

**DJ**

Sam in your book you argue that religion causes in general more harm than good in our society. Yet from a lot of places we here arguments for religious tolerance that we should be more understanding of religion more tolerant of it show it even more patience than we already do. Do you really think that skeptical secular people should be more intolerant of religion.

**SH**

Yeah I do, I think we should be clear about what intolerance can mean because I do not mean that we should be intolerant in the sense that the Stalinists were intolerant sending people to the Gulags. I don't believe we should pass laws against religious belief. I don't think there's really any intolerance necessary beyond the intolerance we show to irrationality in every other area of our lives. We haven't passed laws against believing that Elvis is still alive, or believing that aliens are abducting ranchers and molesting them. But when someone claims to be sure that Elvis is still alive for instance, that claim is met with chuckles and derision and the whole armamentarium of conversational pressure that really excludes a person making that claim from holding positions of responsibility in our society. That's a good thing, that's the way it should be and yet there's no formal mechanism for this it's just what I call conversational intolerance.

**DJ**

And you think that we should have more conversational intolerance or intellectual intolerance for religious belief you kind of equate at some points religious belief with being insane, but isn't the difference between believing in God or believing that you know, there's a 300 pound easter bunny in your backyard. Isn't the difference that we have an explanation for religious beliefs, that we're inculcated culturally in these beliefs and that it's not the same as being insane. In the case of insane people we have no other explanation than that their mind, you know has somehow gone wrong, and we don't say that just because you believe in God it's a function of insanity.

**SH**

Right, yeah, that really is a function of how many people subscribe to these beliefs and the taboo in the culture around criticizing these beliefs. What I say in my book at one point is that religion allows people by the millions to believe things that only a crazy person could believe on his own. I agree with you that religious people do not tend to be insane. They tend to actually be as sane as anyone else, but if anyone woke up tomorrow morning thinking that a cracker turned into the body of Jesus if you said the right Latin words over it and he was the first person to think this, he didn't have millions of other Catholics supporting him in this idea that would be a belief that would be synonymous with schizophrenia very likely and so I think the thing to point out is that we have beliefs that are every bit as crazy and unsupportable as they would be in the

minds of lunatics and they are massively well subscribed in our culture because we have created this system of inheritance and no cultural pressure to resist this inheritance and so we have every person on mommy's knee getting part of their world view deranged by the myths of our ancestors.

**DJ**

Do you think that is one of the reasons why so many people say religion should be off limits just because it's such a popular belief. People say it shouldn't be looked in to that religion you know, my religious belief should be respected no matter what you disagree, but isn't respecting other people's views of religion really the basis of american religious liberty.

**SH**

Well, it's the basis of liberty in the sense that we don't jail people or kill people or threaten them with violence for believing things we disagree with, and that's a good thing and I think we are right to be mindful of our history not speaking merely in this country but as human history of religious violence and we should not want to duplicate it, but that said we have to realize that this idea that we respect people's beliefs is a myth and we do not respect peoples beliefs on any subject in any other area of human discourse. We evaluate their reasons for what they believe you know if I come on your show and say that the holocaust never happened you're under no burden whatsoever to respect my beliefs about european history you can challenge them you can dismiss me as an idiot ultimately if I'm holding a sufficiently strident and divisive idea without any evidence, and yet on the subject of religion we have made it taboo to challenge. Beliefs that are on their face just patently ridiculous beliefs that even if they are not ridiculous on their face is obvious to everyone that the person holding these beliefs cannot possibly be in possession of strong evidence in their favor. Anyone who believes for instance that Jesus was born of a virgin and is sure about it is you know, even if that person had a time machine he would be unlikely to be sure about it. And so we have just eroded the most basic standards of intellectual honesty in our discourse in the subject, and we're paying a terrible price for it because we are meandering into a global conflict with the muslim world we have 1.4 billion muslims who are utterly deranged by their religious mythology. We are deluding ourselves on our own side with euphemisms about Islam being a religion of peace, and our own sides we ourselves are organizing around our own religious myths, impeding medical research like stem cell research based on ludicrous ideas like souls living in petri dishes and none of this is getting criticized because it is taboo to criticize faith.

**DJ**

I would like to talk about your criticisms of militant Islam in a moment but first I want to continue exploring this reluctance that people people have to look critically at religion. Do you think it stems from, is it just that people are afraid of religious violence or that

they it is just unpopular. Where is it coming from.

**SH**

Well there are two things, one is that I think we are right to be afraid of offending people because of how deeply committed people are to these ideas, and so the threat of religious violence and our history of religious violence and the manifest violence in muslim world all of that is sobering. But the other thing is that people are just massively attached to these myths, and they think that these myths somehow underlie our morality though there is no evidence for that whatsoever. Which is to say that many people in our society, many very smart people think that if you jettisoned religious superstition you would jettison morality and people would just have no reason not to rape and kill their neighbors if they ceased to believe that one of their books was dictated by the creator of the universe. There is no evidence for that and there's a lot of evidence to suggest otherwise. There is for instance no evidence that atheists are any less moral than religious believers. So there is a whole morality argument is problematic. But people are also just attached to ritual and religious language and the hope that death is an illusion and that there is, you really don't lose anyone you love in this life you're all going to be reunited after death in a perfect circumstance of happiness, and this is a genuinely consoling belief for people, and the question is, and I think we have an answer for it , the question is can people find ways of being deeply happy in this world without deluding themselves about the state of their knowledge or about the nature of reality.

**DJ**

I'd like to let our listeners know that you can purchase discounted copies of Sam Harris' book *The End of Faith: Religion Terror and the Future of Reason* at our website [pointofinquiry.org](http://pointofinquiry.org) Sam in your book you really focus on religion and violence that they're link more directly, and its not just that people are reluctant to speak about religion or criticize religion because they are afraid of violence you actually talk about a direct development of violence out of religion.

**SH**

Yes I think religion leads to violence in at least two senses one is that in certain circumstances it leads people to commit acts of violence that they would never have committed otherwise they're specifically theological acts of violence where someone is killing other people, in many cases innocent non-combatant , simply because they think they can get into paradise for doing it because they think the creator of the universe wants them to do it, will reward them for doing it, reward their family and obviously the paradigmatic case at the moment is Islamist suicidal terrorism, and there is simply no doubt whatsoever that the people who are blowing themselves up are doing this for religious reasons, and really think they are going to get into paradise. This is not politics, this not economics, and it is one of the great sins of secularism on our

own side that secularists so often allege that it is economic and politics and not religion. But the other way in which religion inspires violence is much more defuse and ultimately more consequential. It's just the fact that people have defined their differences from other people in terms of their religious affiliation. So they have defined their moral community as being the community of muslims say, or catholics, or protestants, and so then you have muslims tending to side with other muslims and protestants with protestants and so forth and this has balkanized our world. It has really shattered our world into separate and irreconcilable moral communities and then when societies become stressed as they do, when resources become scarce, when one group of people victimizes another the religious lines in the society are really the lines across which conflicts arise and we see this again and again so that conflicts that appear to be fundamentally terrestrial in nature there conflicts about land they're conflicts about resources, conflicts about political grievances they are religious in nature in the sense that people are defining their differences from other people in religious terms. Take the Shia and the Sunnies for instance they're different communities because they adhere to slightly different religious beliefs. And the conflicts in Northern Ireland, and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia many many examples where religion is the variable around which people have defined their differences. And it's a very dangerous variable because it's the only variable that, in which people posit a difference between themselves and their neighbor which is not just a matter of this life, it is a difference that becomes a kind of transcendental object it endures for eternity the difference between you and your neighbor is that you're going to go to paradise and he's going to go to hell for eternity and that's a very big difference indeed.

**DJ**

So religion can bring about violence but isn't it just a matter of violent religion bringing about violence not every religious person thinks his neighbor is going to hell isn't the majority of the religion on the planet peaceful and non-violent.

**SH**

This is another taboo that I break in my book. It is a taboo especially among religious moderates. It's this idea that all of our religions somehow equivalent and equally wise and all teach the same thing they all teach the same thing equally well.

**DJ**

Kind of the Joseph Campbell approach to religion.

**SH**

Its, that's something I've been very critical of because the problem is we have a word religion which names a very diverse class of beliefs systems and moral commitments and it's just not a homogeneous class of human activity. Religion is a word like sport I

think or exercise or drug I mean there are many different kinds of drugs and some of them are dangerous and some of them are very helpful and this is true of religion too. So that you take a religion like Janeism which is the religion of India that just has a few million subscribers. The core principle of Janeism beyond any shadow of a doubt is non-violent. This is just what Janes are about. They're vegetarians, they won't kill anything, they're afraid to kill anything, they're pacifists they just, you cannot a death cult of suicide bombers out of Janeism no matter how squint your eyes no matter how you read the books, and so not matter how ill treated Janes are in their history they are not going to be the people who start flying 747s into buildings and they're not going to do that because of what they believe so yes Janes may be very dogmatic they may be deluded about the nature of the universe but their belief systems are not intrinsically divisive, in the way the beliefs of muslims and christians and other groups are, and there are gradations of liability here. I think there's no belief system that should be of greater concern to us at the moment than Islam and that is just remarkably obvious and yet remarkably denied in our culture.

**DJ**

You mentioned Janeism they sweep the paths in front of them so they don't even step on ants or little insects, here's the hypothetical, suppose the whole world suddenly converts to Janeism or that the whole world right now converts to Unitarianism or say they all read Bishop John Shelby Spong the Epsicopalian bishop who doesn't believe in maybe the afterlife. Doesn't believe in the virgin birth, miracles heaven hell any of that. He's kind of a pacifist a liberal Christian and everyone now believes in separation of church and state. The moral autonomy of the individual you know liberal even secular values all of that would you still think religion should be eradicated or are you I mean isn't it just that you're talking about a certain kind of religion the violent the nasty kind.

**SH**

Well, I'm talking about all of these features of religion that cause it to divide one human community from another and therefore lead to conflict. In so far as you relax the dogma and taboo enough so that all of these belief systems cease to be operative in peoples minds and their lives and their behavior then I become less and less worried about it and then religion could be like astrology something that people pick up at parties and talk about but very few people make world shaping decisions on the basis of what their astrologer said its a kind of a hobby it's kind of, it's basically acknowledged to be goofy. I would not have written a book saying we must eradicate astrology because I just don't think anything turns on it, but at the moment it became obvious that people were impeding stem cell research because of what there astrologer said then we have a public policy problem on our hands. It's whether the beliefs are operative and in the case of religion there is just no question that the beliefs are operative and there is also no question that the negative consequences of thinking badly about things or not thinking about things clearly are difficult to foresee because you take a belief like the

catholic belief and the Christian belief rather generally that contraception is immoral, that condom use is immoral, this belief on its face does not seem to pose civilization shaking danger to us until you realize that you have Catholic ministers preaching the sinfulness of condom use in sub-saharan Africa where literally millions of people are dying every year from aids. And many many more millions are going to die worldwide if we don't do something about it. And so this is a curious belief that on its face did not seem like it's going to get millions of people killed and yet the realities of our world are such that it does. So I'm saying that upfront it's hard to judge in advance what is an inconsequential dogma and so I think dogma itself should be something we are unwilling to keep on our shelves for very long.

**DJ**

You just said that belief in astrology really isn't operative for a lot of people but we hear reports that President Reagan may have had an astrologer advising on certain decisions that he made or at least Nancy Reagan did and I even think for liberal religious people their liberal religion is operative in their lives. They adopt more secular or liberal policies because they are informed by their liberal interpretation of the Bible. So it seems to me that you are not just arguing against how operative religion is in someone's life but how negatively are the consequences of that operation of religion in a person's life.

**SH**

I become concerned to the degree that there are reasons to be concerned. So once we hear that Reagan is taking his wife's astrologer seriously all of sudden that becomes absolutely terrifying, and it should. As is the fact that he took in Hal Lindsay and Jerry Falwell, two religious lunatics of the highest degree into brief the pentagon on the implications of biblical prophecies for our cold war with the Soviet Union and that is just a terrifying accommodation of medieval thinking in a world that is armed with 20th century weapons at that point, and there is nothing in our discourse that is preventing that kind of thing from happening. There is nothing keeping us from electing people who believe in the literal truth of biblical prophecy to a much greater degree than Reagan did a greater degree than Bush does. We are really the kind of society that could elect a Pat Robertson kind of character whether or not he would wear it on his sleeve the way Pat Robertson does I don't know but it's really possible for us give more power and responsibility than any human being has held in human history to somebody who thinks history is about to end and that its ending is going to be glorious. And that should keep us awake at night. Is it a matter of how likely these beliefs are to have an effect on human life but that said effect or no effect I think there are things that it's reasonable to believe and there are things that it's not, and no one certainly should be respected for believing the absurd.

**DJ**

Last time you were on the show we were talking about the problems you have with let's call them religious literalists. The pickle I'm in when I get into your writings and your arguments which are really persuasive on the whole is that on the other hand you seem to have almost more respect for religious literalists. You seem to have more respect for them for being intellectually honest than you do for religious liberals who pick and choose their readings of scripture. You can of argue that fundamentalist, biblical literalists are more coherent, or let's say more consistent than religious liberals who reinterpret ancient texts to make them make more sense in the modern world. Am I getting that right? t

**SH**

Yes you are. I think there is something intellectually dishonest about religious liberalism and religious moderation that people are not coping to. The first thing to say up front is that religious moderates and religious liberals are better than fundamentalists in almost every other respect. In that religious moderates don't fly planes into buildings, they don't blow themselves up, they don't kill abortionists, they don't pass laws impeding, the most promising medical research we're ever likely to have. This is a difference that is worth keeping in view, but there are problems with religious moderation and very few people talk about them and fundamentalism really does have the courage of its convictions and it is a rational enterprise given certain ludicrous assumptions. If for instance you really believe that there really is a creator god who can hear your prayers and who cares about what human beings do with their bodies while naked say then it is totally rational to be concerned about the sexual practices of other consenting adults, and if you think the book you have by your bedside is actually the word of the creator of the universe it is totally rational if that book is the bible to think that homosexuality is an abomination and to try to legislate against it and this is a coherent world-view given certain assumptions that are genuinely preposterous. The primary assumption being that you are correct to believe that this book is magically emanated out of some omniscient beings mind and you have it in the bedside table of every motel room in the United States. So what I'm arguing is that at least fundamentalists talk in terms of reason for what believe and if you ask the fundamentalist why do you Jesus is the son of god he doesn't say wishy-washy things about well it gives my life meaning, it brings up a lot of happiness it, I love the community, that this is the kind of speech you get out of moderates and liberals. What you get from fundamentalists are reasons. They're just not good reasons, and so for instance when a Tsunami gets whipped up in the Indian Ocean and kills 300,000 people on the day after Christmas. The fundamentalist will say that God is angry, which if you believe in God it is pretty obvious that he is angry and he's in control of everything. He is making the decision on the day after Christmas to drown 150,000 toddlers in a single morning. He is clearly pissed off. What's he pissed off about well then we can haggle over the details but the moderates will not draw any conclusions at all about the nature of their god from his works. They will say that God is a mystery that God is purely a matter of consolation. They will say that we must look for God this is actually a quote not in the

power that moves the waves but in the human response to the waves.

**DJ**

And that sounds an awful lot like humanism. Look for God in other people where at least you can find some kindness in other people not in God.

**SH**

Yeah, well I'd just say look for kindness in other people and look at how much better our world is when we nurture kindness and help other people and realize our happiness is linked up with the welfare of other human beings. Clearly you can find it in your mind and in your heart to be moved to help other suffering human beings who are suffering the most desolating evil of bad luck in this world. I mean to be standing at the wrong place at the wrong time when there are tsunamis in the world, you know, that is terrible luck and we all should be moved to help people but we do not need to believe that the creator of the universe is looking over our shoulders in order to be motivated in fact in large part I believe that belief is hostile to to genuinely compassionate response. Because just look at the details here if you think, if you're helping people because you think God wants you to do it and you're going to be rewarded for it that seems to me to be far less ethical than to be helping people because simply you are concerned about their welfare, and also the belief in God and his justice causes a lot of very religious people not to be motivated to help people because they think all the sinners and idolaters and homosexuals are getting their just desserts. That is an obscene moral point of view.

**DJ**

So belief in God can actually stunt moral development you'd argue.

**SH**

Yes, I think it does in many cases and I'm persuaded by Weinbergs, Steven Weinberg's, Noble Laureate in physics quip about this he said, "good people will always do good things, bad people will always do bad things, but for good people to do bad things that genuinely requires religion." I think that, either we might want to dabble with the details there, but I think basically true. I think we might even that for bad people to do good things often requires religion. That may be true but that's much less of a dividend than the converse is a liability. I'm much more worried about good people being led on mass to do bad things, than I'm consoled by the fact that occasionally somebody in prison who is led a terrible life finds Jesus and then is reformed.

**DJ**

So you're not really giving anybody a break. Obviously you're stongly critical of the fundamentalist the inerrantess, the people who read thier holy text literally, but you're

not going to give any points to a liberal religionist who says well you know that's not really what the Bible means we don't know what it means, Gods a mystery, suffering is in the world, and you know those people who read the text in a justificatory way you're not giving anybody and wiggle room.

**SH**

Well I think the fundamentalists are more dangerous and one of my greatest gripes with the moderates is that their style of discourse gives cover to fundamentalists. The respect they accord religious faith prevents us from taking on the people who really believe in the God of their fathers and really believe that the book is the word of God. It prevents us from taking these people on to the degree that we now must. But that said, moderates have a more obnoxious intellectual double standard in hand because they really they're not being honest about where their moderation is coming from it is not like they have good theological exegetical reasons for their moderation. It's not like if you look at the books more closely you find all kinds of reasons to be a moderate, you don't find reasons to be a moderate. If you read the Bible closely at no point does it say none of this has to be taken literally this obviously much of this book was written in the first century or before and we didn't understand a lot of things that we understand now so relax your standards of adherence to these barbaric principles we laid down for you in Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, and Exodus. It never says that, either this book is just a book written by human beings who did not understand the universe perfectly or it is God's word and whatever side of that dichotomy you come down on has consequences. And neither side of the dichotomy suggests to me that religious moderation is a good idea. Either you really take the book seriously as a transcendental source of insight into the moral nature of the universe that no other human being could have come up with in which case you get a world view I think as extreme as can possibly be imagined and something like the Taliban under mullah Omar or you get St. Thomas Aquinas thinking that heretics should be put to death, or St. Augustine thinking heretics should be tortured. You do not get the religious liberals of the world and that my main grievance with them is that they are not being honest about what has delivered their liberalism What has delivered their liberalism is two thousand years of confronting how preposterous it is and how unseemly the consequences are of taking these books too seriously, and they have had their religiousosity hammered out of them by modernity, by science, and by secular politics and by witnessing the mayhem of competing religious fundamentalists in this world vying for a greater share of power.

**DJ**

So the values of the religious moderates come from the secular values of the west not the from the religious values that are found in ancient texts. That's your argument. Have you won any converts with that argument. Have any religious moderates contacted you and said wow you've persuaded me. I want to be a more vocal kind of critic of extremist religion.

**SH**

Yes, I really have. I think and most of these people have gotten in touch with me through email so it's not been a dialogue that I've explored to fully, but yes I've gotten thousands of emails and some significant portion of them have been from religious moderates who have found my critique of moderation very compelling and feel like calling a spade a spade now. In a way that they felt they couldn't. It's every degree of reception on this front there are religious moderates who are incredibly offended by my critique of their version of faith and they think I completely misunderstand faith and that this is not at all what. That I've set up a straw-man you know that fundamentalism is not at all the prototype of what it is to be faithful and that faith is really about mystery and not drawing any conclusions about the nature of reality and what you find I think you find in liberal and moderate discourse is a lot of well intentioned people whose hearts are in the right places on almost every question we would pose to them about what they value in the world and the kind of world they want to see politically and socially but they're attached to their identities of being christians and being muslims and being jews and they do not want the fundamental project of raising your children to believe they are muslims christians, or jews to be called into question, and they're not willing to look seriously at the intellectual underpinnings of these religious identities.

**DJ**

Sam if you could wave a magic wand would you make so that all religious moderates were more consistent or had the courage of their convictions either the secular kind of moral conviction of the west or the religious convictions or would you turn all religious extremists into religious moderates.

**SH**

Oh I think I would do the later without any question because the one I think we are actually outnumbered if you take the world in its entirety I think the people that would fall into the extremist bin far outnumber the people who would fall into the moderate bin. So that alone would suggest that option number two is the right option, and that aside sheer numbers, you have to look at what extremists tend to do with their extremism versus what the moderates tend to do with their moderation. The perfect example of this is really the muslim world . The task for us vis a vis the muslim world is to find some way of moderating it We're not going to turn the muslim world anytime soon into a bastion of atheism or secular humanism so how to produce the religious moderate of the muslim world how to get a muslim talking the way people like Bill Moyers speak in our society. This is the task perhaps the greatest task of civilization at this point, and that's going to be very hard to do.

**DJ**

Right, well you say that it has to be reformed from within. It can't be, we can't reform it

has to come from within Islam but you seem to say the only way they can do that is either by becoming secular or atheist which is unlikely you just said or by giving up reading the Koran literally which you yourself said would give up being intellectually honest since liberalism you say is more intellectually dishonest. So what, you want fundamentalist to be intellectually more dishonest.

**SH**

No, I think that it maybe that it is a necessary evil to be less coherent in your world-view as you transition into secularism and a full commitment to civil society. Because it is true that if you dignify the claim that these books are the word of God you can not find a good reason to be happy living in a pluralistic secular society Both of these books the Bible and the Koran make it perfectly clear that people who do not agree with your view of the world are fit only for the fires of hell. You are well advised to treat them terribly and on many occasions kill them outright for their unbelief. So we have to find some way of getting people not to think that way, and since we can't magically leap from mountain top to mountain top and get them to disavow all of these beliefs all at once. I think there is going to be a necessary transition through some kind of moderation. It's the kind of transition we've made in the west we are not burning people at the stakes for heresy anymore, and we can talk about the reasons why we are not, but the end result is even our own fundamentalists are moderate by the standards of the fourteenth century and the muslims of the twenty-first century are a lot like the Christians of the fourteenth century in their level of scriptural literalism and the level at which they are willing to be motivated by their religious certainty.

**DJ**

In your book you really seem to be treating the western monotheism's. You're not indicting all religion. You kind to seem to even to go easy on Eastern Mysticism What you seem to be against is Islam, Judaism, Christianity what some people refer to as religions of the book So is your beef basically it is just biblical literalism which isn't something that's done in eastern traditions.

**SH**

No. I think there are eastern worshippers who take their scripture literally and this is dogmatic and potentially problematic. It's just that eastern religions does not tend to produce the same kind of commitment to world conquest and routing out heresy that the western monotheism's have. There are reasons for this, one thing is that monotheism in and of itself is in principle hostile to incorporating the Gods of other people. Whereas you have a religion like Hinduism or the paganism of ancient Rome. Polytheism allows for these, if you believe in a thousand gods what's one more. You have Hindu's talking about Jesus as an avatar of Vishnu It's basically there is always room at the inn over there in the land of polytheism for another god. So that is less of a danger, just as a matter of discourse and as a matter of assimilating the diversity in this

world. So yes there is something uniquely problematic I think about monotheism but eastern religion has its liabilities and there are beliefs within eastern culture many of which of religious components that are deeply obnoxious and produce a tremendous amount of human suffering. The caste system in India which is kind of cashed out be a belief in karma and rebirth which consigns millions and millions of people to status of untouchability merely be accident of birth. This is eroding to some degree in modern democratic India, but it's a terrible belief system and many people are suffering because of it.

**DJ**

One facet of eastern traditions you kind of seem to celebrate in your book are the meditative practices of some of the eastern traditions. You argue that atheists, secularists can even learn something from eastern traditions. Even that eastern meditative practices can be co-opted by secular non religious people, atheists and agnostics as a kind of from of atheist spirituality.

**SH**

Yes, I don't limit it to eastern traditions It's just that I think the eastern tradition and especially Buddhism have been far more articulate on this subject and have produced a wealth of testimony, a literature describing the phenomenology of meditation and spiritual experience and the contemplative life generally, but its just far surpasses anything we have in anything we have in the west anything we have in the Christian or jewish or muslim traditions. But the basic fact is this every culture that we know about has produced people who have engaged certain practices of introspection generally, often called meditation or prayer and often supported by ancillary practices like fasting and yoga-like exercise, and isolation in caves and forests and other places. Vows of silence are sometimes part of this picture You have people who have fundamentally separated themselves from the human community and paid attention to their direct experience in a way that has transformed their minds, and I think that there is no question that it is possible to do this and that this is can be engaged as a rational experiment. That nothing has to be believed on insufficient evidence to look into this and to see whether or not paying attention to your experience, noticing with as much precision as you can muster what it is like to be you in every present moment, but that can actually change what it is like to be you There is just massive testimony on this, and there are many reasonable people in the west and increasingly since the 1960's many very well educated affluent people in the west who have spent a fair amount of time looking into this and now scientists are studying the brain of these people This does come out of our—the paradox here, or the apparent paradox is that a commitment to introspection, a commitment to seeking these kinds of experiences comes out of our religious traditions It's only been through religion that people have been hearing about this possibility. Therefore the testimony on the subject tends to be cluttered with all of the dogmatism of religion. So you look into the Buddhist literature on the subject and you see that it's riddled with Buddhist superstition and that's a

problem and we have to find some way of extracting what is useful in this dialogue and not every tradition is equally contaminated by medieval thinking. I think the Buddhist tradition is almost uniquely clean and reasonable and empirical in spirit. That is not to deny the fact that Buddhists believe many preposterous things. That many Buddhists themselves practice Buddhism as a religion and not a branch of empirical science.

**DJ**

So you're arguing for being more introspective, being more self aware but you use phrases, terms like spirituality and being more spiritual. Have you changed your mind on using those kinds of terms as you've made this splash in the secular and the skeptic communities in other words are you concerned that using the word spiritual, spiritual vocabulary won't mislead people and make people think that your kind of leaving a back door open for mysticism or some sort of new-age transcendental mumbo jumbo thinking.

**SH**

Well, as you know I've received a lot of grief from the atheists and secular community. In my book I took some pains to use those terms in scare quotes and to define them, to restrict their definition to the definition that I found intellectually justifiable. The problem really is that we don't have other words for this. I tend to use the word contemplative now more than spiritual or mystical, but the basic fact is that most atheists, most secularists, are not people who have had these experiences or they are certainly not people who tend to have these experiences more than other people.

**DJ**

And by experiences you are talking about introspective experiences not mystical or transcendental experiences.

**SH**

I'm talking about the whole range of experiences that mystics tend to have and interpret in the light of their religious metaphysics, metaphysics that we want to disavow as being irrational and unjustifiable. When you look at historically, who are the people who have made heroic efforts at introspection who are the people who stop talking to their friends for years at a stretch and simply paid attention to the nature of their own consciousness in a cave. These don't tend to be politicians, they don't tend to be artists, they don't tend to be well integrated members of society or of the scientific community at any point in human history. They tend to be religious monastists, they tend to be contemplative who are, who have been motivated by to some significant degree the religious proposition that they encountered in whatever culture they came from. So you have someone like Meister Eckhardt in the Christian tradition

**DJ**

Considered by the religious authorities of his day to be a heretic and an atheist.

**SH**

Yes, he died just in time otherwise they were going to burn him at the stake. He was somebody who was motivated by the discourse of christianity to introspect and pray in ways that i had no doubt led to a range of experience that was fantastically transformative for him, and it's worth looking at It's worth looking at scientifically, its worth understanding, and it's worth everyone experiencing personally It's just that, what I'm arguing in my book is that we don't have to believe anything on insufficient evidence, in order to do that, and having had experiences of this sort whether it's through meditation or drugs or anything else, any other intrusions into our nervous system Having had these experiences we can talk about them rationally. We do not have to plunge into metaphysics, and into unjustifiable proclamations about the nature of the the universe, because we have had unusually positive changes occur in our own consciousness by whatever means. I think we need to admit these first person phenomenological facts into the realm of our data. when we talk about what it is to be a human subject, what the human mind is, and what the human capacity for experiencing happiness and well-being is.

**DJ**

Well, that answers Sam gave me a lot of food for thought and it would be interesting to talk about transpersonal psychology, integration-al psychology they call it but we don't have time. I'm interested in finishing up with a question about the sub-title of your book. It talks about the future of reason. You've made this case, you've gotten world-wide attention for your argument. Do you have some idea about what the future of reason is?

**SH**

Well, I think I have a very clear idea of what I think it should be whether we are at all likely to actualize this future I cant say. I can't really say things look promising, but it's a very simple change ultimately that I'm advocating. I'm advocating simply that the same standards of reasonableness and intellectual honesty that we really reflectively apply in every area of our lives be applied on matters of religion, matters of claims about what happens after death, about the moral structure of the universe, and when people don't know something to be true they should not win any points for pretending to know that it's true. We recognize that from elementary school on in every area of our lives, and yet on religion we have applied a fundamental double standard in which people win accolades. They really, its thought to be a world transforming event to get a sufficient number of people to pretend to know things that clearly no human being could ever know. It's that dysfunction I'm pointing to and really that's the only changed required.

The irony is the every religious person every fundamentalist knows exactly what it's like to require that honesty of others and to even be an atheist with respect to the beliefs of others. Every fundamentalist Christian knows what it's like to be an atheist with respect to the beliefs of muslims Muslims have a book they think its the perfect word of the creator of the universe it says a lot of things in this book anyone reading the book critically realizes this is not the best book written on any subject Christians look at the discourse of muslims and they see a discourse of self-deception and wayward thinking and a total unwillingness to look critically at their own dogmatism, and yet they don't turn that same criticism on themselves. That's all in the end I think we atheists need to point out.

**DJ**

Thank you very much for being on the show Sam.

**SH**

Yes thank you DJ it's been a pleasure.