



DEBATE

GOD ON TRIAL

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS VS.
DINESH D'SOUZA

GOD ON TRIAL

STUDY GUIDE



FIXED POINT FOUNDATION

THE PARTICIPANTS

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS is a British-American journalist and literary critic. He has served as a columnist for several publications, some of which include *Vanity Fair*, *The Nation*, *Slate*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. He has written numerous bestselling books and in 2007 released a book entitled *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poison Everything*. Christopher is one of the world's most influential and outspoken atheists.



DINESH D'SOUZA is formerly a fellow of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, and a former White House domestic policy analyst for the Reagan administration. He has written five *New York Times* bestsellers and his articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Vanity Fair*, *New Republic*, and *National Review*. Though his previous books had centered on political issues, in 2007 he wrote *What's So Great About Christianity?*. At that point D'Souza became recognized as one of the most formidable defenders of the Christian faith.



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. A published author, 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

“God on Trial” takes up the question, “Is it good to believe in God?” It pits two of the most eloquent and influential spokesmen for atheism and Christianity against one another in what is surely one of the most spirited discussions of its kind.

In 2007 both Hitchens and D’Souza entered the arena of the intensifying “God debate” by publishing their respective books on the issue. It is clear from their writings that they perceive Christianity from diametrically opposed perspectives. It is either “great” or “poison”. They clashed in 2008 before a packed house of over 2,000 people in St. Louis’ elegant Powell Symphony Hall.

No matter what you believe, “God on Trial” will challenge your prejudices and opinions on issues that are relevant to us all: faith, eternity, purpose, justice, and morality.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DEBATE

The debate is organized into five segments. In segment one, each participant gives an opening statement ten minutes in length. Following the opening statements are five minute rebuttals. Segments three and four are less structured. Hitchens and D’Souza volley questions and answers toward each other in segment three, and questions come directly from the audience in segment four. This fourth segment consists of some twenty-five minutes of lively exchanges between the two debaters and members of the audience. The final segment is comprised of five minute closing statements.

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.

PART ONE: OPENING STATEMENTS (4:00 - 25:30)

D'Souza devotes most of his time to a delineation of the positive evidence for God's existence: the evidence inexorably compels us to believe in God. More than that, however, he asserts that the postulation of God's existence is a *necessary* explanation. Were it not for belief in God, we would live in a world where the most important questions are not only unanswered, but unanswerable: What caused the universe to come into being? What accounts for the origin of morality? Why should I believe that my thoughts lead me to true conclusions? What power is able to rectify what is fundamentally wrong with the world? D'Souza spends a comparatively small amount of time making an argument against atheism. In short, atheism fails to answer any of man's most important questions or satisfy his deepest desires.

Conversely, Hitchens spends a small amount of time dismissing the notion that God's existence is *necessary* to explain anything. Instead, he devotes most of his argument to an attack on theism directly. He asserts that theism is the very opposite of anything a reasonable person would think or wish to be true. He also protests that D'Souza frequently blurs the audience by making an argument for deism and then passes it off as an argument for theism. Deism is belief in a God who, though caused the universe to come into being in the first place, now remains detached and disinterested in the universe and the creatures within it. Theism is belief in any god, but especially one who personally sustains, interacts with, and cares for the universe.

QUESTIONS

1. Hitchens argues that a compelling case for design in the universe, and therefore a Designer, would be a small step compared to the large leap of persuading him of monotheism. If one starts from an atheistic position, is it true that deism stands *closer* to atheism than to theism?
2. D'Souza makes two main arguments for God's existence: God is a necessary postulate as the cause of the universe and as the origin of morality. Do you think these are the best arguments for believing in God? What would you add or replace?
3. D'Souza contests that Christianity is more credible than the other religions: it alone accurately diagnoses man's true condition and it alone offers a satisfactory answer to resolve man's greatest problem. Do you think this is why most Christians avow their faith? Why or why not?
4. Hitchens relates the famous reply of Laplace, one of the most brilliant mathematicians in history, to Napoleon who had inquired why God was absent from his explanation for how the universe works: "it works without that assumption?" Does Laplace's answer deal a fatal blow to belief in God?
5. Hitchens makes his own moral argument: Christian salvation involves "the most horrific sadomasochistic prostration of the human personality before...tyranny" and that "to emancipate oneself from this it seems to me is the beginning of the long story of human liberation?" What makes this argument compelling?

PART TWO: REBUTTALS (25:30 - 36:15)

D'Souza moves away from the positive evidence for God in his rebuttal and, instead, devotes most of his efforts to addressing Hitchens's moral argument. He claims that Hitchens hardly even addressed the positive evidence for God. Rather, he revealed what, for most atheists, is the underlying basis for their rejection of God: they don't like the idea of "ultimate moral accountability".

Hitchens counters by expanding on his main contention in his opening statement: there is no need to postulate God to explain anything. It is *optional* from a scientific perspective and D'Souza, he asserts, never contested this point in his rebuttal. Then he reverts to his moral objection to Christianity. It is immoral to be relieved of your responsibility for your sins through another's suffering and death.

QUESTIONS

1. Does D'Souza grant Hitchens' point that God's existence is scientifically "optional", as Hitchens asserts? Cite some supporting evidence in your reply.
2. Hitchens compares the God of Christianity to the totalitarian leadership of North Korea. If you think this comparison is unfair, how would you respond to him about it?
3. If you think this comparison is fair, do you think God (on the premise that he exists and has the attributes of the traditional Christian God) is not or should not be the supreme authority of ultimate material, spiritual, and moral reality? How would God abdicate and who is qualified to share in his supreme moral authority?
4. Do you agree with D'Souza that Hitchens is more motivated and impassioned by his moral argument against God than by his scientific/rational one? Is this a weakness? Is a moral argument the same as an emotional one?
5. D'Souza argues that the example of North Korea does not "undermine religion", but establishes all the more the need for belief in a transcendent God. On what basis does he make this point?

PART THREE: CROSS-EXAMINATION (36:15 - 53:00)

Unfortunately, there is no central thread running through this Q&A session. Each question raises a new issue. For that reason, the questions that follow will tend to be longer than the previous ones in order to introduce the particular subject matter involved in each question.

QUESTIONS

1. Why do D’Souza and Hitchens debate Thomas Jefferson so intensely? Do you think that the Declaration of Independence is an important part of the discussion of whether God exists? Why or why not?
2. D’Souza is accurate in explaining that the truth of Christianity does not depend upon the virgin birth. The Apostles did not proclaim the virgin birth of Christ so much as the resurrection of Christ as a demonstration of the truth of their claims. Why is this so? (See Acts 10:34-43)
3. D’Souza presses Hitchens to explain in Darwinian terms the rational basis for the equality of all people since by common observation people do not *appear* to be equal and from a Darwinian perspective there seems to be no *scientific* basis for believing in the equality of all people. Hitchens replies that there simply is no corollary between Darwinism and inequality for Hitchens, a Darwinist, believes in equality. Does Hitchens answer the question? Why or why not?
4. Hitchens asks D’Souza to explain why we should believe in a benevolent and designing God when “98.9% of all species” that ever lived have suffered and now become extinct? D’Souza replies that the fall explains the mass suffering in the world and God’s temporary non-intervention. Would a world where God directly intervenes and judges each wrong as it occurs be preferable to the one described in the biblical narrative? Why or why not?
5. Hitchens challenges D’Souza to present evidence that there was actually an “Edenic utopia” of some sort in real human history. D’Souza counters by saying that both the secularist and Christianity posit “what things were like in the original condition and then how they got to be the way they are.” Is it true that both the secularist and the Christian posit an explanation for what accounts for the “moral history” of humanity without much scientific or historical evidence for either narrative?

PART FOUR: AUDIENCE QUESTIONS (53:00 - 1:21:00)

1. D'Souza is asked whether it is immoral for God to consign even deists to hell. D'Souza indicates that the biblical teaching is that people go to hell because they don't want God rather than because God "consigns" them there. Why is deism not a sufficient "faith" in biblical terms? (See Romans 3:23-26)
2. Hitchens is asked why it bothers him if 90% of the population is religious and does good things from a religious motivation. This raises the following question: Is truth or happiness more important to you? Why?
3. Hitchens and D'Souza debate Hitler at length. Was he motivated by faith in God or by a secular agenda? Is it relevant whether Hitler, Stalin, or Mao were secularists or Christians? Why or why not?
4. Hitchens contests that man cannot be truly said to have free will in the matter of salvation if the only two choices are heaven or hell. On the premise that Christianity is true (which the criticism assumes), is Hitchens correct? Why or why not?
5. D'Souza is asked if an eternity of hell is a fair punishment for a mere eighty years of a disobedient life. D'Souza replies that eternity is not defined as an infinity of years but as a *timeless* state of existence. Would you prefer that all of our actions in this life have no consequence for the life that is to come? Why or why not?

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

Hitchens gives a fairly brief closing statement in which he makes two major points. First, he reemphasizes the immorality of the Roman Catholic Church in putting salvation up for sale. Second, he contests that Pascal's Wager is both irrational and immoral. It is irrational because it does not clarify which brand of theism to believe in – Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and immoral because it assumes that the matter of eternal salvation/damnation rests upon a bet.

D'Souza dismisses Hitchens' "obsession" with Roman Catholicism as one example of his repeated mischaracterizations of Christianity. He simply doesn't understand biblical Christianity. He then addresses some of Hitchens' "stronger" points. He rejects Hitchens' two explanations for why people believe in Christianity: their place of origin and Sigmund Freud's wish fulfillment hypothesis. The first explanation asserts that most people believe in Christianity because they were born in the West, where Christianity is the predominant faith. Freud's hypothesis states that we perceive as the truth what we *wish* to be true.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think it is an effective strategy for Hitchens to focus so much on Roman Catholicism? Why or why not?
2. Hitchens describes Pascal's Wager as both "irrational and immoral." In short, the Wager presents two alternatives: If you don't believe in God and turn out to be wrong, you lose everything. If you do believe in God and are wrong, you lose virtually nothing. What is your opinion of the Wager? What about it is persuasive or not persuasive?
3. D'Souza dismisses Hitchens' appeal to Freud's concept of "wish fulfillment" as the best explanation for the origin of the Christian "myth". He argues that neither Hell nor even some of the Ten Commandments represent beliefs anyone would *wish* for. Do you agree with D'Souza? Why or why not?
4. D'Souza emphasizes that theism is an attempt to "account for phenomena that have no easy natural explanation". This sounds like a "God of the Gaps" argument, which is generally acknowledged to be a weak argument. Does D'Souza's argument differ at all from a "God of the Gaps" argument? If so, in what ways does it differ?
5. Do you think that people decide to believe or disbelieve in God for intellectual reasons alone? What other factors incline *you* to believe one side over the other?

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

1. Hitchens' view is that the concept of Christian salvation through vicarious redemption is immoral. Do you agree? Explain.
2. 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)?
3. Are atheists hypocritical, as Taunton implies, when they censure the morality of vicarious forgiveness? Why or why not?
4. 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?
5. 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 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.