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# Not Great

*Christopher Hitchens*

**God Is Not Great: How Religion  
Poisons Everything**

*Twelve, 2007,*

*307 pages.*

*Reviewed by James Kirchick*

The publication of Christopher Hitchens' latest anti-religious tract, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, could not have come at a more opportune time for its author. Two weeks after it appeared on bookshelves came the death of the American televangelist Jerry Falwell, who had infamously declared, among many other absurdities spanning a half-century, that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were the fault of abortionists, gay people, and the American Civil Liberties Union. This drivel provided the perfect marketing opportunity for Hitchens, who immediately took his dry, unsparing British wit to the airwaves. Asked by a cable television host if he believed Falwell was "in heaven," Hitchens replied, "No. And I think it's a pity there

isn't a hell for him to go to." Hitchens' atheist admirers might coyly postulate that the near-simultaneous occurrence of this book's publication and Falwell's death was divinely inspired.

Hitchens' merciless skewering of Falwell—"an ugly little charlatan"—was entirely appropriate. Ultimately, however, Jerry Falwell was an easy target, and the rhetorical glee that Hitchens evinced by flagellating a dead man repeats itself, endlessly, as an underlying problem with the polemicist's book and his arguments about religion in general: When it comes to faith, Christopher Hitchens likes to fight straw men.

This is not to say that the religious fundamentalism Hitchens rightly despises does not exist, or that the threat it poses to humanity is exaggerated. There is much to revile and mock about religion today, and Jerry Falwell and his ilk are the least of it. Turn on the news and you will be awash in images of violent, religiously motivated madness from Pakistan to the ghettos of Paris. The danger the world faces today is a distinctly religious one; religion (or at least a

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radical form of it) is the cause and terrorism its tool, despite the rhetorical niceties of the president and his minions. This is the reason why reading Hitchens on faith is so cathartic. Since September 11, no one has defended the virtues of Western civilization against the barbarism it confronts more eloquently than this reformed Trotskyite. But according to Hitchens, the only religious people who exist are the fanatics he so pleasurably excoriates.

Hitchens opens his treatise with what ought to be a simple request. Listing a series of expectations foisted upon him by religious people (attending bar mitzvas, offering “respect” for the belief that the Koran was dictated in Arabic, etc.), he writes that he has no problem as long as the religious agree to his “polite reciprocal condition—which is *that they in turn leave me alone.*” In other words, live and let live. This, however, “religion is ultimately incapable of doing.” He’s only partially right. Judaism—which, according to Hitchens, as the progenitor of Christianity and Islam is ultimately responsible for much of today’s religious lunacy—emerges rather well from his withering critique. This is because the Jewish faith, if it ever had a history of proselytizing, certainly does not any longer. It is when religion makes demands

on non-believers that Hitchens gets angry. Mighty angry.

The inescapable fact is that the vast majority of the religious madness that plagues our world today is Islamic, and it is for this reason that the youngest of the three monotheistic faiths—“not much more than a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms,” in Hitchens’ words—comes in for the greatest drubbing. In a chapter that will surely earn him a *fatwa* if he has not secured one already (entitled “The Koran Is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths”), Hitchens makes a convincing case that Islam “initially fulfilled a need among Arabs for a distinctive or special creed, and is forever identified with their language and their impressive later conquests, which, while not as striking as those of the young Alexander of Macedonia, certainly conveyed an idea of being backed by a divine will....”

It is in light of this unoriginal history that Hitchens does not view Islam and its prophet with trepidation and respect, but instead confesses to “laugh[ing] when I read the Koran, with its endless prohibitions on sex and its corrupt promise of infinite debauchery in the life to come.” Nor does Hitchens show much respect for the Almighty; he spells “god” lowercase throughout.

Christianity and, to a greater extent, Judaism, have made their peace

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with modernity, at least more so than has Islam. Of course, the “intelligent design” movement is but the latest example of taking biblical literalism too far, but Christians no longer execute those who defame their God, and the Jews no longer wage war against the Philistines. Judaism, which is an explicitly non-proselytizing faith, is even more respectful of non-believers in this regard. The same, of course, cannot be said for Islam, which, ironically for a religion whose followers so often accuse the West of being rapacious and imperial, divides the world in half: The land of Islam (*dar al-islam*) and the land of the infidel (*dar al-harb*), where war must be continuously waged until victory.

Given Judaism’s adaptation to modernity, Hitchens cannot launch the same sort of verbal assault against it as he does against Islam. He does not seem bothered by this (he is the last person to worry about being called “Islamophobic” or any such epithet), but in an attempt to be ecumenical, he makes some unfair arguments against Judaism. To advance his claim that to be religious *ipso facto* one must be a fanatic, Hitchens fixates his ire on a particular faction of Orthodox Jewish settlers in the West Bank. It is of course reasonable to feel distaste for the bigotry and territorial demands of the most extreme settlers, but once again, Hitchens creates a straw man:

Most Jews (and Israelis) are not religious extremists (even by his own liberal definition), oppose the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, and have long supported the removal of settlers from Israeli-controlled territories. When it comes to both Jewish theology and Jewish religious practice, settlers in the West Bank—who make up less than two percent of Jews in the world, and a significant portion of whom are not in fact religious—are almost meaningless.

Hitchens’ thesis that religion is always stupid, evil, and detrimental to human advancement leads him to make many more absurd claims. For example, he contends that religion was at best tangential to the civil rights movement. But to say that religion did not have to be an important motivating factor behind the civil rights movement ignores the fact that it *was*. Hitchens can point to all of the atheist, social-democratic civil rights activists he likes (and he misidentifies a monumentally important individual, Bayard Rustin, as an atheist, when in fact Rustin, the head organizer of the 1963 march on Washington, was a Quaker), but this does not negate the obvious fact that the civil rights movement was a church-based cause led by clergy from several different Christian denominations and joined by prominent American Jews, many of whom, like Abraham Joshua

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Heschel, were motivated by and spoke in the name of religion. If there were great atheist leaders of the African-American civil rights movement, they were overshadowed by the religious ones, which must say something about the power of religion in drawing people's emotions and energies toward the cause of social justice.

Hitchens believes he has made some sort of great revelation when he points to the difference between what Martin Luther King, Jr. preached—non-violence and moral suasion—and the calls for “savage punishments and genocidal bloodlettings” found in the Old Testament. Hitchens then, with an obnoxious sense of self-appointed authority, declares that “in no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he [King] a Christian.” This simplistic assessment of the great civil rights leader's supposed inconsistency underscores once again the central problem with Hitchens' book: His assertion that religious people are all zealots because their faiths are grounded in texts featuring scenes that today are considered extreme. Yet King was able to harmonize the teachings of a book written several thousand years ago, when such “savage punishments and genocidal bloodlettings” were a common form of justice and statecraft, with a modern conception

of human rights. And indeed, today the overwhelming majority of Jews and Christians practice their religions in a way that is entirely at peace with modern conceptions of justice. But to Hitchens, who arrogates to himself the right to determine who is and who is not sufficiently “religious,” no form of modern religious observance can ever be true religion, because the Bible sometimes expounds moral and legal practices that today are considered abhorrent.

Just as religion has compelled people to do horrific things, it has compelled them to do wonderful things as well. But even then, Hitchens argues, it is never religion that really obliges people to treat others justly. One may not require religious instruction to learn proper human relations, but that does not mean religion has no role to play and ought to be banished from the public square. Hitchens boasts that “charity and relief work, while they may appeal to tenderhearted believers, are the inheritors of modernism and the Enlightenment.” Hitchens, himself a well-traveled foreign correspondent, should tell that to the Catholic bishops and nuns clothing, feeding, and educating the wretched of the earth the next time he travels to one of the world's most blighted lands.

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Similarly, Hitchens has a baffling reply to those who argue that the greatest evils of the twentieth century—Nazism and communism—were explicitly atheist movements. “Communist absolutists,” he writes, “did not so much negate religion, in societies that they well understood were saturated with faith and superstition, as seek to *replace* it.” If one is to believe this line of reasoning, the proper reaction to it is an acknowledgment that insofar as human beings appear to have a tendency toward faith and superstition, that tendency is best channeled toward things like religious worship, as opposed to genocidal mass movements like Nazism and communism. Hitchens is actually making an argument *in favor* of religious observance, yet he is so blinded by animosity that he does not appear to know it.

He claims, for example, that North Korea represents the modern apotheosis of religious totalitarianism, because it “is a land entirely given over to adulation” of the “Supreme Being and his father,” Kim Jong Il and the late Kim Il Sung. With its “daily movements of ritual” and Big Brother-like horrors, North Korea is “a totalitarian state and also a religious one.” But North Korea is only a “religious state” insofar as Hitchens would like to portray it as such; it is

very easy to attack something when you control the means of defining it. This particular assertion is especially fantastical; Kim Jong Il’s North Korea is a country-size totalitarian prison for its citizens, whose “worship” of the Dear Leader is compulsory and inescapable. North Korea’s sinister regime may represent some form of idolatry in its authoritarian excess, but even if we make this logical leap, it is not the sort of religion adhered to by anyone other than the opportunistic family that expounds it and forces its subjects to worship them; it is most certainly not a religion followed by people of genuine, voluntary faith. The other half of Korea, on the other hand, a prosperous, democratic country, is home to a pious population that follows Christianity and Buddhism. Hitchens, of course, ignores the distinction between the Orwellian North and the voluntarily observant South, and offers the lame rejoinder that the latter is the birthplace of the cult leader Sun Myung Moon.

Hitchens, of course, has every right to come up with a theory of what religion really is, and who really is religious. One of the deepest flaws in his polemic, however, is the capriciousness of his definitions. Thus, the true essence of contemporary religion is a totalitarian

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nightmare state that upholds its Dear Leader as a deity, and decent people who call themselves religious (i.e., Martin Luther King, Jr.) are just deluding themselves when they claim to be working on behalf of their faith. This rhetorical sleight of hand works wonders for Hitchens' argument, but it studiously avoids tackling the real, crucial issues underlying religion as most self-identified religious people live it. "Unquestioning faith in God—the yardstick by which both atheists and blinkered fundamentalists seem to measure religious commitment—is not the best true sign of religiosity," write Scott Korb and Peter Bebergal, authors of *The Faith Between Us* (Bloomsbury, 2007). This is something with which many self-affirming "religious" people would agree, yet is contradictory to Hitchens' narrow view of what constitutes faith.

As he avoids blaming secular horror shows for their own exceptional origins, Hitchens expediently ignores the astonishing faults of the non-faith-based. For instance, criticizing the Catholic Church for its ineffective policies regarding contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, he opines:

We are not dealing, as early missionaries might have liked to believe, with witch doctors and savages who resist the boons that the missionaries bring.

We are instead dealing with the Bush administration, which, in a supposedly secular republic in the twenty-first century, refuses to share its foreign aid budget with charities and clinics that offer advice on family planning.

Hitchens is absolutely correct on the latter point, both on the factual matter of the Bush administration's foreign aid policies and on the substance of its ineffectiveness. But considering his deftness at exposing any and all forms of pseudoscience and quackery, how can Hitchens possibly ignore the mind-numbing offenses to humanity and common sense offered up by the African National Congress-led government of South Africa, which has prevented the distribution of anti-retroviral drugs, incorporated "witch doctors" into its national health policy (administered by a health minister urging AIDS sufferers to eat beetroot and garlic as alternatives), and whose president, Thabo Mbeki, entertained the theory that HIV does not cause AIDS? These were the doings not of the dreaded Christian right, but rather the socialist, avowedly secular liberation movement to which Hitchens has been partial ever since his Oxford days as an anti-apartheid activist.

Considering Hitchens' lineage, it is not hard to see where his modicum of respect for Judaism

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comes from. In a 1988 essay, “On Not Knowing the Half of It,” in the now-defunct literary quarterly *Grand Street*, Hitchens wrote of the revelation that his mother was Jewish: “On hearing the tidings, I was pleased to find that I was pleased.” His matrilineal line was traced to the English Midlands via Breslav, Poland. In England, it was “easy to visualize the retarding influence of the Rotary Club, and perhaps Freemasonry and the gold club, on the aspirations of the Jewish dentist or hatter.” Thus, his mother’s parents anglicized their last names. “But I was glad to learn that, while they sought to assimilate, they did not renounce,” Hitchens professes.

Hitchens discovered that his mother hid her (and thus, his) Judaism so that her exceptionally bright son could get into Oxford. This fact (and Hitchens’ frequently expressed revulsion towards anti-Semitism) may explain part of his animosity toward religion writ large: Not so much for monotheism’s origins in the Jewish faith and the continuance of those traditions into the present day, but for the divisions that religion inspires, building up schisms in our common humanity. If there were no Judaism (and for that matter, no Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.) there would be less reason to discriminate. In other words, if there were no Judaism, there would be no anti-Semitism.

But this is silly logic—it is a not-so-distant cousin of the commonly expressed view that Jews, by their “clannishness,” uncritical support for Israel, and other traits are themselves responsible for anti-Semitism—and discredits Hitchens’ own contention that “Judaism might turn out to be the most ethically sophisticated tributary of humanism.” Not for nothing does Judaism—at least as it is believed and practiced today—emerge relatively unscathed from this book. What angers Hitchens is what ought to anger anyone who believes in secularism, freedom, and human rights: The use of religion to sow hatred among peoples; to justify bigotry, murder, and the subjugation of women; and to smite the individual. Islam, as it is practiced in whole swaths of the world, does this. Judaism does not.

In this light, perhaps Hitchens now finds himself part of the great tradition of secular Jewish thinkers who, whatever their beliefs about God, used the Jewish tools of criticism and questioning to further human knowledge. Throughout the book, Hitchens’ delight in castigating religious Christians and Muslims is evident. Yet there is a grudging respect for Judaism and Jews throughout. Even though he scorns particular Jewish rituals and ancient beliefs, Hitchens admires men like Albert Einstein,

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who “preserved what he could of ethical Judaism and rejected the barbaric mythology of the Pentateuch.” Such acknowledgment of “ethical Judaism,” however, seriously undermines Hitchens’ argument that “religion poisons everything.”

Hitchens’ nearly twenty-year-old essay about the discovery of his Jewish heritage is a far more serious, nuanced, and respectful meditation on what religion means than *God Is Not Great*, and there are several reasons for this. It is likely that the rise in religious fundamentalism in the past decade has affected Hitchens’ atheist sensibilities to the point of overreaction. But there is now a huge market for this anti-religious stuff, as evidenced not just by the many months Hitchens’ tome has spent on the *New York Times* best-seller list, but by the popularity of other anti-religious books by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Reading his 1988 essay and his latest work, one gets the sense that Hitchens is ignoring the tougher questions about religion

to take advantage of this anti-religious fad. *God Is Not Great* is, therefore, something of a cop-out.

Irrespective of its intellectual laziness, *God Is Not Great* is a delight to read. Hitchens is among the funniest of today’s political writers, his humor marked by the outrageous treatment of fact. For instance, he opens a paragraph with this declaration: “In 2004, a soap-opera film about the death of Jesus was produced by an Australian fascist and ham actor named Mel Gibson.” Creationism, masked as “intelligent design theory,” is “the inculcation of compulsory... stupidity.” Gandhi is a “fakir and guru.” Easy targets all, and deliciously skewered by a brilliant man. It’s just too bad he didn’t sit and think longer about the bigger questions.

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