



DEBATE

GOD OR NO GOD?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS
VS. LARRY TAUNTON

GOD OR NO GOD?

STUDY GUIDE



FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

THE PARTICIPANTS

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS is a political observer, journalist, and literary critic. Educated at the University of Oxford, 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.



LARRY A. TAUNTON is founder and Executive Director of Fixed Point Foundation. Educated at Samford University and the University of Alabama, Larry specializes in addressing issues of faith and culture from a Christian worldview. His new book, tentatively entitled *The Grace Effect: How the Power of One Life Can Reverse the Corruption of Unbelief*, is set for release in the fall of 2011. 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.



AARON FLINT is the host of “Voices of Montana”, the only statewide radio talk show in Montana. He earned his B.A. in Broadcast Journalism from the University of Montana and has worked with NBC’s “Today” show and Montana Public Radio. Aaron also served as an army officer in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is the moderator of this debate.



INTRODUCTION

“God or No God? Is it Preferable to Live in a Christian or Atheistic Society?” raises in practical terms a question with profound implications. It is one thing to debate theism and atheism abstractly. But the topic of this debate relates to the more practical issue of the kind of society we would want to live in. Would a person (regardless of their individual religious persuasion) prefer to live in a society predominantly influenced by Christianity or atheism? What are the practical implications for a society’s education, jurisprudence, politics, and medicine? The debate took place on October 19th, 2010 before a packed house at the Babcock Theater in the picturesque city of Billings, MT.

DEBATE AMONG FRIENDS SPECIAL FEATURE: PRE-DEBATE INTERVIEW

Unfortunately it is all too common in public discourse on such provocative issues to observe a good deal of shouting and hostility. But, surprisingly, Taunton and Hitchens describe themselves as friends. In an interview with NBC News, Hitchens described Taunton: “If everyone in the United States had the same qualities of loyalty, of care and concern for others that Larry Taunton has, we’d be living in a much better society than we do.” This is a stunning comment given that the question the men debated was “Is it preferable to live in a society predominantly influenced by Christianity or Atheism?”

Hitchens and Taunton categorically disagree on the question in this debate and engage in a lively and passionate dialogue. Yet they drove together through Yellowstone National Park the day after the debate, enjoyed each other’s company, listened to a little Simon & Garfunkel, watched Old Faithful blow, and, of course, continued the debate privately. It is important to keep in mind that the question at the center of this debate is not only relevant to people of widely varying opinions, but can also be debated in a robust but friendly atmosphere, free from petty *ad hominem* attacks. To learn more about the unique friendship of Hitchens and Taunton, be sure to watch the *Special Feature* on the DVD.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DEBATE

The debate is organized into six segments. In segment one each participant gives an opening statement twelve minutes in length. Following the opening statements are three-minute rebuttals. Segment three consists of a series of exchanges on four different topics. The topics are as follows:

1. Are all Religions the Same?
2. Pascal’s Wager
3. Atheism in the 20th Century
4. Vicarious Redemption

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

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

- 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.

TWO IMPORTANT ARGUMENTS DISCUSSED

There are two famous arguments or challenges that are mentioned throughout this debate and so they are included here in the words of the original authors. Pascal's Wager is famous as a challenge presented by Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician and philosopher, in his work *Les Pensees*. It is concerned with motivating a skeptic to seriously consider the life of faith. The Hitchens Challenge, articulated by Hitchens on many occasions in his public debates, is an attempt to defuse the exclusive claims Christians make concerning the link between the existence of God and objective morality.

THE HITCHENS CHALLENGE

Name one ethical statement made, or one ethical action performed, by a believer that could not have been uttered or done by a nonbeliever. The second challenge: Can anyone think of a wicked statement made, or an evil action performed, precisely because of religious faith?

PASCAL'S WAGER

"God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here...

But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is...

If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is... there is an eternity of life and happiness...

You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began... it is this which will lessen the passions, which are your stumbling-blocks [to believing].

(Pascal's *Pensées*, translated by W. F. Trotter.)

PART ONE: OPENING STATEMENTS (4:00 - 27:10)

Taunton devotes the majority of his opening statement to a negative argument: that atheism is intrinsically and irreparably deleterious to any society. He levels three main criticisms of atheism generally and of the so-called New Atheists in particular (Hitchens is one of the prominent voices of the New Atheists): 1) Since atheists are statistically less charitable than people of faith, atheism would lead to a society where the poor and unfortunate are less cared for. In this context, Taunton refutes the Hitchens Challenge by exclaiming that the better question is not whether atheists *can* perform the same acts as Christians, but whether they actually *do* these virtuous acts. 2) Atheism is a “dehumanizing” and “soul-destroying” philosophy. 3) The historical record of atheistic political philosophies in the 20th century is characterized by the greatest atrocities human beings have ever inflicted upon one another.

Hitchens’ opening statement is according to him an extended rebuttal of Taunton’s opening statement. First he argues that a new Iranian leader, who eschewed Radical Islam, would fill all of us, Christian or otherwise, with a sense of hope that Iran’s future is brighter. So atheism is clearly preferable to at least one form of ancient religion. Then he defends atheism’s lack of charity by criticizing Christians for adhering to a book (the Bible) that “commands” atrocities of its devotees (e.g. circumcision), that presents barbaric ethical scales (e.g. use of condoms forbidden), and that promotes the early indoctrination of children. Lastly, he believes religion is man-made and that the only escape for humanity is to cast off the shackles of holy books and use the faculty of reason alone to solve our greatest problems.

QUESTIONS

1. How important is Taunton’s argument about charity? Explain.
2. Hitchens says, “It is only by deciding there are no Scriptural absolutes and emancipating ourselves through Socratic self-examination that we have managed to escape from the elements of those religious societies that take their morals in tablet form.” Are “Socratic self-examination” and “Scriptural absolutes” mutually exclusive? Elaborate.
3. Taunton insists that Hitchens assumes a Christian worldview at the core of some his ideas. Identify some of these. Also, identify any atheistic assumptions behind any of Taunton’s ideas.
4. Explain why you agree or disagree with this statement by Taunton: “Christianity restrains the darker impulses of man, but atheism exacerbates them.”
5. What, if any, important argument would you add to those presented by either participant?

PART TWO: REBUTTALS (27:10 - 34:30)

Taunton's rebuttal focuses on two main points: 1) The Hitchens challenge. He asserts that Hitchens missed his point. Taunton had conceded that atheists can do charitable works. His argument was simply that they don't do them with anywhere near the frequency or sacrifice that Christians do. 2) The atheist bus campaign (which Hitchens did not directly sponsor, though he does defend it in the debate). The slogan read as follows: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". Taunton asserts that atheism amounts to a moral blank check and offers no compelling reason to restrain evil acts such as child molestation.

Hitchens rebuttal emphasizes three areas: 1) The bus campaign. The church and state are not separated in England and so the bus campaign offers an opposing view. England allows free religious expression, but in this instance required of the atheists to add the word "probably" so the slogan was less offensive. This confirms in Hitchens' opinion that religion is innately totalitarian. 2) Christian atrocities: It is insufficient to ascribe all religious atrocities to *false* religion. In some cases it is clear, says Hitchens, that religious belief motivates an evil act (e.g. 9/11 and various commandments from the Old Testament). 3) Christianity is man-made: Christianity has a history of seeking to indoctrinate children at an early age and so constitutes a form of child abuse. Religion fears free thought, actively suppresses reason, and therefore it is clear that man has made God rather than that God has made man.

QUESTIONS

1. The atheist bus campaign began in response to a Christian bus campaign which ran the following verse from Luke 18:8, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on this earth?" Compare the two messages and discuss what the main thrust of each message is. Do you think that "advertising wars" like the bus campaign are in any way effective? Why?
2. What are the merits and/or demerits of the Hitchens Challenge?
3. Do you agree with Hitchens that it is an inadequate defense of Judean-Christian atrocities to say simply that these acts were done *contrary* to the teachings of the Bible? Explain.
4. Why is it, as Hitchens asks, that Christians do not fight for prayer in the factories but only for prayer in the schools? Does this make sense?

PART THREE: ARE ALL RELIGIONS THE SAME? (34:30 - 41:35)

Taunton makes two arguments: 1) The atheists have a thoughtless habit of painting all religions with the same broad brush. If a Radical Muslim kills innocent people through a terrorist act, the argument goes, then *all* religions are bad. Taunton says that this tendency to conflate all religions (Islam and Christianity in particular) is fatal to a more thoughtful analysis. 2) Taunton sums up what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions: Grace. This is Christianity's baseline doctrine that humans cannot save themselves, but must depend exclusively upon the grace of God offered through the death and resurrection of Christ. Other religions rely, he says, upon a punch list in order to obtain salvation.

Hitchens counters with two points: 1) Taunton likes to focus on the modern context of Christianity where the meek and mild Baptists, etc. do not normally commit despicable acts on a scale with Radical Muslims. But two hundred years ago, the Baptists were being persecuted by the Danbury, CT Congregationalists! If these Christians ever held the reigns of government, Hitchens says, then they would rule as theocratic tyrants. 2) Islam and Judaism are inextricably tied in lineage fashion to Christianity, so the horrible atrocities of the two other faiths cannot be neatly distanced from Christianity. This is especially true of the Old Testament and its atrocities, which the New Testament claims to have "fulfilled."

QUESTIONS

1. How would you define "religion"?
2. Would you add anything to Taunton's argument that the doctrine of grace is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions?
3. Do the actions of the Danbury, CT Congregationalists compare to those of a suicide bomber? How are they the same or different?
4. The New Testament affirms the violent acts of judgment in the Old Testament (e.g. the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah). If a Christian, how would you defend the rightness of these acts? If a non-Christian, how do you think Divine justice should be enacted (consult John 3:19-20 for a summary of the Biblical concept of justice)?

PART FOUR: PASCAL'S WAGER (41:35 - 47:45)

After praising Pascal for his work in probability theory, Hitchens severely criticizes the Wager on two main grounds: 1) The Wager assumes that God is either cynical about genuine belief or is easily fooled. 2) The Wager assumes that a person is so “thick” as to believe that God exists on the flip of a coin. Hitchens singles out as particularly vile the popular use of this argument on people who are dying.

Taunton retorts that Pascal could hardly be classified as some kind of “huckster” (as Hitchens put it) and that one cannot dismiss Pascal’s argument so casually as Hitchens does. Pascal never intended for his argument to be the singular thing that caused someone to believe, but was rather intended to shake the skeptic up enough to reconsider his unbelief. In the end, Christ would have to be personally trusted.

QUESTIONS

1. Reread the actual Wager above in Pascal’s own words. Do you think Taunton and Hitchens characterize the Wager fairly? Elaborate any *significant* differences between what is written and what they indicate it means?
2. Do you think there is any validity or merit to Pascal’s Wager? Does it have the power to compel a person toward belief? Explain.
3. Do you agree with Hitchens’s statement that some people are “so made that they cannot believe?” Elaborate.
4. Do you think that the argument of the Wager is consistent with the reasons the Bible sets forth for believing?

PART FIVE: ATHEISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY (47:45 - 55:20)

Taunton devoted much of his opening statement to the atrocities, he alleges, that are laid at the feet of atheist political philosophies of the 20th century. So here he adds just one more major point: the problem with all human atrocities at their core is the problem of human nature itself. Since human nature is the root problem, the question any society faces is what philosophy/ideology best “restrains the darker impulses.” Whereas atheism offers no compelling reason for humans to suppress evil behavior, Christianity does.

Hitchens responds by arguing that the so-called atheistic regimes were more “theocratic” than they were atheistic. Hitler and Stalin, for example, were themselves motivated either explicitly by the desire to advance “the work of God” or implicitly by a virtually religious desire to establish “a heaven upon earth.” Their ruthless totalitarianism, he insists, was not in any way motivated by or devolved from an atheistic persuasion.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is Hitchens’s strongest point in defending against the charge that atheism was in anyway linked to the actions of Stalin or a Hitler?
2. Do you agree with Taunton that the problems of society are at their root the problems of human nature? What examples or counter-examples support your opinion?
3. What elements within Christianity/atheism restrain human impulses to do bad things?
4. It is undeniable that some churches condoned some of the 20th century atrocities (if only by their silence). What does this say about Christianity as a worldview?
5. This question contains content from the exchange that takes place during the final topic of vicarious redemption, but is in fact a continuation of this topic:

Hitchens refers to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in which he wrote that he knew he was doing “the work of the Lord” in destroying the Jewish people. Taunton retorts by referring to Hitler’s statement that Christianity was “the invention of sick minds.”

Do you think Hitler had a sincere belief in Christianity or that Christianity was nothing more than a moveable ideological prop “to serve as camouflage” (Joachim Fest, Hitler)?

PART SIX: VICARIOUS REDEMPTION (55:20 - 1:03:20)

This doctrine refers to the teaching in the Bible that Christ's execution constitutes a substitutionary death ("vicarious") for all sinners, so that God may justly forgive humans of their sins.

Hitchens argues that this central doctrine of Christian salvation should itself be condemned as a horrible idea. He makes two critical distinctions between the nobility of sacrificing one's life to save others and the "immoral doctrine" of the cross of Christ: 1) Sacrificing one's life in order to deliver someone else, such as serving someone else's judicial sentence, is noble. But he says that vicarious redemption implies that a human is no longer held responsible for their original actions and therefore this teaching is nothing but scape-goating. 2) The nobility of a sacrificial death is inextricably tied to the fact that it can only happen once. In the Christian concept, the one death of Christ is cheapened into a ritual that everyone can access over and over again.

Taunton responds by first challenging Hitchens's "moral outrage" over vicarious redemption. He argues that Hitchens implicitly appeals to a "moral law" while simultaneously denying the existence of an objective and real "Law Giver." The moral law transgressed in this case does not possess in Hitchens's worldview any *objective* authority if the law itself arises from subjective opinion. Secondly, he insists that Hitchens, nonetheless, misunderstands the doctrine entirely and has confused the "taking of one's life with the giving of it." Christ's sacrifice was the greatest demonstration of God's love because Christ *volunteered* his life.

QUESTIONS

Hitchens' view is that the concept of Christian salvation through vicarious redemption is immoral. Do you agree? Explain.

Does the concept of Biblical forgiveness encompass the removal of personal responsibility (Cf. Lu 23:39-43 where the repentant thief, though forgiven and assured that he will escape the final judgment, nonetheless dies for his earthly crimes)?

Are atheists hypocritical, as Taunton implies, when they censure the morality of vicarious forgiveness? Why or why not?

Hitchens clearly does not believe that his sobering health predicament should in any way influence his thinking about God's existence or the proclamation of an eternal forgiveness. Do you agree with him? Should the reality of an impending death skew a person toward belief? Why or why not?

Excepting the pure logic and reasoning of each combatant, what other characteristics compel you to be persuaded by these men? Do you think it is acceptable and good for you to be persuaded by things other than pure rational argument? Why or why not?

RECOMENDED READING

The following recommendations are intended for those who want to acquaint themselves with some of the details surrounding this debate. There is no substitute for reading primary sources and acquainting yourself with what great minds have thought or wrote. Included in this list are the major works cited or written by the participants:

Bullock, Alan (1961). *Hitler: a Study in Tyranny*. Bantam.

Conquest, Robert (2007). *The Great Terror*. USA: Oxford University Press.

Fest, Joachim C. (1973). *Hitler*. Orlando: Harcourt Inc.

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

Hitler, Adolf (2010). Translated by James Murphy. *Mein Kampf*. Imperial Collegiate Publishing.

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Albert E. Bergh, ed., Vol. XVI. Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States.

Letter of Oct. 7, 1801 from Danbury (CT) Baptist Assoc. to Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*. Washington: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Pascal, Blaise (2003). Translated by W.F. Trotter. *Pensées*. Dover Publications.

Taunton, Larry A. (2011) *The Grace Effect: How the Power of One Life Can Reverse the Corruption of Unbelief*. Thomas Nelson.