

God and Mr. Hitchens

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2007 FAIR Conference

I have been urged by a number of people to say something to get even with Bill Hamlin. However, I will not lower myself to the level, his habitual dwelling place. I am not going to do that. Actually welcome to part II of this afternoon's infomercial for books by Bill Hamlin. Professor Sealy and I are honored to be on his marketing team.

I am going to be talking about work in progress that Bill and I are working on right now and entitled "God and Mr. Hitchens: Empty Rhetoric, Skewed History and the New Atheism." We're looking for a publisher. We have several leads on this. We're hoping on do this quickly and get it out.

Let me explain who Mr. Hitchens is. Christopher Hitchens is the fourth of what you might call the four horsemen of the new atheism, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and now Christopher Hitchens. And he is the author of a book that's been on the bestseller list recently called *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. And you may notice if you see it that God in *god Is Not Great* is not capitalized, that sort of emblematic is a very serious and mature approach that he takes to the subject.

Some of you've seen Christopher Hitchens on television I suppose where he has been a presence for quite sometime now as a commentator on politics. He is a British writer who just took US citizenship, this past year, just a few months ago, and has appeared recently as a defender of the war in Iraq and the war against terror. And actually, it makes me somewhat nervous because I am wondering having read his book now twice and given some thought to his positions as to what his motivation is for that, is it really defensive freedom or is it just disdain for religion, which is a very, very powerful force in his life; notice the subtitle of the book again How Religion Poisons Everything.

You may have seen him on television back in the month of May when Jerry Falwell died. He became notorious for what he said then and what he said in a number of venues. This is what he said in Slate Magazine, "the discovery of the carcass of Jerry Falwell on the floor of an obscure office in Virginia, has almost zero significance except perhaps for two categories of the species labeled credulous idiot. Like many fanatical preachers, Falwell is especially disgusting and exuding almost sexless personality while railing from dawn to dusk about the sex lives of others. His obsession with homosexuality was on a par with his lip-smacking evocations of hellfire from his wobbly base of opportunist fund raising and degree-mill, money-spinning in Lynchburg, Virginia. He set out to puddle his sausage-sized fingers into the intimate arrangements of people who had done no harm. It's a shame that there is no hell for Falwell to go to and it's extraordinary that not even such a scandalous career as his is enough to shake our dumb addiction to the faith-based."

It's not the usual kind of obituary. Now he is famous for also despising Billy Graham, Mahatma Gandhi, and at book-length Mother Teresa of Calcutta. On the other hand, he is not a total misanthrope. He has described Lenin as a great man. He still reveres Leon Trotsky, but *god Is Not Great* is explicitly contemptuous of religious believers, at excruciating detail.

He despises Jerry Falwell for his crimes, but as I said admires Leon Trotsky who is famous for saying, among other things, that we need to get beyond the Quaker-Papist babble about the sanctity of life. And Trotsky put that into force as with Lenin, he was the co-architect of the Gulag in the Soviet Union, leading to the deaths of potentially as many as 40 million people.

Now some of you may be interested to know that one of the exhibits in Hitchens' case against religion is Mormonism. He has a short and not very well-informed section about Mormonism in his book. He describes Mormonism -- and this language is fairly typical of the way he approaches religion altogether -- as a ridiculous cult. He says the actual story of the imposture is almost embarrassing to read and almost embarrassingly easy to uncover. Now he has gone to a great deal of effort to uncover it by studying the work of Fawn Brodie.

The story he says has been best told by Dr Fawn Brodie whose 1945 book, *No man Knows My History*, was a good-faith attempt by professional historian to put the kindest possible interpretation on the relevant events. Now this is also typical of his approach, she becomes Dr. Fawn Brodie. In fact, she never had a doctorate. He does this consistently. The most obscure atheist emerges as the great so and so, the illustrious so and so where the greatest theist, Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine all are depicted as completely coolest idiots.

I am fond in particular contrasting Dr. Fawn Brodie, who did not have a doctorate, with Mr. William Albright of Baltimore, who is considered by many of the leading archaeologists, leading Old Testament scholar of the 20th century. And yet, he is just -- Mr. William Albright of Baltimore, he happened to teach at Johns Hopkins, founded the traditional biblical studies there, but it doesn't count because he was some sort of believer.

Mormonism shows "what happens when a plane racket turns into a serious religion before our eyes." Joseph Smith was a gifted opportunist whose cleverness was to unite cupidity with half-baked anthropology. Joseph Smith modeled himself on Muhammad, I found that interesting. I recently published a biography on Muhammad and I hadn't noticed.

Here is another one I liked: Smith refused to show the golden plates to anybody, claiming that for other eyes to view them would mean death, no mention of the witnesses because he probably doesn't know about them. The Book of Mormon is a piece of vulgar fabrication, but you learn a lot from his book about the Book of Mormon. You learn about Nephi, the son of Lehi, the made-up battle of Cumora, misspelled. And then here

is one I like too, meticulous research all the way through this book and I am using his approach to Mormonism as illustration sort of microcosm of the way he generally approaches the whole issue of religion. Speaking of the policy on priesthood and blacks and the Mormons, they had still another “revelation” and more or less in time for the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965 and it divinely disclosed to them that black people were human after all.

Now apart from this slightly misstated theological content of the revelation, I think we knew they were human, I am puzzled by how they actually got the date of 1965. He explains early on this methodology consists chiefly in using Google that’s his research technique. But even on Google, I think they have the date right and there is no ambiguity about it. This is not a debated or obscure historical issue. June of 1978 is not all that close to the Civil Rights Act of 1965, but it fits his thesis to argue that it was connected with Civil Rights Act.

And then here his description of baptism for the dead, also carefully researched. Every week at special ceremonies in Mormon temples, the congregations meet and are given a certain quota of names of the departed to pray into their church. So there you have it, that’s how it’s done.

Okay, now into some more serious things because he only spends a few pages on the Mormons, but he does devote a considerable amount of time to the Bible and I’ll just pick up a few points. I am telling you this book is a treasure trove of good stuff. I remember the Far Side cartoon: You may have seen this, of the one deer looking at the other deer and the deer has a target on its back and the other deer looks at him and says, gee, bummer of a birthmark. Or alternatively, I think of someone walking around with a kick me sign hanging on his rear end and I am one who is not disposed to not kick. So here are just a few things out of many, many things that could be picked up; I mean I am picking from an embarrassment of riches here.

All religions he says have staunchly resisted any attempt to translate their sacred texts into languages understood of the people. Now what are the facts? According to The United Bible Societies, the Bible is being translated into 2167 languages with another 320 in process. And this is by no means merely a modern phenomenon, the Bible was the most widely translated book in the ancient world. It was translated into Greek, the Septuagint, in the second century BC; Aramaic by the first century BC; Old Latin by the second century AD; and the Syriac, Peshitta, in the third century AD; Coptic, Egyptian, fourth century AD, Old German or Gothic in the fourth century AD, Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, that’s been talked about here was done in the late fourth century; Armenian, early fifth century; Ethiopic fifth century; Georgian fifth century; Old Nubian by the eighth century, Old Slavonic by the ninth, Christian Arabic and Saadia Gaon’s Jewish-Arabic version by the tenth. Do you get the idea here? There has been a lot of translation efforts that’s gone into this.

The history of the translation of the Buddhist scriptures is precisely the same. This statement that he is making draws on one thing, he is trying to universalize a very isolated phenomenon connected with a specific religious controversy and that is the one regarding the translation of scripture during the Protestant Reformation. But even in this limited context, his argument is based on unsubstantiated assertion. There would be no Protestant Reformation he assures us if it were not for the long struggle to have the Bible rendered into the Vulgate.

Now think about this one, aside from the obvious fact that the term Vulgate refers not to translations of the Bible into the vernacular but to a particular late fourth century translation by Jerome already referred to; translating the Bible in German as an issue of the reformation never appears among Luther's original 95 theses. It wasn't a major issue of the reformation. In fact the Bible had been translated into German in the 14th century. And the German Bible had been printed by Gutenberg by in 1466, thirteen years after his publication of the Latin Bible. By the time Luther had nailed his theses to the door of the Wittenberg's Castle Church on 31st of October in 1517, the act that is generally regarded as the beginning -- the opening salvo of the Protestant Reformation; Gutenberg's German Bible is nearly 65 years old. So how serious an issue could this have been for Luther? He made his own, and his own Bible is tremendously important for German culture, but it was not a major issue in the Reformation and the polemics.

Now turning specifically to the English Bible, various parts of the Bible had been likewise translated into Anglo-Saxon from the seventh century on with interlinear Latin/Anglo-Saxon versions by the tenth century. The venerable Bede, one of the greatest figures in ecclesiastical history in Britain, who died in AD 735, is said to have translated the Gospel of John into Anglo-Saxon. The problem during most of the medieval period was not that the church was attempting to suppress the translation of the Bible, this may come as a shock to some Latter-day Saints who have heard this story, but that all literate persons in the early Middle Ages knew Latin. There was no particular point in having another translation. The other people couldn't read.

Hitchens laments – and I love this one, that devout men like Wycliffe, Coverdale, and Tyndale were burned alive for even attempting early translations of the Bible into vernacular literature. This is another example of the care with which he approaches his research. Far from being burned at the stake, John Wycliffe died while hearing Catholic mass in his parish church. Miles Coverdale died, unburned, in 1569 at the age of eighty-one. Of the three translators mentioned by Hitchens, only William Tyndale, ironically also known as Hitchens, was burned at the stake.

Here is an example of biblical interpretation, as he does it, the akedah, the near sacrifice of Abraham's son; Hitchens' polemics fail completely to put this into context. In his discussion of the akedah or Abraham's binding or near sacrifice of his son Isaac, Hitchens describes it as "mad and gloomy, a frightful and vile delusion." And he says, "there is no softening the plain meaning of this frightful story that God would require humans to sacrifice their children." But this is not the message the ancient audience would have gotten from that story. The message they would have gotten is that God does

not require the sacrifice of their children, instead he allows a substitutionary sacrifice instead of human sacrifice.

There are other biblical problems that he points to. According to Hitchens, "the Old Testament is riddled with dreams and with astrology, the sun standing still so that Joshua can complete his massacre at a site that has never been located." Well first of all, the sun's standing still has nothing to do with astrology which developed centuries later. The other thing is that Gibeon, the site where the battle occurred, can be located in any biblical atlas; it's an easily found site.

Okay on the New Testament, for Hitchens, the New Testament exceeds the evil of the Old. That's astonishing to me, really. It shows how extreme his case is. Most people will point to the evils of the Old Testament God, but they kind of feel comfortable even if they are agnostics with the New Testament God. But, for him, Christianity is even worse than the ancient Hebrew religion. And it is very difficult to imagine the New Testament being worse because he has boundless scorn for the Old Testament. Hitchens' basic argument is "the case for biblical consistency or authenticity or inspiration has been in tatters for some time, and thus no revelation can be derived from that quarter." Like the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament is for Hitchens merely a "crude forgery." So any Evangelical anti-Mormons who take pleasure in his description of the Book of Mormon as a crude forgery will have the smiles erased from their faces pretty soon when he gets to the Bible; he feels the same about that. It was "hammered together long after its purported events. The notion that the Gospels would be based on eyewitness accounts is patently fraudulent claim. It's an error to assume that the four Gospels were in any sense a historical record."

Now there happens to be on the question of eyewitness testimony in the New Testament, a fascinating new book by Richard Bauckham called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, which argues meticulously I think that the case is that the New Testament Gospels are in fact based on eyewitness accounts - that they have access to eyewitness testimony. Whether they were written by the eyewitnesses or simply on the basis of eyewitness testimony is a matter of irrelevance to him. The fact is that they go back apparently to very specific eyewitness testimony, and he is very careful in laying this out. Of course, Hitchens pays no attention to these sorts of things. His research is as I say is limited largely to Google and a handful of endnotes. The most outrageous assertions are made and you look in the back for any justification for them, nothing. You'll go twenty, thirty pages without any kind of documentation whatsoever.

Now this is one that I like. It's probably not coincidental that Hitchens provides no scholarly sources for his claim that the Gospels, as we have them, were based on oral accounts. Why doesn't he provide any documentation for that? Because the consensus of even secular biblical scholars is precisely the opposite of his claim. Matthew and Luke use at least two written sources, Mark and Q, according to the consensus. And that's - the Q is an abbreviation for the German Quelle, of course which simply means source. It's essentially defined as passages found in both Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark, alright? Now Hitchens is aware of this hypothetical source, Q. Remember he is talking

about consensus accounts, but he understands it in a hopelessly garbled fashion. He describes it as the book on which all four Gospels may possibly have been based. He says, "it's known speculatively to scholars Q." Now note first that Hitchens is aware that Q is a written source, a book, which is a direct contradiction of his claim that the Gospels are based on oral sources. Then notice -- well, he simply can't have it both ways. But he is further mistaken: he claims that all four Gospels were based on Q; all four of them. Now in reality only two are thought, even by the consensus he refers to, to have used Q: Matthew and Luke. John has nothing to do with Q. John is not one of the synoptic Gospels. And Q is defined precisely as the material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark. So where does he get off saying that Q is the source for all four Gospels? There is no one who holds that, let alone a consensus.

He is also mistaken in his claim that all of Jesus' disciples were illiterate. Presumably he is making this claim in order to lessen their value as witnesses; presumably illiterate people are stupid and can't recognize what they see or record it or remember it accurately or dictate it to anyone accurately. In fact, there is no evidence for their illiteracy, and in fact considerable evidence against it. There are lots of cases of their writing letters, of Jesus reading for example. That the early Christian movement was dominated by illiterates is simply unsupported in the sources.

He also describes the Gospels as late. Because they are late, of course, they can't be trusted as history. But there are a lot of arguments for early dating for the sources, for the Gospels. For example, it's generally agreed by the New Testament scholars that the Gospel of Luke and The Book of Acts were written by the same author, so people routinely talk of Luke-Acts. Acts ends with Paul preaching in Rome for two years as a fulfillment of God's plan to bring the Gospel to the gentiles, but it doesn't mention the death of Paul, which is thought to have occurred sometime between AD 62 and 65. If Acts was written after the death of Paul, why did the author not mention that kind of important fact? Although various explanations have been suggested, the most obvious conclusion is that Acts was written before the death of Paul, that is in the early 60s.

Since the Gospel of Luke was clearly written before Acts, this gives a date in the early 60s at the latest for the composition of the Gospel of Luke. Since it's widely agreed that Luke is dependent upon Mark, this gives a date for Mark in the late 50s at the latest. In fact, the main reason consistently given for dating Gospels to after AD 70 is that Jesus prophesies the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. Since Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and atheists assure us since there is no such thing as real prophecy, the Gospels must have been written after that destruction occurred. So in other words, after AD 70, but in fact that's a very, very weak argument.

We may be looking at documents that are written as early as within roughly 20 years of the death of Christ. And how does that compare to secular historiography from the ancient world? Hitchens seems to be under the impression that we are just awash in ancient documents that were written by eyewitnesses to many of the events that we talk

about in ancient history. But listen to this the earliest surviving biography about of Alexander the great by Diodorus dates to nearly three centuries after Alexander's death. Livy's account of the campaigns of Hannibal was written over a century and a half after the death of that general in 182 BC. Tacitus wrote his annals about AD 115. His book covers imperial Roman history from AD 14 to 68, meaning that he wrote about 50 to 100 years after the events he describes. Suetonius wrote his history of the Caesars in the early second century. His biography of Julius Caesar was thus written over a century and a half after the event. You get the point here? By the standards of ancient world, the Gospels are amazingly close. Even if you give them a fairly light date, they are very, very close to the events they narrate.

Herodotus wrote non-eyewitness accounts of the Persian War and it was written up to half a century after the events he describes. A major surviving source for the lives and teachings of the most ancient philosophers is Diogenes Laertius, who wrote centuries after many of the men whose lives he records. Plutarch's famous biography is Plutarch's Lives are likewise often centuries after the fact. Hitchens clearly has no understanding of ancient historiography. If we were to go by his standards, we could know essentially nothing about the ancient world. All ancient history as it's taught, apart from the Gospel, secular history would have to be tossed.

Now one of the things that's noteworthy about his approach is that he completely ignores Paul who is our earliest surviving source for the life of Jesus. You can reconstruct a lot of the life of Jesus and the account of the resurrection and all those really important things from the letters of Paul. But Paul apparently wrote before the Gospels, probably the letters that are universally recognized as authentic in the 50s--again early. We are talking about a gap of about 20 years between the death of Christ and the writing of Paul's letters.

Let me go through a few miscellaneous errors here that I think are illustrative, again Hitchens' seriousness and how seriously he should be taken. One of my favorite is an epigraph that he has at the heading of one of his chapters, he is trying to show that all serious Christian thinkers are idiots. And so, he has to take on one of the biggest, Thomas Aquinas, the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages and certainly in the West. Thomas Aquinas is given a quote, it's placed in his mouth, "I am a man of one book;" the Bible obviously. Now I could not remember ever running across a quote like that from Thomas Aquinas, any passage that ever said that. In fact anybody who has read Thomas Aquinas knows that he is constantly citing Aristotle, early Greek commentators on Aristotle, Avicenna, Arabic philosophers, he is drawing on all sorts of sources. He is a man of scores if not hundreds of books. By the standards of Middle Ages, this guy is a walking library. So why would he say, "I am man of one book?" Well, what a big surprise, he didn't. Hitchens says he said it, but he didn't. In fact if you do a Google search for him, again I am trying to follow Hitchens' research methodology here, you come up with a quotation attributed to him which is actually probably not authentic either where he says, "beware of the man of one book." That's the opposite. Actually I was so curious about this that I wrote to Ralph McInerny at Notre Dame, he is one of the leading Aquinas scholars in the world. And he wrote back and said, "good grief, where that come from?"

He said just tell somebody to look at the notes in his text. He is quoting all sorts of things.” It’s an outrageous misrepresentation of Aquinas.

Another outrageous misrepresentation: he is trying to show that religion is evil in all its effects. So one example is Pius, XII, the pope during World War II, whom he describes as a pro-Nazi pope. Now I will not get into this in any detail, but let me just say that’s absurd. Now it’s a common charge, it’s absurd. The best book on it that I have seen is one written by Rabbi David Dalin, he is a professor of history back in the East Coast, called *The Myth of Hitler’s Pope*. If anyone takes that seriously at all, have a look at this book. It’s devastating to the claim. Here’s one thing that Rabbi Dalin doesn’t mention, I can sort of understand why, but I think this is significant, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, a fellow by the name of Israel Zolli at the end of World War II said this, what the Vatican did in terms of saving Jews will be indelibly and eternally engraved in our hearts. Persists and even High Prelates did things that will be forever will be an honor to Catholicism. After the war, Zolli became a Catholic. This is the Chief Rabbi of Rome. And to honor the pope for he had done for the Jews and the for the role he had played in Zolli’s own conversion, he took the name of Eugenio, which was Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII’s given name in honor of the pope and as gratitude for his baptismal name.

Now Hitchens at this removed time can describe Pius, XII as pro-Nazi. The Nazis didn’t feel that way. There is a new book called *A Special Mission*. *A Special Mission* about Hitler’s plot to kidnap Pope Pius XII and execute him, which is what Hitler often did to his most faithful supporters, right?

And here is another tendency that you see running throughout Hitchens’ book, anything that’s good is secular, anything that’s bad is a believer, a faithful person. For example, he admires Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died as a martyr against Hitler in 1945, just shortly before the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer was a pastor, a radical Christian, who believed in radical discipleship of Christ and that led him into opposition to the Nazis. So Hitchens says that he wasn’t really a believer, that he was motivated by a vague humanism. Karl Barth who was another prominent opponent of Hitler, who is probably the most prominent Protestant theologian of the 20th century, is omitted altogether even though he is the principal author of the principal Protestant statement denouncing Nazism, okay? Because that doesn’t count, that doesn’t fit the narrative that he is trying to tell.

Martin Luther King whom he greatly admires, turns out not to have been a Christian at all. Now that would have been a shock to King who got a theology doctor at Boston University and whose speeches are just laden with biblical imagery, but no he wasn’t a believer either. Secularist it turns out were the ones who ended slavery. John Brown, you might have heard of him, John Brown was this militant Calvinist preacher who opposed slavery, it turns out he was a secularist too according to Hitchens. There is no mention of William Wilberforce. Anyone seen the recent movie about -- called “Amazing Grace” about William Wilberforce and the Christian opposition to slavery, the British slave trade? This was an Evangelical movement led by Wilberforce and his friend John Newton who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace. John Newton is not mentioned, William

Wilberforce isn't mentioned. It turns out that slavery was done away with in the United Kingdom by secularists.

There is no mention in his account of the End of Slavery of the Underground Railroad, what's the significance of that? Or Sojourner Truth or Harriet Tubman or The Battle Hymn of the Republic or Harriet Beecher Stowe. Remember the family, we heard about from Terryll Givens yesterday? The Beechers, great, preacher family. Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the little lady who launched the war, right? No mention of them because religious people can't ever do anything good. On the other hand everything that's bad is done by religious people. For example, religious people put an end to science, try to stomp it out wherever they could. And of course he gets into the old standard warfare of science versus religion stuff. Now I don't have time to expand on this but merely to say that the latest interpretation of the history of science suggest that science grew up interestingly enough not in China, not in the Islamic world, not in India, technologies did. Science grew up in Christian Europe, why? Probably specifically because of attributes of Christian culture in Europe. Look at the works of Stanley Jaki or Pierre Duhem, the other people who are writing on the subject of the history of science, this is pretty much the consensus view right now, but Hitchens doesn't know about it.

But Hitchens doesn't know about it If he knows, he is not telling. Science and belief are enemies. They are absolutely opposed to one another. Galileo, of course, is invoked, but Galileo was the one who, unbeknownst to Hitchens, said, "we read about God in two books, the book of the scriptures and the book of nature." He was a religious man, but he has to be painted as a secularist.

One of my favorite cases is Sir Fred Hoyle, probably one of the greatest, most brilliant physicists of the twentieth century. He was a British agnostic, but in Hitchens' book he shows up as a creationist. Some may remember if you grew up about the time I did, there were two viable alternatives for the origin of the universe: the Big Bang and the steady-state theory. Fred Hoyle was the founder of the steady-state theory and Hitchens portrays him as being opposed to the big bang because the Big Bang threatened his theism. But Hoyle was an agnostic or an atheist. He's done completely turn around. In many cases, Hitchens is 180 degrees wrong. He is so far wrong that if he moved at all, he would be coming back toward right, but he does this constantly.

And in the case of Hoyle, it is amusing. Hoyle was probably having doubts about his atheism towards the end. He is the one and Hitchens just goes ballistic at this, who said that looking at the theory of evolution it reminded him of the idea that that a storm hits a junkyard, and when it's done, a Boeing 747 has emerged. But he was by no means an ardent Christian. The irony I might say about this is that although Hitchens sees the Big Bang as the enemy of religion, guess who was one of the earliest people to just love the Big Bang? He went so far, that his advisers criticized him for it and asked him to restrain himself. It was Pope Pius XII, you know the pro-Nazi. He thought it was a wonderful thing. It reminded him of Genesis 1, and so he pushed the Big Bang. And not surprisingly, why? Because this great atheist theory, the Big Bang was originated to at

least a large extent by Georges Lemaître, who was a Belgian priest and mathematician and physicist. So he has got the history of science turned on its head. He doesn't know what he's talking about but this is just typical.

Here's another amusing part of what he has to say: the loss of faith he says, can be compensated by the newer and finer wonders that we have before us, as well as by immersion in the near-miraculous work of Homer and Shakespeare and Milton and Tolstoy and Proust, all of which was manmade. Now Homer without religion? What do you make of his story – well anyway. You lose about half of it right there. Tolstoy without religion? He would have been shocked by that. But the one that really gets me is Milton without religion. Here are the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*: “Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe, with loss of Eden, till one greater man restore us and regain the blissful seat, sing heav'nly muse, what in me is dark illumine, what is low raise and support; that to the height of this great argument I may assert Eternal Providence, and justify the ways of God to men.”

That's the purpose statement of *Paradise Lost*. So, you know, get rid of religion, but read your Milton.

Imagine Dante without religion! I have tried to imagine Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* without religion. Pilgrimage to what? Where are they going? Sort of reminds me of the joke, you cross an atheist or an agnostic with a Jehovah's Witness, what do you get? Someone who goes door to door for no obvious reason. Remove religion from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and where they are going to go? Well, but he asks us to contemplate a world without religion. I ask you – I invite you to contemplate that same world. Imagine a world without Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, without Handel's *Messiah*, without Mozart's *Requiem*, without Stravinsky, without John Tavener, without John Coltrane - heck, even without Brian Wilson, without cathedrals, without the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. I mean, it's all gone. You cannot imagine that you can just get rid of all the bad parts of religion and you are still going to have all the good things. You get rid of it at all, what are you left with? Instead of the cathedral of Chartres maybe a Quonset hut, something purely functional.

Well, here is a really serious point: totalitarian atrocities. The 1997 *Black Book of Communism* estimates the total deaths caused by Communism at between 85 and 100 million, but I think even the highest of those figures may be low. There is a new biography, a relatively new biography of Mao that credits him with 70 million deaths on his own, in peacetime. You've still got to factor in Stalin and Trotsky and Lenin and all those. And then, of course, there are the Nazis. Now Hitchens realizes that such facts pose a threat to the atheism he advocates because religion is supposed to be guilty of all these crimes and secularism will introduce a brave new world of peace and justice and harmony and all that sort of thing. But it doesn't seem to work. So what does he do? He takes a fairly daring step. He declares that religion created totalitarianism. And he points, for example, the Jesuit reductions in Paraguay, you may remember them for the Robert De Niro movie “*The Mission*,” a really fine movie set around Iguazu Falls, a really

gorgeous area. That is an early totalitarian state where the Indians were kept in terror and fear by these Jesuit priests. Now let me tell you about these Jesuit priests. There were two of them for every 3,500 Indians who were free to come and go anytime they wanted. What kind of terrorist totalitarian state is that? He has completely misrepresented them.

And then, he goes on to say that all totalitarianism is religious. It didn't only originate in religion, but all totalitarianism -- and you thought you knew about Stalin! All totalitarian is actually theocratic. It's all religious stuff. Believers are guilty for that too, okay? He says of Saddam Hussein, I shall simply say that those who regarded his regime as a secular one are deluding themselves. Well, I hereby declare myself deluded. Saddam Hussein was less of a Muslim than I am, and the Baathist state was a fascist state. Baathist ideology was founded by a lapsed Christian named Michel Aflaq. Saddam Hussein was a nominal Muslim, but his chief deputy, Tariq Aziz, was a Christian of the kind that Vito Corleone was a Christian, but still a Christian of some sort, at least nominally. What kind of a theocracy is this? After 1979 it's true that Saddam Hussein, being a thug but a fairly clever thug and a survivor, knew which way the wind was blowing; so he discovered, for example, that he was a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad. And who would dare to question him on that? And then he also put Allāhu akbar on the Iraqi flag, God is most great, because he knew which way the winds were blowing. But he never showed any serious signs of religion. He persecuted religious leaders in Iraq. He killed them by the thousands, Shiite and Sunni both. It wasn't as if he favored only the Sunnis; he disliked them all. Anybody who was a threat to him, died. So this is a preposterous claim on his part, but here's another one. He is overt than this <0:07:16> but I happen to love this passage, this is a description of Stalin's experiments with you may remember Lysenko. If you ever read about Soviet history, a guy named Trofim Lysenko who launched a new theory of Marxist genetics, it was insane. Reject Mendel and all that sort of scientific nonsense and go with Marxist-Leninist thought on genetics. Lots of people starved to death as a result of his agricultural experiments. So Hitchens, who, remember, is an ex-Trotskyite who really admires Lenin and Trotsky and the Soviet experiment, says Stalin pedantically repeated the papal routine, note that word papal, repeated the papal routine of making science conform to dogma, by insisting that the shaman and charlatan -- shaman, religious language again, the shaman and charlatan and Trofim Lysenko had disclosed the key to genetics and promised extra harvests of specially inspired vegetables, inspired. Millions of innocents died of gnawing internal pain as a consequence of this revelation. Now that is just rhetorical irresponsibility, but notice the religious language: inspiration, revelation, shaman, papal -- bringing up the papacy, all of which has to do with a completely atheist regime - a militantly atheist regime. Listen to description of the death of the great theocrat and believer Stalin, Joseph Stalin died a horrific death in March 1953. He had suffered a severe stroke that left his right side paralyzed, and his last hours were spent in virtually unbearable pain. Slowly, he was strangled to death. As his daughter Svetlana later reported, her father choked to death as those around his deathbed looked on. Although at the very last he had seemed at most merely semiconscious, he suddenly opened his eyes and looked about the room, plainly terrified. At that point according to Svetlana, "something incomprehensible and awesome happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand. Stalin partially lifted himself in the bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens, and shook it defiantly. Then, with an

unintelligible murmur, he dropped motionless back onto his pillow, and died. It was a holy death.”

Now I am going to do something here, I am going to read somewhat lengthy passage because I want to make a point here. I find Hitchens in many regards simply absurd but in one aspect obscene. It's his attempt to blame the atrocities, the Nazis and the communists on religious believers. So I want to read this little portion I have just been putting together in past couple of days. Lenin wrote to Maxim Gorky in 1913 that "any religious idea is the most dangerous foulness, the most shameful infection, and worship is no more than ideological necrophilia. In 1921, by now firmly in control of the country, he called upon the Communist Party to adopt a program of militant atheism and militant materialism. Now remember to adopt a program of militant atheism and militant materialism.”

Now remember Trotsky – excuse me Trotsky – yeah, Hitchens is an admirer of Lenin. Accordingly, the atheist weekly, *The Godless*, began publication in 1922, and a monthly journal entitled *The Godless in the Workplace*, was launched. In 1923 the party set up the League of the Godless. In 1924 -- doesn't it sound like a theocratic state to you? In 1924 a Society of Militant Materialists was established. The relatively highbrow magazine *Atheist* began to appear. And the party launched a national campaign of atheistic propaganda and scientific demonstrations. By 1929 the League of the Godless had 465,000 members and 9,000 cells of atheist agitators, and it changed its name to the League of the Militant Godless. In 1932, it could claim 5.6 million members. Museums of scientific atheism were built across the country. During 1940, 239,000 anti-religious lectures were delivered to an estimated audience of 11 million nationwide under the auspices of the League.

But the Bolsheviks weren't content with propaganda. In 1922, Orthodox churches were ordered to surrender all of their treasures, including chalices and clerical vestments over to the state. When the patriarch tried to retain objects related to church sacraments, they were seized by force. More than 8,000 members of the clergy were killed during the process of expropriation, and over 1,400 violent clashes are recorded between agents of the state and angry believers.

By 1930, estimates the British historian Richard Overy, a fifth of all of those imprisoned in the far northern Solovki prison camp complex were clerical victims of religious persecution. By 1940 the overwhelming majority of churches, chapels, mosques, synagogues, and monasteries had been either dynamited, closed down, or seized by the state for some other use. Whereas the Russian Orthodox Church had 46,457 churches and 1,028 monasteries at the time of the revolution in 1917, by 1939 there were fewer than a thousand still in operation and some estimates put the number as low as a hundred. Six hundred religious communities existed in Moscow in 1917. By 1939 only twenty survived. The famous Strastnoi monastery, for example, located in the heart of the city, was converted into the national anti-religious museum. Remember the church in St. Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, the St. Isaac's Cathedral was according to the guides we

had there at the end of the Soviet Union donated to the state by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn puts the proportion of women imprisoned for their religion at Solovki, a facility he knew during his own imprisonment at about a third. When the women of the religious commune near Khosta were arrested and sent to Solovki, their children were left to fend for themselves on their farms. They tended the orchards and vegetable gardens, milked their goats, studied hard at school, and sent their grades to their parents. Solzhenitsyn says, “together with assurances that they were prepared to suffer for God as their mothers had. And, of course, the party soon gave them the opportunity.”

At that time Solzhenitsyn says of the very beginnings of the Soviet system under Hitchens' much admired Lenin and Trotsky, “the authorities used to love to set up their concentration camps in former monasteries: they were enclosed by strong walls, had good solid buildings, and they were empty. After all, monks are not human beings and could be tossed out at will. In Moscow, for example, there were concentration camps in at least three monasteries. Others were located in empty nunneries as early as September 1918.”

“Men of religion,” says Solzhenitsyn, “were an inevitable part of every annual catch, and their silver locks gleamed in every cell and in every prisoner transport en route to the Solovetsky Islands. From the early twenties on, arrests were also made among groups of theosophists, mystics, spiritualists, religious societies, and philosophers of the Berdyayev circle. They were arrested and destroyed in passing. Of course, ordinary Roman Catholics, Polish Catholic priests, etcetera were arrested too as part of the normal course of events. However, the root destruction of religion in the country, which throughout the twenties and thirties was one of the most important goals of the government, could only be achieved by mass arrests of Orthodox believers. Monks and nuns, whose black habits had been a distinctive feature of old Russian life, were intensively rounded up on every hand, placed under arrest, and sent into exile. They arrested and sentenced active laymen. The circles kept getting bigger, as they raked in ordinary believers as well, old people, and particularly women, who were the most stubborn believers of all. True, they were supposedly being arrested and tried not for their actual faith but for openly declaring their convictions and for bringing up their children in the same spirit. As Tanya Khodkevich wrote: You can pray freely, but just so God alone can hear. She received a ten-year sentence for that verse. A person convinced that he possessed spiritual truth was required to conceal it from his own children! In the 20s, the religious education of children was classified as a political crime under Article 58-10 of the Code.”

“Now such people,” Solzhenitsyn observes, “typically received ten-year sentences to the labor camps, they were prohibited from returning to their children and homes even upon their release. By contrast, prostitutes customarily received three-year sentences, continued to ply their trade among camp administrators and guards, and then returned home bearing suitcases laden with gifts.”

The number of Orthodox parish priests fell from approximately 40,000 in the late 20s to roughly 4,000 in 1940. And this was by no means merely the result of natural attrition or a national loss of interest in religion. Many had been executed as counterrevolutionaries or died in prison camps while unknown numbers were in hiding. Jewish and Muslim religious figures suffered similar fates. After 1929 religious study groups and Bible circles were banned, religious youth and women's groups were prohibited, church reading rooms and libraries were closed, and religious instruction was outlawed. Taxes on the incomes of religious workers were raised to 100 percent. Civil service workers were fired if their fathers had been Orthodox priests; people who refused to work on Sundays were imprisoned. Some religious believers were deliberately starved to death.

One stream has never dried up in the U.S.S.R., Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn could still write in the 1970s with reference to the river of prisoners going to the labor camps, and it still flows. A stream of criminals untouched by the beneficent wave summoned to life by the revolution. A stream which flowed uninterrupted through all those decades whether Leninist norms were infringed or strictly observed and flowed in Khrushchev's day more furiously than ever. I mean the believers. Those who resisted the new wave of cruel persecution, the wholesale closing of churches. Monks who were slung out of their monasteries. These are in no sense political, they are religionists, but still they have to be re-educated. Believers must be dismissed from their jobs merely for their faith; Komsomols must be sent along to break the windows of believers; believers must be officially compelled to attend anti-religious lectures, church doors must be cut down with blowtorches, domes pulled down with hawsers attached to tractors, gatherings of old women broken up with fire hoses.

Do you see why I think it's obscene for Christopher Hitchens to be suggesting that religious believers were responsible for the Soviet Union? Well, another thing that he says they are responsible for – and I know I need to quit very, very soon and I'll try to hurry is religion and violence. Hitchens objects to the violence that, he says, is caused by religion, and he specifically targets suicide bombings as an example of that evil thing. Still although he apparently doesn't realize it, he makes a crucial admission when he acknowledges that the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka pioneered the disgusting tactic of suicide murder long before Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, as he puts it. While true to form, he seeks to paint the violence in Sri Lanka as a religious war between Buddhists and Hindus, the Tamil Tigers are not motivated by religion. He acknowledges that the conflict is one of ethnic tribalism, but he attempts to obscure its reality by pointing out that the Tamils are chiefly Hindu. Note that important word chiefly. That means that some of them aren't and that the strife is reinforced by religion. Now here are the theological demands made in 1985 by a confederacy of Tamil militant groups; listen to the language of theology here:

1. The Tamils are to be recognized as a distinct nationality.
2. They are to be recognized and guaranteed their territorial integrity in the traditional homelands of the Ceylon Tamils.

3. The right of self-determination of the Tamil nation should be guaranteed.

4. And, recognition of citizenship and fundamental rights of all Tamils who regard Ceylon as their home should be promised.

Do you hear a single word about religion in that? There isn't any. But that's deeply significant. Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, compiled a database of every single suicide bombing and suicide attack worldwide from 1980 through 2003, 315 attacks altogether, and carefully analyzed them. In a 2005 book entitled *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, he concludes that, "while it might seem obvious that Islamic fundamentalism is the central cause, the presumed connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism is misleading. In fact, he writes this is really important and it may be a surprise to you, the data show that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism or any one of the world's religions. In fact, the leading instigators of suicide attacks are the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, a Marxist-Leninist group -- that's Trotsky territory, Lenin territory, Hitchens territory, a Marxist-Leninist group whose members are from Hindu families but who are adamantly opposed to religion. This group committed 76 of the 315 incidents, more suicide attacks than Hamas. Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland. Religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective.

Okay, religion and war; David Martin, who is an emeritus professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, is responding to a book by Richard Dawkins, a friend and ally of Hitchens. He says from a sociological viewpoint, the role and nature of religion varies according to the kind of society in which it is present, and its relationship to warfare will likewise vary. That is why statements to the effect that religion causes war are not likely to be taken very seriously by sociologists. And we heard earlier today by Ervin Staub, the fellow who wrote about the causes of violence, religion is only one factor among many in those cases.

Martin continues to say, know of no evidence to show that the absence of a religious factor in a contention of rival identities and incompatible claims leads to a diminution in the degree of enmity and ferocity. The contribution of religion has instead been of signal importance, and it's always been almost entirely directed to peaceful reconciliation internally and peace in foreign affairs. If Dawkins' arguments were correct, he says, then the separating out of believers and clergy from the general population ought to reveal them as major proponents of violence towards each other and violence in international affairs. This is far from being the case. The evidence does not bear out the contention, the case falls.

Now, in fact, the cause of violence is what it always is, and it happens with religious people and nonreligious people: lust, greed, irritability, the urge to power, all those sorts of things. Religion is a factor, but not a major factor. As my son put it to me a few weeks ago: Hitchens seems to be saying that without religion we could all just hold hands and sing Kumbaya, except that of course we couldn't sing Kumbaya, because it's a religious song. And there are so many other things that could be said about this, but I won't say them. Mercifully it's coming to an end. But on claim that he makes in particular that I found striking he says that Islam has ruined the culture of Persia. The culture of Persia is Islamic. The greatest writers of the Persian tradition are Islamic writers, the Persian miniature paintings are Islamic paintings, the greatest poet of Persia is Jalal ad-Din Rumi, who is an Islamic mystical poet. His book, the Mathnawi, is often called the second Qur'an or the Persian Qur'an. If you get rid of Islam, you get rid of every major poet in the Persian tradition. You get rid of every major bit of Persian architecture. You are getting rid of every bit of Persian artistry and painting. Statements like this are abysmally ignorant. It's just astonishing.

Well, let me just say *god is not great*. Some of you I've discovered haven't even heard of the book, that's great, more power to you. It's been on the bestseller list, but fine. But it is crammed to the bursting point with errors, and the ironic thing – the interesting thing, striking thing about this is the errors are always, always, in Hitchens' favor. Now if you have an accountant or a cashier or something who makes errors and they are sort of random, sometimes one way, sometimes another way, you think, okay, that's alright; but if the bank teller is always making the error in her favor, you begin to smell a rat. Well, I smell a rat in this case. There is not a disputed fact or a fact that struck me as questionable that I've checked in Hitchens' book where it has not turned out that he's wrong -- every single time.

It reminds me of a very famous review of a book by Lillian Hellman, who wrote a memoir called *Scoundrel Time*. It was reviewed by her longtime archenemy Mary McCarthy, who was on a television show on PBS, the old Dick Cavett Show. And at one point -- this in 1979, when he asked about the book *Scoundrel Time*, she said famously -- and this led to a lawsuit, every word Lillian Hellman writes is a lie, including "and" and "the."

Well, I am not saying that Hitchens is lying, but I am saying there is virtually not a sentence in this book that is true. It is absolutely astonishing. He has become millionaire with this book, which gives me hope. By reputation I am a constant liar too, so the future is bright. Anyway it's a remarkable thing and I have said before that I think that the secular critique of Mormonism and of religious belief is much more serious now than the Evangelical critique which we have been experiencing for so long. And I thought when this book first came out, this was going to be a formidable challenge. This is a remarkable fellow. He writes well, he has written extensively, he has traveled the world, he is a formidable presence on television. It is truly disappointing or in another sense really exhilarating to realize how bad the case is.

Thank you very much.

You can watch this presentation on our Youtube site here:

Pt 1- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKJjoWprzUI>

pt 2- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvpjSmYbXqI&feature=watch_response

Pt3-

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqjqyAKGUyE&playnext=1&list=PL332D6DA30BE2E65C>

pt 4- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUqeWEV4UK8&feature=related>

pt 5- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EI8nkLQwWbU&feature=watch_response_rev

pt 6- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rK24S5jDOU&feature=watch_response_rev