



Christopher Hitchens: Godlessness Is Not Great — How Atheism Poisons Everything

And in writing this critical article about bon vivant Christopher Hitchens in the wake of his death this past Thursday, I expect some ridicule as well. Yet I don't think Hitchens would demand to be spared the acidic ink he used to eviscerate others — or that he would have any credibility doing so. Remember that this was the man who, before the gentle Jerry Falwell's body was even cold, said things such as "If he [Falwell] had been given an enema, he could have been buried in a matchbox" and "I wish there was a Hell for Falwell."



For my part, I wouldn't wish eternal damnation on Hitchens; I truly hope he rests in peace. But I can't say the same for his legacy. And when I see the obligatory exaltation of his life's work — with secular icons, the deader they get, the better they were — I think that legacy needs a little damnation.

If we listen to one of Hitchens' eulogizers, Jamie Weinstein, we [should believe](#) that "Hitchens taught us how to live, and how to die." But other than teaching us how to live recklessly and die prematurely, is this really true? With a life defined by self-medication through heavy drinking and smoking, and contempt for those he deemed intellectually inferior, this polemicist hardly showed us how to live. In making his death about an ego-driven battle to the bitter end with people of faith, he hardly taught us how to die. In fact, in seeking to incite instead of sharing insight, in railing instead of relating, in substituting sarcasm for scholarship, he didn't even teach us how to reason.

Yet the most shocking thing — to his faithless flock, anyway — I have to say about Hitchens is that, whatever he was, he was no intellectual. This isn't to say he didn't have an excellent mind. He did. It isn't to say he wasn't learned. He was. Hitchens was one of the foremost essayists of our time, a wordsmith extraordinaire, a keen wit, and a clever debater. But while this is all well and good, it does not a true intellectual make.

The first great indictment of Hitchens' intellectualism is the evidence that he was wholly capable of the quality. He could be eminently reasoned when he was right, such as when he brilliantly dissected demagogue Michael Moore in his [essay](#) "Unfairheit 9/11." Yet when the subject was his *bete' noire*, religion, he became downright demagogic himself. Oh, don't think I accuse him of intentional deceit; if he had been so Machiavellian, he could at least have laid claim to an evil intellectualism. No, leading with his heart rather than head on religion, he led himself astray along with everyone else.

The fact is that while Hitchens considered religion (Christianity in particular) his mortal enemy, he made no serious attempt to understand faith and the faithful. It's not just that he called Mother Teresa a "fraud" and [wrote](#), "[Mother Teresa] was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend of *poverty*. She said that suffering was a gift from God." If he at all had tried to understand the context of Teresa's comment, it might have brought to mind C.S. Lewis's statement, "Pain is the megaphone God uses to



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get through to deaf ears” or the Khalil Gibran quotation, “Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.” It’s not just that he condemned the Catholic Church for alleged complicity with the Nazis. If he would have done his research, he would have discovered that Rabbi David Dalin, Ph.D. [credits](#) WWII-era pontiff Pope Pius XII with saving 800,000 Jews from extermination. He would have learned that prominent Jewish contemporaries of Pius — Golda Meir; Albert Einstein; Chief Rabbi Alexander Safran of Bucharest, Rumania; Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett; and Jewish historian Pinchas Lapide, just to name a handful — roundly praised Pius and the church for its anti-Nazi, humanitarian efforts. It’s not just that his 2009 book *god is not Great* is merely, as an intellectual *secular* friend of mine put it, “a rant.” It’s that while Hitchens was skilled at making audiences confuse well-turned quips with the last word, he was wholly incurious about “First Things.”

In the aforementioned book Hitchens wrote, “Religion is poison because it asks us to give up our most precious faculty, which is that of reason, and to believe things without evidence. It then asks us to respect this, which it calls faith.” Yet, like virtually all atheists — save the self-aware theoretical sociopaths among them — he never applied reason well enough to recognize his own faith.

That is to say, Hitchens claimed that religion was the cause of all sorts of bad things, such as “sexism,” murder, and oppression. Yet can you scientifically prove that anything is bad? If there is no God, it follows that what we label “morality” is just an invention of man. But then what is it but consensus opinion, but perspective? Sure, we may take it as axiomatic that murder is wrong, but an axiom is a *self-evident truth that requires no evidence*. And what was Hitchens’ famous saying?

“That which can be asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence.”

Infamous serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer recognized this as a teen, as he asked his parents rhetorically, “If there’s no God, why can’t I just make up my own rules?” The fact is that just as we wouldn’t consider vanilla ice cream “wrong” or “evil” simply because we learned that 90 percent of the world didn’t like it, it makes no sense to thus label murder *if the only reason we do so* is that most of us prefer that people not kill others in a way we fancy is unjust. If there is no God, “morality” is just values and values are just taste. And when Hitchens axiomatically accepted his morality as something more, it implied God’s existence. Only, while Dahmer figured this out, Hitchens never did.

And did Hitchens also take as axiomatic the wickedness of religion itself? He must have.

Because I never heard him mount an intellectual argument against it.

Instead, religion was the one topic that clearly made the writer seethe with emotion. Unlike my father, an atheist who upon considering my movement toward faith would wistfully say, “I wish it were true; I just can’t see it,” Hitchens billed himself as an “anti-theist” and *didn’t want God to be real*. But why this hostility — some would say fear — of the divine?

Well, a long time ago I discovered something about people hostile toward Christianity. Sure, the more cerebral among them may offer philosophical justifications for their opposition, but at the end of the day their antagonism finds its origin in the emotional realm. To be precise, they hate Christianity not so much because they think it’s wrong. They hate it because it tells them they’re wrong: It condemns their sins as sins.

Scratch the surface of these Christophobes and you find that, almost invariably, their anti-Christian worldview is driven by a desire to justify behaviors they’re attached to and will not relinquish or for which they, in the grip of pride, simply will not repent (it can be hard to admit you’re wrong). And since Christianity condemns these behaviors, they condemn it.



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And while I could, of course, never read Hitchens' mind and heart, he fit this profile. In his 2010 memoir, *Hitch-22*, the writer admits that he had some homosexual affairs while in school. It was also clear that he was a very prideful man, someone who was so busy looking down on others that he was unlikely to look up and see something far superior.

Yet giving his memoirs a title that is a play on *Catch-22* was more fitting than Hitchens ever could have imagined. For his whole world view was a *Catch-22*: He so desperately wanted to convince the world that a belief in God has led to many bad things, but without a belief in God, it's impossible to credibly say that things can be "bad."

This isn't to say that Hitchens was dishonest with us. On the contrary, in moving Right after 9/11 and defending the Iraq War, he seemed honest. In undergoing waterboarding and then reporting that he believed it was, in fact, torture, he seemed honest. In expressing some pro-life views he seemed honest. In sharing some of his most embarrassing sins, he seemed honest. It was this honesty that, as much as anything else, won him admirers. And it's entirely possible that he was honest with everyone — everyone except the one person with whom it would have been most important. Himself.



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