

[http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis\\_e\\_elliott/2007/10/religion\\_messes\\_up\\_and\\_straight\\_1.html](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/willis_e_elliott/2007/10/religion_messes_up_and_straight_1.html)

## Religion Messes Up and Straightens Out the World

ON FAITH - WASHINGTON POST - WILLIS ELLIOTT

1922 came to my mind, Hitch, when I read this of yours: "Religion is violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children."

But before I get into that, I hasten to address the two challenges you've put to us "On Faith" panelists:

1) "Can [anybody] name a moral statement or action, uttered or performed by a religious person, that could not have been uttered or performed by an unbeliever?" Of course not! But consider what your statement concedes: Such moral statements and actions as HAVE come from religious persons, only "COULD" have come from unbelievers. Religion actually HAS been productive of your desiderata; you can only speculate that your irreligion MIGHT have been so productive.

2) "Can [anybody] think of a wicked action or statement that derived directly from religious faith?" Of course! Religion is natural, human beings are naturally wicked (as well as naturally good), so we should expect wickedness (as well as goodness) to come out of religion. Your claim that the world would be better off without religion is almost as patently stupid as would be saying that the world would be better off without sex, which is guilty of a list of horrors rivaling religion's list. As for your assumption that religion is natural only to the extent of a surgically removable wart (the knife being reason), the cumulative evidence of history and of the human sciences is against you.

Back to 1922 and the yellowed newspaper clipping I have from my father about a sermon preached by "Harry," a schoolmate of his. What Harry Emerson Fosdick preached on Sunday morning was frequently in the Monday-morning papers. Like you, Hitch, Fosdick had a witty way of irritating religious folk. This sermon's title was "How Religion Helps Mess Up the World," a title you yourself could preach a rip-snortin' sermon on. There the similarity stops. What I have to say to you I choose to say by *contrasts*.

1) Unlike you, Fosdick preached his sermons inside instead of outside the church. Your brother Peter listens more to sermons inside the church, less to sermons outside the church. How about coming inside to preach? Of course it would require that you advance from your present debater's moralism of religion as bad to the preacher's realistic recognition that religion is both bad and good.

2) Unlike you, Fosdick rightly saw religion as only *one* factor in messing up the world. If you had preached the sermon, its title would have been not "How Religion Helps Mess Up the World" but (simple-mindedly) "How Religion Messes Up the World."

3) Unlike you, Fosdick had a joyful lift to his head, a lilt in his voice, a lightness in his laughter, and a twinkle in his eyes--all bespeaking his contagious Christian faith and love. (I remember especially that twinkle as I conversed with him at eye-level [as I am, he was a little guy].)

(From your New York City apartment, you may be able to see something reminiscent of Fosdick. It's the twenty-story *Riverside Church*, which a fellow-Baptist, John D. Rockefeller -- who had urged him to start a liberal church of his own -- gave him the money to build.)

Hitch, you are (unwittingly) making a contribution to religion, which -- like every other dimension of human life -- needs continuous criticism. You understand religion's potential for messing up the world. I invite you to explore religion's potential for straightening it out. You could start by studying instances of religion's being "*friendly* to free inquiry" (as over against your assertion, above, that it's "hostile to free inquiry").

To begin, you might stay with that liberal Baptist, Rockefeller. In 1893, he gave some money (\$78,000,000) to a Baptist preacher to start a school in Chicago, and its faculty has won more Nobel Prizes than any other school in the world. William Rainey Harper, that Baptist preacher, believed that the Bible is the world's best book for promoting freedom, and he was a specialist in it. Indeed, the first five presidents of the University of Chicago were professional scholars of the Bible.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | OCTOBER 2, 2007; 5:15

### Comments

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well, i thing some thing have to be done about this wickedness, some are not wicked while human being make him to be wicked that call ativicial wickedness,while some are naturally wicked from thier child whold.so what shall we do to reduces such incident:-

1. we have to be very carefull the way we talk to people.
2. we have to learn about human behaviour.
3. we have to be very care to the kind of people we meet in our day to day life journey that we make.
4. to avoid in relevant sugestion that is not even good to our health.

POSTED BY: JOSEPHINE ASHEZI MATTHEW | OCTOBER 25, 2007 6:58 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

I posted this on Donna Freitas' page but I wanted to float it here as well...

I have discovered the key to this whole debate.

Replace the word "religions" with the word "organizations" and the whole antitheist critique comes into sharp focus.

Organizations by their very nature are more effective than individual action... and it is precisely this "organizational" feature that makes them violent (armies), irrational (Burning Man festival), intolerant (the any club with membership requirements), allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry (the KKK organization // any tribe), invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry (AMWAY/QUIXTAR organizations), contemptuous of women (Moose Lodge organizations) and coercive toward children (the public education system)."

Antitheists have railed for years against "organized religion" but now that the Church is going Emergent and Emerging, they have to think of a new critique.

Let's face it, there is not necessary connection between (false or not) God-belief and evil, while there are clear links between (religious or not) effective organizations and the evil deeds these organizations can facilitate.

So let's focus the critique on the real causes evil and not the red herring of false God-beliefs.

Peace,  
RT

POSTED BY: RICHMOND T. STALLGISS | OCTOBER 3, 2007 11:15 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Sorry.The above post is mine.

POSTED BY: FATHER O'MARLOWE | SEPTEMBER 30, 2007 12:58 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Yes Hitchens is foolish if he thinks a little logic will stand between me and my God.  
The reason my faith is so secure is that I know it is on another level from logic and reason and overrated rationalism.  
There's more to life than making sense. Sense is for the weak and unsteady.  
The highest virtue is accorded those who believe in the least likely, and the most seemingly silly.  
Any fool can believe in logic and earthly common sense.  
It takes a man of true Faith to believe in the apparently ridiculous.  
The Lord understands because he is The Lord.  
Will atheists ever get it? I really do not think so.

POSTED BY: ANONYMOUS | SEPTEMBER 30, 2007 12:56 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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I am not a "believer" that God exists, I KNOW that He exists.

This knowledge, supported by philosophical arguments, is a result of direct experiences with God - not once, but many times, over what now is becoming a rather long life!

In other words, although it is possible to argue that God is a figment of people's imagination, and it also is possible to argue that He is a necessary being, the real test to me is, simply put, does He care about me, personally, and does He demonstrate that through action and interaction?

Have I seen Him - yes!

Have I spoken to Him - yes!

Have I heard Him speak - yes!

Do I always do what He advises - unfortunately, no!

Do I care if you now consider me to be certifiably... well... you know! - No, I do not care!

However, in the views that God has expressed to me, through good people that have written about Him and from Him over thousands of years, as well as in person to person interaction with me, He has been less complimentary of organized religion than any human writer...

Frankly... anyone that takes upon his or her self the mantle of authoritatively representing God... might want to reconsider!

By the way, I can testify that He HAS authorized people to speak for Him, but principally as a means of alerting others that He wants everyone to ask of Him, to find out directly what He has to say about... well... about everything!... Never as a means of exalting one person or group or organization over another!

In fact... He has made it very clear that He is no respecter of persons... What He offers one... He offers to all...

As for those who do not "believe"... It is my view and experience that He seems to care about that only because it stops them from enjoying the benefits of learning from Him...

In fact, He is reported to have said that those that do not believe are damned... But a milder and more loving interpretation of that would change the word damned to a more modern "blocked"... That is... blocked from being with God... blocked from finding the happiness that He wants all to have.

The real challenge, then, is to ask and see if He does not answer, is to seek and see if He is not found, to knock and watch for the door to open... But... to do so with faith... or in more modern terms... exercising good faith... that is... being open minded and truly wanting to receive!

Why not try it and see what happens?

I did so first, many, many years ago, and I have repeatedly and successfully done so many, many times since then!

Just as importantly, I personally have met hundreds, possibly thousands, of people in all walks of life, in and out of organized religions, from all over this planet, that have experiences just like I have had... so that they, too, exclaim that they KNOW He is!

The interesting thing is, those who KNOW may have different viewpoints... different life styles and cultures... but they all KNOW because of personal interaction and experience... not because they have followed one or another set of doctrines!

Much like the story of the blind men that went to "see" an elephant (one touched his leg and exclaimed that the elephant was like a tree, another touched his tail and said that the elephant was like a rope, another touched his side and said that an elephant was like a brick wall, another touched his ear and thought the elephant was like a palm tree, and still another touched his trunk and exclaimed that the elephant was like a snake), they may even have different views of what or how He is... but they all know that He is!

By the way, although evil is not yet overcome... He has some very exciting and interesting surprises ready for those that seek Him... and He has promised to... in His own time... conquer evil... even as it shall eternally be presented!

POSTED BY: BEN YOUNG | SEPTEMBER 30, 2007 3:11 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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" Chaotician:

By the way Bgone, Jews do not have a Heaven, Hell, Souls, life after Death, or any of that nonsense!"

Well, that's their problem, or should be.

I don't suppose it ever occurred to you that just maybe the people that appropriated this Jewish stuff that causes so much discord in 'Western' hearts and minds \*never meant what you think it does in the first place?\*

Wacky idea here, but maybe it never made sense to us because it \*just doesn't\* and it's time to stop 'blaming' the Jews or trying to be 'saved' from them, and just...

Whoa. Stop.

Look around. Breathe.

We animal-skin-but-handy-with-pointy-objects Western people are \*not\* The Chosen People, nor do we need to be going begging to be.

We're ...just us.

There was never anything wrong with that.

And, actually, there's absolutely no God from some other part of the world that ever actually did anybody any harm for just doing what's us, and what makes sense.

This is not a competition.

No more hurting people for 'Daddy's' favor, though.

Your toys are too big for that, now,

Big boys.

Figure it out.

It's not actually that hard.

Least if you have enough faith to operate on the idea that the Ultimate God Of Everything won't go away without the latest translation of a book.

But hey.

Your choice.

Just, suppose your ancestors had a brain in their head before someone imposed a Bible they weren't allowed to read before the industrial revolution anyway...

I know one can get attached to things that way, but hey....

Who said that was what you wanted in the first place?

Except those who use your book to justify doing the exact opposite of what they say it means.

Suppose your Jesus, and/or some random queer Pagan Paddy that happens to agree told you that your soul actually is your own.....

And it has \*absolutely nothing to do with what certain people say it must mean if they mean you must hurt or oppress others....\*

What if you actually have nothing in particular to do with anything but where your heart is, and anyone who tells you different just happens to keep getting caught with their hand or still more unseemly bits in the till?

What if faith means, it's us, all of us, right here, right now... no easy answers, but also, whose fricking 'hard questions?'

What if this was never so hard in the first place.

What if, it's not about some side winning...

What if....

The likes of you, and the likes of me, and the likes of this situation..... Just so happen to be all we got.

Perspective, 'holy guys?'

Frankly, the more I talk to Christians, here, the more I lose faith that humanity really has the Right Stuff to make a go of the life we're given...

Then in Burma, some Buddhist monks gotta make the point that some things are worth fighting for.

Or at least standing for.

The very freedoms some seem so anxious to cast off here in the name of a Dominionist 'Christian Nation' that never was....

A 'nation' that probably already killed me... but...

They use platitudes of 'freedom' to justify wrongs...

Here in Burma, people cry for \*rights,\*

Call me Satanic or Unamerican, but I say \*that\* is where my America, the land of Lady Liberty, should be \*heard.\* Right now.

Reverend.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | SEPTEMBER 30, 2007 2:54 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

By the way Bgone, Jews do not have a Heaven, Hell, Souls, life after Death, or any of that nonsense!

POSTED BY: CHAOTICIAN | SEPTEMBER 30, 2007 12:02 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

It is truly amazing what some religious people can do! Think how much more they could have done if they had a full range of the world to operate in and were not constrained by the superstitions of religion! Baptists, I thought they were not allowed to be worldly or happy!

POSTED BY: CHAOTICIAN | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 11:55 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Let's face it, this is a great time for Atheistic opportunists to strike. In terms of notoriety, the most famous of the world's great monotheistic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, are George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden, and Ariel Sharon! Not one of those individuals in any way resembles a force for tolerance, compassion or freedom in the 21st century.

As a previous writer has noted, believers are left to celebrate the example of Buddhist monks in Burma.

POSTED BY: J DITTES | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 7:18 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Willis E. Elliott:

What secular moral force could equal the religious meaning delivered to the ruling Burmese junta by the upturned alms bowls held aloft by the marching Buddhist monks?

POSTED BY: ALAN MORRIS | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 6:17 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Anders: said, "What Hitchens means with his question, is this: You do not need to believe supernatural things to "Justify" good deeds, but sometimes you do need this belief to justify the bad ones."

Do you know how right your are?

Hell is the concept of somehow stopping murder victims from retaliating in the next world. It's been found in the archaeological record. And, it's the foundation of all three great faiths as well as the foundation of the not so great ones.

It's a piece of cake. Mr A wanted what Mr B had so he killed him and took it, (Cain killed Able). But Mr B does not die, goes on to a new world not all that different from this one. And he carries his memories of this world, getting murdered being one of them.

Sooner or later Mr A will show up in that new world. What will Mr B who has the lay of the land and so on do when Mr A shows up? Mr A desperately needs two things:

- 1) Mr B must NOT be there in the next world. He needs some other place for him to go. Hello hell, a place where murder victims can be safely restrained.
- 2) Just in case there are supernatural beings watching him and they have rules, don't allow murder, etc he needs forgiveness.

Hello Jesus, son of God, the ultimate sacrifice to the God to atone for Mr A's sins, taking the life of his fellow man and a litany of other sins that are necessary to get what Mr A wants, covetousness, robbery, etc.

Religion is a known. Religion is kaput, real soon. Kinda going out of style as we speak.

POSTED BY: BGONE | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 3:17 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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"What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing there's just too little of."

That's not it Rev?

What the world needs now is a good preachin' to from inside the church?

Just a thought. Do preachers preach to themselves? Anywhere?

I've had some success holding mirrors in front of Jehovah Witness door to door types and saying, "that's so good I don't want you to miss it."

POSTED BY: BGONE | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 2:57 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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What Hitchens means with his question, is this: You do not need to believe supernatural things to "Justify" good deeds, but sometimes you do need this belief to justify the bad ones. In fact, here is another challenge, try coming up with a purely secular evidence-based justification for 9/11, the crusades, the inquisition etc. and name a POTENTIAL crime that could not be justified on the grounds that your God agrees.

Anything, ANYTHING can be justified using religion, if you think you have God on your side, not even the sky is the limit.

The same arguments can be used against dogma such as communism/stalinism, where the system, and the FAITH in the system, contrary to all evidence and reason, is justifying gulags and genocide. It was as good supernaturalism as any.

POSTED BY: ANDERS | SEPTEMBER 29, 2007 8:17 AM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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Not too unreasonable.... Though, while we may dispute Hitchens' idea that all religion inherently messes up the world, too often the temptation is to say, 'I must decide if religion is good or bad, and if I can say this guy doesn't have it 100 percent right, I'll blame non-belief for some other bad thing and continue trying to impose my religious authority on others, as though it \*were\* perfect and entitled to do so, even if it were.'

I would say that the main reason America, for instance \*is\* such a religious and spiritual country, is because we have something of a history (hardly a perfect one,) of \*constraining\* religion from using government and social power to enforce the abuses that such regions as Europe remember all too well.

There's a tendency now for Christian religious to \*romanticise\* their own institutions' goodness, when, you know, we basically had an Apartheid state in much of America until quite recently.

Certainly, as a queer person, I credit \*secular\* law and values for changing the climate from one where, before Stonewall, I might have expected to grow up in a country where the police were free to treat me as a Biblical abomination undeserving of life, rights and civil liberties, rather than as a free and equal citizen...

And I've certainly lived with the lingering oppressions and hurts and real injustices that certain religious feel it's their right and duty to roll back the clock on.

It's not like they ever completely went away, ...my own life is something of a testament to how people will do real harm and terrible things to people in the name of a religious abstraction.

This is a conspicuous way in which certain religious ideas and ambitions are in fact, \*trying to mess up the world.\*

It's a time when you can have a Senator caught enjoying the furtive, bathroom sex scene of marginalized gay people, then going right back to Congress and opposing hate-crimes protections for gays, in order to seem 'righteous.'

Frankly, he's not the first publicly-pious GOP guy who it turns out just so happens to get his own gratification out of marginalized conditions for gay people, and using the power he gains from religion to try and keep them there.

I think that if one wants to claim 'religion,' (really, Christianity and Islam, in Hitchens' generalized statements) is really a force for nobler sentiments, then 'religion' has to actually learn that it's not a matter of, 'Our way is arguably better than nothing, so we must try and impose it as hard as we can, regardless of the real consequences we impose on harmless others for our own comfort,'

But actually to live that nobility.

If 'religion' doesn't want to seem to be the bad guys, you can't just hold up a Hitchens and say, 'Unbelievers are unreasonable when they get cheesed off,'

...you can't just make with the apologism and deny the bad effects of what you say or do, or say that it's in the end 'worth it' to take the whole kit and kaboodle, especially when it's others that end up getting hurt because you like to use big words to tell people who \*ain't that sophisticated\* that in fact gay people are morally-inferior people who deserve eternal torment if they don't obey someone else's interpretations of their own religion, ...what you get there is people taking away from all the rhetoric, 'Gay people or people of different beliefs are bad, I'm better, ...if I rape or assault or socially marginalize someone, endorse hate crimes against them, deny them health care or jobs or housing, well, that's to discourage gayness, so that's Good,'

Same with calling people 'Unamerican' if they aren't Christian, however you defend the notion: the real fact is that Christians aren't being denied public office by atheists for being Christian, but someone \*not\* being Christian or a religion Christians find acceptable is an \*immediate\* disqualifier, often, even, for speaking up.

Fundamentalists have been putting foxes in the henhouse at least since James Watt, which at least was exposed as scandalous, when a Secretary of the Interior was selling off public lands he was supposed to protect cause he thought the Apocalypse was coming anyway, (so, therefore, I guess one may as well cash out.)

The negative sides of religion... like people who put smug bumperstickers on their SUVs claiming the vehicle may suddenly go unpiloted and kill people when they're Raptured...

Well, they want us to 'literally believe' the Bible when it comes to climate science or providing for a future, but I have to wonder exactly what kind of belief allows one to think that's going to happen any minute, ...and instead of taking the train, threaten and gloat about the havoc they believe they will cause.

I mean, ...Is that what we're supposed to 'believe' or at least politically \*obey?\*

We see Christians in Texas breaking up queer families on the basis that it'll lead to unrelated things like bestiality, while in the same anti-gay bill \*legalizing\* bestiality for themselves, (as long as you 'own' the animal.)

All very pious, I'm sure, but, really.

Surely not above criticism, and clearly, in fact, irrational. The frustration of many angr atheists has a great deal to do with Fundamentalist voices really \*insisting\* on imposing their irrationality on others, and claiming, in fact, that blatant unreason is manifest, universal truth.

Now, I don't much care for Hitchens' blanket condemnations, but there's a few points to look at there. Not just defend.

Thank you for responding directly to the questions posed by Christopher Hitchens - that's more than your fellow panelists dared.

studying instances of religion's being "friendly to free inq

- 'But consider what your statement concedes: Such moral statements and actions as HAVE come from religious persons, only "COULD" have come from unbelievers.'

No, just that he needs to show that "such moral statements and actions" HAVE come from unbelievers.

- "Religion is natural, human beings are naturally wicked (as well as naturally good), so we should expect wickedness (as well as goodness) to come out of religion."

If religion does harm as well as good, on balance does it contribute more harm and less good than the absence of religion. (What are the consequences of promulgating ignorance?)

- "Indeed, the first five presidents of the University of Chicago were professional scholars of the Bible."

Until 1923 it was a requirement that the university president was a Baptist.

<http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/centcat/pres/home.html>

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POSTED BY: BEMUSED | SEPTEMBER 28, 2007 2:29 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev Willis -

Mr Hitchens lives in DC. I don't know that he owns an apartment in NYC.

As far as religion "straightening out" the world, I'm reminded of a comment made to me by a dear (and now departed) friend. When asked once if he was straight, he responded, "yes, as in straight to the nearest man."

Your comment about religion straightening out the world is a bit like unto that, and I thank you for making a statement that caused the memory of a friend to pop into my head.

Chalk up one point for the religious commentator. :)

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POSTED BY: MR MARK | SEPTEMBER 28, 2007 12:32 PM  
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)