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Title: Christopher Hitchens and Hallowed Secularism

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8/20/2007--I read the story Christopher Hitchens wrote recently in *Vanity Fair* about his book tour for *God Is Not Great*. I was impressed by how smart Hitchens is and depressed by how shallow his challenge to religion is. Hitchens' basic argument is that religious people do terrible things—although of course they sometimes do good things too--and that secular people do good things. But, while secularism does not cause anyone to actually do bad things, religion does cause bad behavior. Hitchens has a standing bet challenging anyone to come up with something good that only a religious person would do. The main response to Hitchens is that his challenge cannot be tested in this culture because there is no such thing as a person unaffected by religious categories. The very concept of doing good is, in the West, an invention of Judaism and Christianity. Before they influenced the western world, people of course did things we now think of as good, but the category that one should do good things did not exist. As I think Peter Brown put it, almsgiving, that is, support for the poor, was not something Romans did. So, there is no way to really answer Hitchens' question. The problem for him is that this is a post-Christian culture. That means that our categories of cultural behavior are still premised on a Judeo-Christian outlook. Even people like Hitchens, who fancy themselves atheists, know what the biblical God is like. That influence will take generations to weaken, although in many ways secularism is growing in America and the West. Nevertheless, there is one way to begin to test Hitchens' surmise. We simply look at those parts of our culture furthest away from Christian life and ask whether they seem a good bet to ground a healthy and sustainable culture in the future. Since the market is the part of the culture I would identify as furthest from the Church, and since I think the market's influence on human attitudes is harmful, I am afraid secular culture as currently constituted is not self-sustaining in a healthy way.