

## Ben Burgis on “Christopher Hitchens: What He Got Right, How He Went Wrong, and Why He Still Matters”

AFS will welcome a popular returning speaker—scholar, writer, and activist **Ben Burgis**—for our Zoom meeting for 11th September. We’ve had Ben Burgis as our speaker before and he’s always a delight. Some may not agree with him on every-



**Ben Burgis**

thing, but everyone agrees that he’s witty, lively, engaging, and informative.

Burgis said of his talk (and book), “Chris-

topher Hitchens died a little over ten years ago. He got a lot right, on subjects ranging from atheism to **Henry Kissinger**, but he also made disastrously bad calls like supporting the war in Iraq. As I did in the book, this talk looks back at the complicated legacy of the ‘Hitch.’” The book—*Christopher Hitchens: What He Got Right, How He Went Wrong, and Why He Still Matters*—was published in 2021 by zerO books, Alresford, Hampshire, United Kingdom.

Ben Burgis is a columnist for *Jacobin* magazine, an adjunct philosophy professor at Morehouse College, and the host of the podcast and YouTube show GTAA (Give Them An Argument). His work has appeared in *The Nation* and *Current Affairs*, and he’s a regular opinion writer for *The Daily Beast*. His books include not only the Hitchens book but also *Give Them an Argument: Logic for the Left* (2018) and *Canceling Comedians While the World Burns: A Critique of the Contemporary Left* (2019).

The Burgis program, free and open to the public, will be preceded by a few minutes of socializing starting about 12:30 P.M. EDT in the US, for any interested. The program will start at about 1 P.M. (EDT) on Sunday, 11 September, via Zoom. We welcome those who are not freethinkers but

### Calendar

Oct 9	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Nov 13	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Dec 11	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

All events are via Zoom unless noted and are subject to change.

who just want to know more about Christopher Hitchens, history, and human thought in general. All freethinkers are of course welcome—and we hope that they will decide to join as members in due course.

Details (the same as last month) on the Zoom meeting link can be found below.

### AFS September Meeting Sept 11, 2022 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

To join Zoom meeting go to this link:  
[us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911)



“Men talk of heaven,  
-there is no heaven but here;  
Men talk of hell,  
- there is no hell but here;  
Men of hereafters talk, and future lives, -  
O love, there is no other life - but here.”

Omar Khayyam

**For the latest in upcoming AFS events, join our Meetup group!**  
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## Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at AF Hall, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Atlanta, GA, 30339 unless presented online due to global pandemic (see link on page 1). Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:30 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.



The views and opinions expressed by speakers at AFS do not necessarily reflect those of AFS members or its policy.

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|---------|---|
| 11 Sept | Ben Burgis, "Christopher Hitchens: What He Got Right, How He Went Wrong, and Why He Still Matters"  |
| 9 Oct   | Massimo Pigliucci, "The Quest for Character: How to Make Sure That Our Politicians are Not Crooked" |
| 13 Nov  | Valerie Tarico  |
| 11 Dec  | Annie Laurie Gaylor   |
| 8 Jan   | Chuck Miller, "Religion and White Supremacy"  |

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We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

We define freethought as "the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other's company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences. Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

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### Atlanta Freethought News

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# Same Song, Same Verse? Whence Morality?

By Ed Buckner

Free Inquiry • Volume 42, No 5, August/September 2022

It's an old, old story, addressed quite adequately many times over by thoughtful atheists, freethinkers, and secular humanists: theists claim that a society needs religion to be moral or even to have reliable moral standards. There really should be no need to revisit this at all, given the consistent history of atheistic rebuttal. For example, in 1913, **Mangasar M. Mangasarian**, not the first to argue effectively against such nonsense, noted:

"No God, no morals," says the theologian. ... If he can get everybody to think that they cannot have morality without his creed, the future of his creed would be secure. ... He is playing politics, just as much as the Czar of Russia or the Tammany "boss" in New York, and, like his fellow-politicians, he would see the country ruined if that would advance his party or church.<sup>1</sup>

Mangasarian's refutation should have been enough to end the argument. These are, in logical or philosophical terms, settled questions—matters about which little more need be said. (Not only was Mangasarian not close to being the first irreligious thinker to argue thus and has certainly not been the last, others have also dealt with this issue. For example, experimental psychologists such as **Doug Mann** have given comprehensive evolutionary explanations of human morality that demonstrate why religious explanations are superfluous at best.<sup>2</sup>)

But in the popular culture in the United States, the debate keeps popping up. "Settledness" is breezily ignored, so perhaps it's worth getting on the merry-go-round again:

**Christian:** *Atheists are not moral, or if they are, it's just because they were raised in a Christian culture.*

**Atheist:** *Christians have no better track record of being decent and moral than atheists, historically or now.*

**Christian:** *What about Hitler and Stalin?*

**Atheist:** *Stalin at least was an atheist—but not a secular humanist. And what about Hitler's declaration that he was doing the Lord's work or the fact that Stalin was educated by Catholics?*

**Christian:** *But they weren't real Christians.*

**Atheist:** *How do you know?*

**Christian:** *Because they were evil, murdering bastards, and no real Christian would be that immoral.*

**Atheist:** *Ever hear of the Scotsman who put sugar on his porridge?*

There really are Christians who insist that Christians are moral and followers of Jesus if and only if they are what some call Sermon-on-the-Mount Christians: compassionate, interested in helping the poor and downtrodden, kind, humble, willing to follow the path of the non-Christian Good Samaritan, etc. And they then claim that Christians responsible for the Holocaust (or the Inquisition or the fact that the Church profited directly from "owning" human beings) were "obviously" violating biblical ethics. The circularity of these claims and the plain language of the Bible contradicting them can be pointed out, but it's often hard to make that case, despite the obvious logic.

All the many people I trust, love, and respect—mostly Christians, secular humanists, and atheists but also a few Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists—are people I consider moral. They care about other people, and they pay attention to the effects that their actions have on others. Morality matters to them, even as most take for granted the source of the standards they strive to follow. And this extends, for example, to some Christian writers I respect, such as **Randal Rauser** and **Jennifer Glancy**. Rauser persuasively

rebutts, in 2015's *Is the Atheist My Neighbor?*,<sup>3</sup> the simplistic quoting of Scripture about atheists being immoral fools. For example, Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good." (More on Glancy in the discussion of slavery below.)

A somewhat more serious approach to the argument about the necessity of divinity for ethical behavior goes something like this:

**Christian:** *Atheists can be decent and moral, but the source of morality and moral standards is—must be—divine. Only if moral teachings are absolute, unchanging, and come from an external, eternal, clearly authoritative source—God—can they be relied on and understood.*

**Secular humanist:** *That presumes there is a god to set out the moral standard. What if there isn't a god—finding a benefit to having a god does not show that there is one, only that it would be good if there were. If there is in fact no god, what should human beings do? And if there are in fact absolute, God-given moral standards, why hasn't God communicated those clearly to humans?*

**Christian:** *To answer your last point first, He has. He gave us the Ten Commandments, which underlie moral understanding comprehensively if only we are mature enough to understand them. As to your first point, without a god to set out moral standards, all that we have left is arbitrary and capricious morality—ethical relativism. It comes down, in that case, to the equivalent of mere taste: whether one likes vanilla or chocolate better. Without a god and absolute morality, hurting children can be justified as satisfying the needs of the sadistic adult who hurts them—and what are the grounds then for choosing the needs and wants of the children over those of the adult?*

**Secular humanist:** *The Ten Commandments as presented in most versions of Exodus 20:1–17 appear to endorse slavery and treating women and children as less than full human beings, so your own claim appears to reek of what I hope is ethical relativism for you. And the problem Christians never seem to honestly address regarding "the" Big Ten is that there are multiple versions in the "Good" Book, with dramatic differences among them, of the supposedly solid moral guide called the Decalogue. Imperatives such as not seething a kid in its mother's milk are wholly absent in one version but holy and prominent in another, as secular humanists such as Valerie Tarico have noted.<sup>4</sup> The many conflicting versions of biblical*

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**Morality continued from page 3**

commandments leave Christians choosing not between apples and oranges but between apples and rats. It is nonsensical to pretend that we cannot distinguish between matters of taste and moral standards without invoking a God. As Paul Kurtz has noted, "The reflective, deliberative, probing moral conscience is too vital to be deferred to the transcendent."<sup>5</sup>

conclude, pretty uniformly, that slavery is deeply immoral and impossible to justify. (You can hold prisoners of war but should release them when the fighting is over, etc.)

**The Case of Slavery**

An interesting example of moral standards and moral treatment of one's fellow human beings, one that requires all kinds of moral considerations and has theist versus atheist implications, is the question of human slavery. This is, of course, also not at all a new twist in the debate. Human beings have "owned" other human beings from as far back as



into the known distant past, and slavery continues today in various forms. The morality of this is complex and not always quite as simple as one might think. For example, if you or your loved one is captured in battle, would you rather the result was death or slavery? Modern Christians and atheists alike

Edward A. Westermarck long ago (not as far back as Mangasarian, but still before my time—and I'm beyond three score and ten) argued persuasively that Christianity has not dealt with the immorality of slavery well at all. He noted in 1939, for instance, that "slavery was not only recognized by Christian governments, but was supported by the large bulk of the clergy, Catholic and Protestant alike."<sup>6</sup> He took British and American Christian leaders to

task especially for the race-based slavery that he declared the "most brutal form of slavery ever known."

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## Morality continued from page 4

Some Christians engage in circular argument or careless thinking about this (“*Slavery is unacceptable; Christians who say otherwise are not good Christians; The Bible doesn’t really accept slavery, and what’s more, it was Christians who led the abolitionist movements, so ...*”).

Other Christians strain at gnats in their attempts to declare the Bible as objecting to slavery. For example, occasionally 1 Timothy 1:10 is declared to be an example of early Christians’ moral objection to slavery, as Paul writes (according to some translations), “for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine”—implying that early Christians decried “slave traders.” But other versions of the same verse translate Paul’s words not as “slave traders” but as “kidnappers” or “men-stealers.”<sup>7</sup> It seems quite clear that the early Christians surely did not want to become slaves—but not that they considered slavery itself immoral, as long as the slaves come from nearby nations (as declared in the Old Testament, Leviticus 25:44: “Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves”).

But not all Christian thinkers are hypocritical or inconsistent. Jennifer Glancy, a religion professor at Le Moyne College in New York, has written about slavery as a moral problem<sup>8</sup> with considerable sensitivity and thoughtfulness while still maintaining and professing her faith. She recounted unflinchingly and in great detail the treatment of slavery in the Bible (Old and New Testaments), including the actual and potential sexual abuse and torture of slaves, and recognized that the moral outrage of modern Christians about slavery is not reflected in the books that many of them consider sacred and inerrant. One of her most telling passages:

I often teach about early Christian slavery in my classroom and in parish settings. Inevitably, it seems, someone insists that Christian slaveholders knew deep down that owning another person is wrong. I don’t think this is the case. Our moral instincts are profoundly shaped by our culture.<sup>9</sup>

Secular humanists of course routinely argue that biology and culture create and change moral standards for human beings, and it is refreshing to find honest contemplation of this from a theist.

Many theorists, including biologist Charles Darwin, philosopher Paul Kurtz, experimental psychologist Doug Mann, and anthropologist Marvin Harris, have considered the origins and development of human morality. The nonreligious conclusions these and other such thinkers have reached are generally accepted across disciplines, with few beyond committed conservative theists arguing that any god is necessary or even desirable to explain moral standards.

It must also be said that it is possible that not all atheists grapple fully with the implications of cultural relativity. If, as we think, there is no external or divine source for our moral instincts, it still remains true that arbitrariness (or “might equals right” instead, say) is possible. If we all now conclude, in a broad, deep consensus, that slavery, especially race-based slavery, is morally repugnant, how can we be sure that no other consensus will one day develop? If the idea does develop, a thousand years or a thousand generations from now, that lighter-skinned people lack something crucial to being fully human and are therefore justifiably enslaved (so long as they are treated humanely), will that be wrong? Our current understanding is certainly that skin color varies tremendously, that, biologically speaking, “race” is meaningless, and that nothing we now know about different groups of human beings is remotely likely to indicate superiority for any group. But how can we know? We cannot be sure that some better, wiser ethic will not have been discovered—or pretended to have been discovered.

Of course, it is also possible that light-skinned slaves will become accepted if and when God changes her mind and announces this new moral fact in some unambiguous way. Who are we to say?

## Notes

- [1] Gordon Stein, ed., “Part Six: Ethics and Unbelief,” *A Second Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987, p. 402.
- [2] Doug Mann, “The Science of the Evolution of Morality,” *Free Inquiry*, Volume 39, No. 2 (February/March 2019), pp. 16–23.
- [3] Randal Rauser, *Is the Atheist My Neighbor? Rethinking Christian Attitudes toward Atheism*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015.
- [4] Valerie Tarico. “Why Christians Get the 10 Commandments Wrong,” Salon, July 15, 2014. Available online at [https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/why\\_christians\\_get\\_the\\_10\\_commandments\\_wrong\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/why_christians_get_the_10_commandments_wrong_partner/); accessed February 8, 2021.
- [5] Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988, p. 416.
- [6] Gordon Stein, ed., *A Second Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, p. 435.
- [7] George Arthur Buttrick, commentary ed.; Nolan B. Harmon, ed.; et al. *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions, with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. In Twelve Volumes. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952–1957, p. 387.
- [8] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery as Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011.
- [9] Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery as Moral Problem: In the Early Church and Today*, p. 101.

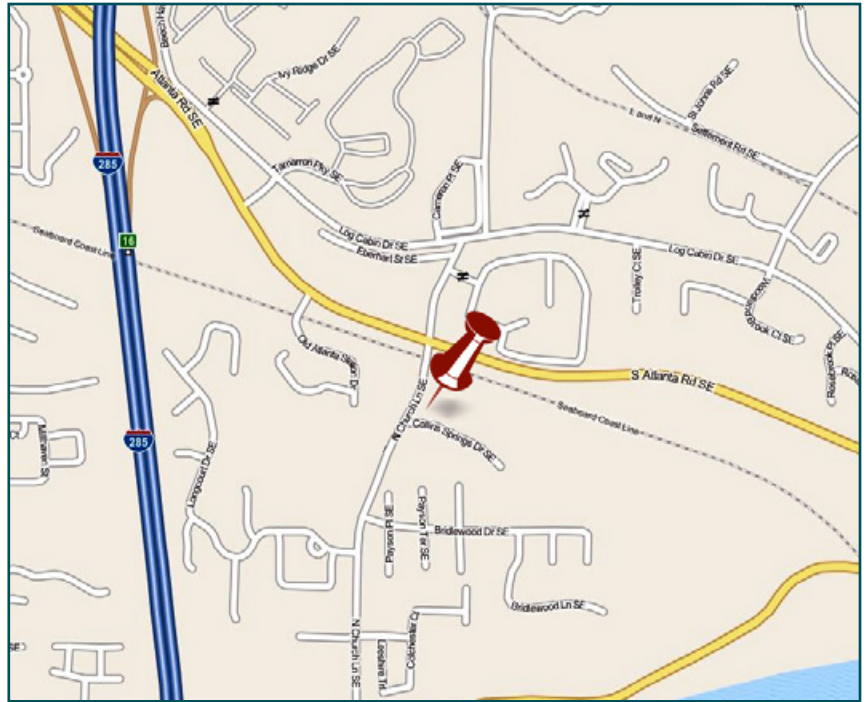


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