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Mixing politics and religion leads to lively discussion at Miami Book Fair

BY CONNIE OGLE - COGLE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

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TRUTH SEEKER: Barbara Ehrenreich, left, is interviewed by the Rev. Priscilla Whitehead at the Miami Book Fair International. PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

So, remember how you're not supposed to talk about religion and politics in polite company? On a cloudy, cool Wednesday night at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus, Miami Book Fair International said: Fie on such restrictions! Let's talk about both.

The fair welcomed journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, who discussed her memoir *Living With a Wild God: An Unbeliever's Search for the Truth About Everything*, and Chuck Todd, chief White House correspondent for NBC News, host of *Meet the Press*, and author of *The Stranger: Barack Obama in the White House*.

Ehrenreich, a scientist by training and a "fourth-generation atheist," was interviewed by the Rev. Priscilla Whitehead, a former longtime minister at Church by the Sea in Bal Harbour, because, as Ehrenreich explained, she finds the "me me me" of memoir too embarrassing. Her book looks back at and tries to make sense of a mystical spiritual experience she had as a teenager, one she hid for years.

When asked what she thought that intense feeling was, she replied, "A little spot of mental illness."

Now, in examining the phenomenon of spiritual ecstasy and rituals, she admits, "I feel like I've come out of the closet," but is adamant that she remains an unbeliever and celebrates the scientific method of asking questions.

"Don't ask me to believe. Don't believe when there's a chance of knowing."

Over on the political side, Todd drew a large crowd and deconstructed the last six years of the Obama administration, saying he felt the president's biggest problem was that he never learned to play the Washington game.

"He views Washington as cynically as we do," Todd said, "but he can't do that."

He discussed Obama's legacy on immigration and health reform and said there are two truths that can't be denied about this president: He didn't change "the tone and tenor of politics," and "the Middle East is more chaotic today; it will be more chaotic when he leaves office than when he took office. Is this on him? It's hard to say it's all on him."

Of course, some fairgoers skipped the religion and politics, for stories and libations at The Swamp. The winners of the #SixWords contest read their short, short, short works evoking Miami. Lip Service launched its book *Badass* with slightly longer readings, and the Miami Culinary Institute's Gourmet Club offered sips of its new Belgian saison beer (assessment: tasty, but I hear it's better with a Meyer lemon slice).

As for that gloomy weather, nobody paid much attention to it. And the authorities assure us better days lie ahead as the fair continues through Sunday.

"I promise you this rain is not going to last," said Mitchell Kaplan, co-founder of the fair.