

REFUTING THE NEW ATHEISTS

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE
TO SAM HARRIS,
CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, &
RICHARD DAWKINS

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LETTER FROM
A CHRISTIAN
CITIZEN

A RESPONSE TO SAM HARRIS'S *LET-
TER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION*

CHAPTER 1

DEAR MR. HARRIS

I would love to begin by saying something like “Greetings in the Lord,” but I have no idea what your background is or whether you have ever been baptized. And so, not to presume, let me begin simply by greeting you warmly in a general fashion and thanking you for setting your thoughts down so plainly. I would also hope that I might raise some equally clear questions about what you have written.

On the first page of your small book, you begin by discussing some of the reaction you got to your first book, *The End of Faith*. You say that the “most hostile” responses came to you from Christians. “The truth is that many who claim to be transformed by Christ’s love

are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism” (vii).¹ You suggest the possibility that this might just be attributable to human nature, but you don’t think so. You go on to suggest that “such hatred” draws “considerable support from the Bible.” You say your reason for saying this is that the “most disturbed of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse” (vii).

I think I know why you began your book this way. I have been in evangelical Christian circles my entire life, and one of the *standard* concerns that many Christians have is presenting “a bad testimony” to nonbelievers. Of course this doesn’t prevent some Christians from presenting that bad testimony anyway, oblivious to all surrounding concerns. But your opening is guaranteed to cause many Christian readers to lament the fact that a number of professing Christians have sought to clobber you for Christ through their hostility. And then when you didn’t respond favorably to “the treatment,” these sorts of people have another chapter and verse handy that can explain *that*.

You opened your book this way because you knew (quite accurately) that Christians generally would be upset by it, would be put on the defensive, would be sorrowful over what some of us have done to you in the name of Christ, and so on. I know, and you clearly know, that Christians can behave badly in this way,

1. Throughout this book, the page numbers given in parentheses refer to Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006).

and you also knew that a lot of other Christians would be ashamed of this undeniable fact. And you are right: we are ashamed of this kind of thing. When my son (a Christian) published an article showing how the Shroud of Turin could easily have been produced with medieval off-the-shelf technology,² he got lots of mail—from professing Christians—with all sorts of variants of “go to hell” or “I hope you rot in hell.” So you tagged us. The Christian Church has a problem with this kind of person in our midst. We are embarrassed by it, believing it to be inconsistent with what Christ taught and what we profess to believe. Attributing it to human nature doesn’t cut it with us because we believe that Christ came to transform human nature. You knew this about us and started out very shrewdly. You knew that we would disapprove of this kind of thing, just as you do.

But *that*, actually, was the surprising thing: that you, too, disapproved of that kind of hateful behavior. You used a number of words that clearly portrayed that disapproval: hostile, murderously, disturbed, hatred. I could not get to your second page without encountering a cluster of indignant moral judgments, and I am genuinely curious as to what you could possibly offer as the basis for these judgments. Pick the nastiest letter you got from the nastiest Christian out there. As a pastor, I know what I would say to him about it because I

2. Books and Culture, March/April 2005, Volume 11, Number 2, pp. 22–29. The article can now be found online.

can appeal to the Bible. But what could *you* say to him? By your understanding of the world, he is just doing his thing. Two hundred years from now, when both you and he have returned to the soil, what difference will it make? There is no judgment, no standard, no law that overarches the two of you. When this nasty Christian dies, you don't even have the satisfaction of knowing that he will finally discover the error of his ways. He will discover nothing of the kind. You believe his eyes will close and that will be that. The material universe will not give everyone thirty minutes after death to re-adjust their thoughts on the subject before they pass into final oblivion. So why, on your terms, should he have written you a nice letter? *I* think he should have, but then again, I'm the pastor guy.

In different ways, this same issue is going to come up again and again as I respond to various portions of your book. You want Christians to quit behaving in certain ways. But why? You want them to write nice letters to atheist authors, and you want them to stop turning America into a big, dumb theocracy. But *why*? If there is no God, what could *possibly* be wrong with theocracies? They provide high entertainment value, and they give everybody involved in them a sense of dignity and high moral purpose. They get to wear ecclesiastical robes, march in impressive processions to burn intransigent people at the stake, believing they are better than everybody else and that God likes them. Further, the material

universe doesn't care about any of this foolishness, not even a little bit. So what's wrong with having a little bit of fun at the expense of other bits of protoplasm? Hitler, Ronald Reagan, Pol Pot, Mother Teresa, Mao, Nancy Pelosi, Stalin, Ted Haggard, and the Grand Inquisitor are all just part of a gaudy and very temporary show. Sometimes the Northern lights put on a show in the sky. Sometimes people put on a show on the ground. Then the sun goes out and, behold, nobody cares. Given your premises, this is the way it has to be.

But I find it quite curious that you clearly do care what happens to our nation. "The primary purpose of the book is to arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right" (viii). Again, you are using words like *should be*. Not only do you have an *ought* going here, you have one that you are clearly willing to impose on others who differ with you (which can be seen in your goal of "arming" secularists). But what is the difference between an imposed morality, an imposed religion, or an imposed secular *ought*? Why is your imposition to be preferred to any other?

Although your book is small, the goal is certainly ambitious. "In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, I have set out to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms" (ix). In order to demolish something intellectually, you have to have a standard for thought and reason, and I presume

you will reveal this standard later in your book so we will be able to discuss it. But you also want to demolish the moral pretensions of the Christian faith. This could have two meanings. You might mean to show that Christianity does not live up to its own professed standard, in which case you are simply joining a long covenant tradition of admonishing hypocrisy that includes the prophet Amos and John the Baptist. I could not really object to this, because it is what I try to do every Sunday in the pulpit. But you appear to mean something else. You seem to be saying that there is a standard which Christianity does not acknowledge even though it is authoritative over Christians anyway, and that Christianity is in rebellion against this standard. I want to continue to ask you for the source of this standard. Who has defined this standard? You? Your friends? Is it published somewhere so I can read it? You write as though it exists. Where is it?

You say, “In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, however, I engage Christianity at its most divisive, injurious, and retrograde” (ix). So Christianity is divisive, compared to what standard for unity? Who promulgated this standard? Why do we have to submit to it? Christianity is injurious, you say, but I would want to inquire why it is bad to be injurious. What standard do you appeal to here? And *retrograde* means that we are sliding backwards in some sense. What slope are we sliding down? Why are we not allowed to slide down it? I am not trying

to be cute here. I think these are the central questions in this discussion. Okay, so I am part of a *divisive, injurious* and *retrograde* movement. Is that bad?

At the conclusion of your “Note to the Reader,” you make an opening move in what I suppose is part of your larger strategy of demolishing the “intellectual pretensions of Christianity.” You begin by noting that the intellectual pretensions of the Christian faith are certainly widespread. “If our worldview were put to a vote, notions of ‘intelligent design’ would defeat the science of biology by nearly three to one” (x). I do not share the same faith you apparently do in the abilities of pollsters to measure this sort of thing, but let us grant this as at least a distinct possibility. You believe that the pervasiveness of certain Christian doctrines constitutes “a moral and intellectual emergency” (xii). You speak in terms of “us and them,” so allow me to do the same thing for a moment. You all have had nearly complete control of the education establishment for over a century and a half. You have the accrediting agencies, you have the government schools, and you have the vast majority of colleges and universities. You *are* the educational establishment. And yet your complaint here reminds me of the indignant father who said, “I taught him everything I know and he’s *still* stupid!” At what point should a committed secularist take responsibility for the state of education in America? Perhaps the problem is not in the students?

But there is more to this argument. It is quite true that I do not regard the widespread acceptance of intelligent design as indicating stupidity, apathy, or worse. I believe God created the world, and His intelligence is on display in riotous ways in everything I look at every day. But given the current climate, this conviction is certainly easy to *mock*:

This means that despite a full century of scientific insights attesting to the antiquity of the earth, more than half of our neighbors believe that the entire cosmos was created six thousand years ago. This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue. (x–xi)

But notice what you are doing here: the Sumerians *invented* glue? Glue didn't just happen? Why couldn't it just appear the way the sexuality of moss, and the eyeballs that see in color, and the superbly engineered ankle, and the majesty of the great white sharks all did? *Glue* is so complicated that it needed to be invented?

You say that our nation is a “dim-witted giant” (xi). You say that we combine “great power and great stupidity” (xi). To bring this installment to a close, let me just give you a friendly caution. This sort of thing is probably red meat to many of the folks buying your books. But if you are really concerned about delivering our nation from our Christian “clutches,” I am afraid that underestimating the intelligence and education of your foes will probably not help you at all in the long run.

CHAPTER 2

A TROUT IN THE PUNCHBOWL

In your first argument (3–7), you begin the discussion with agreement. That agreement may seem minimal to some, but I actually believe that a great deal rides on it. The agreement is that one of us must be right and the other wrong. There either is a God or there is not. As you put it, “We agree, for instance, that if one of us is right, the other is wrong. The Bible is either the word of God or it isn’t. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation (John 14:6), or he does not” (3). This is an appropriate way to state it and a good place to begin. Some might claim this is a false dichotomy, but it really is a fair statement.

GOD IS

HOW CHRISTIANITY
EXPLAINS EVERYTHING

PREFACE

It may appear to the casual observer that a few years ago someone gave a signal and a new wave of militant atheists began publishing books like crazy. These books contain many or most of the standard arguments against God, but *something* is different. The zeal, the militancy, and the underlying sense of panic indicate some kind of sea change in the relationship between believers and unbelievers.

I believe it is necessary to answer the challenges, but it is also necessary to resist the temptation to be shrill in response. The issues are important, but no sense getting really worked up over it. If we were all sitting on a used car lot, and one of the F-250 trucks began questioning the existence of Henry Ford, we would all think

it was a serious situation, but that is not the same thing as thinking it a serious question.

I have answered Sam Harris in a short little book called *Letter from a Christian Citizen*. This is my second book that seeks to address and answer the new wave of atheist challenges, and it is a response to *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. Those who have read the first book will recognize that some of the structural arguments in this one follow the same pattern, but it is still important to give each author his due, and to follow the ins and outs of the entire discussion. It would be foolish to think that a study of the battle of Gettysburg was the same as studying the battle of Waterloo because “they both had guns.”

If this subject interests you, as it does many, it is my hope that you will enjoy the discussion, and, when you are done, that you will say a prayer for Christopher Hitchens’s soul.¹

1. This paragraph was written when Christopher Hitchens was still alive. And while what is done is done, I would still urge everyone to pray for those that Hitch influenced. And I can mention that I do know that he had at least one opportunity to consider the gospel after he was diagnosed with the cancer that killed him.

CHAPTER 1

LO, THE BOMBASTICATOR
COMETH

Comes now Christopher Hitchens in his new book, *God Is Not Great*, and he thwacketh us believers upon the mazzard.

The book promises to be an engaging read; Hitchens writes fluidly and well, and he knows how to go over the top rhetorically, but not by too much. There will be more on this shortly. His rationalism is very much in evidence, but he does not write like so many other atheistic rationalists—men who believe that the authority of reason (all rise!) necessitates a turgid kind of book that acts like it was put together by a committee of certified public accountants trying to write a phone directory. As though *that* were a rational thing to do.

But Hitchens promises better than this. His prose is hale and hardy; he recognizes and appreciates good writing elsewhere, and he uses it consistently himself. And it is a good thing too, because it appears that this is all he has.

I need to change the subject for just a moment, but I am not really doing so. I do have a point here. Suppose you went to see some fantastic illusionist, and he did something remarkable, like levitate himself. His beautiful assistant with insufficient clothing—and this might have something to do with the success of the trick, actually—comes out on stage and passes some metal hoops every which way around the floating body. Jeepers, you think, and head on home scratching your noggin. When you get there, you find yourself in a discussion with your cousin who used to do a smalltime illusionist act of his own down at the local Ramada Inn, and he explains to you how the trick is done. He doesn't have to be a big-time headliner; he just has to have enough experience to be able to explain how such tricks are pulled off.

I am the Ramada Inn guy, only drop the illusionist aspect now. I write a lot, like Hitchens does, and I know how to put a sentence or two together. I believe I also know how to make a metaphor crawl up your back and make an unpleasant smacky noise in your ear. Or, more pleasantly, to get a couple of cute zephyrs to

fool around with your hair on a warm spring day. Here, pick a card, any card.

To get right to the point, I can tell *exactly* what Hitchens is doing, and how he is doing it. As we work through his book together, I am going to point it out for you. But do not think that I will do anything so trite and rationalistic as objecting to his use of rhetoric or wordsmithing showmanship. “That’s just rhetoric” is a simplistic objection. Rhetoric is not to be thought of as the M&Ms or chocolate sprinkles that you use to decorate the top of your frozen yogurt. It is not a mere flourish to adorn an otherwise *bleh* argument. Rhetorical abilities are an essential part of argument itself, and this is why, when someone like Hitchens (obviously gifted in this) turns those abilities against God, he is revealing far more than he knows. Or perhaps not . . . Hitchens begins by trying to take away that possible response. Those who point out the “sins and deformities that animated” Hitchens to write this book are revealing that *they* are the ones with the problem (1).²

As just mentioned, Hitchens is unlike other atheist writers in his ability to write. But in one sad fact, he is just like them. He is morally indignant. Instead of taking refuge in the (relatively) strong fortress of nihilistic relativism and laughing at all the poor blinkered dopes who think that truth and beauty are still

2. Throughout this book, the page numbers given in parentheses refer to Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

ambulatory in this sorry world, Hitchens (like *all* these other recently published guys) calls us and raises us ten. “You have puritanical indignation at our unbelief? Well, watch *this*.” And the atheist, a complex chemical reaction, according to the best contemporary science, uncorks with scathing observations on the hypocrisies of other complex chemical reactions. Hitchens does this in the first five lines of his book, and he shows no sign of letting up. But how can a chemical reaction be hypocritical? How can the chemical reaction that is man be a hypocrite? Given his premises, it is like being indignant with a tornado, or some random rutabaga, or sand on the beach—but Hitchens does it. They all do it. This is a point that I have made before in my interactions with Sam Harris, and with Richard Dawkins, and with various others before them. I am happy to make the point again, and it should not distress any of us that I am doing so. An argument is like a tool; you put it down when the job is done, and not when you are tired of holding it. When atheists stop suspending their moral indignation from their invisible sky hook, then I will no longer amuse myself by pointing out *their* levitation trick. I can answer Hitchens on this point with an argument condensed into one word. Not only that, but I will condense it into a word with only two characters in it. Three if you count the question mark: *so*?

Religion poisons everything. So?

The fact that the argument can admit of such elegant economy does not mean that it cannot be expanded, like this. Religion poisons everything. “So? Does this offend anyone whose opinion should matter to me? Is there some kind of rule against poisoning everything? Who made *that* rule? And who died and left that particular busybody king? Get your moralism outa my *face*, Hitchens.” Now this response should not be confounded with anything so juvenile as a Bronx cheer. This is an *argument*, not a raspberry.

When Hitchens says that religion poisons everything, he says this as though it were a bad thing. He doesn’t *show* that it is a bad thing. He doesn’t prove that it is a bad thing. He doesn’t demonstrate that it is a bad thing. He just rummages around in all the old Sunday School lessons from his upbringing, hidden in some shoebox in his intellectual attic, blows the dust off his best sanctimonious judgmentalism, and declares that we all must submit to the Word from his attic. “Thou shalt not poison everything.” Sez *who*?

Lots of people think lots of things are bad, and not all of them are, and who are *they* to tell me what to do anyway? Some are right, some are wrong, and others are simply incoherent. Let’s start with those who are simply wrong. They tell me that Allah is the one true God, and Mohammad is his prophet, and I have to drop everything and do just what they say. I am a

Christian, so I believe this is an error, but at least it is coherent. If Allah *were* God, we *should* do what He says.

An incoherent approach would go something like this: “There is no God; there is no fixed standard of morality overarching all of us, and so we must all pull together and submit to the resultant fixed standard.” I don’t get it either.

If Hitchens is merely saying that Christians frequently don’t meet the standards of their own Christian faith, he is doing nothing remarkable. If he is pointing out such internal inconsistencies, then he is welcome to add his voice to the long and honored line of prophetic denunciation. There is nothing in that approach that the prophet Amos wouldn’t be good with. But this is not what he is doing. He is assuming that Christians are offending against a standard that overarches believers and nonbelievers alike, and that this standard is clearly obligatory on everybody.

Now pretend I am a simpleton. Hitchens went up these stairs three at a time, and I must have missed something. Explain it to me *slowly*. “God does not exist. Therefore all people have a fixed moral obligation to not poison everything *because . . .*” What goes after that because? Because the universe doesn’t give a rip? Because in two hundred years, we will all be dead? Because moral conventions are just that, social *conventions*? Give me something to follow that *because* that is derived from the premises of atheism and that clearly

and compellingly requires nonatheists to submit to it as well. Is that too much to ask? Apparently.

The assumed standard (inevitably) has to be the result of mixing reason and science together in some magical way. He doesn't argue for it, but he does assume it. Hitchens wants unbelief to be in a class by itself. No rented square footage in the marketplace of ideas for him.

Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, openmindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. (5)

In this notable expression of high sentiment, Hitchens declares that he distrusts anything that outrages reason. And just before this, he delivered himself of the zen-mystery that "our belief is not a belief." Okay, so he has faith in certain of his principles, but this faith of his is not like our faith in our principles because ours are . . . wrong. His faith in his principles is not faith at all. It is something else. It is confidence, yeah, that's it, confidence. *Con fides*. With faith. And his beliefs are not like our beliefs, not at all. No, his beliefs, which are not beliefs, are based on certain beliefs about science and reason.

David Hume had a mighty hard time figuring out how to get across the chasm from *is* to *ought*. Mr. Hitchens must have figured out how to do this, because he has gotten from the *is* of repeatable experiments, and the *is* of the law of identity, to the *ought* of “Thou shalt not poison everything.” This is a stupendous breakthrough. And Mr. Hitchens needs to do this whole math problem on the board, in front of the class, and Mr. Hitchens needs to *show his work*.

Hitchens points out that some believers respond badly to his kind of bad boy atheism, and this is something I grant. In fact, I am perfectly willing to loan him a fixed scriptural standard so that he might enjoy the pleasure of disapproving of hysterical believers who go off like a bottle rocket whenever an atheist is naughty in public. But that is the only way he is able to enjoy such spectacles—*with borrowed standards*. When believers panic or hyperventilate over the monkeyshines of men like Hitchens, they *are* displeasing Jesus. But are they displeasing the mindless process of time and chance acting on matter, which is all that anything or anyone actually is? Well, it turns out, no.

In Hitchens’s view, according to his premises, Christian hypocrisies (a source of amusement to many for millennia) turn out to be just another big dud in a universe of big duds. The infinite concourse of atoms supplies us with nothing more than an endless supply of dropped punch lines. But the Puritan Nathaniel

Ward had more to feed on than this; he said he had only two consolations in this life—the perfections of Christ and the imperfections of Christians.

But not *all* Christians are threatened in the way Hitchens describes. There are believers who are secure in their faith and who respond to atheistic blowfish faces on our windows with the appropriate amusement. We *are* out here. There are *many* of us. And if you want to know who we are, we are gentlemen of Jap . . . no, wait, wrong groove.

THE DELUDED ATHEIST

A RESPONSE
TO RICHARD DAWKINS'S *THE GOD
DELUSION*

CHAPTER 1

LET'S FRITZ OUR BRAINS
AT THEM

Richard Dawkins wants to raise our consciousness—to “raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one” (1).¹ And his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, certainly does have some high aspirations in this regard. As high, that is, as approximately one hundred and eighty pounds of protoplasm can have. Get yourself a double-layered Hefty garbage bag and fill it with some kind of vegetable soup, shake it

1. Throughout this book, the page numbers given in parentheses refer to Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

for a bit, and you have some idea of just how lofty an aspiration can actually be.

But the point is apparently not how high the aspiration has to *be*, but what you can get other bits of protoplasm to say about it in the blurbs, which is almost as good. But they need to say it in an energetic enough way to sway the general mass of protoplasmic bipedal carbon units out there, which is to say, the reading public. Because if enough bits of protoplasm get together on this, we can get ourselves a consensus going, and first thing you know you are dealing with the voice of Reason. The voice of Reason is what happens when any kind of physical wave (sound waves are best) shudders through a portion of the vegetable soup, dispelling the voice of Superstition forever.

Still, the blurbs are kinda fun. The noted intellectuals Penn and Teller say this: “*The God Delusion* is smart, compassionate, and true like ice, like fire. If this book doesn’t change the world, we’re all screwed.”

Ahhhhuuuhh. True like ice. True like fire. But how true are *those*? How true are they together? Does the fire melt the ice, or does the melted ice put out the fire? Or both perhaps? True like a puddle with charcoal in it? Now we’re talking.

And then Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, said this, while obviously holding back: “Many religious leaders today are men who, it’s obvious to anyone but their deranged followers, are

willing to sanction vicious cruelty in the service of their faith. Dawkins hits them with all the power that reason can wield.”

Let me go on record right *now* as saying that vicious cruelty is bad, and maybe it is here that we atheists and Christians can actually find some common ground and move the discussion forward but, come to think of it, probably not.

Now of course, it's kind of early in my response to be pointing this out, but the thing has to be done some time. If that is the case, then why not make the point every other page or so? Or at least until someone gets it enough to attempt an answer. Reason, being a quaint and superstitious name we give to random neuron firings in the brain, *wields no power at all*. On atheistic principles, expecting to find a correlation called “truth” between the chemical activities of the cerebral cortex in *some* people and the outside world is more than a little bit like astrology—or tying the bulls and bears of the stock market to the batting averages of professional baseball players. Can be done, I suppose, but why would we ever think that *this* random dance of atoms had anything whatever to do with *that* random dance of atoms?

“Fearless atheist leader, look! There goes a *religious* leader, with his deranged minions behind him! They are going out to perpetrate another vicious cruelty and will perhaps even differ with us! Whatever shall we do?”

“Don’t waver, Bertrand. We shall wield the force of Reason. All together now—let’s fritz our brains at them!” We are only in the preface to the book, but Dawkins begins with the idea that we religious types need to lay off the kids. He wants us to get jumpy about expressing ourselves too freely about that “nurture and admonition of the Lord” stuff. “That is not a Muslim child, but a child of Muslim parents. That child is too young to know whether it is a Muslim or not. There is no such thing as a Muslim child. There is no such thing as a Christian child” (3).

And of course, arid cognition is king around here. That child is also too young to know if it is a boy or a girl, and it therefore follows that it must be neither. That child is too young to know if it is Canadian or Swiss, so it must belong to a holding tank at the United Nations. Apparently, Dawkins instinctively felt that he was losing me with his deep argumentation right around this point, so he presses on to explain how it was that I got so silly.

If this book works as I intend, religious readers will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature (whether by evolution or design). Among the more effective immunological devices is a dire warning to avoid even

opening a book like this, which is surely a work of Satan. (5–6)

I don't know. I would more inclined to consider it a jesuitical work of the Holy Spirit, designed to make lapsed Christians, who had unreflectingly drifted into a secular mindset, go running back to the Church in a panic.

That's us! Immune to argument! They bounce right off *my* forehead, but even so, we Christians have to pretend to argue sometimes, to keep up appearances. Let's see how it goes.

