

>> On Uncommon Knowledge today, Christopher Hitchens, the author of the best selling book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, which, indeed, is such a big best seller that you can do what I did, and walk into your local bookstore and get it off the best seller rack for 30% off. If Christopher Hitchens does not believe in God, reviewers have asked, then where does he get his sense of right and wrong? You have replied, in print, that this question is in itself insulting and you have rejected, "the appalling insinuations that I would not know right from wrong if I was not supernaturally guided." Why do you find it insulting?

>> Because I think it's degrading to the human, to us, to you and me, to imply, or not to imply, to state directly that absent a celestial dictatorship that have some supernatural influence over us, yet to be established, by the way, as anything really existent, but without the assumption of it, we wouldn't know right from wrong. We wouldn't return stolen property if we found it in the back of a cab. We wouldn't give blood if someone badly needed a transfusion unless we were afraid, either of punishment or desirous of reward, that we might help ourselves to underage children as some religious people have actually been known to do because, after all, what's stopping us? Now, you could tell me if you wanted, that you would do all those things if you weren't God fearing but I would choose not to believe you. I have more respect for you, if not for your opinions, than that.

>> All right, Jonathan Swift, not just reviewers of your book but Jonathan Swift is at least aware of this argument. He has an essay in which he has a country yokel listening to the arguments of an atheist, and then declaring, "why, sir, if it be as you say, I can drink and whore and defy the parson."

>> So far, so good.

>> But, if there is no God, if there's no objective ground of right and wrong, from what do you derive your morals? What do you derive them from?

>> The stupidest person in, Smerdyakov, I think it is, in *The Brothers Karamazov* says that, he turns out himself to be a very moral person, he says, but without God, wouldn't everything be permitted? That's the sense of what he says.

>> Right.

>> By the way, I think some people who say this may fear it to be true of themselves. I mean, some people who are psycho- or sociopathic may conceivably have this view that only superstition restrains them from cruelty, theft, rapine, violence, other selfishness, and so forth.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But I don't believe it's true, first.

>> Right.

>> I think our knowledge of right and wrong is innate in us. Religion gets its morality from humans. We know that we can't get along if we permit perjury, theft, murder, rape. All societies at all times, well before the advent of monarchies (inaudible), have forbidden it.

>> If morality, a sense of morality's another adaptive or evolved faculty, the problem is that there are all kinds of things that we're stuck with as a result of evolution if one posits evolution. So if your biological urges, you feel the impulse to steal and you, yet, at the same time, you have some kind of innate morality that tells you not to steal, the question is, with a religious point of view, it gives you some way, you say there's an objective standard according to which we can, we recognize that certain of these impulses are acceptable and certain other impulses are to be disciplined and restrained and so forth. I don't understand how, if you take it all as a kind of evolutionary--- result of evolution, let's put it that way, how it is that you can say morality is over and above other urges. How do you do that?

>> Well, two observations. One, I mention in my book a Muslim taxi driver---

>> Right.

>> in Washington, DC. who returned quite a lot of money that my wife had left on the back of his cab. Must have taken his quite a while to work out whose it was.

>> Whose it was, right.

>> Where she lived, where he dropped her off, to come back into town, he lived in the burbs.

>> Right.

>> Losing quite a lot of labor and time and effort just in doing that, to return what I can tell you would be more than he could probably hope to make in a week and he wouldn't take, he wouldn't even take the 10% I wanted to give him until I really, obviously, crammed it into his top pocket. He really wouldn't, thought it was insulting, almost, because he said it was his Islamic duty. Now, as it happens, I think, and I suspect you think, too, that most of the preachments of the Koran are either fatuous or wicked. They enjoin evil on many people and they claim to believe in things that shouldn't be believed in on sheer grounds of absurdity such as the Archangel Gabriel appearing to an illiterate Arab merchant or a night journey to Jerusalem on a winged horse or any of this nonsense.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But for him, without it, he couldn't imagine being moral. Well, I'm sorry. I think that's insulting, too. Now take somebody who isn't necessarily evolutionary or determined by the crude terms you suggest, if I'm making a speech –

>> Right.

>> And I make a cheap point to get a laugh, which I'm not above doing. I can do that, or I skip a stage in an argument, you know, to make an inexpensive point, especially if it works, I get, I feel a pang.

>> Oh, do you?

>> Especially if it works. Why is this? Not to be grand about it but Socrates, it's what Socrates called his daemon, it was an inner voice that stopped him when he was trying to take advantage of someone in an argument, wrongly. Adam Smith calls it unspoken partner in conversation who we hope to, whose approval we hope to get. Lewis calls it conscience and says it's proof of the existence of God. That's stretching it enormously further than it will go. Why don't we just assume that we do have some internal compass?

>> Mm.

>> And that if we didn't, we couldn't be the partially rational mammals that we are.

>> Rational, all right, this brings us (inaudible), by the way, all that seems, I'm delighted to see that we're making progress here, Christopher. I'm bringing you along. The, so, your argument is then, that when the taxi driver returned your wife's money, that was the human shining through in spite of the religious overlay?

>> I would say, yeah.

>> All right.

>> I believe, if we define conscience as you were about to, or morality as you were about to, my definition would be what do you do, how do you do something when no one's looking?

>> Okay. Now –

>> Now, in this case, he could've easily got away with it.

>> Right. Of course.

>> But he didn't, he couldn't live with himself if he did. Well, who doesn't have that feeling? And why do we degrade this feeling by saying it's a heavenly gift accompanied by a threat of heavenly punishment?

>> You raise the question of rationality. Lewis makes the point "granted that reason is prior to matter," as it is in most religions, in religious, certainly in the Judea-Christian conception, "granted that reason is prior to matter, I can understand how men should come, by observation and inference, to know a lot about the universe they live in. If, on the other hand, minds are wholly dependent on brains and brains on biochemistry and biochemistry on the meaningless flux of atoms", that is to say, if there's nothing but material, this is the materialistic world view, "I cannot understand how the thought of those minds should have any more significance than the sound of the wind in the trees." Set aside questions of right and wrong and pangs of conscience to the question of reason itself. If you have a thorough going materialist view of the world, doesn't that tend to represent an attack on reason itself, or at least lower it? Why should the work of Christopher Hitchens have any more claim on my attention than the random poundings at a keyboard of a chimp?

>> Well, you –

>> Isn't that a serious philosophical problem?

>> No, it isn't. As usually, Lewis is chewing much more than he bites off. As it happens, I have had my DNA sequenced recently. You can get yours done, too. You should, by the way.

>> You had it done?

>> Yeah. You can find what we always suspected, you know, I'm half a chromosome away from a chimpanzee, related also to plant and vegetable and other matters, with other animals and I don't think evolution even knows that I'm here. And I don't think that the big bang originated with me in mind. I am sorry to say that I'm not as solipsistic and self-centered and arrogant as the religious would have me be. I don't think that these processes had me in mind or are aware of my presence. Doesn't make me feel that I can go and do anything I want. Why doesn't it? I don't know why it doesn't. But I do know, by counter example, that if I put this problem to you.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Name me an ethical action taken or a moral statement made by a believer that could not have been made or performed by a non-believer. I very much doubt you'll be able to do it. At least, no one else has been able to yet. Give you time for it.

>> No, no.

>> If I ask any audience, can they think of a wicked action undertaken or a wicked statement made because of religion, nobody has a single second of hesitation before they can think of one.

>> Mm.

>> So you have advanced the argument not at all. But you've again degraded it to the view that we ought to believe foolish things such as that we need divine permission to behave well. Because, if we didn't believe this, we might behave badly. Well, the facts are what they are and the fact is that no, actually, material does come first.

>> But I've already handed you –

>> Material, the mind is a brain before it's anything else. Of course. Anyone who says to the contrary is talking abject nonsense.

>> No, but I think you're opening yourself to, all right, if you won't take it from Lewis, take it from Darwin. I'm quoting Charles Darwin now, precisely the same point, by the way, "with me, the horror doubt always arises", Darwin writes in a letter, "whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind?" That's precisely the same point, if there's nothing but the material world, excuse me, I grant that we feel pangs of conscience. I grant that we all lead our lives as though reason, we take reason completely for granted –

>> Yes.

>> The way that we take the air we breathe.

>> Yeah.

>> It's there. We recognize it.

>> With nothing but the material world to go on.

>> Ah, but is that a clue?

>> You don't know of any other world. You only postulate it because you think it might so.

>> Isn't that a clue, though, that there's something outside us? Isn't rationality itself something outside us? Doesn't conscience, isn't it a clue that there's something outside us?

>> No. It's not. It's to be reconciled as, you might call it surplus value, I suppose, if you say there were certain people who love others more than they need to just for human solidarity. I mean, there are altruistic people with something quite –

>> Even as the large cranium that enables us to escape the tiger, also enables Beethoven to compose piano sonatas.

>> Yes.

>> That's surplus value.

>> Yes, it is surplus value. And there are many, there are people who've always been celebrated, those who will live largely for the wider human family or, if you like, the wider, maybe it's more of a wider tribe, some who don't. And those who do have always been honored and respected, quite rightly. And there's no need to postulate anything supernatural about that.

>> Mm.

>> And since there's no evidence for anything supernatural, let alone any supernatural intervention even occurred, I mean, none whatsoever of any kind, why make mysteries where none exist? We have, we do have the spare capacity in our cranial wiring to care for other people in the hope that they will reciprocate, or maybe even without that hope. And when I give blood, which I don't do often enough, I get a positive pleasure out of doing it. I like doing it. I don't lose a pint.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Somebody else gains one.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> That thought is very agreeable to me. I like it. I actually enjoy doing it. I could add that I have a very rare blood group, myself, and I may one day need a transfusion in my turn and I hope other people have been doing it for me, but actually, no, it's not just for that reason. Not just reciprocal. It's, now, I, the idea that I need a supernatural prompting to think this way is so –

>> No, you clearly don't.

>> I'm sorry, I think is a barbaric idea.

>> Question here, the purely utilitarian argument: by calling insulting reviewers who ask where you get your morals, you also deplore the "the self-satisfaction that simply assumes whether or not religion is metaphysically true that at least it stands for morality", but I'm not sure that argument is all that contemptible as witness two pieces of evidence. George Washington "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to the prosperity of a nation, religion is the indispensable support." It tends to lend itself toward a healthy polity. And the second is a kind of counter-example, which is the history of the twentieth century, during which you have the Communist regimes, that is to say, the regimes that were officially and aggressively atheist, caused the deaths of, you named the number,

Bob Conquest, I think, is about sixty million, isn't it? Sixty million of their own people, which dwarfs any number that the Crusaders may have slain in the twelfth century.

>> Well, I have a whole chapter about this in my book.

>> All right.

>> And, but, of course, I do think it's a very serious question. I put it like this. First, the regimes of Fascism and National Socialism, the so called Axis powers, who would be up in the same class of figures of mass murder, were, in the case of the Mussolini/Franco forces, effectively nothing more than the right wing of the Roman Catholic Church. That's it, with that you'll have to admit, the church as itself had to admit that whether it's Croatia, the Ustata [assumed spelling], Hungary, the Arab cross.

>> Mm, Croatia I'm not [inaudible].

>> Well, it's effectively-- it's movement -- the Fascists moved to the Catholic right of the right. National Socialism is pagan and in some ways anti-clerical, pagan and in some ways anti-clerical but it never breaks its concordant with the church.

>> Right.

>> The church reciprocates by having prayers, by the order of the Vatican, for Hitler's birthday every year till the very end, and then, by rescuing, even after the National Socialist regime, the Nazi regime was at an end, to helping its wanted people to escape to other clerical fascist dictatorships in South America. This has all been attested many, many times and apologized for by the church, though I think not enough. To say nothing of the preachments down the years of anti-Semitism. And the third leader of the Axis is actually, the Japanese Emperor, is actually a god, a god to whom everyone knows it. No one in Japan thought there could possibly have morality if you didn't agree that Hirohito was god. Well, where would morality come from if we didn't have the Emperor? We wouldn't know what to do. People would be screwing in the streets. That's where it gets you.

>> Well –

>> Now, Stalinism, cause I'm not ducking your question.

>> Yeah, yeah. All right.

>> Okay, until 1917, millions of Russians had been taught for millions of years, sorry, millions of Russians were taught for hundreds of years that the Tsar is the head of the church.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Which he was, the Russian Orthodox Church, the leader of the country should be something a little more than humans, not a god but he's a little more than, he's not quite divine but he's –

>> He's a Tsar.

>> A Holy Father. If you're Joseph Stalin, you shouldn't be in the dictatorship business if you don't know how to exploit an inheritance like that: millions of credulous, servile people. And what does he do? Lysenko's biology, miracles.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> We can have three harvests a year if we believe in Lysenko's biology. Inquisition, heresy hunt, orthodoxy, everything comes from the top and must be thanked for and groveled for, a complete replication of the preceding bureaucracy. For your arguments to have any force, I mean, any force at all.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> You'd have to point to a society that adopted the teachings of Lucretius, Spinoza, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Albert Einstein, and then fell into famine, dictatorship, torture, and genocide. And you won't, I think, be able to point to such.

>> You're surely not –

>> That's what you'd need for a level playing field.

>> That's embarrassing. That's slippery work. You should feel a pang now, I think. You're not going to say that what Stalin did to the peasants in the Ukraine was the fault of the Russian Orthodox Church?

>> Well, the Russian Orthodox Church always was on his side, I might add.

>> It may have, it may have –

>> The Ukrainian Orthodox wouldn't have been at that point, but the Russian Orthodox Church, as you know, split because the hierarchy stayed with his regime as it does with all such regimes. You have to render unto Caesar.

>> You truly wish to blame the crimes of Joseph Stalin on Christianity?

>> No way, that would be slippery. No, I was very careful to say, Stalin's gifted legacy of backwardness, servility, and incredulity inculcated by Christianity and he replicates the conditions of political theocracy and he keeps the church in his corner all throughout the war and throughout the collectivization. Look it up. The church had to split on the question. Those who didn't like it had to leave for America. And the religious mentality

is very clearly shown in the totalitarian mass movements of leader worship and the Fuhrer princip [assumed spelling] and their heresy hunts and proclamations of miracles. Yes, it's an allotropic form of the same thing. See, if you want a society that is secular to be judged, you have to have one that is derived from the work of Lucretius, Galileo, Spinoza, Einstein, and the rest.

>> Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792 to 1822, sent down from Oxford for publishing a pamphlet entitled The Necessity of Atheism.

>> Yes.

>> Anti-monarchist, this is clear in a writing called Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things which was lost until 2006, anti-monarchical tract. A proponent of what we would now call sexual liberation, your kind of guy. All right, listen to this. This is from a poem published after Shelley's death, dated about six months before his drowning, so it's dated June, 1822, "this lo sphere and all that it contains, contains not thee, thou whom seen nowhere, I feel everywhere, in music and the sweet unconscious tone of animals and voices which are human meant to express some feelings of their own, in the soft motions and rare smile of woman, in flowers and leaves, and in the grass fresh shown, or dying in the autumn, I the most adore thee present, or lament thee lost." Shelley, of all people, experiences deep intimations of the divine. What does Christopher Hitchens do with that fact?

>> The common mistake, perhaps the commonest made by, if you like, your side, not mine, is that once we've said we were materialists, we declared ourselves to be arid, pitiless, no sense of the numinous or the transcendent. This is something I think we could do another show on, on whether or not the natural world is wonderful enough, on the beauties of science and on the landscapes and so on.

>> But are you saying that Shelley's simply mistaken here? That he's responding to something that doesn't exist? That is your point, isn't it?

>> Oh, yeah, of course, yes. But I mean, people do this all the time.

>> All right.

>> Look, the belief that there is a transcendent, that it's divine, that it can be identified, worshiped in some ways are very, very common delusion not only among poets.

>> All right. So Shelley doesn't shake you?

>> No. It'll take a lot more than Shelley to shake me.

>> Oh, would it?

>> Oh, yes.

>> Oh, I thought Shelley was precisely the kind of man to shake you.

>> No, Shelley, no, Shelley's politics and his romanticism don't, in fact, politically appeal to me very much at all.

>> Oh, they don't?

>> No, his –

>> Oh, I thought I had you. I thought Shelley was just the man.

>> No, I think his writings on atheism are excellent and much better than that, I thought, rather indifferent poem.

>> Hmm. I didn't do justice to the poem, by the way. You have to read the whole thing.

>> Right. But I don't, it doesn't seem to me in the same rank as his other poetry, for effect.

>> Hmm. All right. And Shelley –

>> And notice, by the way.

>> Yes?

>> How many poets write, as when poet laureates in England get the job from the Queen, as soon as they become the monarch's poet, they cease to write well. They just don't do it. Religion often has the effect of making very intelligent, very sensitive people talk the most terrible piffle.

>> Oh, Hopkins [inaudible].

>> Oh, particularly Hopkins.

>> Oh, Hopkins, oh, no.

>> Not George Herbert and not John Donne, I must admit.

>> But you don't like Hopkins.

>> I don't like Hopkins at all, no. But I also think that Auden's worst poetry is, comes after his re-conversion to Anglicanism, as it happens. Auden's best poetry is all from his secular period.

>> God Is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens for whom I shall be lighting a candle tomorrow. I'm Peter Robinson, this is Uncommon Knowledge, thank you for joining us.