

A STUDY GUIDE FOR

IS GOD GREAT?

A DEBATE

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A STUDY GUIDE
compiled by Bill Wortman



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THE PARTICIPANTS



Christopher Hitchens is a political observer, journalist, and literary critic. Educated at Oxford and Cambridge, Mr. Hitchens is a naturalized American citizen and a self-proclaimed “anti-theist.” He is also a regular columnist for *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Nation*, among others. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Mr. Hitchens has written extensively against religion because he deems it dangerous. He is the author of the *New York Times* Bestseller, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. He also served as editor for *The Portable Atheist*, a collection of essays spanning the classical world to the present.



John Lennox is a Reader in Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green College, University of Oxford. He holds doctorates from Oxford (D. Phil.), Cambridge (Ph.D.), and the University of Wales (D.Sc.) and an MA in Bioethics from the University of Surrey. A prominent voice in the science vs. religion controversy, Prof. Lennox is the author of *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (2007). Lennox is a Christian.



Christopher Metress earned his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. He currently serves as a Professor of English at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama and as the Director of the Fellows Program. His book *The Lynching of Emmett Till* (2007) was named by the Association of American University Presses among its “Best Books For Understanding Race Relations in the U.S.”

INTRODUCTION

Asking the question “Is God Great?” may seem strange to many. They argue that, in a time when people cannot even agree on God’s existence, such a question seems presumptuous at the very least. But God’s existence and his greatness are inextricably related in the minds of most people. The New Atheists fervently “preach” that the God conceived of and portrayed in the Bible is decidedly not great. This, they argue, is a primary reason for disbelieving his very existence. The Christian proclamation has been that the biblical God not only exists, but that his very essence is immeasurably great.

“Is God Great?” sees two of the West’s very best minds face off on this compelling subject. The robust debate features a unique blend of both planned remarks and fast-paced dialogue that tackles these issues in a refreshing and informative light. In the spring of 2009, Journalist Christopher Hitchens, an atheist, and Scientist John Lennox, a Christian, met to debate the topic, “Is God Great?” at the Wright Center on the beautiful campus of Samford University in Birmingham, AL.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DEBATE

The debate is organized into five segments. In segment one each participant gives an opening statement fifteen minutes in length. Following the opening statements are ten minute rebuttals. Segment three is much less structured. Hitchens and Lennox, seated in comfortable chairs, are asked questions by the audience and inevitably begin to banter in respectful but lively fashion about their respective answers. The final segment is comprised of five minute closing statements.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide will introduce each topic segment and explain as simply as possible the meaning of that segment's thesis and the nature of the conversation that ensues. It is probably best to read each topic's introduction first and then watch the debate segment that corresponds to it. Following the introduction is a series of questions for further discussion. These are intended for group discussion. At the conclusion of all the segments there is a recommended reading section on the topics discussed.

THREE PRACTICAL HINTS

- A common way to watch such a highly charged debate like this is to look for a rhetorical knockout punch or silver bullet. But a debate about serious ideas and their consequences should not be viewed as merely another form of film entertainment. Instead, the goal is to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of *both* sides by listening to two highly accomplished scholars present their respective arguments.
- It is natural for people to identify more closely with one side of the debate. Therefore, it is all too easy to listen carelessly to what the opponent of one's own views is arguing. So as a practical strategy, it is recommended that you try as a priority to understand the arguments of the person you *don't* tend to agree with.
- Unfortunately, much of public debate these days is nothing more than an emotional shouting match of talking points. This debate represents a contrast to this. Two educated and well-informed men have a robust and civil disagreement, where they respectfully allow their opponent to finish his thoughts without rude interruptions. In your own discussions on this debate, you should consider the debate itself as a model of how people can respectfully, yet forcefully, dialogue.

PART I: OPENING STATEMENTS (9:00 - 41:10)

INTRODUCTION

Christopher Hitchens argues two main points in his opening remarks: first, he explains why he does not think God exists and second, he explains why he is happy that God (the God of the Bible) does not exist. He does not approach these two arguments in order, but mingles the two main themes throughout his statement. His main objection to the “God hypothesis” is that it completely depends upon the argument from design. Hitchens sees plenty of evidence that the cosmos was not designed and so reasons that there is no need to postulate a Divine Designer. What makes him happy about God’s nonexistence? It deprives the believer of the claim to know God’s will exclusively. Religious belief causes theists to be “neurotic”, for a believer exalts humility as a virtue and yet arrogantly claims to know particular things about God’s desires and decrees that the non-believer has no access to.

Lennox opens with two preliminary points: 1. Hitchens’s criticism, “religion poisons everything”, is without any meaningful force, since politics and science (and atheism) *can* be poisonous too. But that is different from whether religion *intrinsically* poisons everything. 2. He rejects the notion that God and science are mutually exclusive explanations for the universe. Science explains how things work in nature, while God is necessary to explain their origin. After covering his preliminary points, Lennox makes an argument for God’s greatness from three main areas of emphasis: first, a Divine intelligence is the best explanation for both the origin of the universe and its rational intelligibility (rational intelligibility means that the universe is comprehensible because it operates by fundamental laws rather than being chaotic and unpredictable). Second, theism provides society with a rational basis for morality and for the equality and freedom of all human beings. Third, hope for ultimate justice is grounded in a good and great God, who at one point in history dramatically righted a wrong. Thus resurrection of Jesus, who was executed unjustly, foreshadows an ultimate justice to come.

QUESTIONS

1. Hitchens says that “there is nothing superstitious or supernatural” about deistic beliefs. Is this true? Is deism closer to atheism or to theism?
2. Is there something “neurotic”, as Hitchens says, about the fact that believers claim to be humble and yet also to know God’s specific will?
3. Does Hitchens provide convincing evidence that the universe has not been designed by a Divine intelligence? Why or why not?
4. Lennox asserts that scientists conduct their science on the basis of faith. Explain what he means by this.
5. Lennox says, “atheism is irrational, anti-scientific, and incoherent, though emotionally its adherents seem unable to take this on board”. Explain why you agree with or disagree with the various elements of this statement.

PART II: REBUTTALS (41:10 - 1:03:15)

INTRODUCTION

In his rebuttal Christopher Hitchens focuses on two main areas: first, on the argument from design and second, on the evil nature of the biblical concept of God. That is, he retreads the two main themes he set out in his opening statement: 1. Why he does not think God exists and 2. Why he is happy that the biblical God does not exist. Only now he confronts Lennox's main criticisms of these two themes. With respect to design, Hitchens insists that one has to be narrowly selective in analyzing the universe to find evidence of design. When an observer considers the *end* rather than the origin of the universe (that the universe will eventually implode upon itself), then it becomes clear that the cosmos was not designed. With respect to the biblical God's nature, it is clear that he is not a "benevolent despot", but something much worse, something more akin to an Orwellian Big Brother.

Lennox answers Hitchens's two main points in the following way: 1. The design argument is not weakened by the fact that the universe will end cataclysmically. This only indicates that the cosmos was deliberately designed to be *temporal*. Furthermore, the Bible (2 Pet 3) indicated long ago what the physicists are only now confirming: that the earth will be burned up in intense heat. 2. God's "watching" over human beings is not like that of Big Brother, but more like that of a wife who watches over the needs and interests of her husband. Lastly, Lennox says that there is nothing neurotic about knowing God or his will. Hitchens is confident and sure that certain knowledge about God's will is arrogance. But isn't his own certainty about this a form of arrogance? In contrast, the theist does not ground his certain knowledge in his own powers of reason. It is not arrogance to accept the revelation, which God has given to the world in Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with Hitchens that it is arrogant to claim to know God's will or with Lennox who counters that this knowledge is *accepted* from God and is not limited to believers alone? Why or why not?
2. Hitchens claims that the fact of the universe's demise indicates that the cosmos was not designed, unless the designer was malevolent. What, if any, are the flaws in his point?
3. While Hitchens clearly does not like the idea of a Divine Being "watching" his every thought, word, and deed, Lennox has a very positive impression of this notion. What are the potential negative and positive aspects of God's "watching" the details of the daily lives of human beings?
4. Lennox says that Hitchens "missed his point completely" about Albert Einstein. Why do you think these two men see Einstein's views as significant in this debate? Does it matter to you what Einstein thought about God and his greatness? Why or why not?
5. Hitchens says that God "created [us] sick and [we are ordered] to be well". Lennox says that God "made us perfect" and we chose to become sick (at the so-called "Fall"). Yet God has provided a way of salvation from this sickness. What evidence is there from history for and against the notion of this Fall?

PART III: AUDIENCE QUESTIONS (1:03:15 - 1:37:45)

INTRODUCTION

The topics in this Q & A session meander around to such an extent that it is impossible to give a brief introduction to a specific set of themes. Instead, the questions may be slightly longer in order to introduce the background necessary to address the specific content of the question.

QUESTIONS

1. Hitchens and Lennox have an exchange about whether religion (Christianity in particular) is *innately* evil. They discuss Christ's explicit statements on physical violence. Did Jesus advocate physical violence as a means to advance his cause?
(Cf. Luke 12:49-53, Matthew 26:47-56, John 18:33-38)
2. Lennox is asked why the Christian notion of God is the exclusive option if there is evidence for a Divine Designer. He asserts that the question must be settled on the basis of evidence. He cites the resurrection of Christ and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies as key to the body of evidence for the truth of Christianity. What are the potential strengths and weaknesses of this evidence?
3. Lennox's reply to the question about why the Christian God must be the true identity of the Supreme Designer implies that the evidence for God (as a general concept) is not sufficient to lead a seeker to the unique Christian God in particular. More evidence is required to bring one from belief in God generally to belief in the unique Christian God specifically. How is the evidence for a Supreme Designer different from the evidence cited for the Christian God?
4. Hitchens is asked if he agrees with Peter Singer (an atheist and Bioethicist from Princeton University) that "...the life of a newborn baby is of less value...than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee..." Hitchens's response begins, "No, but then the 'why not?' is problematic". Why does he say that his disagreement with Singer is logically "problematic"?
5. To the question of what a student should do who entered a university sharing the core beliefs of that institution only to jettison those convictions while still a student, Hitchens advises that such a student should leave the institution, but Lennox encourages the student to remain. With whom do you agree and why?

PART IV: CLOSING STATEMENTS (1:37:45 - 1:51:55)

INTRODUCTION

Lennox closes with an emphasis on two major areas: first, he seeks to erase a few mischaracterizations of Christianity, which he believes Christopher Hitchens has promoted throughout the debate. Second, he sets forth some practical evidence from the positive influence of Christianity in culture. As evidence, he cites the argument of an article written by an atheist, Matthew Parris, in the Times Online (December 27th, 2008) who insists that Africa needs Christianity more than anything.

Hitchens makes two central points: first, he reiterates that God is unnecessary as an explanation for anything in our experience of nature or of morality and second, that religion's influence is always negative. He is especially concerned that the postulation of God as a universal explanation for everything we don't understand stunts further exploration for a clearer and more helpful answer to the greatest questions of life.

QUESTIONS

1. Earlier in the debate, Hitchens had made reference to Sigmund Freud's concept of wish-fulfillment to describe why believe in God. Lennox argues that if God exists, then it is the atheist who engages in wish-fulfillment by denying a Divine Judge to whom he must give account. Does the wish-fulfillment explanation tell us anything about whether God actually exists?
2. Lennox cites the article by atheist, Matthew Parris, about Africa's great need for the influence of Christianity. In what ways does Christianity benefit a continent such as Africa?
3. Lennox refers to the words of Jesus, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11), in order to confront Hitchens's statement that a shepherd is only interested in fleecing the sheep and eating them. Whose understanding of the meaning of Jesus' words seems most accurate to you? What accounts for their very different understanding of what this metaphor signifies?
4. Hitchens cites the influence of the famous Christian, William Wilberforce, in helping to overturn slavery as an example of how Christianity was slow historically in being a good influence. Does it reflect poorly on Christianity that slavery was not abolished in countries with a strong Christian influence until the 19th century? Why or why not?
5. Aside from the core arguments of the speakers, what other factors do you think lead you to agree or disagree with them?

RECOMMENDED READING

The following recommendations for further reading are deliberately few. They are intended for those who want to acquaint themselves with the details of the recent debates about God's existence. A debate of this kind ventures into science, history, philosophy, and biblical scholarship. For that reason, it is helpful to get the perspectives of authorities in different areas and so the recommendations are organized according to this criterion. Books marked with an asterisk (*) are written by Christian authors.

BOOKS BY SCIENTISTS:

Berlinski, David (2009). *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. New York: Basic Books.

*Lennox, John (2009). *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* London: Lion UK.

Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

BOOKS BY HISTORIANS:

Hitchens, Christopher (2007). *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve.

*Hart, David Bentley (2009). *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. New Haven: Yale UP.

BOOKS BY PHILOSOPHERS:

Singer, Peter (1993). *Practical Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Peguin.

*Craig, William Lane (1984, 2008). *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton: Crossway Books.

*Plantinga, Alvin (2000). *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford UP.

BOOKS BY BIBLICAL SCHOLARS:

Ehrman, Bart (2009). *Jesus Interrupted*. New York: Harper Collins.

*Roberts, Mark (2007). *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton: Crossway Books.

*Blomberg, Craig (1987). *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.



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