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Jonathan Groubert: From Amsterdam, this is the John Adams podcast, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking. I'm Jonathan Groubert and this shows guest is someone who has never, ever avoided controversy.

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Christopher Hitchens: I think it is no longer possible to maintain that the work of the scientific mind and intelligence and the belief in a divine design or divine intervention of any kind is remotely compatible.

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Jonathan Groubert: The late great Christopher Hitchens, there, both barrels blazing, came to Amsterdam in 2008. Touring his book with the uncontroversial title *God is not great*. Hitchens excelled at polemics. He considered himself to be politically liberal and yet expressed his full-throated support for the War Iraq and called Hillary Clinton an “aging and resentful female.” And then there were the blistering attacks on religion and religious belief. In *God is not great*, Hitchens details how religion is worse than any totalitarian regime, why science and religion are fundamentally incompatible and why it's a bad time for secularism in politics. You'll also notice he makes reference to the 2008 election between Barack Obama and John McCain. And yet somehow, despite this talk being 13 years old now, his remarks about religion, and particularly religion in politics, seem as relevant as ever. This is Christopher Hitchens.

00:01:36

Christopher Hitchens: Well, thank you for your very generous introduction. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming. It's not often that I speak in, what seems to be, one of the rooms of the Hogwarts School Dining Hall division, no words for that. For the last two days I have sat in the same chair in the hotel by this beautiful canal under the sponsorship of the divine princess of Friesland, who you just saw bring me my drink, facing one Dutch journalist after another, defending my thesis against theism from morning till night for two days, and I've got as close as I ever have to the point where I could conceivably be tired of the sound of my own voice.

But, I hope you are relieved to hear this point has not yet quite arrived and you, ladies and gentlemen, will be the test of that and I invite your patience and your indulgence. But I know we don't have a huge amount of time together and I'm going to do it under three headings. The first two are things I learned in debates with the faithful. Points I should have made, arguments that I have refined, lessons that I have learned, and then I thought in the last section I would say, because I know there's much interest in it, how this argument comes to bear on the election in which I voted by proxy yesterday in the Great Republic of the United States. O. K.

The most dogged argument with which I have been confronted in this tour, whether I have spoken in synagogues, in Christian or catholic churches or in debates with the Shia or Sunni Muslim, is this and also with other less identified, religiously identified, intellectuals, is this question; Is it not the case that secular tyranny, secular totalitarianism, if you like, is just as bad, if not worse, as a religious dictatorship? In my book I gave a whole chapter to this question, but I feel I should have given two chapters to it. And what I'm going to give you,

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the, the, chapter I haven't yet written. In my opinion, it still remains the case that the origin of tyranny, of the tyranny of man over man and of the tyranny over the mind of man, I'm saying man to mean mankind, is originally theocratic, theistic. The first dictator we ever encounter in our history as a species is the divine one. There's an old joke to cover this. People used to say: Nietzsche said that God was dead and Freud said that God was dad.

That's putting it pretty mildly. If you think of the idea of a final, unalterable authority. Who can tell you that he will never, it's always he somehow, will never change. He cannot be challenged. He was there long before you, he will be there long after you. You owe him a complete obedience and he can detect you in thought crime. He can convict you of things you think while you are asleep, or while you are semiconscious. Then you have the image upon which George Orwell built, the idea of the unknown, untestable big brother, the authority from whom there is no appeal, the tyranny that is so frightening precisely because it's so reassuring.

Tyranny from which, as I say, there's no escape. And for me I don't know about you. But my libertarian instinct tells me that the worst thing about such a tyranny and absolutism, and an unalterable, unchallengeable authority. The worst thing of all would be that it was benign. That it was all for your own good, because then your autonomy, your liberty, your freedom, your irony, your sense of humor, your sense of self is completely gone. Because all this is being done for your own sake and for your own good, and the humiliation is complete.

Not all religions insist upon that. Some of them make you think that this is a god to be feared, to be terrified of a cruel, malicious, a capricious god. And remember, the essence of totalitarianism is not that it is systematic, but that it is unsystematic, that it's unpredictable, that you will never be completely sure that you have obeyed all the rules or not. They used to say in Moscow in 1936; the bad day was when Stalin was in a good mood. Anyone who laughs is understood. I'm trying to make you cry, you can laugh if you like. This is a vision of perfect tyranny and I think it should be considered extremely frightening, because it goes on forever and it promises both everything and nothing. And the essence of the totalitarian, it seems to me, is exactly that.

All totalitarian parties and movements promise an absolute solution, a complete solution. Everything will be fine. You will have absolute domination of the world. If you are of the right race or the right party, the right nation, there will be a regime of perfection, always to distrust. Anyone with an ironic mind has to know how to distrust people who promised too much. It's also often, by the way, I hate to say it in what used to be consecrated ground, is also often the sign of the fraud or the conman promising just a little bit more than they can probably deliver.

What does religion promise? It promises eternal life, eternal life. It promises the forgiveness and remission of sin. It promises an eternity of bliss coupled with, it's only a small catch, an eternity of worship, an eternity of praise, an eternity of abjection, of saying "thank you" to someone who apparently can perform miracles without effort, who can contemplate such a future without horror? Who wishes that this would be true? Who but a serf wants it to be the case that there is such an authority? And, by the way, if you should have the

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independence of mind to refuse this wonderful offer; believe absolutely in me, worship me forever, full down and praise me indefinitely, and you will have eternal life.

Suppose you say I don't actually like the sound of it, they say: well, we have an alternative for you: an infinity of torture. Does no one see the hook that sticks out of this bait? Is there any secular party, however absolutist, however totalitarian, however complete in its wish to have the citizen as the property of the state, that has ever dared to make such an extraordinary so-called bargain? I think not.

Let me give you an example. I've been to now, in my life as a reporter and travelling writer, all of the countries nominated by President Bush as the axis of evil. In other words, Iraq and Iran and North Korea, and without question the most terrifying of these was the state of North Korea. When I was young, when I was a little boy, being told at school that Heaven would be eternal praise, I used to think; "Sounds like hell to me." But I also couldn't really, I was. It was an idle worry, because I couldn't really imagine a state where praise went on all day and all night and for the rest of your life. All you did all day was to praise the leader and thank him for things, whether you got them or not.

Well, now I know what it would be like, because I've been in North Korea. Every newspaper story, every day, every day of every week of every month of every year is entirely about one person: Kim Jong-Il. Every opera, there aren't many operas, is about him too. Every movie, there are not many movies, is entirely devoted to him. Every program on the television, every program on the radio, every speech made, every minute at the office, every minute at the factory, of every minute of public-private waking is entirely the worship leader and thanking him, groveling to him.

When it is not about his father, because in North Korea is only one, one, person short of Trinity. They have a father and they have a son and the son is the reincarnation of the father, you may be interested to hear, and the son is only the head of the Army and the party. He is not the head of the state. The President of North Korea is still, to this day Kim Il-Sung, who died in the early '90's. So, North Korea might be described as necrocracy or a thanatocracy or a Mauselocracy. if you like. It has a dead person as President and reincarnation of his son as the head of the party in the Army. Of what is this reminding you?

There's only one duty of the citizen and it is to praise both of them, and there's no private life now. The North Korean State was founded in 1951, which was the year that 1984 was published, and I have the distinct impression that someone handed a Korean translation of this book to Kim Il-Sung and said: do you think we could make this work? Can we actually install it? And he said; I don't know, but we can certainly try. It is the most religious state I've ever seen now.

This is not to be compared to the ordinary bureaucracy of secular tyranny, the fumbling attempts by Communists and the catholic right wing under Franco and so on to establish a totalitarian state. We can look back on some of these experiments now. We can laugh at them. We can see what, how bumbling, how human, how error-prone how corrupt, how incompetent they were. But we should never lose the horrible idea that there were people then, and there are some still, who wish it could be made to work, who want religious

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authority that cannot be challenged, and where the penalty is death and death in life for any objection to it. I'm willing to take questions about all of this could go on, but I'd better not.

Second, tell me how much I've talked, how much I have left?

00:13:15

Moderator: Fifteen minutes.

00:13:16

Christopher Hitchens: Good. That's exactly what I hoped for. Now, the second question that came up a lot in my book tour and my arguments with the religious was this: isn't it the case that you can believe in science, you can, believe in the scientific method, in the discoveries and innovations of science and still be religious? Why is there a contradiction here? Surely these two things are compatible.

The great Stephen J. Gould, who, the great biologist and paleontologist whom some of you will have read, I dare say, uses the phrase; "non-overlapping Magisteria." The scientists do their work, the religious do theirs, the two spheres do not really intersect and do not contradict one another. I wish, perhaps, that that might be true, but I think it is no longer possible to maintain that the work of the scientific mind and intelligence and the belief in a divine design or a divine intervention of any kind is remotely compatible, and I'll say briefly why I think that that is.

Edwin Hubble, the greatest astronomer, as you will know, took some observations a few decades ago which showed that the big bang was still going and that of the I think it's 400? I'll tell you one more joke about the Andromeda galaxy, which is headed, as you know from the work of Lawrence Krauss, is headed directly towards our galaxy, it's now the largest observable body in the sky. It can now be observed with the naked eye by a human being at night-time. This galaxy is headed directly to us. It's on a direct collision course. It's coming in five billion years, which is to say in cosmological time, pretty soon, to direct confrontation with our galaxy.

Anyway, when Lawrence Krauss first mentioned this to the lecture, a man got up and said in the question time. "Did you say, Professor Krauss, Andromeda will collide with us in five billion years or five million?" He said "five billion" and I said "I'm so glad to hear that I was really worried for a second that that you just said five million." Well, anyway, soon, which by the way means the other point I want to make. That's quite some design. Those who argue that there is a divine presence in the universe ask us to ask ourselves the question: why is there something instead of nothing? As if, since there is something that could only imply design? Well, let us return then the question.

There is something now, but there is going to be nothing. Of that we can be sure. Who designed that? Which is to replace the question. Not much of a designer and not a very kind designer in any case, which is exactly the argument as it was first posed by Lucretius, Democritus and Epicurus. But there's more. Edwin Hubble noticed the Big Bang. I think it's 400 billion observable stars. It might be 4000 billion. You will excuse me, only one of which we have even the remotest idea, has a habitable solar system around. Yes, was exploding and going far and far away from itself at a great rate. It was then thought fine, but

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Newtonian gravitational mechanics will mean that this process will be slowing down. The next time we look, it'll still be expanding, but more slowly. So now we looked. Big investigation, ended just ten years ago, Lawrence Krauss, again predicted it. No, it's expanding more rapidly than before. The rate of expansion is increasing for reasons we don't understand. The next time observations are taken, it will not be possible to see the relationship of these galaxies to one another. It won't. It won't be possible any longer to tell that the big bang ever took place. Consider the gigantic cosmological implications of that and imagine somebody with a divine intelligence wanted it to be that way. It's falling apart and it's falling apart faster and faster and faster all the time.

Or then if that doesn't impress you think of the little suburb in which we live, at the edge of this tiny bit of huge galaxy with a tiny solar system, most of whose planets are either too hot or too cold to support life at all. And on a planet much of which is too hot or too cold already and which is on a climatic knife edge now. As we know, and where we have been for Francis Collins, my friend, Christian Scientist, who did the human genome project, thinks a 100 000 years since Homo sapiens separated from the Cro-Magnons and the Neanderthals. Richard Dawkins thinks 200 000 years. Since we left Africa, 50 000 years in cosmological time, no time at all.

And here's my thought experiment. Let's call it a 100 000 years. Let's compromise: a 100 000 years since we Homo sapiens developed and first started to walk out of Africa. Average life expectancy: maybe 20 years for the first 50 000 years, maybe less. Infant mortality rate, enormous, the rate of those who just died in childbirth incalculable. Deaths from microorganisms that couldn't be explained, that we didn't know existed, swaths cut through us from animals that we couldn't control, from earthquakes we didn't understand. Because we didn't know we lived on a cooling planet. You can add all this in for yourself, picture it, but gradually, very, very, very slowly surviving and spreading once we left the African savannah. And picture the suffering and the, the, very microscopic exponential growth and Heaven watches this happen. With arms folded, with perfect indifference for the first 97 000 years, and then about 3000 years ago, decides it's time to intervene, and the best way to do that would be by revelations to illiterate people in bronze age parts of Palestine. That would be the most convincing way of redeeming the situation. You are free to believe this if you like, but you cannot make it compatible or reconcilable with anyone, any one of the scientific innovations and discoveries that we have in the meantime, made.

Had we known this story first, we could never have fallen for the story that were expected to fulfill. In other words, religion has one advantage, huge one and only one. It's the first and the worst explanation that we came up with. It's what we came up with when we didn't know anything, when we were terrified children, when we didn't know about microorganisms or dinosaurs, comets, or volcanoes. This is a depressing picture, but I think it's more cheerful to face it than otherwise, and my, my verdict, therefore, is that these, these magisteria, as Gould calls it, do indeed overlap, and you must choose which one of them you take seriously, and they are not compatible or reconcilable, and thus what the poet Shelley called the necessity of atheism is born in on you just because of scientific reasoning, never mind moral and ethical reason.

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Okay, now you want to know about what's happening in my hometown of Washington and what this has to do with it. Well, it's very depressing time to be a secularist in the United States. We have in order. Let me see, a man governor of Massachusetts, the state of the Pilgrims, admittedly, the Pilgrim fathers, the state of the Kennedy family, the state of the original American revolution, in some ways. Governor Romney, who is a member of a crackpot racist cult known as the Church of Jesus Christ, of latter-day Saints, or, if you like, Mormons. Who believe that the Garden of Eden was in the state of Missouri, originally, and Jerusalem will be rebuilt in the same state relatively soon, and the missing verses and books of the Bible were written on gold plates in a small town in Upstate, New York, dug up under the direction of an angel called Moroni and dictated to a scribe named Joseph Smith, who, you might be interested to know, proclaimed himself at the time to be the Mohammed of North America. Though these are supposedly Christian books, he preferred to say he was the Mohammad of North America.

Well, you can believe that if you like, and Governor Romney does believe it. Until 1979 this church did not admit any black members, didn't believe that black people had souls, thought the people of African descent were a special creation, not completely human. Thus it would be nice to believe that a man who is of more, we're all from Africa, all of us, and only 50 000 years ago at that, but Senator Obama, who is more visibly and palpably from Africa, the senator from Illinois, would be nice if he didn't believe anything like this, but unfortunately he is a member of a rock-and-roll ethnic church in Chicago that only admits black people. That has recently given an award to Louis Farrakhan, who isn't even the Muslim, says he's Black Muslim. This now only applies to black people and whose pastorship and leadership regularly visits the, in my opinion, extremely unappetizing Colonel Gaddafi of Libya. Divest yourself, if you will, of your illusions in Senator Obama. He too, when it comes to religion, is capable of belonging to an ugly, stupid, backward, childish juvenile organization. Why he would want to do this when he knew he would run not just for the Senate but for the presidency, is beyond me, unless by any chance his belief is sincere, and thus he is willing to pay the price for holding it. That would be a sobering thought.

Senator John McCain, who has been a senator for many decades and before that, held a commission in the American Armed Forces, which means that he has several times taken an oath to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States, recently said that he believes the United States is a Christian country, which means he has not read the constitution of the United States and that when he takes his oath yet again, if he ever should, as President, to uphold and defend it, he will be making an oath which (inaudible) this is not good news. It's also overwhelmingly probable, given his fantastic unpopularity with the right wing of his own party, that he will have to appoint as his running Mayor vice-presidential candidate either Michael Huckerby of Arkansas, Governor of Arkansas, or someone very much like him politically. And Governor Huckerby, as you may know, believes or says he believes that Adam and Eve were real people and quite recently at that, though not in Missouri. You pay your money, you take your choice.

This is, here's a question I'll probably have to leave you with, because I think I'm about to trespass on your time, their time, and it's a question I've never resolved for myself. Do I prefer the sincere believer to the hypocritical one? I asked myself frequently. Would I rather

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be talking to someone who absolutely said that they thought, yes, the Archangel Gabriel had A. appeared to a Virgin and told her she was pregnant and B. had time later on to appear to an illiterate merchant in Arabia and tell him he was about to have a dictation of verses. That would be the last and final word of God, the busy Archangel Gabriel!

Would I prefer to meet someone who said yes, I absolutely believe one or other of those things? Actually, you can believe both, because the Koran also contains the assertion that the Virgin birth was a real event. Or would I prefer someone who simply said these things in order to be elected? I actually, there's a story about a church in America that was trying to hire a new preacher. It's in Georgia this church, big church with a lot of money. Many preachers come saying I'd like to be your new vicar. They're interviewed. The board comes across a bright young man. They think he looks promising. They say to him: you should know, though, that a lot of people in this church believe that the earth is flat. Quite a lot of the congregation believe it's round, but a good number really believe it's flat. What, what, what line do you take on that? And he sees he's nearly got the job and he says: well, I can preach it round, I can preach it flat. There are people who are running for the office of the President. You say, if I could get elected, I'll say I believe anything at all by way of faith, and there are those who one knows would say if they thought it would mean that they lost. I think I should probably leave this question open and try and make it upset you as much as it's upsetting me and then see where we go from there. I'm incredibly grateful for your kindness and your attention, ladies and gentlemen, and I'm looking forward to the next...

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Jonathan Groubert: I didn't always agree with him, but I always enjoyed listening to his erudite arguments. That was the incomparable with Christopher Hitchens. He died of esophageal cancer in 2011. Mr Hitchens was a smoker and a heavy drinker, and right before he died he admitted he burned the candle at both ends, but that it gave a lovely light. There's a lot more of hitches in our video of this evening, including a very lively debate. We put it on our YouTube channel, and I'll put the link in the show notes. So why not subscribe?

We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at <https://www.john-adams.nl/>, and while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do, you get a discount of future live events. In the meantime, you should go wherever you get your broadcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out. We can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week show. Our theme song is called 'La Prensa' by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Mets from Amsterdam. This was the John Adams Podcast. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.