

The argument from atrocity

This episode – episode 20 – will focus on an argument against Christianity, and also against religion more generally, the argument from atrocity. The argument is basically as follows: Look at all the terrible things that Christians have done in history, they burn, they kill, trillions and zillions of people have died as a result, boo Christianity, let's be atheists.

Arguably the worst offender in recent years is Christopher Hitchens. His particular presentation of this type of argument exposes more or less every type of weakness that it can have, but due to his unique boorishness sometimes mistaken for showmanship, he has become something of a hero for internet atheists, so I've decided to use his version of the argument. Be aware that I use the term “argument” fairly loosely here. Hitchens doesn't actually give an argument (that is, connected premises that establish a conclusion). Instead he simply makes some claims about the involvement of religion in historical atrocities – does not actually defend those claims, and then hopes like mad that the audience will share his prejudices and connect the dots for themselves, concluding that religion is bad, atheism is good (the question of truth, interestingly, plays no role at all in his argument). I'll have a thing or two to say about this argument.

What I will be saying more about – and this is really the point of discussing Hitchens at all – is the way that Hitchens tries to deflect the most obvious rebuttal to this argument, which is that if we're going to take the ridiculous approach of assessing a belief based on the involvement of those who hold that belief in historical atrocities, then we ought to reject atheism due to the involvement of atheists in such atrocities. I'll show how in the process of replying to this possible objection Mr Hitchens lapses into hopelessly circular reasoning which would never be acceptable in defense of any other cause. Indeed, my conclusion that due to the atrocious nature of Hitchens' argument *itself*, if we should reject every view that is associated with an atrocity, we should reject atheism because it is associated with Hitchens' argument.

Let's get underway. I'm going to try to help the atheists who use this tactic, by assembling the general attack into the form of an argument. In Hitchens' very broad comments, the question of truth never even comes up, but I'm going to make the argument sufficiently clear that it actually does end up saying something about what is true and what is not. This helps these atheists in the sense that it makes their approach clear in how it means to reach its conclusion, but in another sense it doesn't help them at all, because in clarifying the argument so we can see exactly what it *is*, we also end up seeing its flaws.

- 1) If those who hold any belief are also responsible for carrying out horrible acts against their fellow human being, then that belief is false.
- 2) Some people who have believed in God or who have thought that Christianity is true have carried out some horrible acts against their fellow human being.
- 3) Therefore there is no God and Christianity is false.

Notice that this argument is about whether or not Christianity is true. I could have presented a much weaker and rather pointless argument that claimed that if people who hold a belief do terrible things then that belief may have done some harm and because it has done some harm we should avoid that belief.

Why would that weaker argument not work? It's simple. It is possible for unpleasant and even harmful beliefs to be true – and even very important. This is not to concede that Christianity or theism more broadly is harmful, because what is conspicuous by its absence from the argument from atrocity is a careful argument that the religious beliefs themselves caused the atrocities, and I will return to that point in a moment, but for now, just ask yourself – can you think of any beliefs that might have lead to harmful things being done, and yet that belief was completely true?

Think hard, your time starts now.

- What about the belief that the atom could be split? It may have lead to many good and helpful things being done (a bit like religion really), but consider the atomic equivalent of the crusades or the inquisition – namely Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and the threat that now exists in the form of North Korea.
- Take another example: Evolution. Just now I am not saying anything about the truth or falsehood about aspects of evolutionary biology, but I am taking it for granted that the atheist will believe wholeheartedly in it (what other choice does he have?). So let's say it's true. Geneticist James Watson, who won the Nobel prize for his key role in discovering the structure of DNA caused a scandal in 2007 by stating – citing an evolutionary basis, that black people are less intelligent than white people. He may not have been a racist, but there is absolutely zero doubt that there will be people who are racists who will pounce on this evolutionary argument and use it to justify poor treatment of people of colour. (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article2677098.ec>) Is evolutionary theory true? We've said yes. Would this type of racist behaviour change that? Of course not.
- A third and final example, because I don't want to labour the point (I think it's a fairly obvious one). In a rural village in 18th century England, a group of people witness a man stealing a loaf of bread. Because of their true belief that this man stole a loaf of bread, they dragged him out of town and killed him by hanging him. They reacted very badly. Was their belief that led to this action true? Yes.

So it's an obviously silly argument that says we should avoid beliefs just if people act on them by doing harmful things. To have any weight, it has to be an argument that actually means to say something about the *truth* of Christianity or theism more broadly.

However, in showing why the weaker argument would be a waste of time, we've already found one major reason to reject the argument from atrocity. The argument that we are looking at says that if a belief is held by people who do harmful things then the belief is false. We can even answer a more specific argument here that says that if a belief *leads* to people doing harmful things, then that belief is false. We've just looked at three examples – and there are plenty more – that clearly show that this claim is simply not true. *True* beliefs can lead to people doing harmful things.

Someone with a fondness for the argument from atrocity might want to step into the ring at this point to rescue his bloodied champion from the floor as it were. “But wait just a second,” he might say. “Yes it's true that *some people* might respond to true beliefs about nuclear science, or evolution or crime in ways that are terrible. But they certainly don't *have* to! Those beliefs certainly don't require them to respond that way. You *can* hold true beliefs about nuclear science without nuking anyone, and you *can* be an evolutionist and not be racist, and you *can* know who committed crimes

without advocating vigilante justice.

But far from rescuing the argument, this reply just digs another hole for the argument. After all, isn't it true that you *can* be a Christian without killing or torturing anyone? I feel silly just pointing that out!

This is where I think some desperation starts to kick in. At this point the skeptic who really wants to gain some traction using the argument from atrocity will step into the role of expert theologian or biblical scholar, and tell us that really if you're going to follow the teachings of Christianity then you *should* torture or kill people or do other horrible things to them, because that's what the Bible teaches Christians to do. The crusades and the inquisitions were nothing more than the consistent application of biblical Christianity, we might be told. I was in email dialogue with an atheist just recently who actually said that the inquisitors followed the Bible a little too well.

Really?

Out of interest, I asked this particular skeptic to cite some actual examples of inquisitors and crusaders using the verses he was citing to justify atrocities. The verses in question were as follows:

John 15:4-6

As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

According to the skeptic I was speaking to, this verse “mandated the Spanish Inquisition with its public burnings of heretics.”

Luke 11:19-27

As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said therefore, “A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, ‘Engage in business until I come.’ But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us.’ When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. The first came before him, saying, ‘Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.’ And he said to him, ‘Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.’ And the second came, saying, ‘Lord, your mina has made five minas.’ And he said to him, ‘And you are to be over five cities.’ Then another came, saying, ‘Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.’ He said to him, ‘I will condemn you with your own words, you wicked servant! You knew that I was a severe man,

taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money in the bank, and at my coming I might have collected it with interest?' And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' And they said to him, 'Lord, he has ten minas!' 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'

According to this skeptic, this passage “*was used to mandate the slaughter of non-Christians during the 13th Century Crusade by Pope Innocent III.*”

I can only find one type of corroboration for these claims about these texts of Scripture: atheist blogs. That's not a joke. And those blogs themselves provide absolutely no documentation: no quotes, no references. Nothing.

But let's set that aside. Let's be generous to the skeptic and make believe that there really is good evidence that the cruelties of the past were done because of texts of Scripture like these. There's still a much more important argument than the historical argument, and that's the *logical* argument: Is it really true that oppression, torture and violence really *does* follow logically from the teaching of Christianity? In other words, is this the *correct* way of interpreting the New Testament? I certainly have not been persuaded that it is, but I welcome anyone to put in the time and effort to show otherwise.

In fact, all the New Testament passages that I am aware of (like the ones in John 15 and Luke 11, quoted earlier) that speak of vengeance being carried out on the enemies of God – those who reject Christ – all judgement that is meted out against them, is done – not by the church or individual believers, but by God Himself. Take for example Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. Even when the servants want to tear out the weeds, in this story representing unbelievers, the master, God, says “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” Jesus later explains, “**The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace.**”

Using the logic that was put to me by a skeptic, this mandates the burning of heretics, but in *fact*, it predicts the judgement of the world at the hands of God. The fact of the matter is, you have a very difficult task set ahead of you if you want to show that these texts that I'm referring to *actually warrant* the persecution of unbelievers and the execution of heretics. This is all the more true in light of the New Testament passages that clearly speak *against* the mistreatment of others, or those texts that encourage the church to gain a *good reputation* in the eyes of unbelievers by the quality of their lives! This is hardly likely to be achieved by setting out to kill them. I've heard Jesus (understandably but incorrectly) labelled a *pacifist* because of his comments about loving our enemy, but the suggestion that the Christian Scripture advocates converting people to faith through violence is simply a fabrication.

Hitchens' circular defence of atheism

Here's where the Christian replies by pointing out the obvious. Let's look back at proposition 1) of the argument: *If those who hold any belief are also responsible for carrying out horrible acts against their fellow human being, then that belief is false.*

It is said that any argument that proves too much ends up proving nothing at all. Christians have noticed the obvious way that if any atheist endorses proposition 1, then he ends up proving too much, because that proposition leads to the rejection of not just Christianity, but atheism as well. Consider the most vicious political regimes of the 20th century: Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot. I'll come back to Hitler in a moment, but what do those three all have in common? Atheism. In the case of Stalin and Mao Tse Tung, we've got the worst, most murderous dictatorships in the history of the human race, and they were driven by men who were unambiguously atheists. I have seen some atheist website clientèle make the error of assuming that just because people point out that Stalin etc were atheists, we are thereby blaming atheism for their evil deeds. Not so. This is the mistake that atheists make about the crusades and the inquisition. What I am pointing out here is that *if* you are gullible enough to believe that the horrible acts of a person falsifies any beliefs he holds, *then* you must commit to the belief that atheism is false, because of the horrific acts of atheists in modern history. Secular regimes killed untold millions of people. Surely, as they say what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander as well.

This is where Christopher Hitchens comes to pieces. His almost unbelievable reply is to say that any regime that carries on in such terrible ways is – *by virtue of the fact that it does so* – not secular but religious! Listen for yourself:

<PLAY HITCHENS CLIP>

Those were three clips from Hitchens' debate with Alister Mcgrath. Let's just note a couple of initial things about the historical comments about facism here. Notice what Hitchens says – it was the political activity of the Catholic Church. He's saying this for rhetorical effect, I hope. It's a debate and he wants to make a big impact with strong comments like this, but his comments are demonstrably untrue. In Mussolini's regime there was *never* church state union. Facism was the name for the political actions, not of the Church, but of the government. The young Mussolini freely expressed his dislike for the Catholic Church, calling priests “black germs” of all things. When he rose to power, yes he clearly sought to curry favour with the church because of its huge sway in Italy. All of a sudden and completely coincidentally in 1923 just after he came to power he felt the urge to get all of his children baptised. His marriage to his wife had been officiated in a civil ceremony in 1915 – a civil ceremony, how completely un-Catholic! - but after coming to power all of a sudden he sees a pressing need to have a religious wedding.

Mussolini literally *paid* for the favour of the Church. I quote now from a brief snippet at www.historylearningsite.co.uk (the link is in the show notes):

The Papal States (the name given to land previously owned by the Roman Catholic Church in Italy) had lost all its land in the 1870 unification of Italy. The Roman Catholic Church received £30 million in compensation in 1929 and the Church was given 109 acres in Rome to create a new papal state - the Vatican. The pope was allowed a small army, police force, post office and rail station. The pope was also given a country retreat called Castel Gandolfo.

And even then, in spite of the obvious attempt to gain favour and the huge bribes, the Church and

Mussolini did not always see eye to eye. The disagreed rather famously (well, world famous in Italy at least) over state education. Mussolini wanted the government to control education so that a good generation of little fascists could be raised up, the church publicly disagreed. The biggest clash of them all was over Mussolini's *Charter of Race* in 1938. It was an anti-semitic law that stripped Jews of the rights of Italian citizenship. They could not teach, hold a state job, belong to the Fascist party, work for a bank or insurance company, marry an Italian non-Jew, or join the army. The Church outright rejected this law, to the point where the Pope sent a personal letter of protest to Mussolini. But note: the church had no power to strike the law down, because Facism was not the activity of the church, but of the state.

Remember Hitchens' claim: Fascism *was the name* for the political actions of the Catholic Church. History quite plainly shows that the fascist state was one thing, the Catholic Church was another. Was the Church in Italy too tolerant of Mussolini? Sure, let's say that. But that's not enough for the zealous Mr Hitchens. The same is true of Hitler. So what if the Vatican urged people to say prayers for Hitler? As a Christian that strikes me as perfectly appropriate. It also strikes me as pragmatically smart for Hitler not to specifically renounce his membership of the Church if he wanted influence in Europe. To do otherwise would have been to shoot himself in the foot. The sin of the Church in Nazi germany was not that it was *behind* Hitler's regime, but rather, as a recent article in the local newspaper here in Dunedin says, quoting Elan Steinberg, Pope Pius was guilty of "public silence in the face of absolute evil." The problem is that they didn't do *enough*. The same cannot be said of Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who ended up paying what he himself called "the cost of discipleship," being executed by Hitler's regime for his role in attempting to overthrow it.

But actually, Mussolini and Hitler are a bit of a sideshow here. I only mentioned them because of Hitchens' imaginative attempt to portray them as puppets of the church. When I think of an atheistic state that does great evil, I don't think of those two, because I don't have any reason to think that they were atheists. I don't know. What I think of is the likes of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot. *They* were clearly atheists. And it is Hitchens' comment on Stalin that I want to draw your attention to.

Take a moment to see just how completely circular this is. The skeptic says – look at religion and all the harm that it has done: the forced allegiance, the inquisitions, the persecuting and demonizing of those who don't follow it's beliefs and practices, the violence and so forth.... So a Christian says – you can't reject Christianity because of that, or you'd have to reject the atheistic beliefs of the rulers of secular regimes. Stalin, for example did all those things as well. And then good old Christopher Hitchens comes along and says – Look, Stalin's regime was really like a religious movement. I mean just look at what it did – the forced allegiance, the inquisitions, the persecuting and demonization of those who didn't cherish his ideals....

THAT'S THE POINT! The very point that the Christian is making is that atheists have done their share of the same kind of thing as well, so the sword cuts both ways. What Hitchens is doing is using circular reasoning as follows: Religion is inherently dangerous and oppressive, and if you point to secular regimes as examples of non-religious oppressive systems then you're wrong. They were really religious, because after all they oppressed and persecuted, and as we know, those are inherently religious things. Can you have a religious outlook that promotes heresy hunts and the cataclysmic end of days? Sure. Can you have a secular regime that does things just as bad? Yes. Does that make the religious movement secular? No, and nor does it make the secular movement religious.

To be fair to Hitchens, he is not alone, and it is not just atheists who fall prey to this kind of

muddled argumentation. Some time ago when looking at the issue of religion in the public square I noted an argument from Robert Audi, who is himself a Christian, but who argues against the appeal to religious beliefs in the public square. He says that since religion is polarising and divisive, we should keep religious convictions out of our public decision making. He notes, however, that some might reply by pointing out that non-religious *political* beliefs have been divisive too, and he cites clashes between communism and facism. But he simply replies by saying that the fact that such disputes are so divisive just indicates how much like *religious* disputes they really are. In other words, division is just being *identified* with religion, just as in Hitchens' circular reasoning, religion is being *identified* with oppression, dictatorial leadership and so forth, so that whenever they are present, he will say "ah ha, it's religious after all!"

Using an argument like this should serve as an intellectual embarrassment, the kind of video clip of you on stage that someone plays at your twenty first birthday to absolutely humiliate you. And yet Hitchens seems to think it's some sort of unanswerable comeback. Sorry, no dice. Face the facts: genuinely and thoroughly atheistic regimes like those of Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot have been – at very least – every bit as ruthless and murderous as anything ever done by a Christian movement. Again, I am not saying that this shows that atheism is false – that would be to make the same mistake as Hitchens.

But you might want to rush in to prop up this collapsing argument against Christianity before it topples: "But wait!" You insist. "Christians who did terrible things to people in the past did those things *as Christians*, they did them to further Christianity! The atheists that you are referring to didn't do them out of commitment to atheism, or to further atheism, did they? So there's a big difference!"

So what of this comeback? True enough, when people went on the crusades, they – or at least a good number of them – did it *self consciously* as an expression of their Christian faith. When the authorities carried out the inquisition, they did so *in the belief* that they were doing Christian service (even if, in reality, the Christian Scripture does not command this sort of stuff). Since this is possible, doesn't that say *anything* about Christianity?

Two points come to mind here: Firstly, no – sometimes the acts for which Christianity takes the blame were not done – at least not directly – in defence of Christianity. The second point is that sometimes the brutalities of secular regimes *were* carried out because of atheism or in opposition to religious belief.

On the first point – some of the deeds that a few skeptics like to blame on the Christian faith were largely done for political reasons rather than strictly theological ones. The most obvious example is the Crusades. The best advice I can offer here is that before you comment on what the Crusades were, actually read about them – and by read about them I do not mean that you should go to an internet message board for skeptics and read people raving about the Crusades. Actually pick up a history book, or if you're not much of a reader, I'd recommend a great BBC documentary with Terry Jones on the Crusades – not at all from a Christian point of view. Why did the Crusades begin? Was it "so we can kill pagans"? Or "so we can force people to convert"? Not even close. It actually *began* (even if it did not continue) for perfectly good reasons. In the year 1076, Jerusalem was captured by Muslims. This meant, among other things, that Christians who made pilgrimages to Jerusalem were placed in harm's way. The Christian leader Alexius I of Constantinople realised both the harm that Christians were now facing, and also the very real danger that Constantinople was now in – being very close to the territories already conquered by Muslims. So he made what by any standard is a sensible request: Knowing the influence had by the Pope in the West, Alexius, in the

East, asked Pope Urban to send help in defending Constantinople and in securing the way for Christians who wanted to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem – and this is precisely what the first crusade *was*. Even the skeptic will admit that there is nothing inherently objectionable about this, nor, for that matter, does it have anything to do with forced conversion or executing non-Christians. Did it go badly? In many ways yes, even to the point where cities were attacked and all but destroyed when they were actually inhabited by Christians! Constantinople was so horrified with the rabble that arrived at its gates from the west that they promptly locked them out. I'm definitely not going to try and excuse what went on in the crusades, but the hopeless misrepresentation of those events that you see scattered across the internet serves as a powerful reminder of the fact that for some skeptics (although thankfully not all), the facts are much less important than the myth when it comes to scoring points against Christians.

Turning to the second point, sometimes the brutalities of secular regimes most certainly *were* carried out because of the atheistic beliefs of their leaders. Here are a few examples:

Religion itself was specifically targeted by Lenin and by Stalin because atheism is true and religion is deception, so they reasoned. Stalin had 48,000 churches closed down, and his reign saw the imprisonment and execution of thousands of clergy. Since there is no God to look to, the highest authority is the state, and anyone who suggests otherwise is undermining that authority.

Mao pulled no punches in his view of religion and why he deliberately suppressed it: “Religion is poison,” he declared. An interesting claim in light of Hitchens' position in the debate between himself and McGrath – “Religion: Poison or cure?” Guess which option Hitchens took. It is precisely this view of Mao that motivated his treatment of Chinese worshippers. Under Mao, and specifically *because* of his rejection of religious belief and his view of the threat of religion, Christianity in China, some have said, all but disappeared from public sight.

Interestingly enough, in Pol Pot's murderous regime, religion was oppressed because it what – it causes too much conflict. Oh the irony. Cause the death of a quarter of Cambodia's population by all means, but whatever you do, don't allow religion, that's much too dangerous. So he had standards after all – and he also had similar reasons for opposing religion to Christopher Hitchens.

So there's no defence to be had here by saying that these acts weren't carried out because of atheism or denial of religious belief. At least *in part* they were. You might want to defend atheism anyway, by saying that atheism *should not* be lived out this way. But why is this defence only available to atheists? It should go without saying that *Christianity* should not be lived out by killing people. You might want to reply also by saying that these ruthless dictators were not *just* atheists, they were other things as well. They were communists, they were politicians in tumultuous times of social upheaval, and so forth. But again, in saying this you provide Christians with a reply as well. Leaders in the Crusades and the Inquisitions were not just Christians, they were often political figures, they were people living in times of great social upheaval and power vacuums at times, they were men responding to difficult circumstances and capable of personal failings, and so forth. If you think it is fair to condemn Christianity as a whole today for the actions of such people in such circumstances, then it is fair to condemn atheism because of the actions of Josef Stalin and Pol Pot. You cannot have your cake and eat it too.

The only defensible thing to do here is not to say that theism is false because of what communist dictators did, of course, but rather to recognise how silly it is to assess beliefs in this way. *Of course* you can't assess the truth of a view by looking at the actions of those who hold it.

A much more interesting debate in my view is to be had about whether or not we have a secure platform from which to pass moral judgement on the acts of the Inquisitors *or* the communists. They may have been nasty and undesirable, but what exactly makes them, in fact, immoral? This, I think, is the bigger issue, and I addressed that a few episodes ago now when I looked at the moral argument for theism.

Bottom line here: Skeptics, don't use the argument from atrocity. Firstly, it doesn't work, and secondly, it'll come back to bite you and any comeback you can scrape together against that bite will end up serving as a defence of the very religious people you were trying to refute in the first place.