

*God is not Great*. Christopher Hitchens (2007)  
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Reviewed by Roger Kingdon, March 2011

*This is a tremendous book*. Initially sceptical, but challenged from the very first sentence to maintain an open mind, I found myself conceding to Hitchens' arguments, and later marvelling at his intellect, knowledge, insight, wit and humanity. For in these pages he has set down a devastating barrage of reasons why I could never subscribe to Judaism, Christianity or Islam, reasons that I have lacked the ability or courage to formulate for myself, despite having what I consider to be an enquiring mind, and despite applying my mind to questions of faith on many occasions over the last thirty years. The following quotations (which I have numbered, for further reference) summarise what I consider to be the most telling points from this book:

1. There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.<sup>1</sup>
2. God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization.<sup>2</sup>
3. ...it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It *must* seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak of the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths.<sup>3</sup>
4. For some reason, many religions force themselves to think of the birth canal as a one-way street, and even the Koran treats the Virgin Mary with reverence.<sup>4</sup>
5. In dark ages people are best guided by religion, as in a pitch-black night a blind man is the best guide; he knows the roads and paths better than a man who can see. When daylight comes, however, it is foolish to use blind old men as guides.<sup>5</sup>
6. The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile. A modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religion's monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason.<sup>6</sup>
7. ...I think we are entitled to at least three provisional conclusions. The first is that religions and the churches are manufactured, and that this salient fact is too obvious to ignore. The second is that ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it. The third is that religion is – because it claims a special divine exemption for its practices and beliefs – not just amoral but immoral.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *God is not Great*, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.17.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.23.

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Gedanken und Einfalle*, quoted in *God is not Great*, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> *God is not Great*, pp.46-47.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.52.

8. With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world. By this I do not mean it “looks forward” in the purely eschatological sense of anticipating the end. I mean, rather, that it openly or covertly wishes that end to occur.<sup>8</sup>
9. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made of atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think – though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one – that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.<sup>9</sup>
10. Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar. They offer consolation and solidarity and uplift, competing as they do in a marketplace. But we have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse. And if we chance to forget what that must have been like, we have only to look to those states and societies where the clergy still has the power to dictate its own terms.<sup>10</sup>
11. You can believe in a divine mover if you choose, but it makes no difference at all [to understanding the existence and nature of stars], and belief among astronomers and physicists has become private and fairly rare.<sup>11</sup>
12. This supposed frequency of resurrection [in the Gospels] can only undermine the uniqueness of the one by which mankind purchased forgiveness of sins [*i.e.* Christ]. And there is no cult or religion before or since, from Osiris to vampirism and voodoo, that does not rely on some innate belief in the “undead.”<sup>12</sup>
13. What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.<sup>13</sup>
14. The various forms of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people to be equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful.<sup>14</sup>
15. [In his novel *The Child in Time*, Ian McEwan identifies] the way in which people show their gullibility and their herd instinct, and their wish, or perhaps their need, to be credulous and to be fooled. This is an ancient problem. Credulity may be a form of innocence, and even innocuous in itself, but it provides a standing invitation for the wicked and the clever to exploit their brothers and sisters, and is thus one of humanity’s great vulnerabilities. No honest account of the growth and persistence of religion, or the reception of miracles and revelations, is possible without reference to this stubborn fact.<sup>15</sup>
16. ...contempt for the intellect has a strange way of *not* being passive.<sup>16</sup>
17. From the totalitarian point of view history is something to be created rather than learned. A *totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy*, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.<sup>17</sup> ...Communist absolutists did not so much negate religion, in societies that they well understood were saturated with faith and superstition, as seek to *replace* it.<sup>18</sup> ...Sigmund Freud was quite correct to describe the religious impulse, in *The Future of an Illusion*, as essentially ineradicable until or unless the human species can

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.56.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.64.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.67.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p.70.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.143.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p.150.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, quoted in *God is not Great*, p.155.

<sup>15</sup> *God is not Great*, pp.160-161.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.204.

<sup>17</sup> George Orwell, *The Prevention of Literature*, quoted in *God is not Great*, p.232.

<sup>18</sup> *God is not Great*, p.246.

conquer its fear of death and its tendency to wish-thinking. Neither contingency seems very possible. All that the totalitarians have demonstrated is that the religious impulse – the need to worship – can take even more monstrous forms if it is repressed.<sup>19</sup>

18. Religion even at its meekest has to admit that what it is proposing is a “total” solution, in which faith must be to some extent blind, and in which all aspects of the private and public life must be submitted to a permanent higher supervision.<sup>20</sup>
19. The true value of a man is not determined by his possession, supposed or real, of Truth, but rather by his sincere exertion to get to the Truth.<sup>21</sup>
20. Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that these quotations summarise arguments and examples in the book, which may be understood fully only by reading the relevant sections (or, occasionally, complete chapters). I do not propose to explain why I find these arguments compelling, because to do so would be to largely rewrite *God is not Great* in my own words, which is not the object of the exercise. Instead I will move on and identify what I consider to be the two main weaknesses of this book.

Firstly, Hitchens bases his conclusions overwhelmingly on a consideration of the scriptures and practices of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (which for simplicity I will refer to collectively as ‘JCI’). References to Hinduism and Buddhism are sparse and selective. For example, Sai Baba<sup>23</sup> and Baghwan Rajneesh<sup>24</sup> are wholly unrepresentative of the vast majority of Hindu gurus (although they are quite representative of the type of Hindu guru that appeals to someone born and brought up in the West). Other world religions such as Sikhism, Jainism and the Bahai Faith are not mentioned at all. There may be a case for generalising certain observations from JCI to all religions, but this book does not make it. Thus it is wrong for Hitchens to conclude, for example, that ‘If one comprehends the fallacies of any “revealed” religion, one comprehends them all’<sup>25</sup>, and his many statements about ‘religion’ can only be taken to refer to JCI.

Secondly, Hitchens clearly takes exception to other people judging his motives and character, but perhaps he should ask himself whether this is related to his own propensity to judge the motives and character of others (especially given his high regard for the ‘sober and rational’ Golden Rule<sup>26</sup>). This propensity to judge others is particularly unpleasant and disingenuous when the subjects cannot defend themselves, because they are no longer on this earth. To take five examples: Isaac Newton is described as a ‘spiritualist and alchemist of a particularly laughable kind’<sup>27</sup>; Of Martin Luther King, Hitchens opines that ‘In no real as opposed to nominal sense...was he a Christian’<sup>28</sup>; ‘We do not know [Abraham] Lincoln’s private religious beliefs...However, it would also be inaccurate to say that he was a Christian’<sup>29</sup>; M K Gandhi ‘was quite prepared to make hypocritical use of violence when he thought it might suit him’<sup>30</sup>; And Hitchens takes considerable offence at the ‘bad faith’ of ‘religious authorities’ who have been ‘misrepresenting’ Albert Einstein’s views by misquoting them in ‘religious Web sites and in religious propaganda’<sup>31</sup>, while at the same time he

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p.247.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.249.

<sup>21</sup> Gotthold Lessing, *Anti-Goeze*, quoted in *God is not Great*, p.277.

<sup>22</sup> *God is not Great*, p.282.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, pp.74-76.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, pp.195-198.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.126.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p.213.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.65.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.176.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.179.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.182.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*, pp.242-243.

reveals his own bias by neglecting to remind us of the great man's famous dictum, 'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.'

Clearly, if these are the 'main weaknesses' of *God is not Great*, then there is not a lot wrong with it. The first criticism suggests what appears to be a minor restriction to the scope of Hitchens' attack, while the second criticism suggests that he tones down some of the more personal comments. Nowhere have I given any rebuttal of the title ('God is not Great') or subtitle ('How Religion Poisons Everything'). But I am a member of the Bahai Faith, a monotheistic religion that most definitely follows in the footsteps of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. How can I call this devastating attack on JCI 'tremendous' and at the same time maintain a sincere faith in Bahauallah? Understandably, this is a question that might be expected to give me more than a few sleepless nights. That it does not do so may be attributed to my personal philosophy. (This is relevant because, although it has nothing to do with the Bahai Faith, my personal philosophy is fully compatible with the Bahai teachings, and it thereby facilitates a powerful critique of *God is not Great* on the basis of these teachings – as we shall see.) Simply put, my personal philosophy is that *Humans exhibit five distinct and well-defined 'learning styles', and when a person engages with each of these learning styles in a balanced way then the result is what we recognise as mature, responsible, righteous behaviour.* The names I have given these learning styles derive from their different sources of information about the world<sup>32</sup>: The 'Empiricist' has a preference for learning through *observation*; The 'Idealist' has a preference for learning through comparing and correlating information within a pre-existing mental *framework*; The 'Theorist' has a preference for learning through constructing and operating representative *models* of reality; The 'Activist' has a preference for learning through *action and reaction*; And the 'Conformist' has a preference for learning through *reference* to an established authority. Whilst these learning styles are quite distinct in outlook and approach to the world, it may be supposed that all humans are generally capable of adopting each of them in turn, depending on their inclinations and circumstances. Nevertheless, we all have our preferences, and in some individuals we can recognise traits that identify them as typical exponents of a single learning style. And it is not difficult to generalise these several instances and thereby identify a classic archetype for each learning style. Thus the archetypal Empiricist is an *experimental scientist*; The archetypal Idealist is a *spiritual mystic*; The archetypal Theorist is a *theoretical scientist*; The archetypal Activist is precisely that, a *social activist*; And the archetypal Conformist is a *religious devotee*. Note that two of these archetypes are associated with religion, and two with science, leaving the fifth – the Activist – with the political 'casting vote', as it were. Note, also, that I have defined 'mature, responsible, righteous behaviour' as the consequence of individuals engaging with all five of these learning styles 'in a balanced way'. By this I mean that it is imbalanced (and therefore wrong) to exercise one learning style to the exclusion of the others. So we can be (indeed, should be) like an experimental scientist, but not exclusively so; Or, like a spiritual mystic, but not exclusively so; *Etc.* Thus, with this personal philosophy, I feel perfectly at ease with Einstein's dictum, quoted above, and with the Bahai teaching that 'Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress.'<sup>33</sup> I also feel perfectly at ease with *God is not Great*, which for the most part criticises behaviour that is not mature or responsible or righteous, by my definition. I also feel perfectly at ease with calling myself a Bahai, for I know that this is no more than due acknowledgement to an individual whose definition of righteous behaviour predates, precedes and fully encompasses my own. To consolidate this line of reasoning, it is instructive to subject the Bahai Faith to the same formidable barrage of criticism in *God is not Great* that has proved so devastating for JCI. The following 'Bahai' response to Hitchens<sup>34</sup> follows the same numerical scheme as before.

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<sup>32</sup> Roger Kingdon, *Principia Intellegentia – The principles governing human and machine intelligence* (Allied 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Abdul Baha, *Paris Talks*, p.143.

<sup>34</sup> 'Bahai' is in quotation marks because no Bahai has the authority to interpret the Bahai teachings for others. This is a 'Bahai' response in the sense that it is the response of an individual Bahai, based on his subjective understanding.

1. *Four irreducible objections to religious faith.* Firstly, the Bahai writings do not speculate on the origins of man and the cosmos. Secondly, there are no clergy in the Bahai Faith, so there is no occasion for the public expression of servility or solipsism. Thirdly, the Bahai teachings uphold the equality of men and women, which is the surest cure for sexual repression. Fourthly, ‘wish-thinking’ is Freud’s cynical term for a glass half-empty, which the faithful see as half-full, and call it ‘hope’.
2. *God did not create man in his own image.* The Bahai writings do not speculate on the origins of man or God.
3. *It does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths.* Bahais believe that all major religions come from God, and strive for ‘mutual tolerance, understanding, and brotherly love’<sup>35</sup> between their followers.
4. *Even the Koran treats the Virgin Mary with reverence.* The Bahai writings also uphold the Catholic doctrine of the virgin birth. However, as this is completely incidental to the coherent core of Bahai belief, I see it as a minor anomaly, and ignore it. None of the central figures of the Faith (the Bab, Bahauallah, and Abdul Baha) had a virgin birth.
5. *When daylight comes...it is foolish to use blind old men as guides.* Agreed, and this is why there is a need for the renewal of religion, from age to age. Indeed, Bahauallah call this recurrence ‘the Divine Springtime’, directly associating the new ‘daylight’ with the physical presence of the Manifestation of God.
6. *The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile.* The Bahai teachings are not hostile to medicine or science. On the contrary: ‘Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen’<sup>36</sup>; ‘The third principle or teaching of Bahauallah is the oneness of religion and science. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond.’<sup>37</sup>
7. *Three provisional conclusions.* Bahais believe that the founders of the great world religions are divinely-inspired. But this inspiration is not granted to their followers, and since it is these followers who set up the religions and churches, it follows that the religions and churches are man-made. This is another reason why there is a need for the renewal of religion, from age to age. Each new Manifestation of God reminds humanity of the eternal spiritual principles that are in every religion, and also introduces new social teachings appropriate to the age in which they live. Both types of teaching are precisely what we term ‘ethics and morality’. Since there are no clergy in the Bahai Faith, and since Bahais do not consider themselves ‘saved’ (in the Christian sense), there is no ‘special divine exemption’ for Bahai practices and beliefs.
8. *Religion looks forward to the destruction of the world.* And science provides the means for the destruction of the world – so what? The Bahai interpretation of apocalyptic writings such as the Revelation of St John is that they refer not to the end of the world but to the end of the old religion, which is necessarily coincident with the start of the new. This event has come many times, and it will come again, but not ‘ere the expiration of a full thousand years’<sup>38</sup>.
9. *Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody...had the smallest idea what was going on.* Agreed, religious scriptures have never been (and will never be) useful source texts for the natural sciences. However, these same religious scriptures have always been (and will always be) invaluable source texts for the understanding of human nature.

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<sup>35</sup> Abdul Baha, *Paris Talks*, p.49.

<sup>36</sup> Bahauallah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para.113.

<sup>37</sup> Abdul Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.107.

<sup>38</sup> Bahauallah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, para.37.

10. *We have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong.* Indeed. The warning signs are clear, however. In particular, if the founder of a religion calls himself God, or if he fails to acknowledge his fellow-founders (in the past or yet to come), or if he fails to exclude science or politics from the scope of his teachings, or if his religion is controlled by clergy with special powers of intercession, then beware! Needless to say, none of these warning signs apply to the Bahai Faith.
11. *You can believe in a divine mover if you choose, but it makes no difference at all.* Bahais consider God to be so far beyond their ken that they cannot ascribe to Him any particular names or qualities, including ‘divine mover’, or, for that matter, masculinity. (‘Him’ is used by mere convention, an unavoidable consequence of the English language.) As for the privacy and rarity of belief amongst astronomers and physicists: I am a physicist and a Bahai; For the most part I remain fairly private about my beliefs (as do many people much greater and wiser than me, e.g. Newton, Lincoln, Gandhi and Einstein); But this tendency to privacy should not necessarily indicate unease or weakness; Indeed, it might just as easily be interpreted as adherence to the advice to ‘take care’ enjoined by Spinoza on fellow radicals and free-thinkers<sup>39</sup>.
12. *There is no cult or religion...that does not rely on some innate belief in the “undead.”* Bahais see the resurrection of Christ as symbolic: ‘His disappearance under the earth for three days has an inner signification and is not an outward fact.’<sup>40</sup> Resurrection or reincarnation or physical life after death are not envisaged for the rest of us, either. As for spiritual life after death, this is assured for everyone, but there is no reliable communication between the spiritual and physical worlds, so we can never know what that life entails.
13. *What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.* And what can be asserted without reference to an established authority can also be dismissed without reference to an established authority – so what?
14. *The various forms of worship...were all considered by the people to be equally true.* Bahais look forward to a time when this will be the case for the whole world. As for the philosopher who considered all forms of worship to be equally false: I too have felt this, when I was young; But now, as a Bahai, I feel that it is just as valid (and much more positive) to consider them to be equally true. For me, the glass is half-full.
15. *Credulity...is thus one of humanity’s great vulnerabilities.* There are no clergy in the Bahai Faith, and Bahais are committed to the independent investigation of truth.
16. *Contempt for the intellect has a strange way of not being passive.* Because they demarcate and value the contributions of religion, science and politics, Bahais generally do not display the kind of intellectual arrogance normally associated with ‘born again’ evangelists, second-rate scientists, or political ideologues.
17. *The religious impulse...essentially ineradicable until or unless the human species can conquer its fear of death and its tendency to wish-thinking.* Since Bahais do not consider themselves ‘saved’ (in the Christian sense), and since the spiritual life after death is an unknown and unknowable experience, I suspect that, in practice, Bahais fear death no more or less than the average atheist. (I must remember to ask myself this question, when my time comes.) Regarding ‘wish-thinking’, see 1. above.
18. *Religion even at its meekest has to admit that what it is proposing is a “total” solution.* Yes, in the spiritual realm. But Bahauallah did not come on earth to be a physicist or a novelist or an economist (for example).
19. *The true value of a man is not determined by his possession, supposed or real, of Truth, but rather by his sincere exertion to get to the Truth.* Yes, but ‘sincere exertion’ is not enough. My ‘personal philosophy’ sets out five ways to *approach* the truth, and stipulates that an individual must follow all five ways in order to *get* to the Truth. And there is nothing in the Bahai writings to contradict this philosophy. On the contrary: ‘If five people meet together

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<sup>39</sup> *God is not Great*, p.263.

<sup>40</sup> Abdul Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, ch.23.

to seek for truth, they must begin by cutting themselves free from all their own special conditions and renouncing all preconceived ideas. In order to find truth we must give up our prejudices, our own small trivial notions; an open receptive mind is essential. If our chalice is full of self, there is no room in it for the water of life. The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity, and unity is necessary if we would reach truth, for truth is *one*.’<sup>41</sup>

20. *Religion...no longer offers an explanation of anything important.* And science can never tell us what *is* important. Science deals with facts, and religion deals with values, and they are indeed ‘non-overlapping magisteria’<sup>42</sup>, as the following dictum (attributed to Hume) implies: ‘You can’t get an ‘is’ from an ‘ought’, or vice-versa.’ But just because we can demarcate science and religion in this way, that doesn’t mean to say that scientists can ignore religion, or that religious believers can ignore science. For science and religion are indispensable helpmates: Science relieves religion of the burden of explaining the inexplicable; And religion relieves science of the burden of identifying the unacceptable.

So, out of the twenty criticisms that proved so devastating for JCI, only one (number 4., regarding virgin birth) is problematic from a Bahai point of view. That’s a 95% success rate: Not bad! But, lest we wax too proud, a word of caution is in order. *God is not Great* takes JCI as its target, and the results are devastating. What if Hitchens had directed his razor-sharp mind on the Bahai Faith? What if he had asked Bahais to justify the exclusion of women from membership of the Universal House of Justice? Or the current electoral system which effectively guarantees that new members of the Universal House of Justice will be selected from the elite group of male Counsellors in the International Teaching Centre? Or the verse in Bahauallah’s *Kitab-i-Aqdas* that says, ‘Should anyone intentionally destroy a house by fire, him also shall ye burn’? Or the fact that this ‘Most Holy Book’ reads more like Leviticus than Lincoln or Luther King? Or the omission from the *Hidden Words* of the Golden Rule, or the Covenant, or Progressive Revelation, or Yin-Yang, despite Bahauallah’s claim of ‘This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity’? Or the absence of any reference to Buddha, or Krishna, or Lord Ram, or Laozi, in the Bahai writings? I, for one, do not have satisfactory answers to any of these questions. Nevertheless, on the basis of Hitchens’ published critique (as opposed to a hypothetical future one), I feel fully justified in my lifelong aversion to JCI, and my thirty-year adherence to the Bahai Faith. It is fitting, perhaps, that Bahais greet one another with ‘Allah-u-Abha’ and not ‘Allah-u-Akbar’. No, God is not Great: That God is dead; Long live God, the All-Glorious!

A final point. One of the reasons why I am so impressed with Hitchens’ intellect and knowledge is that he has taught me something I didn’t know about the story of Adam and Eve. I always thought that there was just one special tree in the garden of Eden, which was ‘the tree of knowledge of good and evil’. What I have learnt from Hitchens, and a subsequent more careful reading of Genesis ch.2, is that there were in fact two special trees, the other being ‘the tree of life’. Hitchens mentions this in order to cite Hobbes’ finding (in *Leviathan*) that ‘forbidding Adam to eat from one tree lest he die, and from another lest he live forever, is absurd and contradictory’<sup>43</sup>. I felt this criticism to be sufficiently problematic that I looked to see whether it had been discussed in the Bahai writings. Now, one of the reasons why I am so impressed with Abdul Baha’s insight and wisdom is that I can read his writings any number of times and still find something new. So it was on this occasion. I thought I knew *Some Answered Questions* pretty well, but somehow I seem to have missed ch.30, entitled simply ‘Adam and Eve’. In this chapter Abdul Baha also expresses difficulty with the two trees: ‘If we take this story in its apparent meaning, according to the interpretation of the masses, it

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<sup>41</sup> Abdul Baha, *Paris Talks*, p.136.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, quoted in *God is not Great*, p.282.

<sup>43</sup> *God is not Great*, p.156.

is indeed extraordinary. The intelligence cannot accept it, affirm it, or imagine it; for such arrangements, such details, such speeches and reproaches are far from being those of an intelligent man, how much less of the Divinity – that Divinity Who has organized this infinite universe in the most perfect form, and its innumerable inhabitants with absolute system, strength and perfection.’ But at this point, where Hobbes and Hitchens leave their readers sinking in a swamp of doubt, Abdul Baha leads his readers to the sunlit uplands of certitude. He explains that the tree of life signifies the Manifestation of God, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil signifies the human world. Suddenly all is clear: the entire story of Adam and Eve is an allegory explaining the spiritual/physical duality of man. We constant strive for the world of the spirit, but can never attain it. Instead, we live in the physical world, where we suffer, and work, and learn, and acquire virtues and vices. And once I understood this, I could see the same allegory in many other places: The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis ch.4; The pure sacrifice and the scapegoat in Leviticus ch.16; The story of Christ and Barabbas in Mark ch.15; And the great duality of science and religion. All of which I find to be interesting, exciting, and faith-confirming. As for the ‘outworn shibboleths’<sup>44</sup> of ancient creeds, I’m with Hitchens: *I don’t Adam and Eve them.*

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<sup>44</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahauallah*, p.43.