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### May 11, 2014: Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion?

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Title: Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion?

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5/11/2014—The kidnapping of hundreds of school girls by the terror group Boko Haram raises two generally related questions that critics of Islam and religion, respectively, have been trying ask for years. First, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues, is this hatred of the education and rights of women actually representative of something deep within Islam—not, in other words, an aberration? Second, as Christopher Hitchens argued in his famous book, does religion indeed “poison everything?” For a long time, in my own mind at least, I have answered these two questions in the negative by marshaling countervailing evidence on behalf of Islam in particular and religion in general. After all, the hookup culture of the West demeans women quite effectively and quite a number of women in America are killed by their partners. And religion is also responsible for much of the good things that happen in the world, despite the crimes committed in its name. But I now think that questions like these are not actually meaningful. They assume that Islam and religion are somehow open to debate—as if they might disappear if these questions are answered in one way or another. That of course is a fantasy. No human culture has ever been without religion. And Islam is the religion of 1.6 billion people, 23% of the world's population. Islam is not going away either. So, I no longer respond to questions like these. The point, instead, is to work for change—change within our own traditions—in my case, secularism, which has baggage of its own (including a willingness to use violence through Western governments). Drones undoubtedly kill more schoolgirls than Boko Haram ever will. To be fair, Ali is approaching Islam in that spirit (whether she is still a Muslim I have no idea). She calls upon Muslims who contest violent and oppressive interpretations of Islam to be as active and forceful as are their opponents—to take back Islam, so to speak. For religion in general I am willing to say this: people kill and oppress each other. They do so in the name of all sorts of things—land, money, ideology, their way of life and, yes, religion. I doubt that the name and content of our commitments cause this violence. The cause lies deeper than that.