywhere, defeated; not just defeated but humiliated in a very conservative rural court in Dover, Pennsylvania. They've had no comeback, they're still stunned from being so thoroughly drubbed at the first test that had to undergo. I take huge encouragement from this. I'm always being told—perhaps this is the reason I'm being so hard on you about it—I'm so fed up with being told by visiting Europeans, "oh well, yes, you may say that the Taliban are theocrats but, you know, what about George Bush and the Christian Coalition?" I'm just, I'm so through with that comparison or that suggestion.

A: Well it's not a very interesting field of inquiry to say that they are, in the sense of what they want to do to the world, in any sense equitable. It is nonetheless true that a vast swath of believers in America, their faith is far more literal, inerrant, dispensationalist, and millennialism now, than it was fifty years ago.

H: More than it was fifty years ago. And less than it was twenty-five years ago.

A: A large number of people vote Republican because of religious belief, and not because of political belief.

H: I think it's less than a third of what it was twenty years ago, maybe more than it was fifty. I can share with you that it's undergone a real decline, as have its leaders, such as Robertson, Falwell, in the last twenty, twenty-five years.

A: Robertson and Falwell aren't—they are flotsam and jetsam. We're talking about Dobson or, at the really scary end...

H: But these people are reduced to talking about family values and sexual deviance. They have no real eschatological, no real global, no real messianic vision of any kind.

And they're grubby fundraisers and scaremongers about sex—this is an old racket, it will never stop. It will never stop as long as people continue to believe in Jesus Christ. Which is where you could be of help, Andrew, is if saying that you, who've tried your best to do so, have found this is impossible. Hit the bricks. Now there, you could be making a contribution!

A: Once you've got Bart Ehrman, Christopher, I don't see why you should trouble yourself with trivial figures like myself.

H: Well, every little helps, old thing, and—

A: [*Laughs*]

H: I, if I was you, would not be one who shared the essential belief with the people who you're telling me are such a deadly threat, I wouldn't be able to do that...

A: I don't think they're a deadly threat in the sense that the Taliban or al-Qaeda is a deadly threat. I'm simply...

H: No, I wasn't accusing you of believing that. I was saying that there are those who try for this equation and they're very tiring and they're people who could be trying to save secularism instead of betraying the struggle for it.

A: Well, secularism does not mean *not* having any religious faith.

H: It does not.

A: In that quest you have, you know, you have my complete solidarity.

H: It doesn't now: originally secular meant believing in the material world, not the spiritual world, but secular now means guaranteeing probably just pluralism.

A: Yes. And value pluralism.

H: Saying the state should take no interest in arbitrating religious debates.

A: Yes. What's actually, though...there was an interesting Gallup poll that has asked Americans more generally if they think the government should be enforcing moral values, and those who think it shouldn't. And actually I'm providing for your side, not mine, with this, but I think it's a function of a reaction to the possibility that this

is actually happening, or that people have attempted it or want to attempt it. In South Dakota, we'll find out if all abortion will be banned, including rape and incest, in the next few months. I mean they're actually gonna have a plebiscite on it.

H: So I saw, yes.

A: But, historically by at least ten percent up to twenty percent, the majority is in favor of government having a moral function—it has collapsed since '96, over the past ten years it's dropped dramatically: it's now 49, 49. It's now dead even in America, whether government should have a moral role.

H: And I think that split conceals further splits, too, because the beauty of the Constitution is precisely to remind people that when they say, "do you think the government should legislate morality?" it's not asking them, "do you think it should legislate *yours*?" It shouldn't be able to do so at all. Remember, the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut write to Thomas Jefferson asking for protection from whom? The Congregationalists. That's where he says the wall of separation, that's when that brilliant letter is written. They don't want Congregationalists telling Baptists what to do! Well, how're they gonna say let's have a law that says Baptists can tell Congregationalists what to do?

A: Right.

H: Especially in a country as plural as this. So, if I thought the government should legislate morality I can immediately tell you a few things I think it should enact. Do they want me to be able to do this under the law? I think they would be wiser to protect themselves from me. As I insist on protection from them, and will get it. So, long may this argument continue, but it will always be inconclusive.

A: So let me bring it back to the rather existential question of the existential threat, which 9/11 sort of, at least, focused our attention on, let's put it that way. It's not that it didn't exist before hand.

H: Indeed, no, it called attention. It got mine, anyway.

A: Is it inevitable, losing a city or two? You haven't been able to construct an argument on what we do in response.

H: I think it's the only way to think about it, that if we're to talk about war at all we have to understand that there will be casualties and some of them will be ours. And

one might lose an airplane every now and then, and perhaps a city, and certainly a ship or two, and a schoolhouse. It's extraordinary to me that it hasn't happened yet, in the United States, because just to attack a one-room schoolhouse in Montana now, the way our system is so absurdly set up by Homeland Security it would be to shut down almost the entire country. And why they don't do it, I don't know, but that they will do it I'm practically, morally certain they will.

A: But how does one respond? Now, part of what you and I have argued for is that we go and take the fight to them to some extent, that we got rid of the Taliban and attempted to remove, no, we *succeeded* in removing Saddam. But the Iraq War—there's a subsequent pragmatic, practical argument about how then, therefore, one implements this fight against what is, you and I both concede, a completely amorphous and invisible enemy to some extent. Which requires, you think, some state actor to really weaponize it sufficiently.

H: Well I would rather think it should make everyone ask not, "what's the president doing?" or, which they really must ask themselves, "what would I do if I was president?" which is a luxury people used to be able to deny themselves—I vote for him, that's it; I don't have to be asked for another four years; the great difference made to *me* by 9/11 was that I had finally to think as if I was actually a policeman, which isn't easy for me to think. Or a soldier. Or a bureaucrat. I had to think as if I was one of them and was on their side, what would I really be doing now, how would I hope to be judged, what mistakes would I make and not make? That is, first, one has to become a citizen, to accept the responsibility, that means they don't tell you might have to be a soldier in your own town. And thus, we should abolish the distinction between "over here" and "over there"; I listen to these accounts of "should we withdraw from Iraq?" and I pay no attention. There's no possibility of withdrawing from anywhere in the world where this fight is going on. You could physically not be present in one part of the Middle East if you didn't want to be there, I suppose, but if you think that's withdrawing, you're nuts, you haven't had the first lesson. The war broke out on our territory and will continue here and on the territory and on territory of Western Europe. It's like a stupid version of the Berkeleyan dilemma, what if the tree falls in the forest and there's no one to listen to it. Well, it's as if, "if we weren't in Iraq, we wouldn't have to hear all this noise." It's puerile, actually, they haven't learned the first thing.

A: But what people want to argue is that—fine, I agree, I'm not gonna disagree with you on that—at the same time, one feels that the resources being devoted to this unsuccessful venture, the means are not sufficient for the ends at this point. What is occurring in Iraq, in one's worst fears, is in fact the fusion of jihadists and Sunni

elements, the possibility of Iranian—

H: Ba'athists elements. I mean, most of the jihadis have actually been Sunni. It's the fusion of the jihadis with the Ba'athists that's been most impressive in Iraq. But I thought we knew that beforehand.

A: We did know that but what's intensified much more is that they actually get in operational practice. We have a big influx of jihadists into Iraq, we have—

H: Big influx of Special Forces, also, remember. We're also learning on the ground.

A: Yes, but they're utterly insufficient to the cause. There aren't enough of them, they don't know the terrain well enough, and we have a failed state so far as we can tell. We can see no, I see no evidence, of a viable national government.

H: Well we had a failed and rogue state before that, don't forget.

A: Right, and now we just have a failed state.

H: This is not at all to minimize the difficulties, I'd rather maximize them. I think the situation is much worse than you say, I think the possibility of the end of Iraq as a state, which is part of the hidden desire of the jihadists, must be counted as real. Which would be an enormous defeat for our efforts—

A: And which looks more likely now than not, does it not?

H: But even if we created a functioning federal democracy there, we know in advance, or we should have, this will intensify. It is this that would intensify, the struggle with the jihadists.

A: Yes. And it will be constantly under attack.

H: Without question. As would a Palestinian state, if we could create one.

A: Yes, any such Arab or Muslim state that doesn't not acknowledge the—

H: The sheikdom, the Caliphate, yes of course.

A: —yes, will be under siege.

H: And that's the beginning of wisdom, is to know exactly what we're up against.

A: I'm not disagreeing with that.

H: I didn't say you were, you asked me though, what I would do. I'm not a Special Forces person, and there are good reasons why I'm not. And sufficient reasons, too. Nor am I a policeman or a customs officer or any of the other frontline positions. But as a citizen I can say only this: 1) we should first understand completely what we're up against, which involves, principally, repudiating the idea that there's any excuse for this in the maldistribution of wealth in the world—

A: Right, that argument, in my head, is over.

H: No, but it's a job I do, we both have to do every day. It's not an argument that's been won. I think it's very important, first: one can't have a society that's defeatist. Because that makes victory impossible, may even make resistance impossible.

A: I do not believe that this society, and I think we saw after 9/11, is defeatist. I think confronted with the possibility of its enemies this society united quite dramatically and encouragingly behind its own way of life.

H: But rather automatically, I think. The concept of over here and over there, the discussion of whether to withdraw or not, for example, is all predicated on a complete illusion.

A: Which is that withdrawal is even possible.

H: Well, which is that a soldier in Iraq is in more danger than a civilian in De Moines, Iowa. Quite untrue, I've been several times to Iraq and once to Afghanistan, the Pakistan border and so on, and at all times there was safer than Carol was sitting at the table we're sitting at now with my daughter in Washington. At all times, much safer. I had a chance to do something about it, if attacked. I was with people who would've known how to help me do so, as well. She just has to wait and see if someone puts anthrax in our mail.

A: Yeah, but they haven't. Empirically speaking, the odds of you being murdered over there are far higher than over here, by the people we're talking about. That's where the war is being fought. My point is simply this, Christopher, are we actually making progress, here? Or are we losing?

H: I think at the moment, we're losing, would be my judgment. The ground we lost initially in Iraq may be impossible to make up and in the long view may have made the learning from the error too costly and too late. And that we may be looking at the death of a state, not just the implosion of one. Amid critical conditions that would have implications almost too horrible for us to think about.

A: Well I know, and that's what I contemplate that on a daily basis.

H: I don't want make the use of pessimism, that it's tempting to make. But I do know that if that does turn out to be the case, it will be because we postponed the confrontation till it was almost too late. We wasted upwards of ten years keeping Iraq in a condition in which it was collapsing into a divide and rule, ethnically tense, confession ally poisonous state—

A: But, Christopher, these are interesting, but we are where we are, at this point.

H: Yeah but you know what sort of stake these arguments are recently having in Congress and elsewhere; people want an inquest into, as it were, what went wrong, who blundered, what happened. Almost like, "who lost Iraq?" or something of the sort. Well, I don't object to that idea at all. One thing I can try and bring to this argument, and have been trying to bring, is some sense of history, the missing dimension in a lot American arguments, a lot of arguments altogether. Well, our engagement with Iraq has been a long one already, starts at least in '68, probably earlier, goes through Jimmy Carter's appalling permission for Saddam to invade Iran in '79 it goes through, bungles up to the Kuwait war, the crimes that allowed us to arm Saddam Hussein when he was conducting genocide after hostilities with Iran were over; innumerable others. But I think most recently, the sanctions plus Saddam regime that beggared and shattered and demoralized the society further while rewarding the government. We can't walk away from a commitment like that. People who're talking about withdrawal, as if it were possible, are all talking as though our history with Iraq begins in 2003 where we somehow picked a fight with an innocent man who, upon hearing the term "weapons of mass destruction" or "terrorism" would've honestly said "what are you talking about?" That's what people now believe! This is nonsense.

A: That is nonsense, however—

H: The frame up of Saddam Hussein by Karl Rove is how a huge number of our fellow Americans now think.

A: One would imagine that the president armed with the facts at his disposal and the

history that you outlined would have been able to persuade them otherwise by now. But obviously not. The very missing element—

H: You've now touched a subject so painful that I must void my bladder.

A: [*Laughs*]

H: And recharge my bumper because I must speak eloquently about this, if nothing else.

A: Alright, we'll pause.

H: It's too painful and too complex

[Recording ends /restarts]

H: The inarticulacy of the president, now internationally and locally celebrated—

A: [*Thumps recorder on table*]

H: Does—[*laughs*] please don't do that again—does not derive from his slightly excruciating and provincial personality, important though that may be. I think it derives from his original political ambition as candidate for the office, which was to run a relatively small government, light rain, low-tax, relatively isolationist America. If you remember, he and Mr. Cheney ran on the program of lifting sanctions on Iraq and Libya, opposing humanitarian-type interventions, the use of American force for what we might describe as ethical purposes overseas, and I had no reason to doubt that they were sincere about this. The conversion to the opposite, or anyway very strongly contrasting, view is notoriously a product of experience but I think the original reluctance still shows, in a way. The heart of the Republican Party is not in this. They're not equipped for such a case.

A: When you look at someone like Cheney or Rumsfeld, you can see the thought of sending actually that many troops to a foreign country to actually build a nation, it so violates their DNA.

H: Yeah, so it shows. I think that's the main reason. I could give you tons of examples of how they messed up the case and also the execution.

A: And then you can understand why the Democrats, who actually would be

naturally, one would think, the party that could, leaving aside the fact that they can't. But theoretically speaking, a party that has less problem with government as an instrument of power, that has historically run wars, and has been more eager to run them than most Republicans, actually, historically.

H: Indeed—"Democrat wars," as Bob Dole used to say. Look, I write sometimes for the *Weekly Standard* and I read it regularly, as perhaps you do, and I think in the run-up to the intervention in 2003 the editors of the *Weekly Standard* reprinted Bill Clinton's speech about Saddam Hussein from '98 that was made at the Defense Department. Not less than twice, maybe three times, because they regarded it as the classical statement, the best argued and most exhaustive case for incompatibility between ourselves and Saddam Hussein, and co-existence with him, that had ever been made. And it certainly excels in its reach and its extent anything that President Bush has ever said. And equally fine speeches on the same theme were made by Vice President Gore; I do think President Bush's statement to the UN in September 2002 was very good as laying out the case but it builds upon a thoroughgoing continuity with the two previous administrations of Clinton and Gore and with the unfinished business of his father—which was overstated—and with a sense and resolutions of Congress and the House. The idea that he was someone who was looking for a fight with Saddam Hussein and determined to pick one and fake evidence for it is the sign of a—those who believe this are feeble minded and have no sense of history.

A: Well I'm not going to, we're in agreement on that. The question is whether he ended up actually having the capacity to execute the task. Or whether, or why the opposition party alternative does not have the capacity. It'd be interesting to think what Gore might have done if he had been elected president.

H: Or to read the statements, also, from Mrs. Clinton, at least until very recently, on the floor of the house about her absolute conviction from experience that Saddam Hussein had an al-Qaeda connection and that he certainly should be presumed guilty in the matter of WMD. Because, remember, this is an ontological question, really. Everybody knew that Saddam Hussein had had and did use and did desire to regain weapons of mass destruction. The question of whether he was in possession of stockpiles at any given moment is, in that sense, beside the point: the question is how should be treated? As if he does, or as if he does not? What responsible president could come back to the people of the country and their representatives and say, "I've decided to give him the benefit of the doubt." It couldn't be done.

A: Well, this is an argument you and I need not have.

H: No, I just wanted you...you asked me, so I wanted it to be phrased as clear as I

could make it. We're not debating at this point.

A: Yeah, well you have.

H: Where now? Well, we live with the consequences of various failures. One of them was that the president did, in fact, decide that he would rather scare people than educate them on the need for regime change; on the need to move Iraq into a post-Saddam era. That's not all his fault, the take up of his offer to do this before the world-body was very slight and many supposedly responsible states—mainly European democratic ones but also Russia and China—quite simply pretended not to know what he was talking about and/or worse, were governed by preexisting, rather sickly if not disgusting, relations with the Saddam Hussein regime. I reserve my main criticism for them, I have to say.

A: But now we're there. We're fighting, it seems, in quicksand. Every moment of hope I get that Maliki might be getting his act together seems to be undermined by the complete infiltration of the Iraqi forces by sectarian militias.

H: And of Iraq by Iranians.

A: And, absolutely.

H: Which by the way, happens to remind us of an un-postponable reckoning we do have with the mullahs which the president was probably right to identify early on. And has been also coming for several administrations. There is, I think, a radical incompatibility with ourselves and the Iranian theocracy and between them and international law and international order. This is not the fault of the president, entirely. But Iraq is a reminder of it.

A: What would you urge?

H: The biggest disappointment for me, if I was to identify my biggest disappointment with the regime change program it would be that I was sure that the knock-on effect of removing Saddam Hussein would be positive in general, as it has proved to be in the case of Libya's disarmament, the emancipation of Lebanon from Ba'athist Syrian hegemony and the igniting of the debate about democracy in Egypt. Very, very positive, but my personal hope was that it would lead to an intensification of the split between the Khomeini Shi'a and the anti-Khomeini Shi'a in Iran. And it may possibly be, in the long run, that this will prove to be so but for the moment the advantage has been seized by the Khomeinists and that is a consequence, I wouldn't

say not foreseen, but not anticipated by me. But I regard it as a very grievous let down.

A: Do we need to increase the size of the army? Do we need to send more troops into Iraq? Is our presence there, making it worse, not better, at this point? I mean, what would victory look like to you, what would victory be in Iraq? It's a question one has to ask.

H: Well victory I think I could define.

A: Okay. Because we know these jihadists aren't going to go away.

H: No. Victory would be a federal democratic Iraq where differences were settled in parliament by elected representatives strong enough to pass a resolution thanking the United States and asking it to depart. That would be victory.

A: And that isn't gonna happen.

H: That would actually be victory several times defined.

A: Yes, but it's not gonna happen.

H: No, it's unlikely that that will happen, in the current phrase that's starting to irritate me, "any time soon." You notice how people have to keep saying that.

A: [*Laughs*] "Bottom line, Christopher..."

H: Bottom line...precisely, these robotic phrases. But we're a lot nearer it now than we were when Iraq was the private property of a psychopathic crime family. And was imploding and actually encouraging sectarian differences among the population and bringing them about, using appalling force and cynicism in order to maim and wreck its own society. And beggaring it, and sending it into a tailspin, I have no regret at all about stopping that process before it becomes terminal.

A: So your proposal currently is to maintain the current attempt indefinitely until we achieve that moment in Iraq because there can be no withdrawal.

H: As to whether we increase the problem by being there I don't think that it's true in the sense that some people maintain. In other words, that Zarqawi and his people are only there because we made them angry or...

A: I take that point, however, nevertheless in a country where foreign troops exist and they can deploy and leverage that with the population—

H: But I think, it's...Look, I hope the situation is not so bad that my advice would be required, tactically or strategically, but there are two things that are very necessary. One was well known before we entered the country which is that we have to acquire the skill, because we may need it elsewhere, to operate in an Islamic society without outraging or disturbing its people, or certainly not by doing so by accident, unintentionally. Though I've been surprised and outraged by the number of times this simple point that was taught to our soldiers in advance, and which could be understood in a lesson of fifteen minutes—though it may take longer to teach them what the actual norms and precepts are—how often that's been violated, that's been very, very alarming and disgusting to me.

A: The interaction between US troops and Iraqis has not been a positive experience.

H: Earlier on I was impressed very much with things I saw: when, for example, American forces were advancing up through Najaf and Karbala—the Shi'ite holy cities in the south, where I've been since as well as before—they were fired on from behind very important mosques that are of extreme sanctity of the Shi'a of the entire world, they were fired on by Saddam's *Fedayeen*. In the hope, and I think the expectation, that they would fire back and damage the religious buildings, and none of them did, they understood the order not to. So you have to stand there and take fire and not return it for cultural and political reasons, that's a lot to ask of a soldier. They understood this, for this reason—

A: But that phase of the conflict, Christopher, in which you're invading and you can make these decisions, is easy. The long-term guerrilla warfare in urban settings is incredibly grueling.

H: But that's my second point, is that one must get better at that bit. And also, at being not just more culturally sensitive, that's one thing, but more ruthless, too, to learn to distinguish in order to be more lethal. I've been misunderstood for saying this before but I'll have to take the risk of saying it again: in Iraq, there are several thousands, maybe tens of thousands now, as a result of the engagement in Iraq, of young American officers, male and female, and noncommissioned officers and other ranks who have learned a lot from the experience of fighting in the most difficult, unimaginable terrain, a failed and rogue and panicky and degraded and paranoid state and society. It'll never be as bad, the terrain will never be as bad, as this ever again. And though many of them behaved badly and wrongly in doing this, we've trained up an invaluable force. There's no other way of acquiring this kind of

experience and no one's gonna be able to tell me that experience isn't worth having.

A: And you think we're gonna be fighting, in that part of the world, a war of attrition against this force for the rest of our lives.

H: With any luck it won't be a war of attrition but we will need to have a lot of teams of people trained in different ways for different skills and different objectives, and different tactics who are capable in the case, for example, of an implosion any minute of the Ba'athist regime—

A: In Syria.

H: —in Syria. Or, of a crisis in Iran. Or, in Nigeria, where the al-Qaeda forces are also hoping to work on converting...

A: But there's no way, given our current force structure and numbers, this can be done. I mean, we're going to have to expand the military and our military expenditure...

H: Well, for now I'd rather make better use of the forces that we actually have. And one should add, also, Afghanistan, where I think the lesson were better learned and better implemented, up till now. But there's no alternative but to have operating under United States, British and other command—though principally American and British—forces that are battle-hardened, for one, and that understand they're dealing with a civil war among Muslims. And that we have to make sure that the wrong side does not win this civil war. That's a fairly, actually, once understood, that's a fairly simple political/military strategy. It's very hard to implement, but it's—

A: Well, in Iraq, Christopher, if the Shi'a, if we unleash the Shi'a completely on the Sunnis—

H: Which we honorably declined to do.

A: Yes, but if that were to happen, or if we were to withdraw and that were to happen —

H: That would be to our lasting disgrace, I think.

A: I'm, let me just spin out the scenario.

H: Sorry.

A: It seems that Iran would essentially co-opt a large amount of Iraq and that at some point the Sunnis would lose, just numerically. They can't win.

H: It's alarming to an extent to realize that they're sufficiently rational not to notice that. But this is what was going to happen if we hadn't intervened.

A: I understand.

H: The Turks, and the Iranians, and the Saudi Arabians would all have intervened in the imploding Saddam society and all of them would've intervened on the side of the most extreme, and we—

A: So now, we have, the United States is in the middle of this failing state, this imploding state to prevent, essentially what we're doing is to prevent it metastasizing throughout the region. The broader question—and you know actually at some point, we ought to end this—is the American public, the British public, let alone the European public, prepared to sacrifice their young men and women indefinitely in a war that they think at this point was a mistake, and...

H: Or worse.

A: Or worse. A fraud. And this is sincerely believed by a large number of Americans. The sheer management of public opinion in America, given the gravity of what was done to us on 9/11, to have gotten to a point only four years later when—

H: Nearly five.

A: —nearly five years later, when the country is divided in the most astonishingly profound way, in which the bitterness could barely be any greater, in which people have been accused of—

H: Oh, I could make it greater, I hope it does get greater. I want the division to increase and the argument to become more frank and more strong, which I think it will.

A: In terms of “do we withdraw” or “do we stay?”

H: I think you'll notice that even when the best of the Democratic skeptics are

talking, they are not governed, as they think they are, by a fear of the public opinion backlash or impugning of their patriotism or the slightly self-pitying things they sometimes say. They're governed, above all, by knowledge of the enemy. As I think is American opinion. If we were fighting the Viet Cong in Iraq, we'd be out by now. Good thing, too. We're fighting people who are worse than the Khmer Rouge. And this fact alone imposes itself—it's the reason why, if you think about it, an astonishingly large number of people support the war even though the president has given them very little reason to do so.

A: Right.

H: If not, some reason not to. They know in their water, they know in their intestinal nature that we're looking straight into the gun barrel of the enemy in Iraq and that it's too important a country to give up to the common enemies of humanity and civilization. That can't be spun. That cannot be spun, it's not the product of spin, either, it's what people *know* without being told.

A: Well when Hillary is in front of a Democratic audience being booed for saying essentially that—in the most milquetoast manner imaginable—but nevertheless, the reason why she's saying we're not gonna withdraw is precisely because of the matrix that you've described. In the back of her head she understands the consequences of that.

H: It's not that she knows other people think it, either. It's not that it's governed by the opinion of others; it's because in some sense, she has to know it herself. Now, you know, this doesn't have to be taught by propaganda or by some Republican attack machine. It's something people know without being told. That's the kind of gut support that people underestimate and that, though they sometimes insult, they think it's indoctrination or a product of fear mongering. No it's not, it's people's recognition that they know an enemy when they see one. And it's this that I think that has provided a margin of support for the president that he's done nothing to earn. But that shows that people are not, in fact, just the prisoners of gusts of opinion.

A: They are though, prisoners of that to some extent. There is something underlying that. There is the existential threat they grasp... [*fades out*]

[Recording ends]