

The Hitchens Transcript

**The complete interview between the renowned atheist
Christopher Hitchens and Unitarian minister Marilyn Sewell**

Marilyn Sewell

December 17, 2009

Christopher Hitchens's 2007 book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* has made him arguably the nation's most notorious atheist. Already renowned as a political columnist for *Vanity Fair*, *Slate*, and other magazines and known for his frequent punditry on the political TV circuit, Hitchens's barbed manifesto against religion has earned him debates across the country, often with the very fundamentalist believers his book attacks.

But as a precursor to his upcoming January 5 appearance at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, *Portland Monthly* invited Hitchens to an encounter more befitting the Rose City: a conversation with a liberal believer—Marilyn Sewell, the recently retired minister of the First Unitarian Church of Portland. A former teacher and psychotherapist and the author of numerous books, Sewell, over 17 years, grew Portland's downtown Unitarian congregation into one of the largest in the United States.

Marilyn Sewell: Your book, *God Is Not Great* is a sweeping indictment of how religion perpetuates war, exploitation, and oppression throughout history. What inspired you to turn from critiquing politics to critiquing religion?

Christopher Hitchens: My political life has been informed by the view that if there was any truth to religion there wouldn't really be any need for politics. A crucial element in the way I write, as well as what I write about, has been informed by my atheism. Why this book at this time? By the early part of this century I became convinced that religion was back in a big way with the Parties of God—as they dare call themselves—not just in Iran and among Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, but with Messianic Jewish settlers trying to steal other people's land in the name of God to try and bring on Armageddon with help from Christian forces in the United States. These forces overlap with the same Christians who try to want pseudo-science taught to American children with taxpayers money and with the Vatican saying that, "Well AIDS in Africa may be bad, but condoms would be worse." I thought that the moment—with a capital M—had arrived when enough people might be willing to fight back. And I and others—Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris—all came to the same conclusion independently. Let's not boast, but it seems we weren't completely wrong.

In the book you write that, at age nine, you experienced the ignorance of your scripture teacher Mrs. Watts and, then later at 12, your headmaster tried to justify religion as a comfort when facing death. It seems you were an intuitive atheist. But did you ever try religion again?

I belong to what is a significant minority of human beings: Those who are—as Pascal puts it in his *Pensées*, his great apology for Christianity—"so made that they cannot believe." As many as 10 percent of us just never can bring ourselves to take religion seriously. And since people often defend religion as natural to humans (which I wouldn't say it wasn't, by the way), the corollary holds too: there must be respect for those who simply can't bring themselves to find meaning in phrases like "the Holy Spirit."

Well, could it be that some people are “so made” for faith. and you are so made for the intellectual life?

I don't have whatever it takes to say things like “the grace of God.” All that's white noise to me, not because I'm an intellectual. For many people, it's gibberish. Likewise, the idea that the Koran was dictated by an archaic illiterate is a fantasy. As so far the most highly evolved of the primates, we do seem in the majority to have a tendency to worship, and to look for patterns that lead to supernatural conclusions. Whereas, I think that there is no supernatural dimension whatever. The natural world is quite wonderful enough. The more we know about it, the much more wonderful it is than any supernatural proposition.

The religion you cite in your book is generally the fundamentalist faith of various kinds. I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make and distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?

I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.

Let me go someplace else. When I was in seminary I was particularly drawn to the work of theologian Paul Tillich. He shocked people by describing the traditional God—as *you* might as a matter of fact—as, “an invincible tyrant.” For Tillich, God is “the ground of being.” It's his response to, say, Freud's belief that religion is mere wish fulfillment and comes from the humans' fear of death. What do you think of Tillich's concept of God?”

I would classify that under the heading of “statements that have no meaning—at all.” Christianity, remember, is really founded by St. Paul, not by Jesus. Paul says, very clearly, that if it is not true that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then we the Christians are of all people the most unhappy. If none of that's true, and you seem to say it isn't, I have no quarrel with you. You're not going to come to my door trying to convince me either. Nor are you trying to get a tax break from the government. Nor are you trying to have it taught to my children in school. If all Christians were like you I wouldn't have to write the book.

Well, probably not, because I agree with almost everything that you say. But I still consider myself a Christian and a person of faith.

Do you mind if I ask *you* a question? Faith in what? Faith in the resurrection? **The way I believe in the resurrection is I believe that one can go from a death in this life, in the sense of being dead to the world and dead to other people, and can be resurrected to new life. When I preach about Easter and the resurrection, it's in a metaphorical sense.**

I hate to say it—we've hardly been introduced—but maybe you are simply living on the inheritance of a monstrous fraud that was preached to millions of people as the literal truth—as you put it, “the ground of being.”

Times change and, you know, people's beliefs change. I don't believe that you have to be fundamentalist and literalist to be a Christian. You do: You're something of a fundamentalist, actually.

Well, I'm sorry, fundamentalist simply means those who think that the Bible is a serious book and should be taken seriously.

I take it very seriously. I have my grandmother's Bible and I still read it, but I don't take it as literal truth. I take it as metaphorical truth. The stories, the narrative, are what's important.

But, then, show me what there is, ethically, in any religion that can't be duplicated by Humanism. In other words, can you name me a single moral action performed or moral statement uttered by a person of faith that couldn't be just as well pronounced or undertaken by a civilian?

You're absolutely right. However religion does inspire some people. You claim in the subtitle of your book that "religion poisons everything," but what about people like the Berrigan brothers, the Catholic priests who were jailed over and over again for their radical protesting of the Vietnam War? Or Bishop Romero, the nuns and priests who gave their lives supporting...

They're all covered by the challenge I just presented to you. I know many people who...

Yeah, but these people claim to be motivated and sustained by their faith. Do you deny that?

I don't claim. I don't deny it. I just don't respect. If someone says I'm doing this out of faith, I say, Why don't you do it out of conviction? I don't like the Barogen brothers anyway. They're fanatical and they're pacifists who believe in the non-resistance to evil, which is itself an evil doctrine. And if Bishop Romero got as far as being an archbishop in El Salvador, he achieved the prestige carved out for him by an institution that has made El Salvador into an oppressive slave society.

That's true, but he did change.

Well good for him. He needs to change a bit more. I know many, many, many people in El Salvador who have no religious faith of any kind who stuck up for human rights much longer, more consistently, and more bravely than he did. His prestige as an archbishop was meaningless to me.

Well, I can't argue with that.

As it is for Martin Luther King. For example, he would've been much better off not invoking the nonsense story of Exodus, a story of massacre and the enslavement. He left us with a legacy where any clown or fraud or crook—Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, our new president's favorite priest in Chicago—who has the word reverend in front of his name can get an audience.

I would just say that this shows the fallen nature of people or, in secular language, the selfishness, egocentricity of all human beings. People are imperfect. But have you observed *any* redemptive aspects to religion?

No, in the sense of the challenge I made: any good action by a religious person could be duplicated or matched, if not surpassed, by someone who didn't believe in god. And I would add the corollary question: Is there a wicked action performed by a religious person in the cause of their faith? And of course, you've already thought of several examples.

Yup, that's true.

Religion makes kind people say unkind things: "I must prove my faith, so mutilate the genitals of my children." They wouldn't do that if God didn't tell them to do so. And it makes intelligent people say stupid things: Condoms are worse than AIDS, for example. Things they wouldn't dream of saying if the pope didn't tell them to do that. **I agree and am appalled in the same way you are. Let me ask you this: The Greek myths, their fables, their folk tales that endured are not literally true, but there's great value in the universal truths that are taught just by the story itself. I see so much of scripture in a similar way including, for example, the creation story. Can you agree with me that some of those stories are valuable just as metaphor?**

The creation story is ridiculous garbage. And has given us a completely false picture of our origin as a species and the origins of the cosmos. If you want a good mythical story it would be the life of Socrates. We have no proof, as with Jesus, that he ever existed. We only know from witnesses to his life that he did. Like Jesus, he never wrote anything down. It doesn't matter to me whether he did or not exist because we have his teachings, his method of thinking, and his extreme intellectual and moral courage. Anyone who can look me in the eye and say they prefer the story of Moses or Jesus or Mohammed to the life of Socrates is—I have to say it to you—intellectually defective. The great edition starts with Locutius and Epicurius who work out that the world is made of atoms and is not created by any design. It goes through Socrates and through, well, Galileo, Spinoza—people whose work is burned and despised by Jews and Christians and Muslims alike—to through Voltaire to Darwin to, I'm abridging the story somewhat, but it's the last chapter of my book. It's a better tradition for people who think for themselves and who don't pray in aid of any supernatural authority. That's what you should be spending your life in spreading and deepening that tradition.

You say that nonbelievers, "Distrust anything that contradicts science or outrageous reason" that you respect free inquiry. I am a person of faith and absolutely agree with these two statements. But I do not believe that in order to be religious you have to disconnect your brain. Do you believe that and, if so, why?

The smallest privilege of faith over reason is a betrayal. My daughter goes to a Quaker school, for example. Do I think that the Quakers are the same as Hezbollah? No, of course I don't, though I think there's a lot to be said against Quakerism morally and what Quakers and Hezbollah do have in common is the idea that "faith" is an automatically good word. I think it's not. When people say, "I am a person of faith,"

they expect applause for it as we see in every election cycle. If I could make one change in the culture it would be to withhold that applause, to say, “Wait a minute, you just told me you’re prepared to accept an enormous amount on no evidence whatsoever. Why are you thinking that that would impress me?” I have no use for it, when I could be spending time looking through a telescope or into a microscope and finding out the most extraordinary, wonderful things. People say faith can move mountains. Faith in what, by the way? You haven’t said.

If you would like for me to talk a little bit about what I believe . . .

Well I would actually.

I don’t know whether or not God exists in the first place, let me just say that. I certainly don’t think that God is an old man in the sky, I don’t believe that God intervenes to give me goodies if I ask for them.

You don’t believe he’s an interventionist of any kind?

I’m kind of an agnostic on that one. God is a mystery to me. I choose to believe because—and this is a very practical thing for me—I seem to live with more integrity when I find myself accountable to something larger than myself. That thing larger than myself, I call God, but it’s a metaphor. That God is an emptiness out of which everything comes. Perhaps I would say “reality” or “what is” because we’re trying to describe the infinite with language of the finite. My faith is that I put all that I am and all that I have on the line for that which I do not know.

Fine. But I think that’s a slight waste of what could honestly be in your case a very valuable time. I don’t want you to go away with the impression that I’m just a vulgar materialist. I do know that humans are also so made even though we are an evolved species whose closest cousins are chimpanzees. I know it’s not enough for us to eat and so forth. We know how to think. We know how to laugh. We know we’re going to die, which gives us a lot to think about, and we have a need for, what I would call, “the transcendent” or “the numinous” or even “the ecstatic” that comes out in love and music, poetry, and landscape. I wouldn’t trust anyone who didn’t respond to things of that sort. But I think the cultural task is to separate those impulses and those needs and desires from the supernatural and, above all, from the superstitious.

Could you talk about these two words that you just used, “transcendent” and “numinous”? Those are two words are favorites of mine.

Well, this would probably be very embarrassing, if you knew me. I can’t compose or play music; I’m not that fortunate. But I can write and I can talk and sometimes when I’m doing either of these things I realize that I’ve written a sentence or uttered a thought that I didn’t absolutely know I had in me... until I saw it on the page or heard myself say it. It was a sense that it wasn’t all done by hand.

A gift?

But, to me, that’s the nearest I’m going to get to being an artist, which is the occupation I’d most like to have and the one, at last, I’m the most denied. But I, think everybody has had the experience at some point when they feel that there’s more to

life than just matter. But I think it's very important to keep that under control and not to hand it over to be exploited by priests and shamans and rabbis and other riffraff. **You know, I think that that might be a religious impulse that you're talking about there.**

Well, it's absolutely not. It's a human one. It's part of the melancholy that we have in which we know that happiness is fleeting, and we know that life is brief, but we know that, nonetheless, life can be savored and that happiness, even of the ecstatic kind, is available to us. But we know that our life is essentially tragic as well. I'm absolutely not for handing over that very important department of our psyche to those who say, "Well, ah. Why didn't you say so before? God has a plan for you in mind." I have no time to waste on this planet being told what to do by those who think that God has given them instructions.

Those terms don't have to be attached to God. But I think a religious impulse is when you're just all of a sudden filled with the sense of thankfulness for something beautiful or for someone or perhaps—I use the word “numinous”—or when you're struck with some sense that there's something beyond you. It is a human phenomenon.

I wrote a short book about the Parthenon and the sculpture of the Parthenon, the history of the building and so forth. Without that building, I would feel rather lost. If it were destroyed, for instance, I would feel that something really terrible had happened to the human species. But, I'm able to appreciate the various symmetries and, um, magnificences of the Greek style without at all caring about the cults of Pallas Athena, the goddess in whose honor the building was erected or the Obsidian mysteries that were celebrated there or Athenian imperialism, in general—all those dead beliefs as Christianity will one day be. It's a big cultural task for me to separate the cultural achievement that religion laid claim to from the claims of religion itself. No one's going to deny the role of religion in, for example, architecture or devotional painting (which, actually I like that the least). In music, even though Verdi, it turns out, was not a believer, under that stimulus he could produce a pretty good requiem. The poetry of John Dunn or George Herbert strikes me as having been produced by people who probably really believed what they were saying. I have to be impressed.

You write, “Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and the soul.” You use the word “soul” there as metaphor. What is a soul for you?

It's what you might call “the x-factor”—I don't have a satisfactory term for it—it's what I mean by the element of us that isn't entirely materialistic: the numinous, the transcendent, the innocence of children (even though we know from Freud that childhood isn't as innocent as all that), the existence of love (which is, likewise, unquantifiable but that anyone would be a fool who said it wasn't a powerful force), and so forth. I don't think the soul is immortal, or at least not immortal in individuals, but it may be immortal as an aspect of the human personality because when I talk about what literature nourishes, it would be silly of me or reductionist to say that it nourishes the brain.

I wouldn't argue with you about the immortality of the soul. Were I back in a church again, I would love to have you in my church because you're so eloquent and I believe that some of your impulses—and, excuse me for saying so—are religious in the way I am religious. You may call it something else, but we agree in a lot of our thinking.

I'm touched that you say, as some people have also said to me, that I've missed my vocation. But I actually don't think that I have. I would not be able to be this way if I was wearing robes or claiming authority that was other than human. that's a distinction that matters to me very much.

You have your role and it's a valuable one, so thank you for what you give to us.

Well, thank you for asking. It's very good of you to be my hostess.

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December 17, 2009

Portland Monthly's Liberal Believer. Published in the January 2010 issue of *Portland Monthly*. <pdxmonthly.com/news-and-city-life/2009/12/christopher-hitchens>.

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