

**Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer**

**July 22, 2007**

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## **Is God Really Great?**

**Psalm 8; Psalm 14: 1a**

There have been a flurry of books published recently penned by angry, aggressive atheists. A few years ago Sam Harris published a book entitled, "*The End of Faith*"; not long thereafter Richard Dawkins published "*The God Delusion*." Now *Vanity Fair* columnist Christopher Hitchens has written a work that has climbed the best-seller charts.

Its title is: "*God Is Not Great. How Religion Poisons Everything*."

These books throw the usual mud against believers in God and against religion.

Belief in God has been responsible for much of the world's violence and spawned many of the world's wars.

Belief in God generally inculcates a spirit of intolerance.

Belief in God is a psychological crutch, a fanciful hope that attracts only intellectual weaklings.

Belief in God is an exercise in wish-fulfillment, drawing people's attention away from the proper appreciation of this life and sapping our capacity for protest against injustice.

Belief in God renders people sheep-like, undermining their creativity and assertiveness.

So go the arguments.

One must admit that there is a modicum of truth in these accusations.

Certainly, religion has often played a divisive role in human history.

Religion has inspired no small number of wars, though it is also true

that religion has often been touted as the primary reason for a conflict, when it is often a smokescreen used to mask the true issues that have drawn people into battle.

Yet one does not have to look hard to find prominent examples of sick religion,

and frequently sick religion creates not only twisted individuals but entirely twisted societies.

As people of faith we must ruefully acknowledge that as those planes were crashing into the twin towers on 9/11, killing innocent men, women and children, the perpetrators of that act were screaming as they died,

"Allah akbar!" "God is great!" Religion had obviously warped those people's minds, their values, their souls. In light of such an incident, we are forced to ask anew: "Is God Really Great?"

If you want the essence of my position in a nutshell, here it is:

"Throughout history, theism has proved far from perfect as a principle upon which to organize a society.

Theism's only virtue is that it has proved far superior to all alternatives by which people have tried to organize human communities and promote the health and grandeur of human beings."

Without question, faith in God has often exerted a dangerous, even murderous, influence in many human societies.

Yet societies that try dismissing the reality of God end up devaluing human life shortly thereafter.

Not long ago I read a book written by Richard Taylor entitled, "*Restoring Pride, the Lost Virtue*."

I thought it might provide an interesting slant on my series of sermons on virtue.

It did, but not in the way I had anticipated. Taylor, who fashions himself as a classical scholar, argues that classical Greek culture disdained the sentimental view of human beings that asserts everyone is equal.

He said the ancient Greeks saw that people of talent, achievement, stature, power, wealth and beauty were, in reality, superior to those around them. They could take justifiable pride in their special-ness.

Only this crazy movement known as Christianity promulgated this bizarre notion that everyone is equal, that everyone had value. The ancient Greeks didn't value the poor or the aged or the enslaved or the deformed or the powerless, because they didn't warrant the same regard as did the superior people.

Taylor argued, if we could only recreate a culture where the superior people were allowed to flourish without worrying about the plight of the aged, the poor, the powerless, and the defective,

then the world would progress to new heights.

Taylor, of course, fashions himself as quite modern, but his perspective is but a pale echo of a philosophy articulated far more forcefully by Frederick Nietzsche.

Nietzsche argued that the Christian God was dead and Christian morality with it.

To base a society on agape love was foolhardy and sentimental.

Nietzsche envisioned a time when a race of super-people would rise on the basis of clear talent and rule the world, subjugating those who were weak, impoverished, powerless and blemished.

Nietzsche's principles came to be applied with pitiless zeal, and millions of Jews, Hungarians, Poles, gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally- and physically-handicapped were eradicated because they failed to measure up to an artificial and arbitrary definition of superior humanity.

An atheistic society in pursuit of human perfection bred a ruthless pride that proved morally bankrupt. Indeed, if the twentieth century taught us nothing else, it taught us that when humanity banishes belief in God and tries to fill the role ourselves, we prove to be a particularly cruel divinity.

The Psalmist saw with clarity that the greatness of humanity is inextricably linked to the greatness of God.

A society that begins by acknowledging a divine imprint upon all human beings is a society that has a basis for valuing all of its inhabitants.

*The guarantor our humanity is the imprint of divinity upon us.*

I think of the medieval story of the desperately sick beggar who was hauled before a team of doctors, who said in Latin, which they assumed the beggar would not know:

“Let us experiment on this vile creature.”

To their astonishment, the beggar looked up from the slab and said in perfect Latin,

“Dare you call vile one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”

The beggar, an impoverished student, who would become one of his generation's great poets, knew that the imprint of God's divinity upon him was the guarantor of the worth of his humanity.

Karl Marx was sure that when the workers of the world, the great proletariat, were freed from the influence of religion, that great opiate of the masses, they would rise and create a classless society.

When Marx's vision of society was actually implemented, his view of reality spawned one of the most repressive and stratified political systems the world has ever known.

Having banished God, the Marxist system elevated the state to the status of supreme good, and the state proceeded to give or take away human rights at its pleasure, slaughtering its citizens by the millions in the process.

The great Fyodor Dostoevsky saw in the nineteenth century what was soon to happen in the twentieth, observing, prophetically, “Without God, everything is permitted. Everything!”

We have enjoyed the political fruits of theism's legacy for so long that we have forgotten its spiritual root.

When Jesus said, “When you have done it unto the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me,” he was making a spiritual statement with immense political implications.

John's assertion, “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life,” is a watershed statement in human advancement.

Heaven ceased to be the privileged haven for kings and pharaohs;

eternal life was opened to anyone and everyone willing to claim their destiny as a child of God.

Governments came to understand that they could not deal callously even with the powerless, even with the impoverished, even with the burdensome.

Government had to acknowledge the fact that everyone had value. Everyone was interconnected.

What happens to one person or one community happens to the entire human community.

These twin themes reveal the very fundamental nature of our Western consciousness:

we affirm the intrinsic value of every human being on the one hand,

and we believe in the interconnectedness of the human community on the other.

Both of these bedrock political statements are rooted in our affirmation of God.

But even if we can demonstrate that atheistic governments have not done very well

in protecting and promoting the rights of humanity on a societal level,

can we not still argue that those who are able to do without religious beliefs are healthier of personality

and stronger of psyche for not having to depend upon a belief in the divine?

That may sound reasonable – but it is not true. There is nothing new under the sun.

Between the twentieth century's world wars atheism as a trendy philosophy gained popularity, and the great columnist of a generation ago, Walter Lippman, a shrewd observer of his generation, made this comment about the atheistic intelligentsia he saw around him:

“Their most distinguishing element is not their rebellion against religion but their disillusionment with their rebellion. They are perplexed by the consequences of their own irreligion.

Having lost their faith, they've lost the certainty their lives are significant, that it matters what they do with their lives. Brave and brilliant atheists have defied the God of their youth and become very nervous young men and young women, world-weary at twenty-two, having succeeded at substituting trivial illusions for majestic faith.”

Disbelief did not bring health and balance to that generation, but brought instead a loss of purpose and joy. When one reads a study of the two young men responsible for the carnage at Columbine High School some years ago, one is struck by their militant atheism.

In exchange for the nourishment of faith in God, they fed their minds violent images of mayhem and gore. Having denied the reality of eternal good, they became parables of demonic evil,

becoming so twisted that evil became their good, destroying their lives and the lives of those around them.

Does their atheism sound like a formula for a healthy, balanced personality?

No; the old preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick was right when he noted,

“Once the true God is banished, all the old pagan deities will return.”

Indeed, as people push the reality of the true God away, the old pagan deity of chaos is coming to the fore.

The Psalmist said, “Only the fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Why? Because the Psalmist saw that atheism at its center promotes the notion that life is meaningless, accidental, rooted in nothing.

*Yet our lives feel meaningful.* A drive within our being pushes us to make our existence matter.

Life compels us to search for purpose. Why? Because the divine imprint upon the world calls out to the divine imprint upon our character, summoning us to investigate creation.

The very intelligibility and utility of the world is a divine wonder, a subtle miracle.

The very fact that we are hungry tells us that we are made to eat;

the fact that we are thirsty tells us that we must drink. The fact that we ineluctably search for meaning suggests that we are *made* to search for meaning.

Albert Einstein was often accused of being an atheist, yet he observed,

“The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious.

It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science.

He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.”

Einstein called himself religious because he retained an inexhaustible capacity to wonder at the mystery of the world.

The politician Mario Cuomo eloquently speaks for many of us in explaining the fact of his faith:

“For some of us the awful burden of disbelief became intolerable.

The absurdity of a world without explanation was too much to live with.

Our intellects pushed us to find a rationale, an explanation, an excuse . . .

anything to take the place of despair . . . something larger than ourselves to believe in. . . .

It must be a God like the one that was promised in the ancient books: a God of mercy, a God of peace, a God of hope. In the end to make any sense it must be a God of love!”

What he was saying, the greatness and largeness of life moved him to grope his way toward a great God.

The notion of life's meaninglessness did not seem true. His intellect called out for something more.

Cuomo's heart sought transcendence. He craved transcendence. We all do.

Most of us are smart enough to know that we cannot manufacture this transcendence ourselves.

But our desire for transcendence is not selfish, nor is it sheep-like.

Do you think of Desmond Tutu asking God for the power of transcendence to challenge apartheid

as sheep-like?

Do you think of Martin Luther King Jr. asking God for the power of transcendence to challenge segregation as sheep-like?

Do you think of Mother Teresa asking God for the power of transcendence to challenge the intolerable poverty of Calcutta as sheep-like?

Do you think of Millard Fuller, a young businessman with a full bank account and an empty soul, asking God for the power of transcendence to challenge the problem of homelessness as sheep-like?

Our faith calls us to open our being to receive the power of transcendence

not so we can keep that power for ourselves, but so that we can transform the world around us!

We seek the power of transcendence not just for ourselves but for all people.

There is nothing sheep-like about the power and majesty of our belief.

The power of great lives of faith are testimony to the fact our God is great.

Here, indeed, is where I ultimately come to rest on this issue.

The debate between theism and atheism will not be won by the intellects.

Ours is not an intellectual age.

The reality of our God will be validated by the power of our love, by our capacity to create a society that addresses the woundedness and the estrangement and the loneliness of our world.

If our faith can create a society that brings people together and ministers to them in their suffering,

If our faith can create a society that reaches out to people in their neediness

If our faith can create a society that empowers people with the strength to cope with their challenges, then God's reality will be so palpable that intellectual arguments against God's existence will prove ineffectual.

When the depth of our love makes God's reality manifest in our lives and in the lives of others, then the question of God's existence ceases to be a pertinent philosophical question.

A Martin Luther, an Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Thomas Merton testified with their lives to this great truth: they had experienced the life-changing presence of God,

and the only way they knew how to respond was to live in such a way as to change the lives of others by testifying to God's transcendent power.

In the end, the greatness of our God will be validated by the greatness of our witness.

The reality of our God must be substantiated by the efficacy of our love.

That, my friends, is the great challenge of our faith.

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Sixth in the Series