



DEBATE

DOES ATHEISM POISON EVERYTHING?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS
VS. DAVID BERLINSKI

**DOES ATHEISM
POISON EVERYTHING?
STUDY GUIDE**



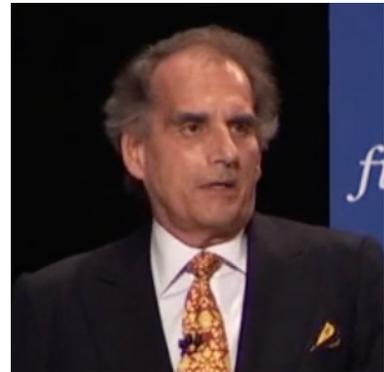
FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

THE PARTICIPANTS

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, an atheist and polemicist, is best known for his controversial book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and, most recently, for his memoir, *Hitch 22*. Hitchens was a columnist for *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *Vanity Fair*, and debated his views around the English-speaking world. Hitchens is one of the so-called “New Atheists”, along with other notables like Richard Dawkins. Hitchens passed away in December of 2011.



DAVID BERLINSKI describes himself as “a secular Jew and an agnostic.” He has written a number of books on mathematics, but he is best known for his appearance in the Ben Stein film “Expelled” as well as for his irreverent assault upon the New Atheists in his book, *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*. Mr. Berlinski, whose immediate family was saved during the Holocaust by the “American Schindler” Varian Fry, resides in Paris. He possesses a Ph.D. from Princeton University and formerly taught philosophy and mathematics at Stanford University and the University of Paris.



LARRY A. TAUNTON is founder and Executive Director of Fixed Point Foundation and Latimer House. Like Fixed Point itself, Larry specializes in addressing issues of faith and culture. Author of *The Grace Effect*, he is the recipient of numerous awards and research grants. He is Executive Producer of the films “Science and the God Question” (2007), “The God Delusion Debate” (2007), “God on Trial” (2008), “Has Science Buried God?” (2008), “Can Atheism Save Europe?” (2009), and “Is God Great?” (2009). Larry formerly taught European and Russian history. He holds academic degrees from Samford University and the University of Alabama.



INTRODUCTION TO BERLINSKI'S MAIN ARGUMENTS

Berlinski opens the debate with a concession: that religion poisons some things. This concession, however, does not undermine his position that atheism poisons everything. Then he makes three main arguments: historical, scientific, and moral. Historically, he presses the case that there is not a single example of an atheistic or purely secular regime that did not result in mass killing. The French Revolution was the first example of a post-Christian government that resulted in a “Reign of Terror.” Scientifically, he claims that nature is essentially neutral about God, but the God hypothesis is a logical necessity to shore up the entire edifice of the pursuit of science itself. Morally, atheism offers no restraint of evil. A secular government does not see itself as accountable to any higher authority and feels free to kill (if it deems it necessary) in such a way that is consistent with a Darwinian view of survival.

INTRODUCTION TO HITCHENS' MAIN ARGUMENTS

Hitchens begins right from the start with a rebuttal of Berlinski's opening statement. He addresses primarily two elements of Berlinski's argument. The first is the question of the evils of secular regimes (French, Nazi, etc.) and the second is the question of whether science points in any way to the traditional concept of God. The atrocities of the so-called “secular” regimes were far more often motivated by a latent religious belief than by a secular or Darwinian zeal. In short, he claims that these regimes simply were not secular. As for nature or science, a postulated God would have to be accused of an extraordinarily wasteful and destructive design. The universe is not only doomed in its temporal macrostructure, but stars (not to mention animals and people!) die cataclysmically every second. An argument for design would not only “indicate” a God, but also “implicate” him of many evils.

QUESTIONS THE DEBATE RAISES

SCAPE-GOATING: When Hitchens is asked to comment on a teaching of Christ that he judges to be evil or dangerous, he denounces the central doctrine of Christian salvation: vicarious redemption; the notion that Christ died for the sin of the world so that repentant sinners, though deserving of death, may escape the final judgment. Hitchens argues that this is the worst form of scape-goating and everyone should be held responsible for their own actions. Yet the famous story of the repentant thief on the cross – who though forgiven with regard to the final judgment, nonetheless was not rescued from dying next to Christ for his earthly crimes – seems to show a more sophisticated notion of sin, its consequences, and ultimate justice than a simplistic “scape-goating”. What are your thoughts about these issues?

THE BASIS OF MORALITY: Hitchens states flatly that “atheism does not itself entail a moral position.” What then forms the rational basis of morality for an atheist? Also, since every law assumes that there is some moral good that results from it, how does a society comprised of theists and atheists decide which moral principles should inform the laws of that society?

PURPOSE AND MEANING: Berlinski and Hitchens appear to agree that purpose and meaning are not derived innately from science. What then do you make of the deep desire that humans possess for purpose and meaning? Does that desire correspond to an objective reality (God) or not? If not, does that imply that the desire is illusory or that it is aimless, a shot at a target that does not exist?

SCIENCE: Hitchens argues that the universe gives evidence only of a malevolent God if of any god at all. In saying this, of course, he is not suggesting that he believes in this malevolent God, but only that nature does not in any way point to a benevolent and efficient Designer, the traditional conception of God. Hitchens believes rather in an impersonal and harsh Macro-Reality. The Biblical perspective is that God, who is good, created the universe originally good. Humans subsequently rebelled and subjected the whole of nature to corruption by the Fall. Which of these two meta-narratives do you think best corresponds to your experience of the world and what is the highest hope of this particular worldview?

CREDIBILITY: There is no disputing that these two men are intellectual heavyweights and that they disagree about fundamental questions all humans face. What factors do you think incline you to believe or reject one person’s ideas over the other’s? Do you think that both sides are susceptible to a kind of “blind faith”?

RECOMENDED READING

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

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.