

# god is not Great

by Christopher Hitchens  
(summary by Jeff Stauffer)

*Editor's Note: It goes without saying (but should probably be said to avoid potential confusion) that Shepherd Project Ministries does not agree with the thesis of this book or with most or all of the minor points which contribute to it. In fact, the opposite is true: we disagree with almost everything in this book. However, this book has become quite popular and we believe that Christians need to be aware of its contents so that they can respond intelligently. It is for that purpose that we provide this helpful summary.*

Christopher Hitchens is a British journalist and author whose columns have appeared in publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Nation*. This latest book of his has made him a frequent guest on popular talk shows and radio programs, where Hitchens unleashes his criticisms of religious belief and its detrimental effects on society. In *god is not Great*, Hitchens attacks all forms of theistic beliefs, providing a myriad of examples how this has led to violence, ignorance, and repression of "natural" behavior.

## **Chapter 1: Putting It Mildly**

In this opening chapter, Hitchens shares a small glimpse into his own childhood and provides some general contrasts between an atheist/secular humanist perspective, and that of someone who has "faith" in their religious beliefs. For Hitchens, an atheist stands for reason, evidence, and "free thinking," whereas the person of faith believes in tradition and holy places, holds to a belief despite the evidence, and in many cases represses sexual desires. He tells a story of his former grade school teacher who once told his class how wonderful it was that God made the grass green, for it is "the most restful color for our eyes." Even though at the time he wasn't familiar with the process of photosynthesis or chlorophyll, he simply knew she got this wrong, for "the eyes were adjusted to nature, not the other way about." For Hitchens, this epiphany was a turning point for the young, inquisitive nine-year old.

## **Chapter 2: Religion Kills**

Hitchens outlines stories from five cities around the world where religious groups have been responsible for great atrocities:

- Belfast: The ongoing Protestant/Catholic wars
- Beirut: Trying to accommodate the various religious populations therein destroyed the beautiful city
- Bombay: The Hindu nationalist party strong-armed the city and destroyed its culture
- Bethlehem: Torn apart by continuous competition and struggle between Jews, Christians, and Muslims
- Baghdad: Suffered the terrible reign of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship

Hitchens delights in pointing out how many examples he was able to muster of the "poisoning influence of religion," just from one letter of the alphabet.

## **Chapter 3: A Short digression on the Pig**

This brief chapter draws critical attention to various religious groups' fascination with denigrating or avoiding pigs. Hitchens views them as highly useful, intelligent, close relatives to humans, and so he

questions why these groups devalue them. He concludes that religion and superstition distort our picture of the world.

#### **Chapter 4: A Note on Health, to which Religion can be Hazardous**

This chapter provides stories from various parts of the world where religion has stymied the health of the general population. Examples include:

- Restricting condoms towards the prevention of the spread of AIDS
- Young Muslim girls in Africa subject to infibulations (genital mutilations)
- The practice of circumcision for infant boys.
- Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to grant blood transfusions for their children.

#### **Chapter 5: The Metaphysical Claims of Religion are False**

Hitchens believes that science has largely replaced religious explanations of the natural world, and attempts to show how the church has resisted accepting these new truths, preferring to believe in the "absurd" and an outdated view of the world. Despite the bold claim of the chapter title, this short section chapter largely involves discussing some astronomical discoveries and how church leaders continue to hold to their antiquated views based on church dogma and tradition.

#### **Chapter 6: Arguments from Design**

He introduces William Paley and his famous essay for an argument from design. (This story involves finding a pocket watch on a beach and inferring a designer. In the same way, Paley concludes, we can draw similar conclusions when looking at the world around us.) Hitchens parries with examples of the human eye and ear and their many flaws. He argues they appear to be the result of evolutionary wanderings versus an intelligent process. He also states that evolution did not have us in mind as an end goal, nor the 98% of all life that has since gone extinct.

#### **Chapter 7: Revelation: the Nightmare of the "Old" Testament**

He critiques the Ten Commandments from the Bible, and claims that the Old Testament warrants slavery, human trafficking, and the abuse of women. He also claims that there is no evidence for the Moses story and subsequent flight from Egypt, nor the conquest of the "Promised Land."

#### **Chapter 8: The "New" Testament Exceeds the Evil of the "Old" One**

The decades which passed between Christ's life and the recording of the gospel are, according to Hitchens, responsible for what he claims are the gospels' differing accounts of what actually happened and many contradictions which, he says, cannot be explained "by any Christian authority."

#### **Chapter 9: The Koran is Borrowed**

The beginnings of Islam, he proposes, were much like that of Christianity: violently opposed to all who questioned their authority. Much like the Bible, the Koran describes events which occurred many years before it was written. As a result, Hitchens concludes, it contains many contradictions and inconsistencies, which one would expect from something passed on through the generations.

#### **Chapter 10: The Tawdriness of the Miraculous**

Hitchens provides numerous examples of "petty" miracles believed in by many people that can be easily explained through science or deceit. After his many interviews around the globe with those involved in supposed miracles, he does not seem to have come across anything that is truly spectacular. Hitchens often refers to "Ockham's razor" in this book for cases such as this. (The basic premise that William of

Ockham proposed was that when two explanations were offered, one should prefer the “simpler” one.) In the case of miracles, Hitchens does not consider the supernatural the “simpler” explanation and so concludes that we should look for simple (aka scientific) answers instead of conjuring up the supernatural when it is unnecessary.

### **Chapter 11: The Lowly Stamp of their Origin: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings**

In this brief chapter, Hitchens provides examples of “huckster” preachers, such as Joseph Smith who founded Mormonism. He compares the Mormon churches’ origins to that of Muhammad and Islam. He states that as a general rule, people want to “believe in belief.” He feels this can be the only reason that someone like Smith can go from such shady beginnings, to the founder of the vastly growing Mormon church.

### **Chapter 12: A Coda: How Religions End**

This is a brief encounter with a small Jewish sect called Sabbatai Sevi and how they have largely died out. The point here appears to be a reminder of what happens to religious sects whose focus largely revolves around a “Messiah” figure who is supposed to usher in the end of all things. There is no shortage of replacement figures and other sects for people to flock to if their prophecies are unfulfilled.

### **Chapter 13: Does Religion make People Behave?**

Those who look for examples of how religion positively influences those in the public square need to overlook the equal if not greater amount of evil done by these same organizations: racism, slavery, etc... “Freethinkers,” according to Hitchens, come out better on this scale, historically. Furthermore, citing instances of virtuous behavior does not constitute proof for the truthfulness of their claims. Hitchens also counters the argument that religion keeps people from being immoral by citing many cases of the exact opposite. He believes that the greater the “faithfulness” one has to their religion, the greater the crimes that are committed in “the fall.”

### **Chapter 14: There is no “Eastern” Solution**

It is no better off to look “eastward” towards Buddhism or Hinduism for the solution to the religious problem. Hitchens reminds us of brutal conflicts between these two religions in Sri Lanka and between China and Japan. Those that leave their Bible and seek “enlightenment” will be asked to “put their reason to sleep, and to discard their minds along with their sandals.”

### **Chapter 15: Religion as an Original Sin**

Condemning the concepts of blood sacrifice, original sin and atonement, Hitchens describes each as ridiculous. Looking at their origins, he feels they are simply refinements of more ancient myths and folk tales.

### **Chapter 16: Is Religion Child Abuse?**

Hitchens calls this “moral terrorism”: Christians frighten their children with images of hell, burden them with guilt, and mutilate their infant genitalia (circumcision).

### **Chapter 17: An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch “Case” against Secularism**

He argues against the common rejoinder that secular leaders have brought about even greater atrocities. As his defense, he gives an account of how the Catholic Church partnered with Mussolini for control of Italy as a state religion, and the church’s surrender to German National Socialism. He also rebukes North Korea as a modern example, stating that their government is more about religious

ancestor worship than communism. He also states there is no modern secular example where religious observances are outright banned.

#### **Chapter 18: A Finer Tradition: The Resistance of the Rational**

This chapter summarizes some of the faithful “freethinkers” from history who stood for the rational amidst religious resistance, including Socrates, Spinoza and Einstein. He cites others who mention God as a modest accommodation, most likely to avoid further scrutiny by the church, such as in the cases of Charles Darwin or Benjamin Franklin.

#### **Chapter 19: In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment**

In his final chapter, Hitchens challenges the reader to pursue the fight for the atheist’s ideals: to pursue evidence and reason in our discourse, to think for ourselves, and to choose a path of skepticism. He recalls recent examples from the world which demonstrate the powerful and often negative influence that religious groups still hold on society. Pertinent illustrations include the theocracy Iran and its dangerous pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the Danish cartoon depicting Muhammad that caused rioting around the world. As, in Hitchens opinion, they are no longer useful, he concludes that religions and their involvement in public discourse should be banned.