

As of this broadcast, Christianity Today has posted 4 parts to an ongoing debate between atheist, Christopher Hitchens and Christian, Douglas Wilson. Listeners can search www.christianitytoday.com for links to this debate. My review of this debate will not attempt to proclaim a winner. Let each reader decide that for him or herself. What I will attempt to do today is to provide an answer to the question CT has chosen as a title for the debate “Is Christianity good for the world?”

At the outset, the answer to this question is going to hinge entirely upon your stand on the existence of God. If you disavow God a priori then Christianity will have one strike against it from the get-go, it’s false. If it’s false, it seems to you like a futile and unfortunate waste of time, and lives, for the many people who are deceived by it. The only way you might consider Christianity “good” for the world would be if you clearly recognize that morally, Christianity has some distinct advantages over other religions. Yet, time and again, atheists like Mr. Hitchens or Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins, have absolutely no concept of any difference between Christianity and other religions. As Sam Harris says in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, “Every devout Muslim has the same reasons for being a Muslim that a Christian has for being a Christian.” Of course, he fails to substantiate his bald assertion, and virtually every Christian alive knows better. For that matter, Muslims should know better, too.

We will explore the fundamental differences between Christianity and Islam in our next podcast, so I’ll move on for now... (not to be confused with moveon.org)...

So, from the start, I want it clearly known that I do accept the God Hypothesis (as Richard Dawkins calls it). I believe that there is ample evidence for one to accept the conclusion that God is likely to exist.

Christopher Hitchens does not. At the start of the debate Mr. Hitchens makes 3 points regarding the question, “Is Christianity good for the world?”

First, he claims that “Christianity spreads morality, but it is not morality’s source.” This is a step in the right direction, in that he admits that Christianity actually *does* spread morality. However, whether or not you view Christianity as the “source” of morality again hinges on the existence or non-existence of the God of Christianity. Technically, on a Christian worldview, God is the source of everything, and everything would include morality.

But, for the sake of argument, let’s assume Hitchens is correct. After all, even the New Testament attests to the fact that non-believers have an a priori awareness of morality. Paul writes in the second chapter of his epistle to the Romans:

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves,¹⁵ who show the work of the law

written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)”

Christopher Hitchens’ second point is that “Christian teachings are immoral.”

Hitchens’ writes, “I would principally wish to cite the concept of vicarious redemption, whereby one’s own responsibilities can be flung onto a scapegoat and thereby taken away. In my book, I argue that I can pay your debt or even take your place in prison but I cannot absolve you of what you actually did.”

This is precisely why Christ’s actions on our behalf are unique.

If God exists, human sin, crime and acts of evil are not only committed against a victim, but are also committed against God. Since God is the one who is ultimately wronged, He DOES possess the ability to absolve us of our sins.

Let’s consider an example:

Suppose I backed a moving van up to your home one night while you were on vacation, and removed everything valuable you owned. Let’s suppose that you weren’t well versed at diversification of your assets and I actually left you pretty much penniless.

I sell all your belongings in another state and run off to Vegas for a wild spending spree. By the time you return from vacation I am long gone.

You report me to the police, who track me down only after I’ve squandered all the money I made from selling off your possessions. I am charged and after almost a year am convicted and am now awaiting my sentencing hearing.

In the meantime, you’ve been struggling to make payments on your home and were evicted several months before. You end up at a homeless shelter when you aren’t walking the streets lamenting your plight.

Eventually, the day of my sentencing hearing arrives and you sneak into the last row of the courtroom to watch the proceedings. Tattered and disheveled, you listen as the judge sentences me to 25 years in the state prison.

To my surprise, you step forward and tell the judge that you have long since forgiven me for my transgressions against you and that you will gladly step in and take upon yourself my penalty.

How could I possibly doubt the sincerity of your forgiveness if you are willing to bear the penalty in my stead?

One of the jurors could have pitied me and made the same offer, but it would hardly have made the same impact.

Again, if God exists, and if our sin is actually committed against Him... we can hardly question His just need to exact punishment upon those who express no repentance or remorse for their actions, especially if their own hearts condemn them...

The Christian view of the nature of God sees Him as both holy and just. In light of this understanding of God, His rectitude... that is, His moral integrity... in exacting appropriate punishment, is accepted and trusted by most Christians.

When we understand that God is responsible for the punishment (as well as the forgiveness) of sin, we are freed from the shackles of the guilt of our personal sin and the sin of others that has claimed us as a victim.

Consequently, societal morality benefits from this recognition as we internalize Paul's words in Romans 12:17-20:

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."

Who can forget the tragic murder of five Amish children in a schoolhouse in Lancaster County, PA last October?

The Amish are an Anabaptist denomination of Christianity who completely understood this passage and lived out its moral message as they immediately urged forgiveness toward the killer and his family. It was reported that the fathers of the murdered children physically visited the killer's parents asking what they could do to help during this tragic time. These men were acting completely consistently with the teachings of the New Testament.

In stark contrast were the members of Fred Phelps' Westboro Baptist Church, who threatened to stage a protest at the funerals of the Amish girls. Fox News quoted Phelps' daughter who said, ""Those Amish people, everyone is sitting around talking about those poor little girls — blah, blah, blah — they brought the wrath upon themselves ... the Amish don't serve God, they serve themselves."

This brings me to Christopher Hitchens' third and final point in answering the question "Is Christianity good for the world?" Mr. Hitchens writes, "If Christianity is to claim credit for the work of outstanding Christians or for the labors of famous charities, then it must in all honesty accept the responsibility for the opposite."

This means that on Hitchens' view, Christianity must share the blame for the Phelps' of the world if we are to reap the credit for the Amish of the world. Of course, Hitchens (as with other atheists, such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins) misses the fact that the Amish were **grounded** in their actions by the written teachings of the New Testament. I

think that Fred Phelps's daughter would be hard pressed to come up with Biblical support for the claim that the Amish brought wrath upon themselves in any way.

And this is the fundamental difference between Christian morality and the secular morality developed via natural selection and espoused by Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris. Morality simply has **no grounding** on a secular world view. The secular morality that has evolved via natural selection, on Dawkins view, is a topic I discussed in *Letter to a Christian Nation: Counter Point*, where I wrote:

”Richard Dawkins suggests that morality has a Darwinian origin. While evolution has endowed us all with selfish *genes*, this does not imply a selfish organism, selfish group or selfish species. He suggests that four types of altruism have evolved via natural selection. Reciprocal altruism he defines as the 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours' type. Kin altruism causes related individuals to 'care for their own.' Third, he presents the altruism that arises when one individual desires to attain a reputation for kindness and generosity. And finally, there is the authentic advertising an individual gains from being conspicuously generous. Of course, Dawkins fails to recognize that none of these examples of "morality" represent classical selfless altruism. In each case, the altruist has a vested self-interest in the action, a self-serving motive. While both [Harris] and Dawkins claim that Christians only do good because they believe God is watching everything they do, and that they intend to reap rewards in heaven, the atheist version of morality implies that we only do good when there is something "in it for us" right here on Earth. Goodness for "goodness' sake" seems a rare commodity in the human species. It's a wonder Santa ever delivers anything but coal!”

Christianity doesn't encourage believers to act morally simply to earn rewards in heaven. Rather, the Christian urge to "do good" is born out of a response of gratitude for the previously discussed "vicarious atonement," which grants the believer a "freedom to do good" in response to Christ's forgiveness. As a direct result of the unmerited forgiveness that the Amish understood Christ had granted them... they became free to express the same manner of forgiveness to others... even to those dear to the one who had victimized them. They were able to say with the Reformer, John Bradford, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

It makes sense that our secular culture would be so awed by the Amish response. The secular mindset espoused by the New Atheists can't seem to get past the "what's in it for me" mentality. The typical secular American response would have been anger and indignation toward the family of the killer. I'd venture to say that most Americans have no idea what might compel anyone to respond the way the Amish did during, and subsequent to, this incident.

But let's dig a little deeper... was the response of the Amish to this incident necessary to consider their actions "moral." Would we, as a society, have thought them less moral if they chose to isolate themselves further from the source of their misery? That is, the family of their children's murderer. No, we wouldn't. That would have been the typical American response.

Sam Harris, in his book *Letter to a Christian Nation* says this on page 8: “Questions of morality are questions about happiness and human suffering. This is why you and I do not have moral obligations toward rocks.”

On page 24 he writes, “While feeling love for others is surely one of the greatest sources of our own happiness, it entails a very deep concern for the happiness and suffering of those we love. Our own search for happiness, therefore, provides a rationale for self-sacrifice and self-denial. There is no question that there are times when making enormous sacrifices for the good of others is essential for one’s deeper well-being.”

Do you see the obvious self-serving nature of Harris’s search for personal happiness? “...feeling love for others is surely one of the greatest sources of **our own happiness**... **Our own search for happiness** provides a rationale for self-sacrifice and self-denial.” He neglects to mention that our own search for happiness also provides a rationale... an even **greater** rationale... for **selfishness**... stepping on the toes of others, climbing the ladder of personal success at any cost, even if others are pushed off the ladder in the process.

The bottom line is that selfishness forms the **foundation** of Darwinian morality. Even if that selfishness is relegated to the level of the genes, as Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene*, suggests. While it doesn’t **have** to (and I won’t get into that in more detail here...) more often than not, that selfishness in our genes translates to a selfishness of the entire organism, and Sam Harris, in his definition of morality, proves the point. One of the most important contentions I offer in my response to Harris’s book was that our definition of morality should not be limited to seeking personal happiness and relieving human suffering. Morality goes far beyond the Darwinian model to include acts of true, selfless altruism.

If “our own search for happiness” was the only motivation for self-sacrifice and self-denial, how do you suppose the Amish people would have responded? What personal happiness could they derive from offering kindness to the killer’s family? If not for their Christian faith, there would be no reason for such a response.

However, in the book of Romans Paul wrote:

“Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.” “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”

In Matthew, Jesus is quoted:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Suppose the same event occurred at a Muslim schoolhouse... What do you suppose the response would have been?

In Sura 2 it is written: “Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you... and slay them wherever you catch them.” There is little doubt that the outcome would have been entirely different.

The Muslim response of revenge and retaliation is **grounded** in the teachings of Muhammad. Conversely, the Amish response of loving your enemy is **grounded** in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Darwinism falls somewhere in between, and without grounding the individual must decide how to respond. Those responses could land anywhere from forgiveness to revenge. More often than not the secularist will merely become angry and bitter toward the attacker and his family.

Which response is ultimately healthiest for all involved? Revenge merely leads to feuding and war... hardly a healthy outcome. Bitterness can be internalized for years and can cause as much harm to a victim’s family... over time... as the perpetrator caused the victim in one short incident. However, after the initial period of grief and anger has subsided, forgiveness is the healthiest way to move on toward healing. The Amish knew this already... why?... because they learned it from Jesus.

Christopher Hitchens wrote that

“the Christian faith cannot credit itself for all that ‘Love your neighbor’ stuff, not to mention the Golden Rule, and the reason for this is that such moral precepts have been self-evident to everybody throughout history who wanted to have a stable society.”

While Hitchens’ statement is strictly true, what Jesus Christ has given the world is the guidance of His written word, and the assistance of the Holy Spirit in helping the believer to understand and live a life that exemplifies the morality He taught.

In Hitchens’ response to Wilson’s letter, he writes:

“Since I am not a Christian, I mutter a mild “thank you” for his admission that morality has nothing at all to do with the supernatural.”

Of course, this was not at all what Mr. Wilson meant, and I applaud his response that included:

“I am *not* saying you have to believe in the supernatural in order to live as a responsible citizen. I *am* saying you have to believe in the supernatural in order to be able to give a rational and coherent account of why you believe yourself obligated to live this way.”

None of us has the ability to live a life that is perfectly moral. Yet most of us live lives in which we don’t even recognize what morality actually is. If we define morality as the search for personal happiness and the avoidance of suffering, we will run into one moral dilemma after another. On the morality of Harris and Hitchens we will unavoidably hurt others since our own self-interest is our primary concern. Yet Jesus teaches us **not** to live a life of such selfishness...

“Then one of them, a lawyer, asked *Him a question*, testing Him, and saying, “Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?”

Jesus said to him, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

In the fourth installment of the debate, Christopher Hitchens claims that it is impossible to love another “as thyself.” While this may be true, it isn’t the first time that God asserted a command that was virtually unattainable. In the first of Peter’s epistles, the apostle, quoting Leviticus, declared “Be ye holy; for I am holy.” The fact is, we can no more “be holy” than we can “love our neighbor as ourself.” And Jesus told his followers in Matthew 5:48 to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

But this brings us full circle to confront the question of the day... Is Christianity good for the world?

It is precisely because none of us is capable of perfection... none of us is capable of exhibiting a morality God would call “holy”... that Jesus came to Earth. He came to seek and to save those of us who freely admit we are lost to moral misconduct... Do you like that word? “misconduct” ... it sounds so much nicer than the word Christians typically prefer ... the word “depravity” ... but most people don’t think of themselves as “depraved.” And atheists certainly don’t consider themselves “depraved.” After all, one of their primary siren songs is the cry that you don’t need God to live a morally “good” life. Of course, without God the definition of “good” is entirely relative and open to majority vote.

Bottom line... if God exists, God determines what is and is not holy and morally upright behavior. Each of us is either morally **perfect**... or in need of the forgiveness only God, our ultimate victim, can offer. And He did make such an offer, through the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ. It is this forgiveness, that only Jesus could bring, that establishes Christianity as not only “good for the world,” but indispensable, as well.

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