Review of Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*

Christopher Hitchens, the powerhouse intellectual who died in December of 2011, was known throughout his career and life as a brilliant contrarian. Obituaries celebrated him as “the incomparable critic, masterful rhetorician, fiery wit, and fearless bon vivant”¹ and as “a slashing polemicist.”² He was also, famously, an atheist. Even when he was diagnosed with cancer in 2010, he did not turn to gods, prayers, or religion. Indeed, in an article written for *Vanity Fair* a few months after his diagnosis, Hitchens took the religious to task. September 20th had been chosen as “Everybody Pray for Hitchens Day”³ which led him to comment, in typical Hitchens fashion,

> Suppose I ditch the principles I have held for a lifetime, in the hope of gaining favor at the last minute? I hope and trust that no serious person would be at all impressed by such a hucksterish choice…I don’t mean to be churlish about any kind intentions, but when September 20 comes, please do not trouble deaf heaven with your bootless cries. Unless, of course, it makes you feel better.⁴

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⁴ Christopher Hitchens, “Unanswerable Prayers.”
He held steadfast to the notions he laid out in his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.*

While this book will most appeal to Hitchens’ fellow atheists, and indeed some of the chapter titles such as “Religion Kills,” “Religion as Original Sin,” and “Is Religion Child Abuse?” are certainly inflammatory, it lays out a perceptive and comprehensive argument for just how exactly “religion poisons everything.” However, as Hitchens takes down religion after religion, his rhetoric is highly intellectual and therefore perhaps not readily accessible. This is typical of how Hitchens always wrote and spoke, and it actually amplifies his own arguments against religion. He held that what atheists “respect is free inquiry, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake;” it is not to say that Hitchens necessarily believed atheists to be smarter, but rather perhaps, more cognizant of the power of reason. Each argument that Hitchens makes in this book is presented with the necessary facts to back up his assertions.

Hitchens mainly goes after the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, indicting these faiths in “helping to choke free inquiry and the emancipating consequences that it might bring.” He lambastes each of these faiths and their dogmas for having adversely affected the health of others; religion has been used as a tool to promote an anti-American agenda in countries such as India and Nigeria, and has been misused by the Catholic Church to preach against condom use, therefore increasing the spread of HIV/AIDS in many impoverished countries. His most damning critique of these religions is the simple idea that “Religion is man-made. Even the men who made it cannot agree on what their prophets or redeemers or gurus

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6 Hitchens, *God is Not Great,* 137.
7 Hitchens, *God is Not Great,* 43-46.
actually said or did.”

As religions and their believers create and adhere to their creeds and doctrines, Hitchens argues that they have “the sheer arrogance to tell us that we already have all the essential information we need. Such stupidity, combined with such pride, should be enough on its own to exclude ‘belief’ from the debate.”

In order to counter religion, Hitchens proposed, “we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will based itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman.”

This Enlightenment would do away with religion and enable any person to assert her or his agency in the pursuit of reason, inquiry, and research; in order for this to be a successful endeavor, it is essential to “know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it.”

In writing this book, Hitchens has done a masterful job of doing just this.

*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* was published in 2007 as religion was once again making its way to the forefront of American consciousness and politics, particularly through the religious right. As this trend has continued, Hitchens’ book is ever important to read. Even if you don’t necessarily agree with Hitchens’ arguments, he lays out a compelling study of how religion has affected, and yes, indoctrinated, masses of people worldwide. In order to understand the workings of American and global societies, it is necessary to look at how varied religions have influenced daily life, politics, and culture, and whether Hitchens’ proposed “Enlightenment” would in fact be an advantageous alternative.

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8 Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 10.
9 Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 11.
10 Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 283.
11 Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 283.
Works Cited


