

Review: JAH226

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS'S SLEDGEHAMMER RHETORIC

a book review of
god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything
by Christopher Hitchens
(Hachette Books Group, 2007)

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Christopher Hitchens does not like “god” one bit. In his polemical and sometimes bombastic tome, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Ruins Everything*, the acerbic author presents what aspires to be a tour-de-force refutation of religion in all its forms. He refuses to capitalize the word *god*, since that would be a grammatical compliment to an entity that does not exist. Hitchens says, unlike belief in other nonexistent entities (such as unicorns), belief in god “poisons everything”—from politics to sexuality to art to education and beyond. He offers a litany of evils committed in the names of various religions, but his main targets are Christianity and Islam. The title of the book is a negation of the Muslim affirmation “Allahu Akbar,” or “God is great.”

Hitchens gives no concessions to religion in this book. He instead prosecutes a scorched earth (or heaven) policy on every page. Amid his chronicling of various religious people who supported or who failed to oppose Nazism, for example, Hitchens injects but *one sentence* about Protestant pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s opposition to Hitler (p. 241). Hitchens says nothing of The Barmen Declaration (1934), a document written principally by German theologian Karl Barth, which unequivocally opposed Nazism for theological reasons.¹ Neither does Hitchens mention the heroism of the Protestant Le Chambon-sur-Lignon village community in France, which bravely sheltered six thousand Jews to protect them from the Nazis.² This is typical of his approach: expose religious vices, and ignore or redefine religious virtues.

It may seem unlikely that an intemperate book attacking all religion would be a bestseller in the United States, a nation of believers in God or a higher power, but Hitchens rides on the coat tails of “the new atheism,” a recent movement led by the likes of crusading unbelievers Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. The new atheism was triggered by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Dawkins, Harris, and others contend that Islamic terrorism is merely a symptom of the intrinsic evil of all religion. Hitchens continues this agenda.

Like Dawkins and Harris, Hitchens routinely uses sledgehammer rhetoric. He invokes the worst possible examples of religious abuse and condemns it in the strongest possible terms. He is not content to critique religion; he must smash it to bits. Unlike Dawkins and Harris, science is not his *métier*, although he uses his naturalistic account of science as a bludgeon against religion as often as possible (and never convincingly). Hitchens employs in lieu of science his wide-ranging (if tendentious) knowledge of history and current events in savaging religion of all kinds. His knowledge of history and current events (often gained firsthand as a reporter) may be impressive, but his interpretations and arguments are another matter. I have categorized his main errors as follows.

Confusing “god” with God. The best way to assess Hitchens’s jeremiad or lengthy grievance is to grant him the idea of “god,” while defending the one true God of biblical revelation.³ The Bible proclaims that there are many false gods. Christians have no need to defend religion *in general*, since Christianity by its very nature claims to be the exclusive and final revelation of God to humanity (see John 14:1-6; Acts 4:12; and Gal. 1:6-11). Christians, consequently, can accept many of Hitchens’s attacks on religion as criticisms of false gods without thereby engaging in special pleading for their own view. Some of Hitchens’s attacks on the core beliefs of non-Christian religions are cogent; his attacks on Christianity, however, are far less convincing.

Hitchens’s treatment of Mormonism (161–168) exposes its corrupt origination, bizarre claims, and unsavory history. This exposé, however, does not argue for atheism *per se*; a Christian (or a Jew) could read it and grant much of its force, since the gods of Mormonism are false gods.⁴

Much of what Hitchens offers about Islam, similarly, is correct. His chapter on the Qur’an exposes the dark essence of Islam: its incorrigible militancy, intolerance, and irrationality. Hitchens claims that it plagiarizes, however, from two other false religious texts, the Old and New Testaments.

Hitchens fires off many criticisms of distinctively Roman Catholic beliefs and practices, such as the celibacy of the clergy (which, incidentally, is unbiblical) and the abuses that often result from this practice.⁵ Some of his objections are unfair (such as his infamous and bizarre attacks on Mother Theresa), but Protestants are unaffected by that, since their understanding of Christianity precludes such things as the authority of the Pope, transubstantiation, the canonization of saints, and so on.

Protestant Christians (whom Hitchens does not spare from criticism) nevertheless can learn from him by granting that they often have been unchristian and positively immoral; Protestant Christians have acted in ways that betray what the Bible teaches. Where Hitchens legitimately has called the church on coming up short, we should recognize the sin and see to it that we don’t fall into the same error again.

Hitchens mainly is concerned with refuting the monotheism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (although he does spend chapter 14 on Eastern religions, which are not usually monotheistic). He hardly breaks a sweat in arguing that God does not exist; nevertheless, he thinks that he has established it as beyond question. In this, he joins his unbelieving colleagues Dawkins and Harris in dismissing natural theology (the philosophical case for theism) without any serious engagement. For Hitchens’s attack on all gods and religions to be successful, however, he would need to furnish a strong argument denying the supernatural realm. Only then would it follow that all the gods of all the religions would be merely of human design. Hitchens’s arguments against theism are made in chapters 5 (“The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False”) and 6 (“Arguments from Design”). These chapters are both thin and shrill; neither demonstrates even the slightest awareness of the philosophically and scientifically sophisticated arguments for the existence of a personal and moral creator and designer of the universe.⁶ Those are the kinds of arguments that convinced formerly atheistic philosopher Anthony Flew that “there is a God.”⁷

Ignoring Reasonable Christianity. To begin chapter 5, Hitchens quotes (without attribution) several Christian thinkers to the effect that Christianity is opposed to reason. He quotes Thomas Aquinas as saying, “I am a man of one book” (63), for example, and includes other similar quotes. This misleads the unsuspecting reader into thinking that Christianity always pits religious faith against reason. This is laughably false in the case of Aquinas, who is famous for his rational arguments for God’s existence. There may be rough strands and pockets of anti-intellectualism in Christian history, but there also is a rich and deep current of vigorous intellectualism, as evidenced by historic Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Pascal, and Edwards, as well as by modern intellectuals such as G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, J. P. Moreland, and William Lane Craig. Rather than engaging Christian theism (or any other religion) at its rational best,⁸ however, Hitchens scavenges around for the worst examples of illogic, ignorance, and outright stupidity in religion. The straw man makes many loud-mouthed appearances in *god Is Not Great*.

Misunderstanding Design and the Fall. Hitchens ridicules the argument from design more than he rationally challenges it. He uses the standard argument that nature manifests too many defects to be

designed. (He claims, e.g., that the human eye is inefficiently designed and ineptly fashioned, although the stock argument for this is false.⁹) In so doing, Hitchens never thoughtfully interacts with *the design inference* advanced by the Intelligent Design (ID) movement.

In a nutshell, William Dembski argues that if something in nature cannot be accounted for on the basis of chance and/or natural law, then the best explanation for its basic structure is design—that is, *intelligent* causation. For example, the complex and specified informational patterns in DNA cannot be the result of natural laws because they are too complicated; nor can their specificity be explained by chance combinations because these are too improbable. The best explanation for this genetic language, therefore, is a designer. ID theorists grant that a design inference is not sufficient to prove all of the important attributes of God, but their arguments spell trouble for naturalism, which attempts to account for everything in nature on the basis of impersonal chance and necessity.¹⁰

When Hitchens and others point to the pain, dysfunction, and frustration of nature as an argument against design, they ignore a crucial Christian doctrine: the fall. The world as it now exists is not the way it was in the beginning. As Francis Schaeffer stressed, the world is, in a sense, “abnormal.”¹¹ Everything in creation is marred and subject to frustration because of the entrance of sin at the fall (Gen. 3), as Paul highlights graphically when he says that the entire creation “groans” in travail, awaiting its final redemption (Rom. 8:18-26). The fact that something may appear to have been designed poorly does not mean that it has not been designed *at all*. The American Motors Gremlin automobile, for example, was infamous for its many design flaws, but no one argued that it came into existence without design. The biblical worldview claims that original creation was wisely and intelligently designed, but that the fall damaged creation such that it may appear poorly designed.

Dismissing Christian Contribution. Again, Hitchens argues that religion “poisons everything,” but a strong historical case can be made that Christianity in particular has motivated a host of beneficial movements in history.¹² I will select only one to discuss. Christianity was at the start and heart of the scientific revolution in Europe, beginning around the middle of the sixteenth century. Given that Hitchens (and the other new atheists) think that science has displaced God, this is an ironic truth. Non-Christian philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued that modern science was born in a Christian cradle;¹³ more recently, respected sociologist and historian Rodney Stark has staked the same claim in more detail.¹⁴ That Christians were at the forefront of modern science cannot really be disputed. Why? The Christian worldview was the impetus for science for many reasons, but principally because, unlike other worldviews, it deemed nature as good, rational, non-divine, and worthy of investigation and development for the glory of God.¹⁵

Atheism, on the other hand, lives on borrowed (or stolen) intellectual capital. It must take the rationality and knowability of nature as a brute and inexplicable given, since nature, according to atheism, was not created or designed by a rational Mind. To atheists, mindless matter precedes the appearance of minds. Minds turn up for no reason. Our reasoning just happens to have the resources for developing sophisticated scientific theories about the universe and ingenious ways to harness nature’s potential through technology. One atheist mathematician, who puzzled over the success of his discipline in a Godless cosmos, wrote an article on the “unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics.”¹⁶ Given a naturalistic/atheistic worldview, as he observed, there is no reason to believe that mathematics should correspond with the objective world so wonderfully; yet it *does*. The idea of a coherent and knowable universe is unreasonable for atheism, but it is perfectly reasonable for those who believe in God as Creator and Designer.

Disregarding Miracles and Biblical Scholarship. Of course, no atheist apologetic would be complete without assaults on the Bible. Hitchens’s criticisms are both high-handed and one-sided; they differ little in form from those of Dawkins and Harris. Hitchens rules out miracles since he believes there is no God, but, as noted, his arguments against God’s existence are inadequate. He invokes Hume’s famous critique of miracles, but without any awareness that this argument has fallen on very hard times in contemporary philosophy.¹⁷ He rejects the Old Testament as having been disproved by revisionist archaeology, but

these conclusions are far from self-evident, as opposing scholars have noted.¹⁸ He claims that seeming discrepancies in the Gospels indicate fabrication and shoddy work by their writers. Christian scholars have developed harmonies of the Gospels for centuries, however, and contemporary scholars such as Craig Blomberg have directed their considerable talents to giving plausible reconstructions that are coherent.¹⁹

Those who read *god Is Not Great* without any knowledge of Christian philosophy, history, and apologetics easily could surmise that all the rationality is on the side of the atheists and that Christians are nothing but benighted and dangerous fools stuck waist deep in premodern superstitions that threaten to poison the civilized world. This view, however, is merely the verdict of the arrogant and the ignorant. The truth lies elsewhere: in the greatness of God Himself.

— reviewed by Douglas Groothuis

NOTES

1. A copy of The Barmen Declaration may be found online at <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/barmen.htm>.
2. On the people of Le Chambon, see Phillip Haillie, "Between Cruelty and Goodness," in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, ed. Christina Hoff Summers and Fred Sommers, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2007), 4–15.
3. This review offers many general responses and refers to a number sources; an entire book is needed to refute all of Hitchens's errors. I do not address his claim that the Old Testament presents a vicious and outmoded morality, which is based on the tactic of selectively citing Old Testament texts that offend contemporary moral sensibilities. I addressed similar arguments, however, in my review of Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. See Douglas Groothuis, "A Summary Critique: Sam Harris's Armory for Secularists against a Christian Nation," *Christian Research Journal* 30, 2 (2007): 46–48, <http://www.equip.org/JAH222>.
4. See Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Hank Hanegraaff (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), chap. 6.
5. See 1 Tim. 4:1–7, where Paul warns that some will err by forbidding marriage.
6. For more on natural theology and its forms, see Douglas Groothuis, "Theistic Proofs," in *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, ed. W. C. Campbell-Jack, Gavin J. McGrath, and C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 698–702.
7. See Anthony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).
8. For a case for Christian intellectual engagement, see J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997).
9. See William Dembski, *The Design Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 59–60, where he explains that the inverse retina of the eye is not a design flaw.
10. On the design inference and its implications for naturalism, see Dembski.
11. See Francis Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), chap. 5.
12. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), and Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great about Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007), chaps. 5–10.
13. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1926), chap. 1.
14. See Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformation, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 2.
15. See Kenneth Samples, *Without a Doubt* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 187–94, for a powerful explanation of this.
16. Eugene Wigner, "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences," *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13, 1 (February 1960).
17. See R. Douglas Geivett, Gary Habermas, eds., *In Defense of Miracles: A Comprehensive Case for God's Action in History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
18. For a popular, but helpful, response to criticisms of the Old Testament (and the Bible as a whole), see Robert J. Hutchinson, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Bible* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007). For a more detailed defense of the Old Testament, see Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
19. See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), especially chaps. 4 and 5.