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February 5, 2010: So, Christopher Hitchens is a Hallowed Secularist

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: So, Christopher Hitchens is a Hallowed Secularist

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2/5/2010—The religious world is abuzz over the interview between Marilyn Sewell, well-known religious liberal, and Christopher Hitchens, the well-known atheist popularizer. (interview site here). In the interview, Hitchens speaks of “the numinous” and the feeling of awe when confronted, for example, by the grandeur of nature. But, then, surprisingly, Hitchens acknowledged that “everybody has had the experience at some point when they feel that there’s more to life than just matter.” Eric Reitan wrote about the interview in religion dispatches in terms you might expect, “religious in spite of himself?” Reitan makes the intelligent point that religious institutions and religious thought are where human beings mostly encounter and think about just what the experiences Hitchens acknowledges mean. So, Hitchens sounds silly bashing those institutions. For all the noise Hitchens makes about literature and art being the place that nourishes these feelings, houses of worship are where they occur for most people and where they are sustained for almost everyone. If you haven’t noticed, secularists rarely acknowledge and seek out anything like deeper meaning in life. But I would put Hitchens’ error at a different point. Why does he insist on the dualism of matter and spirit? This is a reflection of a longstanding Christian heresy. The orthodox view is not dualistic, but insists that the incarnation brings the godhead into matter. Thus there is no need to assert, as Hitchens does, that there is “more to life than just matter.” There isn’t. But there is more to matter than Hitchens dreams. It is important to finally get this right. There is nothing more than matter in reality. How could there be? But as the concept of emergence in physics suggests, reality is more than the sum of its parts. Consciousness is nothing more than wiring in the brain, but there is nothing in the wiring that really explains consciousness. At the subatomic level matter disappears into indeterminate quantum particles and waves. So, at the highest level, why might matter not coalesce into truth, beauty and justice? The problem with Hitchens is not that he is a materialist, but that he is an incomplete materialist. That is why he imagines more of a conflict with religion than there needs to be.