

Is Christianity
Good
for the World?

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Christopher HITCHENS

Douglas WILSON

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Goldberg7

Introductions

Hitchens11

Wilson17

Round 1

Hitchens21

Wilson 25

Round 2

Hitchens31

Wilson33

Round 3

Hitchens35

Wilson37

Round 4

Hitchens43

Wilson 46

Round 5

Hitchens51

Wilson55

Round 6

Hitchens59

Wilson63

FOREWORD

by Jonah Goldberg

Douglas Wilson, a devout Christian, believes that Christianity is true and good. Christopher Hitchens, a no less devout atheist, believes Christianity is entirely untrue and ultimately not good. I fall somewhere in the murky middle, though I will confess my sympathies are more with Wilson, whom I do not know, than they are with Christopher, whom I consider a casual friend. As a non-Christian, I cannot claim that I believe that Christianity is unalloyed truth. As a fairly secular Jew who happens to believe in God as well as the positive role of both religion and Christianity, I'm undoubtedly ill-suited to adjudicate this thoughtful, passionate, and well-informed debate. Fortunately, that's not my assignment here. Rather, I'm simply here to get things started, to awaken the reader's palate for the meal ahead.

ROUND

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HITCHENS to WILSON

In considering the question at hand (for which my thanks are due to your generosity and hospitality in inviting my response), I have complete confidence in replying in the negative. This is for the following reasons.

[1] Although Christianity is often credited (or credits itself) with spreading moral precepts such as “Love thy neighbor,” I know of no evidence that such precepts derive from Christianity. To take one instance from each Testament, I cannot believe that the followers of Moses had been indifferent to murder and theft and perjury until they arrived at Sinai, and I notice that the parable of the good Samaritan is told of someone who by definition cannot have been a Christian.

To these obvious points, I add that the “Golden Rule” is much older than any monotheism, and that no human society would have been possible or even thinkable without elementary solidarity (which also allows for self-interest) between its members. Though it is not strictly relevant to the ethical dimension, I would further say that neither the fable of Moses nor the wildly discrepant Gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth may claim the virtue of being historically true. I am aware that many Christians also doubt the literal truth of the tales but this seems to me to be a problem for them rather than a difficulty for me. Even if I accepted that Jesus—like almost every other prophet on record—was born of a virgin, I cannot think that this proves the divinity of his father or the truth of his teachings. The same would be true if I accepted that he had been resurrected. There are too many resurrections in the New Testament for me to put my trust in any one of them, let alone to employ them as a basis for something as integral to me as my morality.

[2] Many of the teachings of Christianity are, as well as being incredible and mythical, immoral. 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 exorbitant fantasy of “forgiveness” is unfortunately matched by an equally extreme admonition—which is that the refusal to accept such a sublime offer may be punishable by eternal damnation. Not even the Old Testament, which speaks hotly in recommending

genocide, slavery, genital mutilation, and other horrors, stoops to mention the torture of the dead. Those who tell this evil story to small children are not damned by me, but have been damned by history and should also be condemned by those who shrink from cruelty to children (a moral essential that underlies all cultures).

The late C.S. Lewis helps make this point for me by emphasizing that the teachings of Jesus only make sense if the speaker is the herald of an imminent kingdom of heaven. Otherwise, would it not be morally unsafe to denounce thrift, family, and the “taking of thought for the morrow”? Some of your readers may believe that this teaching is either true—in the sense of an imminent redemption—or moral. I believe that they would have a difficult time believing both things at once, and I notice the futility as well as the excessive strenuousness (sometimes called “fanaticism” in tribute to the way that the two things pull in opposite directions) of their efforts. Another way of phrasing this would be to say that if Christianity was going to save us by its teachings, it would have had to perform better by now. And so to my succeeding point.

[3] 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 responsibility for the opposite. I shall not condescend to your readers in specifying what these “opposites” are, but I suggest once more that you pay attention to the Golden Rule. If hymns and psalms were sung to sanctify slavery—just to take a recent example—and then sung by abolitionists, then surely the non-fanatical explanation is that morality

requires no supernatural sanction? Every Christian church has had to make some apology for its role in the Crusades, slavery, anti-Semitism, and much else. I do not think that such humility discredits faith as such, because I tend to think that faith is a problem to begin with, but I do think that humility will lead to the necessary conclusion that religion is man-made.

On the other hand from humility, the fantastic idea that the cosmos was made with man in mind strikes me as the highest form of arrogant self-centeredness. And this brings me to what must be (within the limits of this short essay) my closing point. We are not without knowledge on these points, and the boundaries are being expanded at a rate which astonishes even those who do not look for a single cause of such vast and diverse phenomena. There is more awe and more reverence to be derived from a study of the heavens or of our DNA than can be found in any book written by a fearful committee in the age of myth (when Aquinas took astrology seriously and Augustine invented “limbo”).

I cannot, of course, prove that there is no supervising deity who invigilates my every moment and who will pursue me even after I am dead. (I can only be happy that there is no evidence for such a ghastly idea, which would resemble a celestial North Korea in which liberty was not just impossible but inconceivable.) But nor has any theologian ever demonstrated the contrary. This would perhaps make the believer and the doubter equal—except that the believer claims to know, not just that God exists, but that his most detailed wishes are not merely knowable but actually known. Since religion drew its first breath

when the species lived in utter ignorance and considerable fear, I hope I may be forgiven for declining to believe that another human being can tell me what to do, in the most intimate details of my life and mind, and to further dictate these terms as if acting as proxy for a supernatural entity. This tyrannical idea is very much older than Christianity, of course, but I do sometimes think that Christians have less excuse for believing, let alone wishing, that such a horrible thing could be true. Perhaps your response will make me reconsider?

WILSON to HITCHENS

I want to begin by thanking you for agreeing to—as the diplomats might put it—a “frank exchange of views.” And I certainly want to thank the folks at *Christianity Today* for hosting us.

P.G. Wodehouse once said that some minds are like soup in a poor restaurant—better left unstirred. I am afraid that I find myself sympathizing with him as I consider atheism. I had been minding my own business on this subject for a number of years when I saw Sam Harris’s book on the desk of a colleague, and that led to my book in response, not to mention a review of Richard Dawkins’s most recent book, and now a series of responses to your *God is Not Great*, all culminating in this exchange. I am afraid that my problem is this: The more I stir the bowl, the more certain fumes, mystery meats, and questions keep floating to the surface. Here are a few of them.

Your first point was 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. You then move on to the second point, which contains the idea that the teachings of Christianity are “incredibly immoral.” In your book, you make the same point about other religions. Apparently, basic morality is *not* all that self-evident. So my first question is: Which way do you want to argue this? Do all human societies have a grasp of basic morality, which is the theme of your first point, or has religion poisoned *everything*, which is the thesis of your book?

The second thing to observe in this regard is that Christians actually do not claim that the gospel has made the world better by bringing us turbo-charged ethical information. There *have* been ethical advances that are due to the propagation of the faith, but that is not where the action is. Christians believe—as C.S. Lewis argued in *The Abolition of Man*—that nonbelievers do understand the basics of morality. Paul the apostle refers to the Gentiles, who did not have the law but who nevertheless knew by nature some of the tenets of the law (Rom. 2:14). But the world is not made better because people can understand the ways in which they are being bad. It has to be made better by Good News—we must receive the gift of forgiveness and the resultant ability to live more in conformity to a standard we already knew (but were necessarily failing to meet). So the gospel does not consist of new and improved law. The gospel makes the world

better through Good News, not through guilt trips or good advice.

In your second objection, you gaily dismiss the Old Testament, “which speaks hotly in recommending genocide, slavery, genital mutilation, and other horrors.” Setting aside for the moment whether your representation of the Old Testament is judicious or accurate, let me assume for the sake of discussion that you have accurately summarized the essence of Mosaic ethics here. You then go on to say that we who teach such stories to children have been “damned by history.” But why should this “damnation by history” *matter* to any of us reading Bible stories to kids, or for that matter, to any of the people who did any of these atrocious things, on *your* principles? These people are all dead now, and we who read the stories are all going to be dead. Why should any of us care about the effeminate judgments of history? *Should* the propagators of these “horrors” have cared? There is no God, right? Because there is no God, this means that—you know—genocides just happen, like earthquakes and eclipses. It is all matter in motion, and these things happen.

If you are on the receiving end, there is only death, and if you are an agent delivering this genocide, the long-term result is brief victory and death at the end. So who cares? Picture an Israelite during the conquest of Canaan, doing every bad thing that you say was occurring back then. During one of his outrages, sword above his head, should he have stopped for a moment to reflect on the possibility that you might be right? “You know, in about three and a half millennia, the consensus among historians will be that I am being bad right now. But if there

is no God, this disapproval will certainly not disturb my oblivion. On with the rapine and slaughter!" On *your* principles, why *should* he care?

In your third objection, you say that 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 responsibility for the opposite." In short, if we point to our saints, you are going to demand that we point also to our charlatans, persecutors, shysters, slave-traders, inquisitors, hucksters, televangelists, and so on. Now allow me the privilege of pointing out the structure of your argument here. If a professor takes credit for the student who mastered the material, aced his finals, and went on to a career that was a benefit to himself and the university he graduated from, the professor must (fairness dictates) be upbraided for the dope-smoking slacker that he kicked out of class in the second week. They were both formally enrolled, is that not correct? They were both *students*, were they not?

What you are doing is saying that Christianity must be judged not only on the basis of those who believe the gospel in truth and live accordingly but also on the basis of those baptized Christians who cannot listen to the Sermon on the Mount without a horse laugh and a life to match. You are saying that those who excel in the course and those who flunk out of it are all the same. This seems to me to be a curious way of proceeding.

You conclude by objecting to the sovereignty of God, saying that the idea makes the whole world into a ghastly totalitarian state, where believers say that God (and who does He think *He* is?) runs everything. I would urge you

to set aside for a moment the theology of the thing and try to summon up some gratitude for those who built our institutions of liberty. Many of them were actually inspired by the idea that since God is exhaustively sovereign, and because man is a sinner, it follows that all earthly power must be limited and bounded. The idea of checks and balances came from a worldview that you dismiss as inherently totalitarian. Why did those societies where this kind of theology predominated produce, as a direct result, our institutions of civil liberty?

One last question: In your concluding paragraph you make a great deal out of your individualism and your right to be left alone with the “most intimate details of [your] life and mind.” Given your atheism, what account are you able to give that would require us to respect the individual? How does this individualism of yours flow from the premises of atheism? Why should anyone in the outside world respect the details of your thought life any more than they respect the internal churnings of any other given chemical reaction? That’s all our thoughts are, isn’t that right? Or, if there is a distinction, could you show how the premises of your atheism might produce such a distinction?