

BOOK REVIEWS

IS CHRISTIANITY GOOD FOR THE WORLD? A DEBATE. By Christopher Hitchens & Douglas Wilson (Foreword by Jonah Goldberg), Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2008, 67 pp. \$6.00.

The death of well-known atheist author, journalist and speaker Christopher Hitchens in December 2011 evoked a variety of emotional responses, sadly ranging from morbid celebration mingled with mordant reflection to uncritical lionization. Certainly this outspoken neo-atheist (he preferred to call himself an anti-theist, but to that we will refer more later) was known for his outspoken rejection of the God as conceived in the world's monotheistic belief systems, and many around the globe knew him either through his writings, his television appearances, or both. Most people were not ambivalent about Hitchens – they tended to see him either as a dazzling hero or as a damnable heathen. But heretic he was not, for he made no claims to a place within Christendom, nor desired any. Now, personal preference is off the table for him. He is in eternity – although he would no doubt have rejected the concept out of hand – and is face-to-face with reality, whether reality is spelled with an upper-case or a lower-case “r”.

In this matchup with the late Hitchens was Douglas Wilson, a theologian and pastor (Christ Church, Moscow, ID), author, speaker, founder and Senior Fellow in theology at New Saint Andrews College, and founder and editor of *Credenda/Agenda* magazine. Wilson has distinguished himself in a number of arenas, and adds to his list of distinctions with his able participation in this model debate. Both men, in their own ways, were/are controversialists and neither could -by a long shot- be considered boring. From the standpoint of wit and ability as polemicists, both were in the same weight class.

The bout is promoted in the book's Foreword by a self-proclaimed “fairly secular Jew”, Jonah Goldberg, who describes this slender volume as “a joyful book”, and the debate's participants as “happy warriors in their respective causes.” As the debate begins, the intense passion of these warriors is immediately obvious. Hitchens likened Christianity -a “celestial Big Brother state”- to George Orwell's dystopian nightmare and, thus, the gloves came off.

Hitchens (p. 12) described his corner of the ring thus:

...I am not so much an atheist as an anti-theist. I am, in other words, not one of those unbelievers who wishes that they had faith, or that they could believe. I am, rather, someone who is delighted that there is absolutely no persuasive evidence for the existence of any of mankind's many thousands of past and present deities.

Moreover, Hitchens grounds his anti-theism in biochemical evolution, contending that humans possess “innate morality”, and he further posits the existence of “innate human solidarity”. But Wilson is not slow to expose the innate weakness of Hitchens's reasoning.

Terrier-like tenacity and gentle persistence characterize Wilson's well-aimed jabs, constituting a winsome *apologia*. Hitchens unreservedly suggested that a fundamental knowledge of good and evil are universal traits common to humankind. Everyone knows that, don't they?

Wilson firmly insisted that Hitchens must produce a standard against which comparisons can be made; in other words, he maintains that unless Hitchens can produce a benchmark against which all estimations of goodness might be measured, he cannot meaningfully contribute to a debate about the goodness (or badness) of Christianity as a system. Unless there is a good that is *truly* ultimate, absolute and immutable, how can one possibly know what is more or less good or, conversely, more or less evil? Thus, Wilson had Hitchens on the ropes from the outset. It seems that, to Hitchens, goodness is a self-existent commodity. Wilson, unyielding, noted that Hitchens was “unable...to give an account of why one deed should be seen as *good* and another as *evil*” (p. 66).

Even to the non-expert observer, Hitchens’s evolution-based argument is seen to be inherently friable. For example, he admits that “Humans are capable of even greater cruelty (than animals, that is) because only they have the imagination to inflict it” (p. 53). According to the rest of his argument, imagination *must* come about (as does everything else) through evolutionary processes. Yet those same processes purportedly operate via natural selection, with survival of the fittest *de rigueur*. Why then would the fittest (in this age, ostensibly human beings) evolve with an imagination that constitutes the seed of its own destruction? If men and women are cruel - to themselves and others - only because they have the imagination to do so, why should they have evolved in this way? Isn’t evolution - as defined - about progress, about improvement? Moreover, any particular atheistic conception of morality would, as Wilson noted, be in flux (evolving) and, thus, all ethical judgments of Hitchens and his camp would have to be labeled as “Provisional opinions only. Morality changes over time.” (p. 64)

As James Ledbetter (2011) noted in *The Village Voice* about a week after Hitchens’ demise, “Indeed, the Hitchens universe was long populated by notions of absolute good and evil...”. But what Hitchens was unable to conscience was that such absolute good be tied to an absolute being. The biblical record demonstrates that, ultimately, axiology is part and parcel of divine ontology. Hitchens bound his axiology to contingent (human) beings whereas the Bible binds axiology to the perfect character of the only non-contingent Being in the universe.

Accordingly, Ledbetter’s succinct analysis of Hitchens is on the mark: “...when Hitchens was in holy-warrior mode, belief in the absence of evidence was a trait he shared with his sworn foes.” Hitchens, no doubt, would roll over in his grave at the suggestion that he believed anything in the absence of evidence; but, as with all other human beings, he too had *pretheoretical commitments* (per Herman Dooyeweerd; see, e.g., Sire, 2004, p. 34-35) that provided a framework for his whole belief system.

This lively debateⁱ will be of interest to readers of *JSIRS* because the question that is posed is inherently ethical (Is Christianity good [or not] for the) *and* social (the world). If *JSIRS* readers are concerned about the sociological integration of religion and society, then they necessarily will be concerned about the stability of the foundation of the belief system chiefly in view, namely, Christianity. Beyond that, this debate is a model for anyone who is or will be involved in reasoned argumentation, especially that which is to be based upon the coherence of biblical theology.

The book will interest all who are concerned with biblical apologetics and challenges to Christian approaches to social ethics, and would serve as superb ancillary reading for some college courses in rhetoric, discourse and ethics. Copies of this attractively produced hardcover book would also make excellent, thought-provoking gifts.

In summary, Wilson provides us with an *apologetic whetstone*, a way of thinking and discussing that will sharpen our own attempts to analyze and defend truth. Gracious, tenacious reason is the order of the day. Are you ready to spar?

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Works Cited

Ledbetter, J. (2011). Christopher Hitchens's contradictory legacy: Crusades, holy men, and devils. Retrieved from <http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-12-21/news/crusades-holy-men-devils/>

Sire, J. W. (2004). *Naming the elephant: Worldview as concept*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

ⁱ Much of this debate is available on the *Christianity Today* website (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-12.0.html?start=1>), but the book is recommended because of its brief but meaty foreword by Goldberg and introductory statements by Hitchens and Wilson; these key components are missing in the online version.