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### August 12, 2010: The Death of Christopher Hitchens

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Title: The Death of Christopher Hitchens

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8/12/2010—The news of the terminal illness of the noted atheist Christopher Hitchens has brought out an old Christian-influenced heresy. This misunderstanding can be seen in the following quote from a story in *The Independent*: “To the question that each interviewer was bound to ask an orthodox atheist such as himself – is this the time to reconsider your views on God? – he offers a categorical reply: no.” OK. So, good for Christopher Hitchens not to abjectly surrender his beliefs when confronted with a death that is, after all, inevitable for everyone. I presume that Hitchens like the rest of us has thought about his death before now. The question is, though, why is his impending death thought to be a time to rethink God? Two obvious answers: to save his life from cancer or to go to heaven rather than hell. As to the first, such a thought is beneath contempt. There are millions of faithful Christians and other religious believers dying from cancer right this minute. Nowhere does any creditable religion promise medical miracles. And if God lets some people off the hook and not others, then he is no God worth believing in. That is not the end to death that Christianity is promising. As to the second, why should there be any necessary connection between belief in God and an afterlife? The Hebrew Bible is quite clear that humans just die. Abraham is not promised life after death. He just dies. His justification lies in history—his descendants will be a blessing to the world. Hitchens presumably has that belief now, in a form, in the truth of his writings. Even the New Testament, despite some suggestions to the contrary, does not speak of heaven but of resurrection. The thought of most of the writers is clearly that we die and at some near future time, Christ will return on the last day and that all will be resurrected and some saved and some judged. In other words, Hitchens will still be dead for now. Damon Linker of the *New Republic* was closer to the mark when he wrote of someone perhaps feeling on his deathbed “for the first time in his life the call of God”. In other words, the announcement of my terminal illness marks the proper moment to rethink my life in order to be sure. It is the call to ultimate seriousness. It isn't ultimate vulnerability. Or, even if it is, God is no life preserver. I remain vulnerable. Socrates called philosophy preparation for death. And Heidegger insisted on holding onto the truth of my death. The tragedy of terminal illness for most of us is not that we die but that death reveals how we have wasted our lives. And no conversion can alter that.