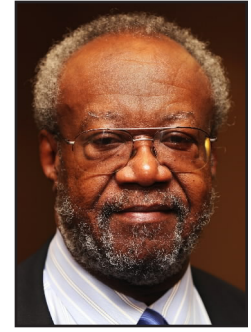




Dr. Abdulrahman
Alhashemi



The Rev. Marshall
Blalock



The Rev. Joseph
Darby



Prof. John
Huddlestun



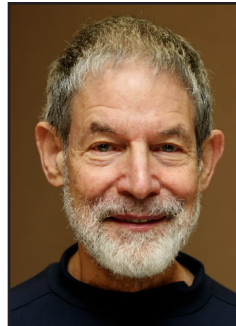
Father John
Parker



The Rev. Vance
Polley



Rabbi Yossi
Refson



Prof. Herb
Silverman



The Rev. Canon
Michael Wright

BIOS

ABDULRAHMAN ALHASHEMI

Born in 1974, Abdulrahman Alhashemi fled with his family from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to Kuwait and then Saudi Arabia. In Jordan, he earned a bachelor's degree in General Psychology with a minor in Philosophy and Islamic Studies, a master's degree in Clinical Psychology, and a Bachelor in Medicine and General Surgery. At the American University in Beirut, he completed his postgraduate studies in Psychiatry with a specialty in Psychotherapy. He's married to an ophthalmologist and has an 18-month-old daughter named Maryam.

MARSHALL BLALOCK

Marshall Blalock is a Charleston native and graduate of Furman University and of Southwestern Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. Pastor of First Baptist Church for 11 years, he is married to Cathy. The couple has three children, including adopted 15-year-old daughter Cathryn, who was orphaned as a baby in South America. Marshall

says adoption is an important cause his family has taken up, prompting him to serve two terms on the board of Christian World Adoption, a local organization committed to helping children in poor countries.

JOSEPH DARBY

The Rev. Joseph A. Darby is pastor of Morris Brown AME Church in Charleston. A native of Columbia, he has a bachelor's degree from the University of South Carolina and prepared for the ministry by attending the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. A fourth-generation minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, his congregation is the largest in the church's 7th Episcopal District. Joseph Darby is the winner of numerous civic and professional awards, and has served in various capacities in the NAACP. He and his wife Mary have two sons.

JOHN HUDDLESTUN

John Huddlestun received his M.A. and Ph.D in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan, with additional postgraduate work in Biblical/Modern Hebrew, Egyptology, and archeology in universities in Jerusalem, Italy and Denmark. His areas of specialization include Biblical studies, history and religion of ancient Israel, Egyptology, and Jewish history. Prior to his academic career, he was a professional musician. "As a historian of religion," he has written, "I do not presume to get into the mind of the God of the Bible or speculate about divine motivations aside from what I find in the text. For me, it is the human dimension of the Bible that makes it most appealing as an object of study."

JOHN PARKER

Fr. John Parker was born at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and raised in Virginia. He earned a BA in Spanish and minored in German at the College of William and Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia. He went on to get a Masters of Divinity from Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and a Masters of Theology from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in Crestwood, New York. Fr. John served as curate at Holy Cross Episcopal Church on Sullivan's Island from March 2001-June 2002. He has served as Priest-in-Charge of Holy Ascension Orthodox Church since June 2003. He says he entered the Orthodox Christian Church as a result of a theological and spiritual journey in search of an institution that teaches and practices what Christians have believed since the time of Christ. He is married to Jeanette, who is preparing for a degree in Nursing. They have two sons, both students at the University School of the Lowcountry.

VANCE POLLEY

Vance Polley is minister Sunrise Presbyterian Church on Sullivan's Island. He has an undergraduate degree from Davidson College, with a major in Art History and a minor in Studio Art. His father, a Presbyterian minister, taught Hebrew Bible at Davidson College for 35 years. Vance Polley received his Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary. His doctoral thesis, "Spiritual Windows," explored the visual arts as a devotional medium. Before joining Sunrise, he ministered at Back Creek Presbyterian in North Carolina and Rye Presbyterian just north of New York City. He's married 25 years to Deborah, a Tufts University graduate. They have two children: a daughter at Mount Holyoke and a son at Connecticut College.

YOSSI REFSON

Rabbi Yossi Refson came to South Carolina in 2007 to establish Chabad of Charleston and the Low Country. Chabad is dedicated to serving all Jews unconditionally, without regard for background or affiliation. Its goal is to foster a deeper sense of pride and appreciation in Jewish heritage and to ensure the continuity of the Jewish people. Raised in Leeds, England, Rabbi Refson studied in England, the United States and Israel. He is married to Sarah, his co-director of Chabad and has a 5-year-old son, Mendel.

HERB SILVERMAN

Herb Silverman was born in Philadelphia, received his undergraduate degree from Temple University, and his Masters and Ph.D in Mathematics from Syracuse University. He has been a Professor of Mathematics at

the College of Charleston since 1976 and is a recipient of the Faculty Distinguished Research Award. He is a founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry and faculty advisor to the College of Charleston student group, Atheist-Humanist Alliance. He is President of the Secular Coalition for America, consisting of nine national nontheistic organizations, whose mission is to increase the visibility and respectability of nontheistic viewpoints.

MICHAEL WRIGHT

The Rev. Canon J. Michael A. Wright was ordained in his home Diocese of Ontario in 1984. He is a fourth generation priest in the Anglican (Episcopal) tradition. Since his ordination, Michael has served in parishes in the Diocese of Algoma and Toronto in Canada. In 2006, Michael accepted the call to become the Tenth Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Charleston. Michael holds degrees from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and Trinity College (University of Toronto). Choral music and hymn writing are among his particular interests. He is married to Margriet de Zeeuw, a social worker and Ph.D candidate. They have two daughters, Julian and Abigail.

'RELIGULOUS' ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

October 29, 2008

ADAM PARKER, MODERATOR

What did you think of the movie? Did you think it questioned belief legitimately?

ABDULRAHMAN ALHASHEMI

I just moved here four months ago, so allow the language barrier, I might be not fluent enough for you to understand. For me, I think it is a shock and a shake for those who claim they have faith. From my own point of view I am a believer. I'm a Muslim. But from my own point of view I would thank him for such a particular item, which is shaking people to see if they do believe or they don't. Stop and rethink of what you have been raised on. That's my own point of view other than that that it is full of negative [...]

MODERATOR

But there is this one positive element, in that it got you thinking about your own faith.

ALHASHEMI

It is a very important positive.

HERB SILVERMAN

I have a question about the ground rules. I was a little disturbed by what I saw you say in The Post and Courier on Sunday, and that is we will do what Mark did not, talk respectfully about religion. Now I certainly respect all the people on the panel, but what my concern is, and I think what Bill Maher was trying to point out in part is that why is it wrong to challenge religious views when it's OK to challenge political views, and should we but religion on that high pedestal. My view, as well as Maher's, is, yes, we should be able to critique religion, or holy books, just like we do any other books. I think he did raise some important questions. And as is mentioned, just examine your own beliefs and the value of having doubt. Because I think Bill Maher was really hitting against this certainty that people have, where they're born into a religion and never question. And I guess his philosophy was more what, he didn't mention Clarence Darrow, but Clarence Darrow once said that doubt is the beginning of wisdom and fear of God is the end of wisdom. And I think that's the point of view.

MODERATOR

But Herb, what do you think of the manner in which he then argued his points or discussed, in other words, he raised the question, and as Abdulrahman said, that's good and he appreciated that. What about what then followed.

SILVERMAN

I think he probably did not choose the right kind of people to have an elevated debate. I think some of the religious people on this panel, I would have preferred to have a discussion with, instead of somebody who thinks he's the Messiah and kind of fringe people and making fun of televangelists which I think most reasonable people would likely do. I think he portrayed a particular fundamentalist branch of religion without having the wider spectrum that I would have preferred.

JOHN HUDDLESTUN

I just saw it last night so it's very fresh, [...] and I'm still reeling from the apocalyptic bang at the end. Which is quite an interesting turn of the way he used that, saying religious zealotry would wind up producing this apocalypse rather than the way it is normally portrayed. I agree actually with what has been said, in terms of saying he has a knack for finding — we'll call them interesting people. But yet it does raise issues for people who want to think about their own beliefs and what they're based upon. A number of the underlying issues are more philosophy of religion issues. The kinds of questions you would find in a class of philosophy of religion. Can you believe in God? Why do you believe in God? Why is there evil in the world, etc. I would say that, yes, at times he's disrespectful. I was most disturbed toward the latter part of the movie when he is speaking to Muslim believers. They came across for me in much of the movie as the more really well meaning serious sensible people. What Maher really wanted to do was, he had his own shtick, he had his own idea about what he wanted to emphasize, and he wanted to really link specifically violence to religion. And Islam is an easy target for that. Toward the end that was the part that bothered me more. And I have to confess I laughed a lot the first half hour. He has a way of putting people in situations, making them say things and he also gets to edit the movie. He's the one making it with (Larry) Charles. They can cut clips and add this here and cut back to that, and as you saw he shows clips from movies. He makes it very entertaining in that way.

MODERATOR

I guess we shouldn't forget that first and foremost, I would argue anyway, that this was a movie, a film, a form of entertainment really. Clearly it looked to me like there were several little editing tricks and turns that he used so that he could better emphasize what he wanted to emphasize as opposed to actually represent a coherent view.

THE REV. JOSEPH DARBY

That being the case then, if it was supposed to entertain, then The Post and Courier owes me \$6.50. [Laughter] It was like Michael Moore without the warmth. I agree basically with what everyone else said about emphasis. He started with a goal. To achieve that goal, he interviewed the people on the fringe who would support his position. It did not bother me, I think. I guess that's because my faith journey, interwoven with my cultural journey, is that, faith stands here and then critical examination stands over here. Because faith is not subject to critical examination, that is simply what you believe. That is how I survived seminary, Lutheran seminary at that. That the faith stands independently and it cannot be empirically proven. I would not seek to empirically prove it. To that end, it was a nice way to kill an hour and forty-one minutes, but I would like my \$6.50 back.

MODERATOR

So you sort of subscribe to Steven J. Gould's concept of the independent magisteria, that might overlap in places but are primarily distinct from one another and therefore not subject to the same rules. [Editor's note: This refers to Gould's concept of "nonoverlapping magisteria."]

DARBY

It's like Christians who get bent out of shape if clerks don't say Merry Christmas in the store. If my Christ is this tall, then I have to defend him. It's a matter of faith.

SILVERMAN

Can I ask you a question? I agree with you that faith and evidence are kind of separate, but in our culture we tend to think that it is good to have faith, whatever that faith. I don't personally feel that way. I was wondering, for any of the panelists, why they might feel that it is good to have faith, period.

HUDDLESTUN

You're asking the right people. [Laughter]

ALHASHEMI

It's if you're asking someone from South Africa in the jungle, if it's necessary for you to have a PC? Someone like Bill Maher or any other one who doesn't know, he should go and search for truth. He doesn't go and make fun of people. You can imagine someone who is in the jungle, playing — I don't know what they call the dance there in Africa. Or trying to make fun of the people using the Macintosh, for example, the Apple or the PC. Because he didn't see this before, this is not the case. If you don't know about something, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Mathematician I think you said?

SILVERMAN

Yes.

ALHASHEMI

You believe in the infinite point? Do you?

SILVERMAN

I recognize the value of infinity.

ALHASHEMI

We believe in the infinite point, but we will never see the infinite point. We believe in the rainbow, but you can never touch the rainbow. It's vice versa. Not everything you see, you have to believe. Not everything you believe you have to see, it's not realistic. I can't imagine what you are talking about in a country where you have in God we trust on the dollar. You can't find God in the street. It's the bank. It's in bank we trust, in money we trust.

MODERATOR

Not any more! [Laughter]

ALHASHEMI

It's not that I feel comfortable, that's there is something called faith. The basic question. What's the purpose of this life? Is there a beginning? What is someone there? Is it mother nature? Is it chaos? Is it what?

MODERATOR

Hold that thought, because we are going to actually touch on that as a question. Why is faith considered by society [...] a good or even a necessary thing for the collective?

PARKER

I think I would begin by saying that I wouldn't defend faith as an independent entity, but that, at least as an Orthodox Christian, we believe and begin with Jesus Christ. So we are not beginning with something that is a thought or a concept, or starting with a concept of philosophy of faith. We are starting with a living person who

lived on the planet, who died on the planet, who had some teaching many of which we can read, some of which we can read. So I don't think it's possible simply to say that faith is good. Because maybe one thing Bill Maher showed was that faith which is not — faith which is completely absent from this ground can be absolutely ludicrous. So I don't think, Mr. Silverman, that we would defend faith on the grounds of faith. As an Orthodox Christian we say let's deal with the claims of Jesus Christ and then talk about what that faith extrapolates to in the rest of our world. So in this particular case the faith is tied to a living person. And the faith part is that I have never seen him personally, but I know people who know people who know people who know people who walked the earth. So that's how I would address the question of whether faith is real.

THE REV. CANON MICHAEL WRIGHT

I just have one thing to say about the context, because what Maher is doing is entering into a larger dialog that's been going on for quite a while now, and we need to talk about that I think. Which is, there is this tendency to kind of put religion into one corner — all flavors, all tastes, all types — and say this is what it is, and really not be representative. I didn't see my tradition in that movie. I didn't really understand where I would fit into that. And then there's this over simplification of reaction to it. And you see it now in literature, where you have fundamentalism as religion, or institutionalism perhaps would be another word, and then the reaction to it, which is just another sort of fundamentalism. It's not really questioning its premises; it's just saying we're not that, and really the choices are those two. Now I must add this to the discussion, that one of my concerns about the movie was how representative it was. It's really hard to be part of this panel, because it's not representative, as in, all of these men are gathered around the table to talk about the deficiencies of a movie that was not inclusive. So I'm sitting here now going, we have our own blindnesses within our own community. I mean, maybe as a joke, I would say this is like many churches on Sunday. Men are up front, and the women are in the congregation, and that's part of the problem and what we don't see, we're talking about this event and this movie and criticizing what's missing, and here a group of men are talking about it as if we're trying to be more representative, and the fact that this is the assembly is really a struggle to kind of talk about inclusion...

MODERATOR

...When not everybody is included.

SILVERMAN

I agree with what you say, but on the other had, I feel in one sense that it's more inclusive than a movement that we have now that I think is good that you have a lot of interfaith gathering. But what that usually does is include people of a variety of different faiths and talk about what we have in common. And I would like to see more of this interfaith and values where we have and accept the faithless who have good humanistic values.

WRIGHT

But you have to be careful as a man to say this is more inclusive.

SILVERMAN

No, I am saying more inclusive than the interfaith without someone who happens not to have the kind of faith as religious faith. But I would welcome women and Buddhists and any group that's not represented because I understand the constraints.

MODERATOR

The reason we're focused on the three monotheistic faiths here is because that is what Maher addressed in his film. It's true, any way you cut it, you're not going to do this discussion full justice. We can only attempt. Actually, that leads me very nicely into question number two.

ALHASHEMI

Adam, the same question you can just rephrase it, Just the other way around. What's the world doing without

faith? You can just watch the news for five minutes.

MODERATOR

Well.

ALHASHEMI

This is the other question for, do we need faith?

MODERATOR

That's a good question, don't let it leave your mind. Number two, The movie focused almost entirely on the fringe of faith, on religious extremism, those who believe every word of the bible is exactly true and those who tend to fuel their ignorance with the fervent belief in the unknowable. And so in the movie Maher wonders how it is possible that people believe in talking snakes, a virgin birth, answered prayers and black rocks that hail from paradise, how it's possible that God would forbid certain activities on the Sabbath, but permit observant Jews to exploit loopholes by devising complex technological solutions that allow them to make a phone call. Loopholes? God created the universe and all its wondrous perfection and loopholes?! In your view, were our sacred text meant to be taken literally?

THE REV. VANCE POLLEY

Well, Adam, you've touched on something that would probably lead to a very long conversation, with the representatives gathered here at the table. And that is, how do we approach the sacred text. How do we approach the way in which a document of faith comes into the human way of speaking about things? The approach that I would take, a lot of Presbyterians would take, is that there's the acknowledgement that there is a filtering. And I want to define that word, because we're trying to put information, truth into perfect human language, that it comes in at a certain historical period. Therefore people are going to put it into a language that makes sense to them at that time which is limited. That I think is the difficulty. So it is very easy to take a sacred text and to open it up and to proof text it, to pick out parts of it and say isn't this absurd? Isn't this humorous? What I try to invite is a much broader view. That is, to look at the whole text and how the disparate parts come together. It's not that each part, in and of itself, gives you the whole truth in and of itself. It's the way in which they interact and then a realization of the experiences, the language, the culture of the time in which the material was either compiled or put into writing. That may be a thumbnail sketch.

HUDDLESTUN

I would ask a different question. What makes a text sacred, sacred texts, from an historical standpoint? And what I do as a professor of biblical and ancient Middle Eastern studies is, texts are made sacred or created sacred by the community that holds the text. There's a long process of what we call canonization. There's a period where texts may not be recognized as such. If you take the New Testament, for example, it was not until the late Fourth Century, that that collective, that actual group of documents is recognized as authoritative and no other writings. And even after that time, with Athanasius, you still have other figures who say, no I like this book, or I like that book, I'm going to throw out Revelations, I'm going to throw out James, for example. Even up to the Reformation there are still issues about what book is included and not included. In that sense, communities make sacred text. There's plenty of evidence in the text that they're not initially written as sacred documents. It's a very long process of time. And even with the New Testament writers... what people nowadays talk about, well, the New Testament was recognized as such because it was inspired, but actually that's not part of the major discussions of canonicity in terms of what makes this part of the canon or that text part of the canon. So there's a human and a social dimension that's there, but now at this point in time, thousands of years later, we don't deal with that.

MODERATOR

And indeed there are inconsistencies even between the four gospels for example. You'll, find inconsistencies

here and there.

PARKER

But as my friend Father [?] says, the Gospel is not about how many times the cock crowed. It's about Jesus and his death and resurrection. So whether he crowed two times or three times or whatever it was, it doesn't matter. It's like being at two corners of an accident. One person sees one window blown out and one sees another. The question is the accident.

DARBY

It goes back to, there's academic and there's faith. [Referring to the Bible] [Faith is the inspired word of the Creator that's placed into the hands of people like us.] The miracle is not that it comes down infallible, the miracle is that it's placed in our hands, and we don't drop it and totally shatter it. So you take it as a whole.

POLLEY

I just wanted to add a word to this, and that is, as the community comes to the realization of the sacred text, the word I'd like to add is the discernment. It's a discernment process in which the collective experience comes to the understanding that this in fact is sacred text. It isn't cavalier in terms of saying I do or don't like. It's a discerning process. And the church is clear about how that's done through prayer, through reflection and understanding. So I would like to add that caveat.

MODERATOR

But different people can discern in different ways and come to different conclusions. So then you create potential for real conflict, which we've seen in the course of human history. Interdenominational conflict, inter-religious conflict...

ALHASHEMI

With every other text it's not only the holy text. I can give you my paper, the one I just wrote, OK? And you'll interpret [according to] your own point of view. And the 30 or 50 people here... This is actually the beautiful-ness of freedom. Go and [unintelligible] but there's a base, don't cross lines, OK? For example, we are here in this court. I'm forced to be here, but it is my free will to sit here, to stand, to talk, to be silent. So I don't know why we always think of the last taboo. This is the phrase he used over and over. The last taboo. We just need to cross things, be there, be happy, live happily and it's very easy. Back to the sacred text... In Islam, I believe you know, maybe many of you don't have this information about the Quran... We don't believe that the Quran was written by a human being. So back to the origin, for people who don't believe. Either you believe in something unseen, creator who can do so and so and so. Then you'll believe that he descended a book. Until now, you don't know this in English, but in Arabic, till now there is no single human being that can say this book is written by a human being. From a vocabulary point of view, from the grammar point of view, there's something magic in it. [In the third year of medical school], we have the embryology textbook, which is here also; it's [used] all over the world. It's a universal book by Moore, Dr. (Keith) Moore. This guy, he converted to Islam. Just when he knew a piece of information that this book that's been there 1,500 years ago, it's mentioning the exact description of the embryo, how come? Was he a genius enough to... So, from our own point of view, it wasn't written. It's sacred. And again I can (have my understanding), and you have your own (understanding). And (in) this we are free.

MODERATOR

Rabbi, in the Jewish tradition, tell us how it works — the interpretation of texts?

REFSON

If you look at the Bible in its original Hebrew, it needs interpretation. There are many words that can be interpreted, can be translated in two ways. So the Bible, which is, in Hebrew, the Torah, Torah means "a guide." So

many of these stories are visions or allegorical. What is important to us isn't, did the snake talk, but does the story of the snake talk to us? What message is that story telling us, and how does that improve our lives? And, because the Torah is a guide and it teaches us how to live our lives, we need to look at the story and say, how is it relevant to us today, and how does it make us better and more productive people?

SILVERMAN

In a sense, that plays into what Bill Maher was saying in that he mentioned some of these stories sound like fairy tales. But there's not necessarily something bad about a fairy tale if it has a good moral to it. And that's how I read the Bible, as I said. There are some wonderful parts of the Bible—I don't take it literally—and there are good ways of living based on that, but there are also some bad things it says, and I ignore those. But I treat the Bible as any other so-called holy book or the readings of Socrates or Bertrand Russell and try to make life for myself the best I can in a humanistic way.

REFSON

Because the Bible is sacred, that's why we need to examine it for the meanings. We're not going to take Jack and the Beanstalk and try to figure out how it's going to improve our lives. But because belief communities and faith communities look at the Bible as a sacred work, we look at that and we see how we can use those stories to improve our lives and the lives of our communities.

SILVERMAN

The problem with the sacred is the absolute view that some people have [of the] sacred. You'll pick a very loving passage, say, and live a good life based on that, but others will see the Apocalypse is coming, we need to help bring it about more quickly. And those are the potential dangers of viewing this as a sacred book.

ALHESHEMI

As a believer, I don't believe that my book is a fairy tale.

MODERATOR

John (Huddlestun) made the distinction between a work that's canonized over time and becomes sacred by the community and a fairy tale. I suppose that's one difference between the two.

ALHESHEMI

But if this is an option, it means there was a lie in history.

MODERATOR

Uh, Huddlestun, you have a comment. You're chomping at the bit!

HUDDLESTUN

I thought he might tell — it's a very famous rabbinic story about this issue of the interpretation of the text that everyone reads in an introductory class in Jewish tradition. Of course, my class is reading it where rabbis are arguing about a particular point of ritual purity in an oven. They are always arguing in the context, but here they are offering different points of view, and one rabbi says look, if my point of view is correct may this tree uproot itself, and the tree uproots itself. And the other rabbi says, eh, if my point of view is correct let this little creek turn around and flow in the other direction and it does. And the other rabbi says that's not going to do anything. Finally, after a series of similar miracles, a voice from heaven — a bat kol, in the Jewish tradition — which is the voice of God, says Rabbi Eliezer is correct. And one of the rabbis says to God, basically, butt out. [Laughter] But it is very important text in the tradition because what he is saying, and he quotes passages, some very brief quotes about, he says it's not in heaven and he's quoting a passage from Deuteronomy that's talking about: You gave us the Torah from heaven, and we have it now, it's our job to interpret it. That's how the system has been set up. We interpret it now, and thank you very much, but we'll decide how to interpret the text. It's a very

important story in rabbinic tradition to give authority and legitimacy to the rabbis who are interpreting the text saying our interpretation is very important.

MODERATOR

Which is a distinction between Judaism and Christianity, and I won't speak for Islam. I'm not sure. But in Judaism the focus is on earth, basically, the covenant that's granted by God to Israel, to the people of Israel who are to carry the light to all peoples of the earth. So the focus is on the community itself, on earth, whereas in the Christian tradition the focus becomes Christ's sacrifice on the cross and the gateway to paradise, the afterlife. Marshall had something...

BLALOCK

I represent the Baptist tradition of Christians, and a couple of things. Dr. Huddleston's story is a great example of how we came to deify our own viewpoint. In the Baptist tradition the tradition is that we believe that every person is competent to have their own perspective on spiritual matters and everything else. And we would say anyone is free and we would defend the right for all to be free to believe as they do, but the danger in our circle, and perhaps in others as well, is that we tend to say we believe this about the Bible, this about it, but we can deify sometimes our own opinions. And what happens— you mentioned it at the beginning this question that taking the Bible literally is an extreme position. But it's taking certain portions of the Bible with a certain viewpoint that becomes an extreme position. But loving your neighbor as yourself is certainly not an extreme, well, it is extreme, it is extreme, but it is extreme in the good.

MODERATOR

But what's wrong with taking that literally?

BLALOCK

And we do take it literally, but what I'm saying is that in our tradition we do take the Bible literally, but literally means as it's meant to be understood. Where it's meant to be understood as allegorical, that's the literal meaning. Where it's meant to be symbolic that's—Jesus said I am the door. Nobody thinks he was wood. So the idea is you take the Bible and let the text speak to you about how your life should be lived. And I certainly would respect my friend here [gesturing toward Alhashemi] but at the same time, I sincerely believe that the truth of what we call the Christian Bible has a powerful effect for good in people's lives, and taking it literally is not — it's often misunderstood, is what I'm saying, it's characterized in the wrong way. We don't want to deify our own beliefs about anything.

DARBY

One point about interfaith dialogue — and I think Marshall has made the point well, that helps, and I throw it out with reference to holy text and fairy tale — one of the things about interfaith dialogue that makes it productive is mutual respect. When that mutual respect does not go, that's when walls are erected. That's when human conflict comes in.

MODERATOR

Which by implication you are saying that Bill Maher did in the film?

DARBY

Which I'm saying, Bill Maher — if you say to a person of faith your text is a fairy tale, you immediately erect a wall.

ALHASHEMI

Adam, did you hear about the French scientist, the one who dies some, like, 12 years ago...?

PARKER

(Jacques) Cousteau?

ALHASHEMI

He was talking to dolphins, OK? He was listening to them. He knows how how they speak to each other. If you tell anybody something like, a hundred years from now, OK, back from now, that there is someone who can talk to dolphins, what would he say? Fairy tale. You're just imaging. It's a neurological disease.

MODERATOR

Although he was using the scientific method to achieve that.

ALHASHEMI

It's science. It's science. I mean, meanwhile, maybe it's just a matter of time. After awhile you'll just discover that you can talk to someone miles away by cell phone so the one who can create this, can create this, we don't know how. Again, back to the point of origin. Will you believe in someone there or not? If you don't believe, you not believe in anything else.

PARKER

One of my professors in an Episcopal seminary, who was Baptist actually, said that we read the scripture — we take the literal parts literally and the figurative parts figuratively. That's a beautiful bumper sticker, but I think we could amplify it a little bit. But I would want to say this that everything requires interpretation, everything even Bill Maher's film requires interpretation. And the way, the best way for us to interpret it is actually for us to sit in a room with him. And I've been wondering... I was speaking with Rabbi Yossi yesterday. I was wondering if he's — Bill Maher — is sitting in his living room someplace laughing that we have a very serious conversation with 100 people in a room when he's thinking are you seriously taking that seriously? I think he would.

MODERATOR

Is that hypocritical of him? Because after all he made a film. He went to great effort and expense.

PARKER

Well, here's the point I would further make. In terms of, since I think it is a given that everything requires interpretation, how do we know what is literal and what's figurative, for example? And as an Orthodox Christian, the way we know that begins with Jesus on the road to Emmaus when he explained how to interpret the scriptures to those who were walking along the road. And so even the New Testament writings of St. Paul aren't really even writings in and of themselves. They are interpretations which are based on that teaching of the whole testament.

MODERATOR

Indeed, and they transformed Christendom at the time.

PARKER

But the key to all that is, from my perspective, the way we interpret things, the way we know literal from figurative, is, Jesus taught Luke and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus. And they taught those that followed them who taught those that followed them, who taught those that followed them, and so today we can say Galatians 3:28 means X because we can ask the people who asked the people all the way along.

MODERATOR

But with no regard to historical context or modern society or changes in the way we live or even new understanding, scientific discoveries?

ALHASHEMI

Like what, give me an example of this.

MODERATOR

Well in other words when these sacred texts were written there was a certain kind of understanding of the world, broadly speaking. But modern science, as this fellow, as somebody in the film pointed out in the movie, modern science isn't until many, many centuries later and so there was no way for the discoveries made during modern science to be...

ALHASHEMI

I will give you an example that Maher said in one interview. He can't believe that there was someone who lived for 900 years. He's talking about Noah. OK, at that moment I just asked myself, My God, this guy knows nothing about anthropology. Has he ever sat with some scientist who was talking about how human beings are living (longer each year?). You know he's a showman. It's a business at the end of the day. I'm actually questioning, searching for truth, for this guy I mean. If he was here, I would just ask him please sit and learn, because for me he doesn't know what he is talking about. He doesn't know about people and dinosaurs, and he'll just throw things, and he doesn't know actually. This is my own point of view.

SILVERMAN

That was a science advisor at the Vatican who pointed out that the Bible was written in a pre-scientific era, and Bill Maher interviewed him right after he talked to the head of the Creation Museum who thought it was a 6000-year-old Earth. And the Vatican said essentially that that's ludicrous.

MODERATOR

OK, let me move on to a new question. Some of the ideas that are boiling in your brains I'm sure will find a way out. I suppose we can agree, I think we can agree, that at the highest level, our sacred texts were made to help us understand the mysteries of life — who we are, why we're here, where we're going and so on — the unknowable for which human kind always searches. They are full of poetry and valuable lessons of literal meaning and figurative meaning. They teach us about ethics and morality and how to treat one another. Yet there is much in our sacred text that has fostered intolerance, hate and violence through the centuries. Is it inevitable that religion will lead to evil just as it might inevitably lead to good? And if so, why is this so?

DARBY

Is it then not then inevitable that the Constitution of the United States will lead to evil, because there are parts of it that have fostered violence and hatred? And it is not a sacred text, it is a legal document, but with the way people have interpreted it, they have interpreted it to do some ugly things. It was created to include some ugly thoughts as a matter of accommodation. It is therefore not an inherently evil document, but placed in the hands of people with evil intent, evil things can happen. You can place anything in the hands of people with evil intent, and they will find a way to make it evil.

HUDDLESTUN

But evil intent is sometimes is inspired by religious zealotry, that's the issue you're getting at.

DARBY

Religion in the hands of people with evil intent...

HUDDLESTUN

But evil intent according to whom? That's the issue. Some people would very vigorously support an action that would be illegal based on their understanding of the text. But I think your point is well taken because any docu-

ment can produce...

MODERATOR

Let me conflate two of my questions. Let me follow that question, and your answer, with another one in an effort to broaden this discussion of evil and intolerance. In his book, *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris argues that religious moderates and liberals because they advocate tolerance and understanding, end up facilitating religious extremism. Bill Maher touches on this point in the film but quickly abandons it. Harris's point is that a live-and-let-live approach — go ahead and believe whatever you want to believe as long as you leave me alone and let me believe what I want to believe — is dangerous because it is our obligation as civilized human beings to stop intolerance when we recognize it. Religion we can surely all agree is absolutely not OK when it leads directly to somebody blowing themselves up in a marketplace in the name of God and killing, you know, a suicide bombing. But where then do we draw that line, at what point do we put our foot down and intervene in another's belief system? Harris says we should do that at the very beginning at the root of belief itself. Since religion inevitably leads some to violent ends, all religion therefore is bad, he argues.

PARKER

He needs to study the history of Russia — 60 million people in a godless society who died as a result of that. Add 'em up.

SILVERMAN

Well, I'm not sure that they died because it was a society that was godless. I think it was a society that worshipped a dictator and it was not a humanistic society. And I think what we should be concerned about is not so much whether there's an atheist leader or a religious leader in charge, but that people have the freedom to think for themselves and to speak out as they would like. There have not been wars over which brand of atheism is better than another or whether an atheist should just stamp out religious people. I think most of the wars that we've had were religious wars and those that weren't [were] with an atheist dictatorship. And we see that, say, in North Korea now very evil leaders who are atheist. It's not about religion, it's about worshipping a leader.

PARKER

My friend, I don't think anybody worshipped Stalin [mumbled disagreement]. There's only been one century in the history of the world that I can think of that ever had any attempt at a purely secular state. Let's take the word atheism out and just call it secular. Only one century in the history of the world where that's been the case and that was the 1900s. So if we could say that all wars were started by religious people — duh! — there's never been a history of non-religious people.

MODERATOR

And some of the most violent wars were in the 20th century.

PARKER

And there's no question, though, that this ultimately leads to the question, "What is good?" The reason we can define good today, at least in our society, is because of the Judeo-Christian inheritance that we have, without getting into the question of whether the founders of our country were Christians or whatever. The question of what is good is specifically defined in the history of all humanity by faith.

ALHASHEMI

He (Silverman) was right. When you don't have someone to worship, you'll try to find someone to worship. I totally agree with him. So why not we go and look for someone who is really there and who's really wanting us to worship him, to feel comfortable...

SILVERMAN

I guess I'm thinking in terms of not worshipping but treating our fellow human beings kindly. Love your neighbor, which is part of the Bible, a religious text...

ALHASHEMI

I mean, what is the manual that would tell you do so, and don't?

MODERATOR

I would point out that the history of philosophy, Western philosophy, is essentially secular. There is very little — now there are certain philosophers that do address religion or find ways to reconcile religion and philosophy, but by and large, the great tradition of philosophy in the West is basically without regard for the doctrines of faith. So, in other words, it is possible, apparently, because there is evidence to show for it, to develop an ethical system, a morality, that doesn't include God.

ALHASHEMI

And how long does it take for people to find a perfect system to live peacefully? It's a trial and error. Let's try this. Let's prohibit sexuality — no, now it's OK. Go for the next session, another chapter. It's a trial and error. The manual is there. If I'm giving you this mobile phone, I'll certainly give you the manual for this mobile phone. You go and try whatever manual you want, but at the end of the day, if you spoil it, don't blame me, it's your fault.

SILVERMAN

I'm concerned that just the term "perfect," whether it's theological or otherwise, I think we might try to improve ourselves, but when we feel we have perfection that could cause a lot of problems. And incidentally I would not call this a Judeo-Christian country. I would call it a secular country because we — what I'm proud about most about America is we have the first secular constitution where it's a godless constitution and it allows us to have the freedom to worship...

ALHASHEMI

Is it working?

SILVERMAN

Better than most countries I think, but there's some danger with people in this country I think trying to turn it into a theocracy. But the fact that we have the freedom of conscience for all people is a goal that I think is great, so you will not find God in our constitution or how one should worship. It's up to the individual.

ALHASHEMI

The other day I was walking down Wal-Mart with my wife and my 18-year-old...

MODERATOR

A religious experience itself. [Laughter]

ALHASHEMI

I suddenly got someone who was afraid — "Is this your child?" I say, "Yes." "Are you not afraid someone will take her?" Come on! She's here (close). Back in the Middle East, where there's God, you are not so afraid for someone to kidnap your child as such (he snaps his fingers). You won't see the dashboard of Target and Wal-Mart and Harris Teeter having the "Missing since 1989." Where there is no God, you can see these things. Where the human being is trying to overrule the country, you can see these.

MODERATOR

Well, in countries where religion is dominant, there are a lot of bad things that happen also. Maybe not kidnap-

ping, but...

ALHESHEMI

As I told you, it's interpretation...

MODERATOR

What I want to know is, should we put down our foot? And if so, where we put down our foot when it comes to an individual's right to express his religion in his way, if that can sometimes mean murder and mayhem? Where do we as a society, where are we responsible for intervening?

DARBY

Before the Lord liberated me from state government — I used to be a probation counselor — the standard for involuntary admission for mental health treatment then was that a person had to be either (a) an immediate danger to himself or (b) an immediate danger to the community. I think that when one's practiced views of their faith means that they are either endangering themselves or, even more so, if they're endangering the community... that's when the foot comes down.

PARKER

Pastor, this is what's so difficult today, because I was watching a debate between the Hitchens brothers (Christopher and Peter) — the one who's an atheist is claiming that it's child abuse to teach people faith. So in the hands of certain people, our job means that we're endangering our children.

DARBY

Then he becomes a non-religious zealot.

ALHESHEMI

Adam, I keep trying to do things from zero. I don't try to jump over things. We need to sit down with people and see what do we believe in, what are the basic background we share. Actually, the problem is that when you go from, let's say, the red color and you say this is black. I go, no, no. This is the black. We will not meet in centuries actually. We need to sit. And we need to have certain definitions. [...] What's the definition of atheist? What's the definition of freedom? What's the definition of satisfaction? What's the definition of logic? We need to put this in mind, and after that we can go further. If we don't, at least we accept each other.

MODERATOR

Which leads me beautifully to my next question...

HUDDLESTUN

That comes back to the question you asked earlier, "Do we need faith?" That assumption is that one does need faith and has been to determine which one is the correct one. That the larger issue we've been discussing earlier and touching on in other ways is that there's a whole tradition, which you mentioned, in Western philosophy and in political philosophy about how do you construct, how do you organize, what are the rules for a society where religion is not the basis for that society, Going back all the way to Aristotle [unintelligible] and all this discussion about what is good, etc., Utilitarianism, is it good for society, how do you set up ethics, and laws and rules that are not necessarily religious-based but are based for the good of the society. I mean, a lot of what we find in the founding documents of this country derives from political philosophers who had a great deal of influence in how the Americans framed this document. So I think that question already assumes that there is a correct one and we have to find it. There are religious traditions, [...] the nonwestern traditions — take Buddhism for example, or Hinduism [...] — certainly in some of those ancient traditions it's an irrelevant question. I mean, to say you worship Jesus and Jesus was a holy man, son of god, etc., OK, we'll add you to our list, that's good. I mean, there's a kind of built-in tolerance there that allows these various views to come into play.

MODERATOR

In Islam and Christianity, though, both — I think, it's safe to say — one of the, perhaps the central doctrine, the whole central purpose is salvation: The idea that Christ sacrificed himself on the cross for our salvation. That is central, I think to Christianity. In Islam, of course, paradise and salvation via the Quran is also a central component to the faith. So, yes, of course we're assuming for the moment that there is faith, that most people are believers (which is the case) and that most people are, have among their goals, if not their first goal, some experience of the afterlife that's good, that's positive. If we take that as an assumption — well, should we assume that, I guess is a fair question — and if we do, how do we get there?

SILVERMAN

If I could make an analogy. Yes, there is controversy within these different religions about what's true, just like in science there's controversy. There was a raging controversy about whether we had a steady state or an expanding universe. Eventually, there was enough evidence that those who were steady-state physicists say, yes, we agree, because of the evidence it's expanding. I don't think we're going to get enough evidence to say whether Islam is the one true way, Judaism or Christianity is, so what I really think we should be doing is to try to see if we can, if not believe as others are, at least respect the right of people to hold these beliefs in a nonviolent way, and our world will be better off.

ALHESHEMI

Back to the detection of evidence, what's the evidence? How do you find evidence?

MODERATOR

He's speaking as a scientist, so observable phenomena.

ALHESHEMI

Just let me correct this. Islam — salvation is not paradise. "Islam" means — in the Quran there's a verse, "We've revealed this Quran for you to be happy. To live happy."

MODERATOR

To live a good life. [...] But I want to hear from some of the more Orthodox on the panel, if I may use that label. You're an Orthodox priest, aren't you?

PARKER

I am.

MODERATOR

Well, there you go. [...] In Christianity, the sacrifice on the cross is the be-all-end-all, right?

PARKER

The goal of life from an Orthodox Christian perspective is union with God. We go all the way back to the beginning, we have a falling out of communion with God in Genesis, Chapter 3 for example, starting there. So our task is union with God which is accomplished in its moment, if there's a moment, in those three holy days: holy Friday, holy Saturday and the resurrection on the third day, no question about it. Do we believe in a literal paradise, do we believe in a literal hell? No. Why can I say 'no' to that? Well, because union with God is an every-moment call. It doesn't mean that there is not some time outside of time when we are going to be with God forever and ever if he so judges, but that's not something we simply look forward to on the other end of the game so to speak. Every single moment we have the opportunity to choose heaven or to choose hell essentially, because choosing heaven is to love god and to love our neighbor, and to choose hell is to turn away from all that, which is precisely, well, one of the two precise definitions of sin: to turn and go in the other direction.

MODERATOR

So you're striving for paradise at every moment.

PARKER

Every moment, absolutely.

MODERATOR

Marshall, what is the Baptist view?

BLALOCK

The Baptist view is, as long as you collect the offering everything's fine. [Laughter]

PARKER

Just one last phrase, and that is, one of the challenges, especially in our contemporary world, which I believe is an especial export of 19th c and 20th c North American Christianity, is that somehow we are the judge the trial and the jury of everyone of their souls. An Orthodox Christian has no right to say who's going to heaven and who's going to hell. God alone is the judge, even we can't say that about our own self. So I cannot say I've got Jesus, I'm in. That's a very troubled spot in our country, and in Christian thought, at least in the Western world.

BLALOCK

I'll give you a serious answer now, sorry. It's my personal belief, and it's true of most Baptists, that we believe that Jesus Christ is the way of salvation I guess is the term Baptists would use. We believe that basically the world has a problem. I think Maher identified that pretty well in the movie. There is evil in the world. There is trouble in the world. A lot of it is the result of sin in people's lives. So we're all flawed human beings, and all of us should be humble about that. [...] And so we believe that God provided a way for us to be able to have forgiveness but also to have change in our lives so that we don't have to live in the pattern of, the evil pattern, Colossians 3 says you want to rid yourself of all things such as evil, that old sinful pattern of our lives. So we believe salvation is about life-change. Changing your life, to honor God with your life, to live as Jesus calls us to live, to actually do what Jesus said to do, which is really important. We also believe that Jesus spoke about heaven and hell, that there is a heaven and there is a hell. I prefer to think a C.S. Lewis thought — [...] that people can choose not to be with God, and if that's their choice, I regret it for them, but I'm not in a position to force them to do anything. [...] I personally think most serious Christians would not want to be arrogant about that. And that's one of the things that caught you when you saw the Maher movie. There were some places where people were flat-out arrogant. I'm not God, I don't make the decisions. So we want to humbly say if we believe that humanity has a problem, God sent his Word and his son here to the world to help us solve our problems and become the kind of people he intended for us to be. That's how we think.

MODERATOR

And in the garden when man was separated from God and made mortal, and original sin entered, this imperfection took root which in turn then prevented us as people from experiencing the full mystery—the mystery was created, the mystery about which we all now strive, whether it be in a religious context of a secular context. I would like to hear, though, from Michael, an Episcopal viewpoint.

WRIGHT

I just pick up on what's been said. I think this fixation — you talk about North American Christianity, I think you're on to something — that in a consumer society where we can do or buy our way or find a way to say we got something in the future; I would come back to saying Jesus says the kingdom of God is in your midst. It's here, it's now, it's about now. Eternal life is not future, it's now. It's not something we work to attain, but it's something we can choose now. And so it is kind of working through what you've been talking about in terms of

this fixation about what's in the future. It's a choice today, but it's also a choice tomorrow, it's a choice the next day. I think we have a kind of fixation on, Why am I doing this, I'm doing this for what there is in the future — no, I'm doing it because it's right, it's good, God calls us into it here and now, and my understanding of what God is calling me to do right now. It is about today, today is the moment, and I think there has been a manipulation of the Gospel story that somehow made this world kind of the practice run for the next, when really why does the incarnation happen? God enters the world because this is worth the attention. So I think this kind of fixation on a certain type of Christianity that's focused on future life is very dangerous around how we live our lives today. And you can see that in some of the focus I think perhaps on the apocalyptic portions of the movie. What I really missed in the movie was the church, and other religious bodies over the centuries, have tried to renew itself in different ways, because we have gone off course. I am humbled about some of the experiences I saw, that arrogance that Marshall talked about. But where is the story of Francis of Assisi who says, really in some ways a lot of the same things a thousand years ago, and says, We've missed it, we've lost—we've gone so far from what our origin is in Christ, and the humility, the humble, the savior. And you could go through periods of reformation in our church and in other religious communities, and other traditions. That's the piece that is part of our tradition that allows us to own up to what Maher is saying. I mean, to watch that movie is a humbling experience. No matter how it misrepresents religious traditions, I am humbled by some of the story that some of the things that have been done in the name of God. [...]

MODERATOR

Does that instill in you a certain responsibility as a leader in the church? Does that instill in you a certain responsibility to convey the right kind of message then?

WRIGHT

Again, just to keep that, that whole humility piece is essential now because as we get so caught up in—Marshall, you were saying that none of us has a right to say, “This is what it means,” We can only value our own experience and share it with other people. I think we just have to step back a bit from our doctrinaire, in-your-face, this-is-the-word, because in fact that's not what we believe. In all these religious traditions we believe the community has a role in that, historically, and in the present day.

MODERATOR

Vance. And then I want to ask the rabbi something too.

POLLEY

I really want to follow up on the image of humility and speak about what it is we are constantly struggling with, and that is our willfulness. You referenced the story of the Garden of Eden, and the sense of wanting to be God, wanting to be in control. And deep down that's such a part of the human nature. I don't know whether it's completely fair to say that's a piece of being created in the image of God that that sense that we have, that we want to be God. And the history of faith, if you watch, is that constant cycle, that struggle that human beings have, to be honest about the fact that we're willful. And it's a real wrestling with the will. So I like the image of humility, but I want to put a bit of an edge to that, and to say that's what we're struggling with, and that's the difficulty I have with making human nature the measure of all things. Because I know, by human willfulness, I know that tendency to want to do it, to want to be in control and not to let go of that being in control. And to me that set between letting go and letting God.

MODERATOR

So in other words, without faith you have, in a sense, the potential for a direct line to Stalin.

POLLEY

[...] The brokenness of human nature, exactly...

MODERATOR

I'm sorry, hold those thoughts, because I do want to get the Jewish perspective from the rabbi, because in Judaism—and you'll be able to speak to this better than I of course—but the concept of paradise and for that matter hell is a lot different.

REFSON

The fundamental principle in Jewish belief is that the world was created, and people were created in order to make the world a better place. And Jews were chosen to perfect the world through the teaching of the Torah, the traditions and the teachings of the Torah. And all other people were chosen to perfect the world in their own ways. So I can look at Judaism and see how we need to perfect the world through Judaism, but if you want to look at other traditions — probably the best I can say is, the proof is in the pudding. If we see that the tradition has brought on good things and made the world a better place, then in the light of Judaism then it's a positive and a holy and a sacred tradition. But I would encourage that we need to stop caring so much about people's paradise, and we need to look about how people are — instead of looking at our neighbor and what's going to be in the world to come — but maybe, are they clothed, are they sheltered, are they warm, do they have all their worldly needs, and let's leave the next-worldy needs, the needs of the next world, to God. And if we're able to do that, we will leave behind a legacy, a history of hate and distrust and truly create a legacy of love. Because in Judaism, there isn't any talk of—or there's very little talk—of heaven and hell, because in Jewish tradition we are encouraged to create a heaven on this earth, and we'll worry about the next world when we get there.

MODERATOR

In other words, to God: Mind your own business, you'll have your chance. [Laughter]

SILVERMAN

I actually agree with a lot of what my religious friends are saying now in terms of, whether you're religious or not, humility is something valuable, look at how people act in this world, and that is what we should concentrate on, and I would say, if there's a God, let him do with me as he pleases when I'm dead, or if I have a chance and I meet God, I'll say "This is enough evidence, and now I'm a believer. [Laughter] At the moment I want to concentrate on this world, and I'm glad to see a lot of my religious friends are also.

REFSON

And that also addresses the interpretation, if the spirit of the interpretation goes along with the concept of making the world a better place, then we know the interpretation is correct. But if it goes contrary to the principle of perfecting the world, then we know we have made an error in the interpretation.

MODERATOR

Let's just go in order, we'll just go right down the table. [To Parker] Did you have something?

PARKER

I did. I would like to say two things. First — and this is probably not going to be resolved today, but I would enjoy, Mr. Silverman, if we could talk about this some more—

MODERATOR

We'll resolve it tomorrow. [Laughter]

PARKER

The question comes back: how do you know humility is good? That's a very important question. As Christians, we know that humility is good because we believe that God became incarnate and showed us precisely what humility looks like. But not humility as a principle.

MODERATOR

Interestingly, you're actually echoing Abdulrahman's concern about definition and what are these things and what do they mean.

SILVERMAN

In the scientific community, often we don't know, and we say "I don't know—we don't have enough evidence." And that is a form of humility. A lot of religious people say that but my concern is someone who has all the answers. It's right here in this book, and my interpretation is right. That's the arrogance that can cause a lot of problems. So whatever you believe—

MODERATOR

But aren't you applying the same standards to, you know, science and religion? I mean, as somebody mentioned before...

DARBY

Those of us on this end of the table are calling for the rules.

MODERATOR

That was a rhetorical question.

SILVERMAN

Which I'd like to answer some time.

HUDDLESTUN

If I could wade through all this theological discourse and play devil's advocate for a minute...

PARKER

For those who believe in the devil. [Laughter]

HUDDLESTUN

To come back to really to what Maher's doing, and to echo some of the comments here, when you for example said God calls us, or God tells us to do such and such, what Maher would do is then say, Yes, that's the problem. God is calling you, or you believe that God is calling you. And what his concern is (is) that people who commit acts of violence, do it in the name of God calling them. So the issue of sin and evil, which religion addresses — which is probably what you were talking about, but there is evil in the world — Maher would say, Yes there's evil in the world, and a lot of it is perpetrated by people in the name of religion. [...] His issue is that this then causes him to just reject — you can say he's throwing out the baby with the bath water. But he's just saying, Just a pox on all of you, I just reject this whole thing. And then the ending of the movie, which is a very powerful image for him, saying, look, there is a holocaust and destruction, but it's not at the hands—it's at the hands of people who do it in the name of religion.

WRIGHT

But John... when you said God call us, I think the problem Maher has, he assumes when we say God calls us that there was a voice that came down to me individually and that's what I'm responding to. We have not taught enough in our own traditions what it means to be called, that the community has a role in call, that tradition has a role to play in call, that reason and Scripture all have a part to play in call. And I think when we say words like "God calls us," the secular world responds by saying, "I haven't heard any voices, I don't know where this is coming from."

MODERATOR

They take it literally!

WRIGHT

Exactly. So our failure, I think, within religious institutions and churches, is we have not defined, we have not spoken in a way where people can understand that the calling of God is not that light show necessarily with the voice. It is a whole process that values community, other people, and all of these other pieces. So, again, that's our challenge, to communicate what it is we mean.

DARBY

There's something that's very easily lost in discussions like this. It's a commonality to Christianity, Judaism and Islam. There's a wonderful commercial for some bank, the name of it I can't remember right now, but it's where this guy starts choking, and the people around him start to discuss the fact that he's choking and how they should (save him), and what perhaps should be the best technique, while the one guy simply comes up and does the Heimlich and saves his life. It talks about the results, not just the discussion. I think we don't want to lose sight of the fact that within those three religions that have been assembled around this table there's a commonality: that there's a call to love the Creator, and to love and respect the neighbor as we love each other. And it's very easy to talk about the number of people—the number of angels that dance on the head of the pin, the nature of paradise and will there be smoking and nonsmoking sections, any number of things, while you don't really have to go that far from the College of Charleston to find people in very desperate circumstances. I think it's helpful to remember that if there is a road to whatever one (thinks of) as paradise, there are people along that road that the Creator calls us to help, to intercede in their lives in a positive way. We have to be careful out there not to get so caught up in that that we forget that piece. There's a beautiful verse of Christian Scripture that says that you cannot love the Creator that you can't see if you cannot love your neighbor that you can see.

MODERATOR

Bon point, as they say. Marshall, did you have something?

BLALOCK

One follow-up word to this particular part of the conversation, and that is, I believe that the reason that the Gospel has such power in my own life is because it's not just the world's view — I'm evil, I have evil in me. So that's the power, I believe, that's humbly coming to God and saying, I know I've got flaws. It's not just, it's easy to point out flaws of other people, but the humility I'm speaking of is, I've got a problem, and by God's grace I hope to become the kind of person... that's the process. That's what we would call salvation. Now I don't presume to say I know everything about where everybody's headed—heaven and hell—but I do know that I've got a problem and the Gospel is what helps me become the person I want to be.

MODERATOR

So in each of your individual theologies or philosophies, “salvation” is achievable now, while you're alive and on Earth.

ALHASHEMI

At least to begin with. Regarding the literal paradise: In Islam we have a saying of the Prophet Mohammed. He says, live your day as it's the last day of your life. And every day is the first day of the rest of your life. OK? So you have to be happy. So if your one — just like [...] Michael say — if you're worrying about the future, you're depressed! And that's what makes me work as a psychiatrist, OK. I've been working for 10 years, I'm not exaggerating, I've never prescribed a single pill, even for schizophrenia. You know why? I'm using my religion. I'm using the way of life, not a text [...] — just go and do so and so — from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed, this is a way of life, this is religion, this is a manual...

MODERATOR

By religion, do you mean little “r” religion, in the philosophical sense, or you're literally using the doctrines of

Islam?

ALHASHEMI

Of course I'm presenting Islam. I would take the verse literally, and just translate it if he's not Arab. For example, I work in Dubai, and in Dubai I have 33 nationalities at the clinic: Americans, Muslims, South Africans, Australian. So I'll just translate and make it practical, OK? And that's it. Regarding paradise, and evidence-wise, if you go and ask an embryo inside the uterus, do you have evidence that there's an afterlife? He doesn't. He just has 50 centimeters, and at the end of the day if there's an umbilical cord (causing) asphyxia, he will just kick. And in the medical school, [you'd have] the kick count. They would ask you as a mother, go and try to count the kicks. If it's more than 20, go to the emergency room, because he's saying let me out. How come he knows about this "out" if he doesn't believe in afterlife? And there's no evidence. Even in numbers, you have the first number and the last number and you can't see this or that, and at the end of the day you believe in numbers. What I'm talking about? I have one of these [unintelligible] in Islam. He said, the human brain and mind is just like the human eye. Both are senses. As if your eye has a limited space, you're mind has a limited space. Don't try to cover God with your [...] logic. This is the second point. The third point, I think people like Bill Maher, the only evidence they're asking for is for them to be called prophets. He's waiting for someone to go, "Bill Maher, you are the prophet, I'm here, go and live your life." And, again, maybe he won't believe. So from my own point of view, it's very simple: Go live your life, happily, relaxed, comfortable. Whatever difference you have even if it—I keep telling people this, the family therapy, I'll tell them, Choose whatever reference, even Einstein reference. If it makes you happy, that's it. I just want you to be happy. And at the end of the day, [...] I don't have the key to judge people, you're in the hell and you're in paradise, because I don't know even where will I...

PARKER

One follow-up thing? Is that allowed? I would just like to clarify, because there's been some discussion around the table about the purpose of this life is to make this life better, to make Earth a better place. I feel it's important to go on record to say that from an Orthodox Christian perspective, God didn't come to make us better. He came to make us holy. And in that process of holiness, the world will become a better place, there's no question about it. But it's not simply to make the world, everybody to hold hands.

MODERATOR

That's interesting because Judaism is the other way around. Through betterment you become holy.

REFSON

Right. Because we are created in the image of God, and each person is divine. By holding the hands of the divine person next to you, through that you reach God.

MODERATOR

Okay, next question. In the arena of inter-faith and ecumenical dialog, there have been some notable advances. The Catholic Church, for example, has altered their doctrine to accommodate non-Christians. Even they now have a shot at paradise, so the Vatican says, even if they have no way to know Jesus Christ, although it's through Jesus Christ. It's a little sneaky. And panels such as this one are formed regularly. How can we fuel and extend this dialogue among people of faith? And how can we find ways to include non-believers in this dialogue, in a productive sort of way.

SILVERMAN

Well, speaking as a non-believer, I feel included if we're talking about making this world a better place, having certain values in common to people who are religious and not religious. Love your neighbor is more or less a universal. There are psychopaths, religious or otherwise, but if we look at the intersection of all religions, is probably what you would consider Humanism and humanistic values. So concentrate on what we have in

common in terms of making this world a better place, rather than disputes among doctrinal differences, which can be fun to do, and maybe over lunch we can talk about this in a reasonable way to understand each other's perspectives, but recognize what we all have in common.

PARKER

That's possible, especially describing how you describe things, Mr. Silverman. Should I say professor?

SILVERMAN

Herb.

PARKER

Herb.

MODERATOR

He's only wearing long pants because I forced him.

SILVERMAN

It's my best outfit! [...]

PARKER

It is good for us to do good together. There's no question about that. If we were going to have an interfaith dialogue that included the absence of faith in that dialogue, there's a certain time where it would be better for us simply to go build a Habitat house because we're not going to agree that black is black or red is red or water is water in a certain sense.

MODERATOR

But aren't there certain things that you can agree on?

PARKER

Sure.

MODERATOR

And then, what you're saying, as Joe Darby was saying earlier, there's, you know, math encapsulated, and then there's faith, which is its own thing, it just is.

PARKER

Well, from an Orthodox perspective, math is what it is because God is who he is first. The reason why there is order in math is because God is God. The reason why science is science and we can now know it is because God was the one who put all those things together and gave us the capacity to find those things out. So, you know, we do have things in common, sure. But to have a religious dialog, at the end of the day, we just have to call it an end and go build a house together because our task is simply to live our life and we can't necessarily change another person simply by intellectual argument because it's not simply an intellectual matter.

DARBY

The nature of interfaith dialogue requires faith. Now, there are other settings, other venues where people of good intention, people of good thought, people of positive direction, some of whom might be people of faith and some of whom might not, can gather to achieve that kind of thing. But if the dialogue is going to be interfaith, then faith is an inherent part of it.

MODERATOR

Well let me add this then. To what extent can, or should, doubt enter into an interfaith dialogue among believers? [...] An inter-doubt dialogue. I'm sure if anybody wants to volunteer. All of us, I imagine, over the course of our life, experience doubt. [...]

DARBY

The bigger question is, the most important part is embrace of the creator, embrace your neighbor. That ends up being more important than a discussion of doubt. In my faith tradition, faith is a given. Not scientifically questionable, there's not the need for empirical proof. You know its there, you then do something. The danger in interfaith dialogue sometimes is that it goes nowhere. I used to share in a body in Columbia, Greater Columbia Interfaith Clergy Association we called it, and it went down the tubes. Part of the reason that it did was that one morning a bunch of us sat around and said you know, it's 7:30 in the morning, we were sitting around debating fine points of faith while we could be sleeping and not making one bit of difference down in the projects. We're talking about the nature of having this nice discussion while there's somebody awake at 7:30 wondering if they've got enough money to put gas in the car to get to work. [...] Interfaith dialogue that leads somewhere is productive. Otherwise it's nice to get together every now and then and sing Kum Ba Ya and then let's go home.

HUDDLESTUN

In terms of doubt, because your question was about interfaith and how do you include doubt among us — to bring it back to the movie again — is that Maher says “Look, I'm a doubter.” He repeatedly says he's agnostic and I assume he's saying that. The issue of what some of us have talked about in terms of you have faith and belief, and you have empirical evidence, and the two don't necessarily have to jibe or, I believe, and we don't have to have faith. That plays into what Maher is saying in the movie because Maher says I doubt because this is irrational. And it's the irrationality of it, that you don't have empirical evidence for this when he keeps asking people questions like this, that's the issue that brings him to doubt and to do the whole movie to begin with because these are just stories where you can't have proof. [...]

MODERATOR

But is he using the wrong language, John? I mean, in other words, he's seeking empirical evidence where there is none.

HUDDLESTUN

This is his own personal thing. And I was just trying to bring you back to the movie, because that's why we are here. He puts himself among the doubters because he can't reconcile this. For him, there has to be a rationality to his beliefs. He says, there isn't a rationality, and therefore, I'm a doubter. [...]

BLALOCK

One word about interfaith dialogue, I personally, to be brutally honest, interfaith dialogue is torture to me. Because the last thing I want to do is come in here and disagree with these guys. Everyone of you, I can tell I like everyone of you guys. And I have profound respect for my friend here [indicating Alhashemi]. And I've spent a lot of time in the Arab Muslim world. And I can tell you, the word that means the most to me for opportunities like this is respect. I respect each one of you. Every one. And I have profound respect. The Muslim culture has a lot to commit[?] itself, believe me. They have some things better then we've got by a long shot. But I do not at all believe in Islam. I don't want to be disrespectful. I respect the different points of view, but at the same time, I'm not going to leave here saying I don't know if I believe as I did when I came. So it's one of those tough things where I think we have a lot in common and I think there are some things we will obviously may never share in common, but respect? Yes. I respect this body and this group.

MODERATOR

So, the goal of interfaith dialogue then shouldn't be necessarily to convince someone else of another viewpoint.

It should be to understand the other viewpoint.

BLALOCK

I think that's helpful. I agree.

ALHASHEMI

Two points. The first one: yes, you can have it. But you have two sectors, two categories. The first sitting, let's say, is between faithful people and those who don't believe. After that you can see that come religious people sit together, and the other people will be sitting as an audience and, let's say, understanding something. But you can't put someone who doesn't believe between people who believe because they don't share the same backgrounds.

MODERATOR

Why exactly, Abdulrahman, because the language is different?

ALHASHEMI

Because of the definition. The black and white. [...] For example, I had one back there in the University. He does not believe in God. He said, I'll sit with you, but don't talk to me about God. I told him, I won't talk to you about God, because you don't believe in God. If I'm saying, God says, you'll tell me, come on, I don't believe in the one who says. So I'll just talk about logic. Talking about Islam, we don't differentiate between science and I challenge every other person on Earth: if you have a scientific evidence that would conflict something in the holy Quran or the saying of the Prophet [...]. It's not there. We don't have these sectors, we don't have some numbers here, in Islam, I'm talking about Islam.

MODERATOR

But there are certain things in the Quran that science just doesn't address at all. It's not that it conflicts.

ALHASEMI

Talking science strictly, if you want to agree or not, you have to prove not. Otherwise, it's correct. Am I right? I'm saying okay, there's a God. Prove not! You can't just say...

SILVERMAN

[...] There's a time for interfaith dialogue, and that's fine, but my concern sometimes is that our perspective is totally excluded as if we don't belong. For instance, after 9/11, President Bush on TV had the three monotheistic religions and tried to say we're all one country unified as Americans, essentially saying we all believe in the same God. And he did not include anyone from the nontheistic community, making us seem like second-class citizens.

MODERATOR

Which represents about sixteen percent of us, right?

SILVERMAN

Sixteen percent of us. Larger than most sects of religion. Our exclusion from this country is why I tend to be sensitive about not just interfaith, but if possible include those interfaith and values, so we're included. If you're going to have a prayer breakfast, fine, I don't mind not being included, as long as it's not government-run prayer breakfast. [laughter] But if we are going to talk about philosophy of life, I think that the non-theistic community should be included.

PARKER

Herb, it's difficult for me to hear that in one sense because in my although admittedly limited study of atheism

and what atheists believe, there is nothing that unites atheists apart from a lack in believing something. Which I think is a beautiful philosophical discussion sometime: in order for you to not believe in it, there has to be something you don't believe in, but that's for another day maybe. But when I tried to make an argument with a particular atheist friend of mine about many of the topics that we've discussed today, he would say, "Well you can't put all atheists in that box." So either we can put atheists in a box and invite you stand near with president after a disaster or...

MODERATOR

But you can't put all Christians in a box. You can't even put all Orthodox Christians in a box. Everybody's an individual ultimately.

SILVERMAN

When I say I'm an atheist it just says what I don't believe. I don't believe in any gods but I also don't believe in any UFO's either. What we call ourselves are humanists. We have certain humanist values and principle that are much like some of the principles that are human-centered within religions. And we're just saying that we don't do this because of a belief in a deity or because of expected rewards or punishments. We try to teach our fellow human beings kindly because that's its own reward in this life, the only live we see. We're trying to help humans that we know about. And we're using evidence and experience to try to live a good life. So those are the beliefs that we have, and I'm sure we share a lot of common beliefs. We don't share a belief that Jesus was resurrected or that there's a God who's going to give rewards and punishments.

MODERATOR

We'll talk more at lunch. Michael, and I just have one more quick question.

WRIGHT

I just want to challenge the interfaith: what is our goal? And I really believe the goal is relationship. I think we still are in this again, we've got to accomplish things out there I think by coming together, I've learned so much about these other traditions. I'm drawn to people that otherwise I wouldn't even get to meet. This idea of that we, why are we meeting cause we could be... I think there's an enormous benefit, with so much ignorance about different traditions that we come together just to be together. Desmond Tutu has a great saying that we are not called to be our brother's keeper, we are called to be our brother's brother. But you've got to know your brother. And I think this idea that there's got to be something at the other end... It's like our dialogue about heaven and paradise: what's it leading to? I think it's leading to right now, which is each of us grow in our understanding. And it is coming to listen. I think often we think interfaith is coming to convince. It's simply coming to listen. And we discover these incredible commonalities, things that link us together, shared beliefs. I've even shared some today before the meeting today where there were some common interests between myself and the Rabbi. Well, this is the benefit, it is about now. I would love to build on this first tradition. I'm Episcopalian: if you do it twice, it's a tradition. [laughter] One more, and we're going to always be doing this, so I'm really hopeful. It's one thing to think you think so and so believes. It's another thing to hear that person and go, gee, that's thoughtful. I'm not sure I agree or disagree but I've never thought about it in that way. What an enormous thing. And that wasn't in the movie. What you saw was different as threat. Different as I don't like it. Different, that makes me angry. What I'm hearing today is some differences that make me go, I'd like to read a little more about that or I'd like talk to some of you about it. How can that be anything but good? How can it lead us to anything but growing in our own understanding within the community and our people.

MODERATOR

Now I didn't design it this way, trust me but thank you because you've now led so beautifully to my last question. That's a perfect transition. What lessons or ideas, if any, have you drawn from the movie, from "Religulous" or for that matter, from this conversation, that might influence the way in which you pastor, teach, or interact with others. [...]

ALHASEMI

I was about to talk about the same idea actually. [God:] We created you, mankind, in order to know each other. So that you can benefit from each other. This is the rule. And number two, unconditional emotional acceptance. Unconditional emotional acceptance. The challenge [is] to be moderate enough to accept, but this doesn't mean to agree. We don't have this moderate thing either to agree or to reject. No, I can accept you. By the way, my roommate was an atheist. And he likes to be called an atheist, OK? [...] Six years, I'm living with an atheist, eating, drinking, watching the same movie. He doesn't pray. He has his own tradition. I accept him. That doesn't mean I agree with him. If I can reach to this, [...] I think this is at least heaven on earth.

MODERATOR

And what about the movie. Did anybody draw any lessons from this movie?

DARBY

Yeah, I got a lesson from it. I found out about something that I consider to be patently arrogant and idiotic excited enough people that I've come to the table and meet some good people. So I like the Christian scripture that says all things go together for good. [laughter]

MODERATOR

See? It provoked this. That's good.

SILVERMAN

I found in the movie, there's a fine line between humor and ridicule. And if you want to get your message across to people with whom you disagree, be humorous, bring them out, but don't make fun of them. Go to where they are and try to have a reasonable dialogue without taking yourself too seriously.

ALHASHEMI

Can I just ask a question?

MODERATOR

Sure.

ALHASHEMI

[To Silverman] If you had a chance to reframe the movie, would you do the same?

SILVERMAN

Oh, I would have made a different kind of movie. Perhaps the movie that's being made right now, with us having a dialogue. And then maybe even going a little more into theological questions about why you believe, you know, just out of curiosity. But also being able to say, well, for instance, you believe that Jesus was resurrected. If I had been a believer, seeing the movie and seeing how the same stories predated Jesus, like with Horace, Myhris, Krishna, it would seem to me that those stories were picked up by Christians to keep that tradition of that kind of belief. In order to be a Messiah, you had to have been resurrected and come back. Those sorts of things is what I would have liked to see more in the movie than just somebody who claims to be the Messiah and making fun of that person.

MODERATOR

See, I thought that was an interesting moment in the film, too, that he might have developed. Joseph Campbell and others who are scholars of mythology and comparative religion have pointed out that there are certain universal stories that have existed since the beginning of civilization, that are manifested in different cultures in different ways. But it's essentially the same story that we're getting over and over again, or versions of the same

story. So you have a virgin birth, the great flood was in Gilgamesh long before the Bible, and the resurrection. I mean, these are old ideas that predate by thousands of years, Jesus Christ, for example. And then, there are newer ideas, Islam, which came after Jesus, that draw from these stories and these traditions and present them in yet new ways but that are nonetheless very similar.

REFSON

One of the fruits of the movie that I found meaningful wasn't the movie itself but [the fact that the movie], by Bill Maher's own statistics, offended 94, 96 percent of the population, probably in Charleston a little bit more than that. [laughter] But we never saw anyone demonstrating outside, or people marching around or praying or laughing or booing during the movie. Everybody was respectful, and everyone was there to be entertained. Because it really was a comedy, it was meant to entertain us. It showed us that we live in this wonderful country, this wonderful city, where people are secure enough in their own beliefs that they are not challenged or unhinged when there's minor criticism of their religion or their faith. And I think that's a message that was brought out in the movie. Really, just for bringing that out, Bill Maher probably deserves some celestial brownie points for that.

MODERATOR

Paradise awaits him! [laughter]

PARKER

I would like to make a few random comments, perhaps. One just to touch on that question of resurrection in Egyptian, I would like to call it Egyptian mythology, I could be wrong about that. One of the things the movie provoked me to do was to go check my facts on some things. Facts like for example in the opening scene and throughout, in the closing scene, he kept referring to Revelations as if it's a book, which it's not. It's "The Revelation." There's only one. So in a movie, which one could argue was a comedy, but was advertised as a documentary. I mean, I think we need to make sure we come back to that. I watched a documentary the other day about falcons and it didn't look anything structurally like the movie we just watched on religion or non-religion.

MODERATOR

Well, to be fair, there are lots of types of documentaries, just like there are different forms of dramas and comedies. You can do all kinds of things.

PARKER

It's true, but I think it's important to remember he called it a documentary. The question of resurrection in other worlds, or in other religious traditions, I thought, "Wow, I never heard that particular example before." I went and looked it up and I thought, well, how would we deal with this? Here's how we deal with it. Jesus Christ is a human being. He was a bona-fied man, who did that. In the other traditions, it's not. There's no incarnation that comes with that. It's the story of a God in those pre-Christian societies where that happened. And so, for us, we would say, thank God. It's amazing and it's a miracle of His own that those are present in those traditions. Why? Because they all point to Christ, who did.

HUDDLESTUN

Well, there are examples. Let me put on my academic historian hat. There are examples of people who died. There's a wonderful story of Apollonius of Tiana, a contemporary with Jesus [...] Apollonius of Tiana — there was a figure who had a life very similar to that of Jesus, who was believed to be a Son of God. By the way, saying someone was son of God, of divine origin, was very common in this period. You can look at emperors, athletes, philosophers, great figures who contributed a lot to society in the Hellenistic world would be then considered divine or semi-divine, meaning they had a divine father and a human mother. Christianity, if you consider Christianity from its Hellenistic side and also from the Jewish or Judaism side, I would argue there's almost nothing new in Christianity when you look at the Hellenistic influence and the Judaism side. The lan-

guage, even, in the Gospels, it's language of Evangelion, of Sotar, of the savior — that kind of language you find in Greek inscriptions, explicitly applied to emperors and philosophers and others. So, there are other things he doesn't do in the movie that relate to that. In terms of what I do in teaching, I think the movie really is something you might show in a philosophy of religion class. Because it's really more Bill Maher personally saying these are the questions, these are the doubts I have about the larger questions of life. If there is there a God, why is there evil in the world, etc. But it also could be used in a class I teach on theories of religion, when you talk about why people believe, for example. That comes out. But I don't know. I think you're right, exactly. It's not a... I would never think of it as a documentary.

MODERATOR

No, ultimately it's a movie about Bill Maher.

HUDDLESTUN

I would have done it completely different, like Herb said. I mean, if I were doing this. But that's not what he was about. This is his own personal shtick. He wants to do this with humor. And you're right, to get us involved in it and to find ourselves laughing at things we would never have laughed about.

MODERATOR

We need to wrap this up because John has a brown bag lunch in 45 minutes in this very space. I went to the movie twice, and the second time I chatted with the owner of the Terrace Theater a little bit, just to find out if it had been popular, and how many people had been coming, and so on. One of the things he mentioned: it was one of the top ten films of the year for the Terrace, in terms of box office receipts. And he's received no complaints at all, from anyone. Which I thought was interesting. Well, anyway, all right, well thank you all. I thought that was pretty fun. I hope we can do this again, actually. [applause]

[END]