



DEBATE

# CAN ATHEISM SAVE EUROPE?

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CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS  
VS. JOHN LENNOX

# **CAN ATHEISM SAVE EUROPE?**

## **STUDY GUIDE**



FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

## THE PARTICIPANTS

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**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 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.



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**JAMES NAUGHTIE** is a British journalist and radio news presenter for the BBC. Since 1994 he has been one of the main presenters of Radio 4's Today program. He formerly worked for the BBC's *The World At One*. He serves as the incisive moderator for this event.

## INTRODUCTION

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A New Europe is emerging from the old order and with it, a modern version of an old philosophy. Dubbed the “New Atheism” advocates are calling for the abandonment of Europe’s religious heritage and the adoption of an aggressive secularism. Religion is detrimental to society, they argue. Indeed, in the words of Christopher Hitchens, it “*poisons everything.*”

Some, such as Professor John Lennox, strongly disagree. They maintain that, far from undermining society, the preservation of religious thought, and Christianity in particular, is vital to the survival of Western civilization.

All this leads to the inevitable questions: Should atheism replace Christianity in Europe? Does atheism have a better record than Christianity? And finally: Where would the New Atheism lead the New Europe?

The eminent and paradoxical journalist Christopher Hitchens and the witty and incisive Irish scientist John Lennox met to debate these questions in 2008. The event took place at Ussher Hall during the largest and most prestigious cultural festival in the world, the *Edinburgh International Festival*. The audience included a number of prominent British intellectuals including the world’s most famous atheist Richard Dawkins, whose reaction to the lively arguments can be seen throughout the debate.

## THE DEBATE

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This debate is traditional in structure. It involves no conversational give and take between Hitchens and Lennox and allows for no audience questions. It concerns the following motion: *That the New Europe Should Prefer the New Atheism*. The beginning of the debate consists of an audience poll by a show of hands of those who are for, against, or undecided on the motion. Then Hitchens and Lennox make fifteen-minute opening statements followed by five-minute rebuttals. At that point each man is given about five minutes for closing remarks. The final segment is comprised of a second audience poll. Hitchens shows himself to be a good sport when he concedes to Lennox that the motion has been lost in a moderately close vote.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

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This study guide will introduce each debate segment and summarize as simply as possible the main points of argument. It is probably best to read each segment'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 TIPS

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- 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 that rule. 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 1 : OPENING STATEMENTS (4:00 - 25:30)

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### INTRODUCTION

Hitchens makes an extended historical argument for the separation of church/religion and state. Europe was “molded” and “is intimately bound up” with secularism and therefore it must remain so in order to continue “to flourish, to grow.” In juxtaposition to a purely secular state Hitchens envisions a theocracy and argues from a few modern examples (both Islamic and Christian) why the desire for a theocratic state has been and would be deleterious to the New Europe. He asserts that “forms of national and international...association” other than those of a purely secular nature are foreign to the spirit of what has made European civilization great. Religious allegiance, since it supersedes secular and national associations, poisons everything.

Lennox begins by asserting that he agrees “with almost everything [Hitchens] said.” He then criticizes Hitchens for muddying the debate waters by not distinguishing between religions. He likens the “abolishing of religion...to get rid of its abuse as about as intelligent as abolishing science to get rid of pollution.” In the main body of his argument Lennox argues that atheism is “fatally flawed in its attitude to reason, science, history, ethics, and justice.” By contrast, theism (and Christianity in particular) fueled the scientific revolution by giving credence to the rational intelligibility of the universe. It also establishes objective morality and absolute justice. Lennox counters Hitchens’ historical argument by delineating how Christianity is the true foundation of European liberty, democracy, science, and justice.

### QUESTIONS

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1. Hitchens’s argument assumes that Europe has just two choices: an atheist secular state or a theocratic one. Are these the only two possible options? If not, what are some others and would they be preferable?
2. Since Lennox agrees with most of Hitchens’s points, describe in practical terms what kind of Europe Lennox is advancing that is different from the one Hitchens’ argues for?
3. Why does Hitchens see religion as dangerous to the continued existence of European democracy? Why does Lennox see Christianity as vital to the continued existence of democracy?)
4. On what basis does Lennox argue that atheism is “an antiscientific blind faith?”
5. Lennox claims with a touch of saltiness that the motion *that the New Europe should prefer the New Atheism* is incoherent from the perspective of an atheist. Explain what he means by this and why you think he closes his opening statement with this point.

## **PART 2 : REBUTTALS** (25:30 - 36:15)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Hitchens addresses what he labels as Lennox's "main point" in addition to some "small corrections." He objects to Lennox's point that violence perpetrated in the name of Christ is shamelessly opposed to the obvious teachings of Jesus. Hitchens quotes Christ's statement that he had come "not to bring peace, but a sword." Next, Hitchens catalogues many of the "superstitious" ideas avowed by famous Christian scientists of previous centuries. He claims that Einstein (a non-theist) is the paragon of an enlightenment and scientific persona. His point is that science had to shed its layers of dead theological skin over some years before it finally emerged in its current mature form.

Lastly, he claims that religion is "totalitarian in principle" and so is analogous to a North Korean-style dictatorship. Historically, it paved the way for Stalin's iron-fisted governance. In contrast, a society established by the ideas of the greatest enlightenment thinkers would clearly be virtuous and egalitarian.

Lennox counters: the plain and natural reading of Christ's words is that he spoke metaphorically about a "sword" that divides people. He openly rebuked his disciples when, at his arrest, they understood his words literally and took up physical swords to defend him. Second, Lennox insists that his central thesis about the rational intelligibility of the universe is unaffected by some of the "wacky" ideas famous scientists have held. All scientists have some wacky ideas about things, but in our day atheist and Christian scientists both work at the highest levels of science. What separates them is not their scientific views, but their worldviews. The debate is not between science and theism, but between atheism and theism.

Lastly, he rejects Hitchens' conception of religion as analogous to a North Korean dictatorship. God watches over the universe not as Big Brother, but as a benevolent Father.

### **QUESTIONS**

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1. Lennox openly confesses that he is "ashamed" of all violence perpetrated in the name of Christ and argues that all such acts are contrary to the plain teachings of Jesus. How does Hitchens respond to and address the violent acts of governments founded on atheistic ideologies?
2. This question concerns "Whitehead's Thesis". It states that the permeation of theism/Christianity throughout Europe is the best explanation for why the scientific revolution took place there and not, say, in Baghdad or China. Why did Christianity give birth to modern science?

3. Hitchens claims that a purely secular society, founded upon the values of the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment, would be a more reasonable and virtuous state than one founded upon any religious thinking or values. Do you agree with his logic? Why or why not?
4. Hitchens regards the notion of God “watching” as appalling and likens it to what a North Korean dictator does. Lennox says it is the source of indescribable encouragement and likens it to what a wife does. Which of these analogies do you think is closer to the truth and why?
5. Both Hitchens and Lennox note the great accomplishments of scientists like Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestley while acknowledging that these same scientists avowed other “wacky” ideas. Do you think that future generations will feel similarly about some of our greatest modern scientists? Why or why not?



## PART 3 : CLOSING STATEMENTS (1:21:00 - 1:33:20)

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### INTRODUCTION

Lennox delineates three points in closing: 1. New Atheists naively believe what atheists before them knew to be impossible: that society could dispatch with God but retain Christian values; 2. The New Atheists are as intolerant as religious fundamentalists and so are unlikely to protect free speech; 3. Christianity was a major positive force in demolishing the iron curtain and creating the New Europe.

Hitchens begins by assailing Lennox's confidence. How can Lennox be so sure about the future judgment and the terms of escaping it? Does he have access to special knowledge – revelatory knowledge – which Hitchens does not? Next, he asserts that the notion of God watching over the holocaust is a pseudo-assurance. Why should it comfort anyone to know God is passively supervising while they suffer? Lastly, he directly attacks various elements of Christian theology: the morality of vicarious redemption (the notion that Christ died to take away sins), the concept of eternal punishment, and the exclusivity of Christian salvation.

### QUESTIONS

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1. Lennox says that the New Atheists have a “frightening degree of intolerance.” In what ways does he see this intolerance manifesting itself?
2. Hitchens claims that the concept of eternal punishment is a New Testament teaching where as Old Testament perceived physical death as the final punishment. Is there any indication that Old Testament writers also believed in an existence beyond physical death?
3. Lennox distinguishes between other more radical atheists and Hitchens who “would not prohibit religion even if he thought he could.” Lennox wishes that the New Atheists in turn “would distinguish between religions.” Why is this important to him?
4. This debate requires the audience to understand and evaluate many *objective* arguments. But what *subjective* elements might cause you to perceive one side or the other as more persuasive?
5. Do you think your side was well represented in this debate? Why or why not? How about the other side?

## RECOMENDED READING

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The following recommendations for further reading 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

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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

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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

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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

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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.