

“Poison or Cure? Religious Belief in the Modern World” Christopher Hitchens (Atheist) vs Alister McGrath (Christian)

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The Debate may be viewed at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-6851159367044940771>

Reviewed by Glenn Peoples

I will number points/paragraphs, to make it easier to refer to them later. I have summarized the debate, and at various points I have also added my own comments [in square brackets], so that my comments are not mistaken for a summary of any part of the debate.

Christopher Hitchens, opening statement

1. Hitchens begins by explaining that he's an up front kind of guy. When you've heard him say something, you know what he means. Religious people, by contrast (he uses the example of Jews and Christians that he has spoken to in the past) are a bit more “Monty Python” in the way they talk. When you ask what they believe, Hitchens tells us, they just can't give you a straight intelligible answer about whether or not they really believe the doctrine that is in question.

2. Hitchens announces his chief intention as follows: to rebut the view that even if religion is a total myth, it is a source of morality. He tells us “I don't believe that it's true that religion is moral or ethical.” As a challenge, he asks, “Is it moral to believe that your sins can be forgiven by the punishment of another person? Is it ethical to believe that?” Hitchens claims that the Christian view that Christ died vicariously to redeem people is immoral. He then says that he might, if he loved somebody, pay their debts. He could, if he could find a way, serve somebody's prison sentence for them. He could, as in the Tale of Two Cities, take somebody's place on the scaffold. “But,” Hitchens adds, “I can't take away your responsibilities. I can't forgive what you did. I can't say you didn't do it.” Such “scapegoating,” he says, abolishes personal responsibility, and responsibility is the foundation on which all ethics must rest, and ergo, the Christian view of Christ's death cannot be ethical.

[It appears that the claim that Hitchens makes in one breath, he undermines in the next. If he can get someone out of having to pay a fine by paying it for them, thus meaning that the debtor is no longer responsible to pay it off, and if he could possibly serve another person's sentence, meaning that they are no longer responsible to serve it, and if he could even *die* for someone else on the scaffold, meaning that they no longer have to die for whatever the offense was, then what sense does it make to say that it is *immoral* to believe that people can be forgiven, that is, not be held to account for their sins, because the penalty has been voluntarily borne by somebody else? This is *exactly* what he has said that he could do. When he says “but I can't take away your responsibilities” and “I can't forgive what you did,” he seems to be simply unclear on what it means to be held “responsible” for something. To be responsible for a loan, for example, *just is* to be required to pay it back. If he has paid off my loan for me, then whether he chooses to use the R word or not, he *has* taken away my responsibilities. The doublespeak uttered here leaves him both making a point and rebutting it at the same time. Unfortunately, when McGrath does explicitly comment on Hitchens' comments about the death of Christ, he ends up sounding a bit like the type of religious believer that Hitchens describes in 1), and he does not capitalize on Hitchens' doublespeak here.]

3. Hitchens' next argument involves the Christian belief that we *must* accept the sacrifice of Christ, even though it happened long before we were born and we had no say in it. This is a symptom of a sinister aspect of Christianity: "totalitarianism." Hitchens says that in the Christian view, "I am born under a celestial dictatorship that I could not have had a hand in choosing." We don't get to choose whether or not God stands over us as ruler. God knows our thoughts and holds us guilty for them. And God punishes people after they die. "Is this morality?" asks Hitchens, as though the answer is obvious. A religious view like this, says Hitchens, is the origin of totalitarianism, which has been a burden to our species for so long.

[If there is supposed to be an actual argument in Hitchens' comments at this point, it seems to be something like this:

- 1) If I did not choose a set of rules, then I am not subject to them, and to deny this is, according to me, horrible.
- 2) Christianity teaches that we are subject to rules that we did not choose.
- 3) Therefore Christianity is mistaken, and it is, according to me, horrible.

How should the Christian go about evaluating this? There's no reason at all given in support of the first part of premise 1), and the second part is merely autobiographical, telling us what Hitchens does and does not like. Why should the Christian really care? Unless Hitchens is prepared to give good reasons for accepting 1), this argument is scarcely worthy of serious attention, let alone rebuttal. The belief that we are subject to rules that we did not choose *follows* if Christianity is true, and Hitchens has not raised an identifiable objection to it.]

4. Hitchens then claims that this religious outlook "dissolves our obligation to live and witness in truth." After all, as Hitchens seeks to remind us, have we not all heard religious people say that their beliefs may indeed be a pile of fairy tales, but it provides consolation, so it is worth believing. Surely to a sensible person, this would be embarrassing, muses Hitchens. "Yes it would be nice," said Hitchens, "but it's not true and it's not morally sound." Thus far in the debate, of course, he has not addressed the first of these two claims, but we are left to think now that he will.

[This raises a couple of issues. The first is that Hitchens has created a fairly obvious straw man, and then called it embarrassing to any sensible person. It would be embarrassing to most Christians as well, which is why they do *not* say that their beliefs are a bunch of fairy tales, but still worth believing. There might be anti-religious skeptics who are prepared to say that religion is at times helpful but false, but Hitchens doesn't cite a single religious source that describes religious beliefs this way.

The second issue is perhaps the more interesting one, and it is one that, unfortunately, McGrath never picks up in his reply. What obligation, according to Hitchens, *do* we really have to "live and witness in truth?" What is the basis of this obligation? For example, if there were a peaceful religion that was false yet gave its members great happiness and hope until the day they die, is there anything *wrong* in believing in it, and is there any actual moral duty to persuade people to give it up? Hitchens certainly offers no clear reason for thinking that truth at all costs is a greater good than peace and happiness for the greatest number of people on earth. The Christian, on the other hand, *does* have a moral mandate for promoting truth, in principle, since there are real and eternal consequences related to pursuing the truth that is found in Christianity. Moreover, the Christian is able to sensibly affirm that we were *meant* to live in accordance with the truth. The pursuit of truth is something virtuous, enjoined on us by our creator. For Hitchens, it should really make no long

term difference whether our beliefs about religion are true or not. If we die happy (even if deluded), we have done as best we can.]

5. Hitchens says that we must repudiate the view that when it comes to knowing right from wrong and being able to make moral choices, we do not have this knowledge innately, and that it must come from a celestial dictatorship that we must both love and fear.

[This is one of the symptoms of the fact that Hitchens is simply ignorant in his critique of Christianity and in his comments about ethical theory in general. In the first place, whether or not moral knowledge – or any knowledge, for that matter – is *innate* is an open question in the history of philosophy quite apart from the schools of Christian theology. In fact John Locke argued at length that moral knowledge is not innate, and he did so *against* the more orthodox Christians of his age. In other words, Hitchens is painting the scene in a way that is the reverse of the case for many Christians, who see morality as indeed something innate. The vast Christian natural law tradition bears obvious testimony to this fact, and Hitchens' ignorance of this is inexcusable in a debate where he is attempting to criticize Christian views of morality. I will have a little more to say about this when commenting on McGrath's reply in 28, and in reply to Hitchens' next comment in 6).]

6. Hitchens says “what is it like – I've never tried it, I've never been a cleric – What is it like to *lie* to children for a living and tell them that they have an authority that they must love – compulsory love, what a grotesque idea – and be terrified of at the same time. What's that like, I want to know. And that we don't have an innate sense of right and wrong, that children don't have a sense of fairness and decency – which of course they do.” Using the example of the Jews in the Exodus, he muses over view that the children of Israel had been “dragging” themselves around the desert under the impression that murder, adultery and perjury were just fine, until they got to Mt Sinai and received the Ten Commandments, only to learn that these things are “not kosher after all.” “Excuse me,” Hitchens objects, “we must have more self respect than *that*.”

[Setting aside the purely emotive and indefensible rhetoric about lying to children for a living (and even if Christians are mistaken, this hardly amounts to “lying”), here Hitchens further reveals that he simply doesn't know what Christians actually believe about morality. Even if morality has its origins in God – in fact, to take an even stronger claim, even if morality arises purely volitionally, based on the pure *will* of God (something many Christians don't believe) – it does not follow that nobody can *know* that an act is moral or immoral unless God tells them, for example by delivering the Ten Commandments. I know of no Christian theologian or philosopher who has taught this. Hitchens does not provide a single example of any Christian thinker advocating this view, and had he researched the matter before making this claim, he may have thought better of making it at all. Christians from across the theological spectrum, from Augustine to Aquinas to Calvin to Locke – and many other prominent examples in history, have affirmed that human beings can have moral knowledge that does not require special or direct revelation from God. The Bible itself teaches this fairly explicitly, saying that even those who do not have God's law still have his moral requirements written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). There is no contradiction at all in believing that morality has its origin in God, and that God has made us in such a way as to intuitively grasp (at least some) moral truths.]

7. Hitchens' next claim is that science and religion are “irreconcilable.” Since humans, he says, have been around for about a quarter of a million years or less, with a short life expectancy (20-25 years), dying horribly in the process. God, apparently, watched this suffering until quite recently, and then intervened via a human sacrifice in Palestine, a method so obscure that some people *still*

have not heard about it. But, says Hitchens, it is “not possible” to believe this. Apparently “a virgin birth is more likely than that,” as is a resurrection. It would also imply that God is unbelievably lazy and inept, or unbelievably callous.

[McGrath seeks to address this in point 29, so I will not comment here in great depth. I will say however that Hitchens is hardly justified in saying that the above makes Christianity and science “irreconcilable,” that is, in hopeless contradiction with one another. All he seems to be saying is that there are many human beings who never get to hear about Jesus, either because they lived and died long before he came along, or just because they live in some far flung corner of the world and have never heard about him. If this were a problem, how exactly would it be a “scientific” one? It is merely a version of the argument from hiddenness: The claim that God ought to make his existence more evident. McGrath takes this up briefly in 26.]

8. Hitchens then makes his final point. These religious views appeal both to our meanness and self-centeredness on the one hand, and to our masochism on the other. On the one hand we are but dust, we are vile sinners, every religion is distinguished *principally* by its view that we should be disgusted by our own sexuality (he adds “name me a religion that does not play upon that fact”). We are wretched creatures, *but* take heart, because the Universe was made for you, and heaven has a plan for you.

[McGrath never comments on this group of claims, and rightly so, as they are really beneath the radar of serious debate. On the one hand is the obvious misrepresentation in the claim that all religions are distinguished principally by the view that we should be disgusted by our own sexuality. Christianity itself does not teach this, let alone *all* religions. Secondly, there is no argument here *against* the possibility of us being sinners on the one hand, but offered salvation by God on the other. What is the problem supposed to be? There isn’t even *an* argument here, let alone a good one.]

Hitchens closes by saying that he can’t believe that there is a thinking person in the audience who doesn’t realize that our species would grow to its full height if it left such sinister and childish nonsense behind.

[This is merely inflammatory rhetorical filler. Hitchens himself, earlier, made mention of the fact that the brilliant scientist Francis Collins, a Christian involved in the Human Genome project, was in attendance in the front row. Hitchens’ opponent is an eminently qualified man in both science and the history of theology. Are both these men (just for starters) here being written of as not being “thinking people” because of their religion? This is just the kind of dismissive bigotry that has earned Hitchens the boorish reputation that he has acquired, and ironically, precisely the type of ignorance and dogmatism of which religious people are so often accused.

Thus, at the end of Hitchens’ opening statement, he has offered practically nothing of substance, and has left himself wide open for a powerful rebuttal.]

(ends 22:55)

Alister McGrath, opening statement

9. McGrath opens by noting that years ago, had he been told that he was to take part in a debate between an atheist and a Christian, he would have assumed that he would have been the atheist in the debate. As his studies advanced, however, he began to believe that the scientific positivism he

had embraced was wanting, and the evidential grounds for atheism were weaker than he had assumed. He found faith, he says, not merely because it made sense, but also because it made sense *of things*.

10. McGrath says that he has become very interested in the work over the last 15 or so years dealing empirically with the effect that religion has on people. He wondered if some of this research might come into Hitchens' presentation [it did not]. For example, McGrath cites research in the 1990s that notes a positive correlation between religious beliefs and health and wellbeing. This doesn't prove, he notes, that any religion is true, or that all religion is good for you. Some religions are pathological. But we need to take seriously the question of what is the *norm* in religion, and what is on the *fringe*. This extends to Hitchens' comments about the impact of religion in general. Religions *have* done harm. But is that typical, or a fringe element? Who are the normal people, and who are the fanatics? As Shermer noted, for every atrocity there are 10,000 unreported acts of kindness etc that arise from religious commitment.

[It is vital to note what McGrath has *not* just said. He did not say that good deeds by religions people is proof that their religion is true.]

11. McGrath's second point is that worldviews in general, religious or not, are capable of motivating people to do evil. Lenin's Soviet Union is a case in point. But McGrath would not argue from Lenin's anti-religious violence that atheism or atheists must be violent (or wrong). This is the case even when the worldview or movement in question is grounded in values that are *right*. The French Revolution is an example. As she was led to the guillotine, Madame Rolande famously said to the statue of liberty, "Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!" This hardly undermines liberty!

[This seriously damages a point that Hitchens seems to think works strongly in his favor, namely his charge that religion is dangerous and that religion has done great harm. Not once does he ever refer back to this counter-example of the French Revolution and this comment by madame Rolande, and explain why it fails to dismantle this repeated argument against Christianity.]

12. The issue then may not be religion or anti-religion when it comes to these acts of violence, but rather something in human nature itself that needs to be addressed. But certainly ideology *can* breed violence, and such things forced upon people *do* need to be challenged.

13. But could God really be behind the violence that is at issue here? McGrath stresses that he speaks from a *particular* perspective, namely a Christian one, and the God of Christianity is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was no advocate of violence – even in the face of his own arrest and death. Jesus does not do violence, but has violence done *to* him. McGrath then makes the point that "your vision of what God is like has a profound impact on your vision of what God is urging you to do." For a Christian, we must take the vision of what God is like as disclosed in Jesus seriously. Some Christians might fail to do this, but let us distinguish, McGrath says, between "some Christians are bad" and "Christianity is bad." Christianity presents us with a *norm* with which we may challenge those who want to engage in religious violence. An example is the October 2006 Amish schoolhouse shootings, where the families of the victims showed forgiveness because of the example of Christ. Christianity contains the resources for self correction, then, towards elements within it that do not conform to Christian standards. They can be challenged on the *basis* of what the Christian God is like.

14. Regarding the question of science vs faith, McGrath says that for him the two have never been in opposition. We can read nature in an atheistic or agnostic or Christian *way*, but that does not mean that nature forces us into those positions. Those are positions that we *bring* to science. McGrath quotes C. S. Lewis to highlight this point: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” Faith gives us a new lens through which to see science, the world, culture and ourselves in a new light.

15. McGrath notes Hitchens’ appeal (in his book) for a “new enlightenment.” McGrath raises some queries about this. A number of postmodern critics of the Enlightenment have noted that the Enlightenment bred a worldview that led to intolerance and the potential for great conflict and violence, just the kind of things about which Hitchens complains, blaming them on religion. Moreover, as Alasdair McIntyre and others note, the Enlightenment’s foundational judgments about the nature of reason and what is right cannot be sustained by an appeal to history and reason itself.

[This, on the face of it, appears to be unnecessary, and perhaps even unhelpful, in the sense that positioning himself an an anti-enlightenment way might well serve to portray him (misleadingly) as anti-science. In my view, a much better path to take would be to raise the argument that the Christian assumptions about the world held by many enlightenment thinkers actually *drove* their revolutionary thinking.]

16. McGrath accepts that Hitchens in his moral quest is genuinely committed to reality. The real question, he says, is whether or not one can sustain that without any metaphysical basis. Can evolution alone do it? As Richard Dawkins notes (in *The Selfish Gene*), we alone seem to have the ability to rebel *against* that which our genes have provided us with. Others have noted that moral values may be manipulated by interest groups. The question is not can I *be* moral, but can we have a *viable* moral framework with no metaphysical foundations.

[Hitchens never appreciates this point. The point is indeed not whether or not we can act morally, but whether or not our belief that there *is* a moral standard to aspire to could possibly be true if atheism were true.]

And so, McGrath concludes, perhaps Hitchens is a man of faith as well. In a world where reason and science alone “do not deliver answers to questions that we once thought they did, on what can we base our lives, if we are to know that we are truly living the good, the beautiful and the true life?”

(43:55)

Christopher Hitchens, Rebuttal

17. Hitchens began by telling two sexually oriented jokes, one about his erectile issues, and another about a promiscuous Amish girl (who was excommunicated for having “two men-a-night”).

[You might think this isn’t worth mentioning, but apparently it was worth including in the debate, and is suggestive of just how seriously Hitchens thinks about religious perspectives.]

18. Hitchens accepts the evidence that religion and wellbeing may be related. But this says nothing about whether the belief is true, and perhaps much about our willingness to think wishfully (we think God loves us, so we are better off in thinking this).

[This is to misrepresent the point of McGrath's argument. McGrath, of course, never presented these observations as evidence that Christianity is true. Here McGrath was speaking to the debate's title: *Religion: The Poison or the Cure?* The point is that religion has an effect on people that is by no means a social poison, but rather something beneficial. Hitchens here, however, does invite the response I offered under 4). If atheism is true, what exactly is *wrong* with harmless but false wishful thinking?]

19. As far as the “fringe vs. the center” argument goes, Hitchens says that he is not using fringe examples, but central examples like authoritative texts or persons. He takes an example from the Hadith (even though he had said at the outset that he was only engaging Christianity), which commands Muslims to kill apostates. Do Muslims think this is the word of God or not? There is no wiggle room here. As another example, the Anglican Bishop of Carlyle has commented that floods in Yorkshire in which people died were a divine punishment for homosexuality. The Archbishop of Canterbury once said that a nuclear war would hasten us into a more blessed state, into which we were bound to end up anyway.

[Hitchens here presents examples that are different in kind. While statements in the Hadith might be authoritative and binding on Muslims, it is certainly not the case that the comments of the Anglican Archbishop of Carlyle are authoritative even for Anglicans, let alone for all Christians. One would be *very* hard pressed, for example, to seriously maintain that *Anglicanism teaches* that God flooded Yorkshire in response to homosexuality. Moreover, the goalpost has shifted from showing that Christianity is *dangerous* (“poison”) in the way that the Hadith advocates something that is dangerous to the lesser task of showing that a Christian has made a *particular declaration* about history that is not true (in Hitchens' estimate). The latter is trivial by comparison, and says nothing at all about whether Christianity is harmful *or* false..]

20. Moving unannounced from the evil deeds of religion to sinister beliefs of religion, Hitchens next claims that lurking under *all* forms of religion, at *all* times, is a desire for this life to come to an end. It has a yearning, a secret death wish for this world to be gone. Hitchens then says that McGrath cannot be “*a la Carte*” in his approach. If he's going to accept the good acts done in the name of religion, then he must accept the wicked acts done in the name of it as well. Moving on rapidly to another point, Hitchens issues a challenge: If you think that morality derives from the supernatural, then just name one moral statement made by a believer that could not be uttered by an unbeliever. However, if Hitchens asks us to think of an evil deed that could only be carried out by a religious person on an “errand from God,” then there isn't a person in the audience who would take ten seconds to come up with an example.

[This was a rapid flurry of unrelated claims in the debate, so I will reply in kind: Firstly, it's false that Christianity teaches that we should desire death. Hitchens has provided no evidence of this. On the contrary, the Christians Scripture teaches that death is an “enemy.” Secondly, Far from desiring this world to be gone, Christianity teaches that this creation will itself be restored.

Secondly, Hitchens' challenge is very easily met. Here's a moral statement that only a religious person could endorse: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” Additionally, Hitchens appears to be assuming that the religious believer must think that unbelievers have no moral knowledge – a characterization that is patently false. His question about

evil deeds is rather one sided. Sure, we can imagine evil deeds that only make sense being done by a deluded believer (e.g. the practice of murdering atheists to make the world more righteous). But it's just as easy to think of evil deeds that could only be carried out by an atheist (e.g. executing religious people to eliminate the irrational members of our species and improve the breeding pool). *Neither* of these facts make theism or atheism inherently dangerous, and they certainly do not speak to the question of which outlook is true.]

21. Hitchens then moves on to say that while the evil deeds of religious people are a problem for religion, the perceived evils of atheists do not count against atheism. Why not? Well, fascism was really just the political right wing of the Catholic Church. Hitchens generously says that you can't quite say the same of Hitler's regime, because that was partly grounded in *other* religious outlooks – Nordic blood rites and leader worship. Moving to Marxism, Hitchens says that in the days of the Tzars, people had thought for generations that the head of the state was God. When Stalin rose to power, Hitchens claims that what he *really* did was to have an "inquisition." He had "miracles" with the promise of four harvests a year. He had "heresy hunts." The leader was to be thanked and praised. The people were to be aware of the counter-revolutionary "devil" who lies in wait, and so forth. "That's not secularism," declares Hitchens. It's really just religion by another name.

[Hitchens is trying to take a short cut to victory by more or less *defining* grand scale atrocities and oppressive societies as religious.

It's just as easy for the Christian to play this tiresome game: When Christians in history carried out evils against people, it wasn't *really* done on behalf of Christianity, because their lack of moral care and their disregard for human life is really more compatible with atheism, so let's just call those deeds the evils of atheism. It was atheism by another name!

The above tactic of Hitchens also results in a viciously circular argument. Had he actually phrased himself clearly, his argument would be: "Religion is more irrational, dangerous and violent than atheism. We know this because even when atheists engage in this kind of thing, due to the oppressive, irrational and violent nature of their behavior it was really just religion by another name. After all, oppressive, irrational violence is a hallmark of religion isn't it?"

Enough of this nonsense. All that Hitchens has genuinely succeeded in showing in making the above arguments is that there are non-religious evil deeds that parallel those carried out by religious people, showing that if religion is to be discounted, it cannot be discounted on the basis of such tragic events, any more than atheism can be.]

22. Religion makes us give up that which makes us different from the other primates – reason – and to replace it with something that requires only incantation. If anybody can come up with the example of a society that had fallen into slavery and ruin because it enacted the views of Spinoza, or Einstein, or Jefferson, or Thomas Paine, etc, then he would be impressed, but no such example exists. The nearest example of such a fine example is the USA, whose constitution "forbids the mention of religion in the public square, except by way of limiting it."

[This reading of history is painfully naive. The French revolution and Stalin's purges were clearly associated with the rejection of religious dogma. Why does Hitchens overlook these examples so that he can focus on the one he likes? Do *all* atheists promote this type of thing? Of course not, but then, neither do all religious people in history. Moreover, the explicitly religious outlooks of men like John Locke, for example, played major roles in *liberating* people from oppression. Should we be conclude on this basis that his religious views were true? If not, why should we apply a different

standard to Einstein (a deist of some sort), Jefferson (also some sort of deist) and Paine?]

23. Yes, says Hitchens, McGrath is right that there is something wrong with us as a species. “We are half a chromosome away from chimpanzees, and it shows.” It shows at least in part in the number of religions we create.

55:59

Alister McGrath, Rebuttal

24. McGrath starts in response to the Hitchens opening claim about religious people not being direct about what they believe. Yes, McGrath does believe that the resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, *and* he believes that just as important is this is the further question of what the resurrection means – what implications it has for who Jesus is.

25. Is God a celestial dictator? No, God is a celestial liberator. The difference here is one of perspective. Sure, religion can do bad things. But the teaching of the New Testament just *does* speak of the liberty we have in God, and of God the liberator – from the fear of death, and also to do much good. It is possible for religious people to lose sight of this, of course.

[These are fine points to make, but they don't actually reply to Hitchens' complaint that God is a celestial dictator. That complaint was in point 3., where Hitchens says that we didn't get to choose the rules, making God a celestial dictator. The above comments by McGrath don't quite speak to those. The proper response, I think is just do deny the claim outright, as no reasons are given for thinking that our lack of consent makes the moral rules nonexistent, any more than our agreement with them causes them to exist. Complaining that moral facts do not align with our wishes is a bit like complaining that the laws of physics are beyond our control.]

26. Yes it's true that wishful thinking has no bearing on what is true. But McGrath notes that just as wishing for something to be true does not make it true, neither does it make it *false*. At this point McGrath announces that he wishes for a drink of water, and one is provided for him. His wish did not negate the reality of water.

27. Also, does this sword cut both ways? Might atheism involve a kind of wish fulfillment? When it rose in the 18th century, it was accompanied by a strong drive to change things, and to seek moral autonomy. Does the wish for moral autonomy make atheism false? As Czeslaw Milosz noted, atheism presents the idea, attractive to some, that we are accountable to nobody.

28. McGrath then responds to Hitchens' comments about people having no moral knowledge until Mt Sinai. Christian theologians *do* say that wisdom existed prior to the law being given, and the Apostle Paul teaches that people will be judged based on what they *do* know, even if they do not have the law. As Pope John Paul II says in *Fide at Ration*, grace does not abolish nature, it perfects it. Revelation brings to fulfillment that instinct we have to do what is right – correcting it as necessary.

29. Next McGrath comments on the argument that Christianity is unjust, as it requires an explicit response to a Gospel that so many haven't heard. McGrath here appeals to the view taught by many Christians that we are judged on the basis of what we *do* know, and how we have responded to it. This is another case where grace does not *abolish* nature, it perfects it.

Question and Answer session:

For Hitchens: If God does not exist, what is the basis for saying that an action is right or wrong?

30. Hitchens says that he has already addressed this. He further responds by saying that in the Old Testament the Israelites enslaved people and took their land – and women, and that they did so with divine permission, making it more evil. In Islamic countries a virgin can be raped by the guards, making her not a virgin anymore, so that she can be executed in a capital case (virgins cannot be executed). Divine permission thus enables people to do great evil. Hitchens cites other examples like genital mutilation (circumcision). At the end of the list, he declares his answer complete, and notes that the questioner did not answer the challenge given in the debate to name one moral statement or act made/done by a believer that could not be uttered/done by an unbeliever, and then name an evil act that can only be carried out by a believer, “and then you’ll see how silly your question was.”

[In spite of his assertion here, Hitchens has not addressed this question in the debate at all. Certainly, Hitchens has said that unbelievers can still know moral truths – a claim that neither McGrath nor historical Christianity has denied. But what is being asked here is what the *basis* of such moral truths might be. And this is not minor question. Unbelievers like Michael Ruse, J. L. Mackie and Friedrich Nietzsche have concluded that in a world where the only things that exist are matter and energy, the idea of a brute moral fact makes little sense, and the moral sense is no more than an evolutionary adaptation, and not an indicator of facts at all. Far from showing how silly the question was, Hitchens has simply demonstrated that he still doesn't see *what* the question was, or if he does, he is avoiding it.]

31. The moderator noted that McGrath had condemned religious violence. Hitchens replies – does McGrath condemn the promise of other people’s land to God’s people? Does he agree with what Jesus said about not bringing peace but a sword, and is it to be taken literally? Is genital mutilation for small boys mandated? Is there a paradise to which people can go by dying for their faith or not?

[Calling circumcision “genital mutilation” in the first place is highly emotive and misleading, but secondly, to suggest that he simply doesn't know what Christianity says about the necessity of circumcision is highly revealing, given that Hitchens presents himself as well informed about Christianity. From its beginning, Christianity has always taught that circumcision is not required at all. McGrath never answered the question about “a sword,” but had he answered he could fairly easily explained that the comment has always been read metaphorically both by Christian and skeptical commentators. It is, granted, somewhat disappointing that McGrath did not say more about the conquest of the promised land in the Old Testament.]

Question for McGrath: Can you expound on Hitchens’ claim that a vicarious sacrifice is immoral?

32. McGrath says that the idea of vicarious sacrifice is just one way of understanding the atonement. He then offers his personal view: The sacrifice of Jesus is about something that he (McGrath) could never attain. It presents the possibility of transformation being offered to him, not imposed upon him. It is about a God who offers something to us, but does not demand that we respond in any particular way. It is like the image of Christ knocking on the door, but leaving it up to us whether or not we open.

[For many Christian listeners, this might have been the most disappointing moment in the debate.

The problem isn't that McGrath's answer isn't true. It's that his answer has virtually no content. Right here McGrath falls directly into the caricature that Hitchens painted in point 1. Does McGrath accept a penal substitutionary view? He gives the impression that he does not, but doesn't directly say so. Nor, for that matter, does he state a specific alternative view that he believes instead.

This was an opportunity for a complete undercutting of Hitchens' unsubstantiated assertions about the immorality of the death of Christ. Here was precisely the moment to make up for the absence (during the debate) of such a comeback, but explaining that Hitchens himself has gutted his argument of any strength at all, by conceding that there may well be circumstances where one might die in place of another, as he granted in point 2. Instead McGrath waxes vague about some undefined view of Christ's death somehow being transformative (although he does not say how), throwing in rather unclear and therefore useless talk of “knocking” on doors.]

33. Hitchens says that it *is* imposed upon us, because if we reject the offer, then we end up going to hell. He then makes comments about the clergy being gruesome elderly virgins, and says that all of this leads to the likes of the Pope (“Herr Ratzinger”) telling people that you must accept *his* version of Christianity to avoid hell. “Where does it end?” Hitchens asks. And as for the book of Revelation, it merely looks gleefully forward to the end of this world and the impending destruction of the wicked.

[Here Hitchens engages in the notorious slippery slope fallacy. The claim that God makes the rules about the atonement being the only way that we can be saved does not entail that we must all be Catholics or we will go to hell. Even conservative Catholics do not claim this, and there is no plausible psychological slippery slope that might lead to people claiming this. Even if there were, however, a belief is not wrong because of the way people might wrongly apply it.

As for His claims about God imposing such rules upon us, the traditional Christian claim is that people go to hell, not for their rejection of Christ, but for their sin generally. A consequence of rejecting Christ would be that a person reaps the consequences of their sins, but is a mistake to think that hell was invented by God to test people on their acceptance or rejection of Christ, and to cast those who reject him into hell. They were, according to Christianity, *already* on their way to hell. Christ merely provided a way to avoid it. If Hitchens wishes to complain that those who reject the way out of hell, then they will continue on their journey to hell, it is not clear what the objection is. He would need to first argue that there's no such thing as sinfulness in general for which people are culpable. If he wants to make a more specific argument, like “The idea of eternal torment conflicts with the Christian idea of God,” then he is welcome to (and he would find some support from Christians as well. As it stands, all he seems to be saying is that he thinks people should not meet with any consequences for their sin, and should not be subjected to moral rules that they themselves did not invent. It is as though he thinks truth should be invented by us human beings, which contradicts what he says elsewhere about religion being bad because it undermines our commitment to truth.]

34. McGrath replies. Firstly, Hitchens' reading of the book of Revelation is open to serious question. It is meant as an encouragement to those who were being persecuted, telling them that it won't always be that way. Secondly he says that since Hitchens doesn't believe in hell, there should be no issue for him personally with the voluntariness of Christianity. He can accept or reject it.

35. Hitchens replies that what is at issue is what McGrath believes. Presenting the “voluntary” message to an unbeliever is like Abraham asking his son to join him on a long walk. He then moves into comments about how the story of Abraham and Isaac is sadomasochistic. He then recalls a

debate where McGrath said that God knows what it's like to lose a son. But in the Bible, God doesn't lose a son. He lends one. Nobody demanded it. For what ill is this a cure? But God does it anyway, and if we don't want it, we go to hell. Hitchens doesn't want torture and violence. He doesn't want smoking temples and altars. It wouldn't make the world better.

36. McGrath replies – he doesn't want those things either. He “appreciates” that Hitchens interprets the Bible this way, but says that there are many other ways of looking at these things within the Christian tradition. He sees the message as being about a God who enters time and space where we are to make possible – if we want it – a transformation of our situation. McGrath says that he sees no reason to believe that this leads to torture.

Question for Hitchens: As someone who considers himself a high primate, it seems strange that you would consider loving and witnessing to the truth an obligation. How does a soulless primate have any obligations?

37. Hitchens says that the very lowest, caring about other primates makes sense in the hope that they will care about us in return. But allowing people to say that they do it on religious grounds means that we have to allow it when they want to, say, veil their wives, or blow themselves up. You can't pick and choose what you allow.

[This “all or nothing” approach seems without merit. Hitchens appears to be arguing that if you allow a person to act on their convictions in some areas, you must allow them to do so in all areas. But what reasons has he given for thinking this? None at all, as it turns out. What if you simply think that a person has some true moral beliefs, and some false ones?

Moreover, Hitchens fails to interact with the question at all. The question had nothing to do with whether or not a person should be allowed to act on religious convictions (all or some). The question was about how it could be that we all have an obligation to live in accordance with truth, or any obligation at all. This is yet another instance of his failure to answer the question that was put to him in 30.]

38. Hitchens uses the example of giving blood. He likes doing it because it helps someone and he loses nothing. He has a rare blood type, so one day he may need others to do the same. “Human solidarity will get you a long way.” This means that there is a plausible reason why we are better off with these tendencies in our genes. To say that we couldn't have them without “celestial permission” is “simply slavish.” If we are made in God's image, then why were there so many sociopaths and psychopaths? Such things are easily explained via evolution by natural selection, and naturalism explains everything that happens in our universe and in biology, and had we access to these explanations to begin with, there would have been no foothold for death cults like Christianity, Islam or Judaism.

[This further reinforces the belief that Hitchens has never understood the question that he is responding to. That some things are advantageous to us is different from saying that we have an actual obligation to do them. Likewise, the fact that we would like other people to do certain things for us does not generate a duty for us to do them. It merely makes it in our own self-interest if we think that our actions will encourage to treat us as we wish.]

39. McGrath replies by saying that while science is good at describing relationships between things in the “material order,” when it comes to deeper questions of meaning or value, science doesn’t help us much. Science gives one level of explanation, but religion may add more *on top of* this.

[McGrath is right, but in what is really a debate, he is much too restrained and polite. He has not even tried to note how Hitchens has failed to grasp the issue. He's on target to point out that science cannot comment on value, he never really capitalizes on the way that Hitchens continually fails to see that this is the issue.]

Question for McGrath: You say that acts of violence come from the fringes of religion. But in the Old Testament God ordered violence. Is God on the fringe of his own religion?

40. McGrath replies that as a Christian when reading those passages in the Old Testament, he looks at it through the lens of Jesus, since he is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Those acts, in light of Christ, can “be challenged as natural interpretations.” Moreover, McGrath sees progressive revelation in Scripture, where humanity’s knowledge of God improves over time. Also, the Church’s engagement with Scripture is dynamic, and not set in the past.

[This is a fairly weak sounding answer, even if it could have been unpacked into something stronger. What does it even *mean* to challenge these acts as “natural interpretations”? Does he mean they never happened? Presumably not. Then what? We never get to find out.]

41. Hitchens replies that *some* early Christians, like Marcion, did want to dispense with the horrible Old Testament books, in which we find the worst doctrine of all, original sin, and expiation by the sacrifice of children. Then the New Testament introduces the “wicked notion” of non-resistance to evil and the command to love our enemies – a suicidal notion. We should defend ourselves and our children against our enemies. We should dislike and be willing to destroy them, “*especially* because they too are motivated by the hectic, maniacal ideas of monotheism which really seeks and yearns for the destruction of our planet and the end of days.”

[This is largely off-topic, but the main thing to observe is that it is laced with either gratuitous falsehoods or considerable ignorance of Christian belief. The most blatant falsehood is that the Old Testament enjoins child sacrifice. This is utterly without substance, and in fact the Old Testament explicitly condemns child sacrifice on more than one occasion.

Secondly, the assumption that the New Testament obviously teaches pacifism is largely rejected by Christians, and a mere unsubstantiated gesture at the claim is hardly an argument.]

42. McGrath replies. The principle of loving your enemies does not lead to these things at all. It doesn’t mean that we ignore moral issues, but that we see enemies as human beings. What Hitchens seems to be proposing is to see our enemies “in de-humanised form.”

43. Hitchens replies that they have de-humanised themselves. But we can still, without challenging their humanity, assert our values as superior to theirs. Christianity doesn’t do this because of its sickly relativism – as, says Hitchens, has been displayed by McGrath clearly in this debate. According to Hitchens, this is what “every Christian Church” has been doing to Islam lately, groveling at the feet of the Mullahs and of Saddam Hussein.

[Hitchens lives under a rock if he believes this. Christianity has *always* opposed relativism – the

doctrine that there is no absolute standard of right and wrong that applies to us all. Far from substantiating the claim that “every Christian church” has been groveling at the feet of the Mullahs and Saddam Hussein, Hitchens does not substantiate the claim that *even one* Christian church has done so.]

44. The moderator points out that Hitchens himself knows that this is not quite right, since Hitchens has, in the past, commented on the Christian Just War tradition. Hitchens replies that the “Christian Just War” tradition is just wishful thinking. The tradition says that we should only go to war when we are sure that we can win, that our cause is right, that our damage inflicted is proportional, and so forth. But we can’t know any of those things. Not so for Hitchens. “I know a just war when I see one, and we’re in one right now.” And our faith based forces are of about as much use “as the Pope’s balls.”

[This is more doublespeak from Hitchens Either we can know that a war is just or we cannot. He eschews the Christian just war tradition on the grounds that his is just not knowable, and yet he then asserts that we are currently in a just war. The problem is in Hitchens' gross caricature of the just war tradition. Certainty may never be possible, and nor does that tradition require it.

Secondly, Hitchens uses these comments about just wars as a smokescreen to avoid the challenge put to him. The discussion has gone like this:

Hitchens: Christianity embraces a sickly relativism and doesn't advocate the forceful opposition of evil.

Moderator: Well you know that's not true, because you yourself have commented on the Christian just war tradition, which advocates doing precisely that.

Hitchens: Well I don't think much of that tradition for other reasons.

So what? The point was, Hitchens was wrong to characterize Christianity as shrinking back from justly opposing evil.]

Question for Hitchens: Why would a scientific explanation of the origin of the universe obviate the existence of God?

45. Hitchens replies that they don’t, in and of themselves. *But*, the likelihood that what Hubble discovered through his telescope should all have happened so that we could be sitting here now is improbable in the highest degree. That life should evolve only on our tiny planet, and that most species that have lived should have died out, is a very strange way of making sure that homo sapiens come to Georgetown. We would be very self centered to think that all of this was going on for our sake. Religious faith is not humble, but arrogant. Moreover, to claim to know what God wants of us is “an unbelievable piece of conceit.” People who claim that they know what God is like and what he wants, that he sent his son, that there was a resurrection, are claiming to know things that they “cannot *conceivably* know.”

[This appears to be a string of question-begging claims. Sure, humanity is not the pinnacle of creation, and sure, we cannot know what God wants, and sure, we could never know that God sent his son who rose from the dead – *if Christianity is false*. But as Hitchens knows full well, that is the very thing in dispute.]

46. McGrath says that it’s not at all an unimportant question to ask, with Wittgenstein, why there is something rather than nothing.

McGrath adds that “we are all interpreters of what we observe.” He says he has not made claim to special knowledge. He observes what others observes, and makes his judgment on what is the best explanation, as we all do. So the real question is what is the best explanation of what we observe, of what were public events. While his own judgment is quite admittedly a matter of faith, all judgments in such matters of interpretation are matters of faith. While he welcomes being challenged, he is quite entitled to draw these conclusions and live his life on the basis of them.

END OF DEBATE

Internet fans of Hitchens have written of an overwhelming victory over the flailing Alister McGrath, who lost the debate hands down. The fans are simply wrong. They have confused Hitchens' flamboyance, stage presence and crassness (which is amusing to some) for actual substance. Go back over the debate. Follow each point throughout the debate. Count those that are actually addressed and those that are not. The winner, in my view is pretty clear – but it's not Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens fumbles. He simply fails to understand arguments that are repeatedly presented to him. He misrepresents facts. He uses fallacious reasoning (e.g. circular arguments). He shows appalling ignorance of the position he is seeking to criticize. In short, he simply loses the debate because of his really bad arguments, and it's not much more complex than that.