

REPORT

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# Debating God: Atheist and Evangelical Face Off at Notre Dame

*Sam Harris and William Lane Craig pack the house, talk over each other, leave audience wanting more...*

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

The University of Notre Dame had cause for its anxiety leading up to last week's big debate between the New Atheist polemicist Sam Harris and the evangelical philosopher William Lane Craig. It's said that all publicity is good publicity, but one needn't strain too hard to find an exception—least of all in the history of God debates.

The great 1925 Scopes “monkey trial” in Dayton, Tennessee, was instigated by a cabal of locals looking to drum up some business. They got it. Two giants descended on Dayton to defend God and evolution, respectively, and reporters from all the big cities came with them, filling up the hotels. But, mostly, their condescending dispatches only antagonized pious small-towners there and around the country. By the end, most people in Dayton wished it had never happened.

Ditto for Dover, Pennsylvania, in 2005. Even before the trial there about Intelligent Design theory had ended, the school board members who'd started it were voted out of office. Pat Robertson warned on TV, “You just voted God out of your city.” The whole thing was a mess.

Notre Dame didn't need another publicity flap. “It's like Obama coming,” a student told me. By that, of course, he was referring to the president's commencement address in 2009, which captured national attention. Those who weren't offended that an abortion-rights politician should be honored at a Catholic institution were embarrassed by those who were. Again, for all concerned, a mess.

These kinds of debates are actually fairly common at campuses and churches around the country. They're unfailingly popular, and YouTube is littered with tapings of them, which junkies like me collect and argue about like trading cards. But I especially anticipated this one. Never before had these two crusaders faced each other. All the better that it was happening at a flagship Catholic school, lately accustomed to being a flashpoint in the culture wars.

Weeks in advance, the campus lit up with controversy. Neither debater was Catholic, some complained, so the religion of Notre Dame and most of its students wouldn't have anyone to root for. Others felt that the very idea of a debate like this offends the subtlety and dignity of the questions at

stake. Still others simply considered one or both of the chosen debaters an idiot.

Controversy was the intent all along. “The main reason we did it was for the discussion in the dorms,” says Malcolm Phelan, a junior, who helped put the debate together and gave the opening speech. He’s tall, a bit lanky, steady with his eye-contact, and erring on the side of clean-cut. Around here, he’s someone who can get things done and get money out of the administration. Even professors talk about him with a shade of awe. As a freshman he was class president, but then he quit student government for greater things. He also has a visionary streak, and a knack for stringing winged words together into crescendos. Busy Notre Dame students need this, he says. They live in an “upper-class Catholic Disneyland” and need to be shaken up. “I wouldn’t necessarily call myself an instigator, but—” he says, trailing off. His word, not mine.

Phelan’s co-conspirator behind the scenes was Arnav Dutt. Someone introduced him to me as The Thinker. While he talks, he looks down and pauses mid-sentence if it isn’t coming out exactly right, his eyes covered behind glasses and a Justin Bieber-type mop-top. He’s the child of a Catholic and a Hindu, both non-practicing. Like Phelan, Dutt considers himself an atheist, though his education has been mostly in Catholic environments. “This issue”—that of the debate—“has thrust itself on me my whole life.” He takes it seriously and wonders whether some of the critics are right; maybe a big debate is the wrong approach. When I ask what he thinks it will do for people, he turns pensive again. “There’s a big difference between what I think they’re getting and what I hope they’re getting,” he says.

## Up For Debate

This wasn’t the first such event at Notre Dame—they billed it, actually, as “God Debate II.” God Debate I happened last year. It was also Phelan’s doing, with a friend who has since transferred to an Ivy. The idea apparently came first to one Assistant Dean Joseph Stanfiel, while reading *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris’s New Atheist compatriot. He floated the idea of hosting a Hitchens debate on campus, but didn’t get very far until Malcolm Phelan became involved.

Phelan faced setbacks too, initially. Most department heads and administrators they approached said no. “We were told to think smaller,” he recalls. “We had to stick to our guns.” So they did, until they reached a turning point in the person of Father Theodore Hesburgh. As Notre Dame’s president emeritus, he’s a legendary figure whose picture in a campus food court shows him locking arms alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. Hesburgh gave the debate his endorsement, plus some money. Most everyone else fell in line after that.

The general consensus is that last year’s match was disappointing. The debaters, Dinesh D’Souza and Christopher Hitchens, are rhetoricians more than thinkers, and the discussion didn’t get very deep as a result. Undergraduates at Notre Dame have to take two courses each in philosophy and theology, so their foundation is stronger than most. The students wanted more.

Hence this year’s choices, more or less. William Lane Craig is something of a virtuoso at this. He

started doing God debates almost thirty years ago, with eight years of debate-team experience in high school and college, as well as a pair of PhDs and a respectable career in philosophy. Sam Harris has (only) one PhD—in neuroscience—and his authority is more charismatic than credentialed. “I’m kind of self-taught in religion, with all the benefits and liabilities of that,” Harris says. “I’ve never studied it formally with anyone.” Three bestselling books on the subject, though, have made his a household name, and the long endnotes that pad the backs of them contribute some nerd appeal. But Arnav Dutt admits, a little grudgingly, “We weren’t hiring them for academic value alone.”

Academics, for one thing, don’t usually get paid like this. The latest debate cost as much as \$63,000, compared to around \$46,000 last year. Most of it was speaker fees.

Craig took part in the planning from the start. He insisted on particular details of the debate’s format, down to the timing of each speech and the placement of the clocks. (“Probably the most important technique to master,” he has told me about debating, “is managing the clock.”) Craig made sure that he would go first. He also suggested the topic, which bears on the subject of Harris’s latest book, *The Moral Landscape*.

The next task for Phelan and Dutt was seeding a controversy. Last year, they planned a whole sequence of pro and con op-eds in the campus newspaper. They only had to manufacture a single op-ed this year, which was written by their friend Mary Buechler. It’s as endearingly earnest and wowingly articulate as she is in person. The essay points out Craig and Harris’s common ground: the belief that objective moral truth is possible. Maybe more significantly, though, it was the first time she had come out publicly as an atheist, after going to Catholic schools most of her life. She isn’t sure what the others in her Catholic cappella group will think, but her professors in the English department cheered her on.

Once again, anyway, the hype paid off. All 900 seats in the brand-new, ten-story-high Leighton Concert Hall sold out within hours.

### **And in the Atheist Corner...**

The look of the debate itself was typical, if understated. (Compare this, for instance, with a recent Craig debate in Mexico, where the podium was in the middle of a boxing ring.) The debaters sat onstage at a table with the moderator between them—Michael Rea, who heads Notre Dame’s prestigious Center for the Philosophy of Religion. They each gave their remarks by rising, one at a time, to separate podiums on either side of the table.

William Lane Craig had on his signature attire: a blue blazer over a starched white shirt, a red tie, and brighter red suspenders. (“He’s hip, man,” a student whispered to me, “or he’s trying to be.” That’s one way of putting it.) Sam Harris, younger by almost two decades, wore no tie, just a black suit and a dark blue shirt.

The usher had seated me alongside reporters from campus publications, and we exchanged notes a

little. Opposite them was a brawny guy who almost immediately fell asleep.

Though Harris read his notes from a gray MacBook, it was only Craig who had slides. This proved significant. Though the title of the debate was “Is Good from God?”, it didn’t appear on the default Notre Dame slide. Craig went first, and he displayed his own more formal title overhead: “Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural?” Then, as far as he was concerned, he set the terms of the debate. He laid out, in carefully-worded bullet points, both what he would argue that night and what he would not. He would argue that God’s existence is the sole sound foundation for an objective morality. He wouldn’t argue that God actually exists, or that you can’t behave morally without believing in God, or what particular moral values are. He also gave reasons why Harris’s book was wrong. It was an intentionally narrow agenda.

Nearly the entire time afterward, the two talked past each other. Each accused the other of misrepresentations and red herrings, then pushed on so as not to lose the offensive. “Allowing yourself to get led around the nose by a person like Craig is a losing strategy,” Harris says. In his twenty-minute opening speech, he laid out his concept of the “moral landscape” based on the “well-being of conscious creatures,” discernible by science. In his so-called “rebuttal” periods, Harris attacked biblical morality and compared it to the Taliban. He addressed most of the subjects Craig explicitly set out to avoid. There were also some off-color remarks about fried chicken on death row and trailer parks. But being off-color was the point. “I hate to break it to you here at Notre Dame,” said Harris, “but Christianity is a cult of human sacrifice.”

Then, at every opportunity, Craig listed the points he’d made, noted that Harris had failed to respond to them, and declared victory thus far. I heard a student tell his friends at the end, “Craig had already won by the first rebuttal!”

Each spoke at an entirely different pace. Craig charged through his speeches with hardly a chance for him to breathe or us to consider. Whether at the podium or not, he speaks in flawless paragraphs. The next day he told me about feeling pressure to put on a rigorous show for his fellow philosophers at Notre Dame, whose department has been the headquarters of Christian philosophy since the 1980s. Harris, however, spoke slowly, in catchy salvos alternating with silence, as if he wanted to ensure everything could sink in for the ordinary undergrad. At the end of one speech, for instance: Pause. “Please think about this.” Pause. Applause. He explained afterward, “This is just the way I speak.”

The question-and-answer session had even more awkward moments than usual for these debates. As is usual, long lines of mostly young men formed at each microphone. One guy presented Harris with detailed scientific evidence for Our Lady of Fatima’s miracles. Another told Craig that God had recently told him that homosexuality is okay; Craig refused to dignify such “feigned sincerity” with an answer. Craig said later that the audience questions had disappointed him, but he suspects it was mainly the fault of the local atheist group, rather than Notre Dame students. (Notre Dame doesn’t have an official atheist group of its own.)

The benefit of the question period, at least, was that it got the two finally talking to each other. They had a spat about psychopathy. Accusations of misrepresentation continued. Harris told the audience, “I’ll leave it to you to sort it out on YouTube.” Inevitably, many will.

## Fighting Irishly

When the auditorium emptied out, the overcast evening had turned into a rainy night, and the lobby stayed full for some time. Harris and Craig signed books. The film *Waiting for “Superman”* was playing in an adjacent auditorium, as part of a program on education policy—astonishingly, also the work of Malcolm Phelan. I imposed myself on groups of students discussing and couples arguing.

“The apologist won because his structure was perfect,” said one young woman, referring to Craig. Her friend thought Harris won since he addressed the topic more fully. Both were disappointed that neither seemed to answer each other’s claims. But they agreed that this debate was better than last year’s.

Another group was a trio of guys, all atheists. “Reading Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins really changed the way I thought,” one said. “Sam kinda blew it,” said another, but the third liked Harris because he’d never realized that an atheist could believe in objective morality. “Sam,” that is. Their conversation was on a first-name basis with him, though not with Craig.

“I liked Harris more than I thought I would,” said a guy in the next huddle over. He talked like he was trying to stare me down. Harris impressed him by sticking it to Notre Dame’s Catholics. “Everything about this university is so appropriate!” He and his friend argued about whether it’s dishonest to be just “socially” Catholic. The girl they were with took off.

Eventually I made my way to a reception at Morris Inn, the on-campus hotel. The organizers were there, as was Craig, his wife Jan, and a handful of philosophy professors. Harris made an appearance later, and one of the elder philosophers greeted him, saying, “Thanks for representing the Catholic view!” (This turned out to be a controversial claim.) With time, people filtered out until only the core group of organizers and their friends remained.

I stayed around until almost 2 in the morning with Malcolm Phelan, Arnav Dutt, Mary Buechler, and company in the hotel lobby. By then, it had become an informal planning meeting for God Debate III. Dean Stanfiel was there, as were a pair of anthropologists. They could all barely hold in their excitement about making this an ongoing thing—a tradition, they mimed, as people like to say at Notre Dame. It could even be combined with football games. The God Debate could be a signature event for the school. It should be. *It must be*. They talked about where to find the money.

I ducked out of the circle after a while, and Arnav Dutt sat down next to me. He asked what I thought about all of this, and seemed concerned that it was getting too show-offy and not academic enough. That led us pretty quickly to the subject of Notre Dame football, and whether the school would be

better off without the Fighting Irish. It's complicated, and he was thinking hard, looking down. I offered my well-deserved congratulations for "Is Good from God?" in any case.

What can you expect, really? What could he? A bolt of lightning? At least the great evolution trials ended with a verdict, and a gavel. Sometimes God debates will end with an audience poll, but not this one. The question wasn't finally settled, and still the debaters each did what they do best, despite each other. Sometimes, at a God debate or a football game, the best you can hope for is a decent after-party.

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