

Christopher Hitchens

In his controversial best-seller *god is not Great*, Christopher Hitchens employs the lowercase g for God throughout the book as an apt symbol of his fierce atheism. He is no fan of any religion. The book, however, also reveals what the Oxford educated Hitchens does believe about the ultimate nature and meaning of life. Isn't that also a faith?

Christopher Hitchens, *Man of Faith*
by Charles Strohmer

I'm not a fan of polemics and sardonic wit, but I tend to set that aside for Christopher Hitchens. In the February and March 2001 issues of *Harper's*, the contrarian essayist argued that Henry Kissinger should be tried as a war criminal, and he has been strongly critical of some of Mother Teresa's influence and of the filmmaker Michael Moore. But his most widely discussed contrarian position was taken in 2001 and 2002 when he joined liberal hawks, neoconservatives, and President George W. Bush to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a position he still strongly defends.

English born, Hitchens is bullish on America. He has lived in the States since 1981, raising his family, and is now an American citizen. His byline can be found virtually any month in any one of dozens of publications, including *Vanity Fair*, *Slate*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Review of Books*. And he knows that how we think is at least as important as what we think.

I did wonder, however, if his provocative book, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, would speak to me. It did, but not in a way I expected, and probably not the way Hitchens expected it would. But first a word from the book. "God did not make 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 both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilizations." That's one of the tamer examples whereby the self-described, life-long anti-religionist let's everyone know he is squarely within the small but noisy club of plain-speaking, metaphysical gamblers whom Anthony Gottlieb calls atheists with attitude, citing Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins. All have written best-sellers that wield an amped-up rationalism to argue from within a naturalistic worldview that God is a myth and religion is manmade, and god help those who don't get that. For his own outing, Hitchens poured scorn on all religions (pagan, Eastern, and Western) and stirred. Little, if anything, of religion remains appreciated by him. His refrain, religion poisons everything, just keeps coming at you.

In *god is not Great*, Hitchens uses his power of rhetoric to recall the sillinesses, abuses, and atrocities that the history of religion is infamous for, from the Aztecs to al Qaeda. He has said in interviews that he put thirty years of work into the book, and it shows. Its three hundred pages may chill the bones of some believers or make atheists of agnostics. His refrain, religion poisons everything, just keeps coming at you.

Everything? Even some atheists don't buy that, including his long-time friend and colleague Salman Rushdie. In a talk at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, Rushdie, who read *History* at King's, said, "To stand in this house is to be reminded of what is most beautiful about religious faith. Its ability to give solace and comfort and to inspire." When asked in an interview with Bill Moyers why he, Rushdie, an atheist, would make such a statement, Rushdie replied, "I do believe that religion at its best has given people profound solace in the travails of life." Hitchens will have none of this. In *god is not Great* he writes: "As for consolation, since religious people so often insist that faith answers this supposed need, I shall simply say that those who offer false consolation are false friends."

Rushdie is not soft on religion. In Grand Rapids some years ago I happened to be among a group to whom Rushdie was shedding light on why, in India, the name of the problem has been religion. Why pick on religion? someone asked. Rushdie had seen why. He was a child in India when the dreadful massacres broke out and continued between Hindu and Muslim families over the partitioning of India and Pakistan. It was a violence made all the more grievous, he told us, because these interfaith communities had lived peaceably together for decades, intermarrying and looking out for one another. But religion "as a totalizing force," Rushdie

explained, had resulted in horrific, ongoing violence and death. Of this period, Rushdie said to Moyers, "You can see how ugly religion can get." To us in Grand Rapids, he said, "Religion is poison in the blood of India." Hitchens, however, has taken that image to the four corners of the earth: religion poisons everything.

Of course, it cannot be tenably argued that religion cannot be directed implicated in a long history of documentable nastiness and much worse besides, but that's a verdict which can be read aloud about every other dimension of life one wants to call into dock. Should the plug be pulled on all politics, or on all education, or on all commerce because their dark sides can be documented? If so, the solution would be a world not just without religion. We'd have to imagine human life in a world without any of its dimensions. This is implied in how god is not Great thinks.

Anyway, certainly there is no excuse for the evils that people commit in the name of their religions, and Hitchens argues that shockingly well. But there is never enough praise for the millions of people of faith who do not go about conspiring to harm or to kill people. They abhor human violence and live peaceably enough in the world, though they know there is always room for improvement. Such believers would say that when they sin, they take responsibility and try to repair the damage they've done. Also, it would take a large library to recall the good that people have done in the name of religion just by their charitable donations, philanthropic enterprises, and individual acts of mercy. The book ignores all this, although a slight but decidedly qualified nod is given to several notables of faith (the Franciscan William Ockham, the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Baptist Martin Luther King Jr).

Although a life-long atheist, Hitchens claims that it was the events of 9/11 that crystalized the threat of religion for him. "I could sense that religion was beginning to reassert its challenge to civil society long before the critical day of September 11, 2001," but the "nineteen suicide murderers of New York and Washington and Pennsylvania were beyond doubt the most sincere believers on those planes." Evidently, sincere believers must be people of violence. This, too, is how the book thinks: there could not have also been "the most sincere" pacifist religionists on those planes.

It should be noted that Hitchens has religious friends, albeit he has "real and serious differences" with them. Also, he respectfully removes his shoes when he visits mosques, and in synagogues he covers his head. And, curiously, he decries the destruction of religious sites, but only because "this is something that no secularist, no atheist, would ever ever allow," as he told Charlie Rose (May 4, 2007). "It horrifies me. We have a natural resistance in ourselves to desecration." This is a very odd "natural resistance" for him to claim. To desecrate is to divest something of its sacred character. Are we to believe that Hitchens sees religious sites as sacred?

It is easy to see why apologists for many faiths are jumping on his chest to see who is best, in book reviews, interviews, and debates. As with Dawkins and others in the club, Hitchens seeks to disprove the veracity of all religion chiefly by citing arguments from modern science and the theory of evolution grounded in materialism. (For anyone interested in irony, his use of science to try to disprove religion mirrors others' uses religion to try to support their "scientific" views.) Not to disappoint, but readers of this essay will have to look elsewhere to find a rehash of any of the many and varied approaches used by apologists to counter the content of god is not Great. Having brought God into the dock, Hitchens has opened the door to discuss his own faith, and that is where I now want to go.

What's puzzling about how Hitchens thinks is that he doesn't seem to think that he holds a faith about ultimate reality. Faith seems to be something most everyone else is afflicted with, but not him. About Einstein: "It is quite clear ... that he put his 'faith,' as always, in the Enlightenment tradition." About totalitarian systems: "whatever outward form they may take, [they] are fundamentalist, and, as we now say, 'faith-based'." When describing the great loss he felt after forsaking Marxism, he says that he writes "as one whose own secular faith has been shaken and discarded, not without pain."

These statements are scattered throughout the book, as are many statements that directly or indirectly reveal what he himself believes to be ultimately true. Early in the book he mentions "[t]he argument with faith," and it is his construction of that argument as a secular atheist that we get in the book. Evidently, however, Hitchens does not see what he's doing as an argument from faith. Very early in the book, on page five, he tries to get round the implications of his (non-Marxist) secular faith as faith by making this

point "about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not belief. Our principles are not a faith." One wonders if this usually careful thinker understands that he has pulled the wool over his eyes with those two sentences, or why he has not seen that they contradict a statement he makes in the middle of the book when dissing miracles: "it takes a certain 'leap' of another kind to find oneself asserting that all religion is made up by ordinary mammals and has no secret or mystery to it." An argument with faith is an argument from faith.

What I'm on about is this. An argument with faith is an argument from faith. Hitchens seems to think that leaning on secular materialism sans Marxism somehow sets him free from the implications of holding an ultimate faith assumption. It ain't gonna happen. It isn't even that atheists make a leap of another kind in their assertions about the nature of life's big questions. It is a leap of the same sort. It is a leap of faith, albeit the object of faith is different than that of believers. For all arguments against faith are arguments ultimately from faith, spring how they may from an atheist.

And, yet, Hitchens seems not to have bricked himself completely in yet. Although one may sense in his rhetoric, such as in the clear denial that his belief is not belief, attempts to fully dissociate himself from whatever existential anxiety he faces at times over his deep faith in secular materialism, he has left himself a few air pockets, such as this one. When he writes about "the unquenchable yearning of the poor and the oppressed to rise about the strictly material world and to achieve something transcendent," in the same breath he continues: "For a good part of my life, I had a share in this idea that I have not yet quite abandoned."

On the other hand, when Hitchens offers a generous, heart-on-sleeve glimpse into how his atheistic faith emerged, it is difficult for readers not to conclude that he has indeed quite abandoned any notions of anything other than the existence of a strictly material world. He begins with a story from his childhood about "a good, sincere, simple woman, of stable and decent faith, named Mrs. Jean Watts." When he was a boy of about nine, attending a school on the edge of Dartmoor, Mrs. Watts was taught Hitchens lessons about nature and the Christian scripture. I can imagine, having visited a friend who lived one step from Dartmoor until her death, the young Hitchens and his fellows thrashing about the fantastically otherworldly beauty of the shrubby moor with Mrs. Watts. Hitchens writes that he liked Mrs. Watts, an affectionate and childless widow who had a friendly sheepdog. The "pious old trout," he writes, "would invite us for sweets and treats after hours to her slightly ramshackle old house near the railway line."

Although he doesn't say how he fared under the spell of the nature lessons while on walkabout through the purple moor grass, bracken ferns, dense gorse, and yellow flowering heather, we are told that he frequently "passed 'top' in scripture class," where he excelled in looking up assigned verses from the Old or New Testament, and then telling the class or the teacher, orally or in writing, what the story and the moral was. "I used to love this exercise.... It was my first instruction in practical and textual criticism. I would read all the chapters that lead up to the verse, and all the ones that followed it, to be sure that I had got the point of the 'original' clue.... However, there came a day when poor, dear Mrs. Watts overreached herself. Seeking ambitiously to fuse her two roles as nature instructor and Bible teacher, she said, 'So you see, children, how powerful and generous God is. He has made all the tress and the grass to be green, which is exactly the color that is most restful to our eyes. Imagine if instead, the vegetation was all purple or orange, how awful that would be.'"

Hitchens then tells of his "conversion" (my word, not his). "I was frankly appalled by what she said. My little ankle-strap sandals curled with embarrassment for her. At the age of nine I had not even a conception of the argument from design, or of Darwinian evolution as its rival, or of the relationship between photosynthesis and chlorophyll. The secrets of the genome were as hidden from me as they were, at the time, to everyone else. I had not then visited scenes of nature where almost everything was hideously indifferent or hostile to human life, if not life itself. I simply knew [his emphasis], almost as if I had privileged access to a higher authority, that my teacher had managed to get everything wrong in just two sentences. The eyes were adjusted to nature, and not the other way round."

The adult Hitchens looks back on this knowing moment and gives it the high register of an "epiphany" (his word for it). Recognizing that he does not "remember everything perfectly, or in order" after it, he writes that he began to notice "other oddities" about religion (some he briefly describes). Then came a time when he was "presented with" what he took to be a huge objection to religious faith, which for him evoked a decisive knowing moment about the existence of God. The headmaster, who led the daily services and prayers, "was giving a no-nonsense talk to some of us one evening. 'You may not see the point of all this now,' he said. 'But you

will one day, when you start to lose loved ones.' Again, I experienced a sheer stab of indignation as well as disbelief. Why, that would be as much as saying that religion might not be true, but never mind that, since it can be relied upon for comfort. How contemptible. I was nearing thirteen, and becoming quite the insufferable little intellectual. I had never heard of Sigmund Freud ? though he would have been very useful to me in understanding the headmaster ? but I had just been given a glimpse of his essay *The Future of an Illusion*."

Of this transformative period of his life, before his "boyish voice had broken," Hitchens writes early in chapter one that he had concluded that religious faith "wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos " and "is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking." This is how he thinks in god is not Great, and it reveals his rejection of what is traditionally called faith. But it is gradually replaced by another faith, another belief in what is taken to be the ultimate source of all reality, secular materialism, as it is typically called today. This faith is the basis of the book's argument against religion.

Atheists, like Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and all religionists, hold deep faith commitments, and it is not uncommon for some people to reach those commitments through a series of soul-stirring personal experiences during childhood that eventually come to be interpreted with a certain ultimate meaning. In *Grand Rapids*, after giving us the wink that we were dealing with "a dreadful old atheist," Rushdie shared how he arrived at his. He grew up in a Muslim home in Bombay (now Mumbai), where his grandfather "was a devout believer and his father was a scholar of Islam but not religious." The home was a model of intellectual openness and "friendly to lively debates about religion," in which the young Rushdie was free to vent his agnosticism and never received answers that he considered sufficient to justify the horrible violence occurring nearby, year after year, between Muslims and Hindus in the name of their religions.

At age 14, he was sent from Bombay to Rugby School in England. There, Rushdie had his own decisive knowing moment. He explained that everyday in Latin class (I think it was; apologies for reconstructing this from scribbled, handwritten notes) he would get completely bored and stare out the window across the green to "the ugliest chapel I had ever seen." After considering this ugly sight for many weeks he asked himself, What kind of God would let his followers build such an ugly house to him, and why would God want to live in such an ugly house? "After class I ate a ham sandwich for the first time in my life," he told us, "and there were no thunderbolts. That day I became a disbeliever in God."

I no longer think about my own decisive knowing moment very much, for it took place decades ago, but Hitchens reminded me of its significance through his own story. Mine begins with the Catholic Church. Its religious teaching loomed large in my childhood when at age five I was fed into the Catholic elementary school system a couple blocks from our house in Detroit. Every subject was taught by formidable nuns who demanded our undivided attention and meticulous conformity day after day. Their tasks included our religious education and enforcing our attendance at mass every weekday morning before classes began.

For this child, what amounted to nearly an entire working day every week (Sunday mass added an hour) kneeling in a pew before a priest who was unintelligible to me, and not just because the mass was in Latin, and then that same week, but across the street from the church in school, having to memorize answers from the catechism and be regularly tested on it, and this training went on week after week and month after month for years, well, religion wore me out. By the time I was nine or ten, I had such a yawning belief in God that I might as well have been raised Protestant!. After all, Rome wanted me to accept that none of the Protestant boys and girls I played with everyday in my neighborhood after school were going to heaven when they grew old and died. The notion struck me as inconceivable. After all, they believed in Jesus and attended church on Sundays just like I did.

Then one day a bunch of us were taken to the Detroit Zoo. I don't think it was a school field trip because I don't remember any nuns being present, so I'm assuming it was one of those neighborhood, Saturday outings organized by some parents. But I do remember excitedly queuing up at the entrance, which in those days was an imposing concrete archway. Running right the way across the arc of this entryway above our heads some unfamiliar artwork held my attention. I tried to take in its meaning, and then the penny dropped. I was stunned. The Zoo expected me to believe that? No way. I stared in disbelief. The Zoo had got it wrong.

I had encountered for the first time a huge installation of the "ascent of man," as I later learned was the name of this illustration of human evolution. From out of the biotic soup we rose, up a gently sloping hill in various stages of bent progression until, voila, man

upright. But that wasn't how we had got here. That was suddenly and strongly the silliest thing in the world to me, and here was a trusted institution promoting it. I remember being profoundly disappointed that the Zoo was trying to get me to believe that there was no God.

I also noticed that my belief God suddenly had become sure. Of course I could not have explained how this now-quite-real-to-me God had put the world here and us in it, nor did I seek any theological understanding about this God's nature or about what had just taken place, for I did not report the experience to my teachers or parents. I kept my decisive knowing moment to myself. Neither did the experience open me to Catholic religious life, which like attrition warfare finally did me in. When, at age fourteen, I was given the choice to enter ninth grade at a public school or switch to another Catholic school, I fled. I had no compact with religion. Religion hadn't convinced me of God's existence. I am reminded of the Capaldi and Winwood lyric, "spirit is something that no one destroys."

Both Hitchens and I at about the same time in our lives (we're nearly the same age) had moments of decisive intuitive knowing that that we interpreted differently as enlightenment about the nature of ultimate reality, and our beliefs about God have traveled with us down the quite different paths we have trod as a result of that difference. Such decisive knowing moments, however, make believers of the people who have them, whether they call themselves atheists afterward or not. People today typically assume that decisive moments like mine represent a leap of faith but that ones like the one Hitchens describes of himself do not, as if nothing about life's ultimate nature or meaning is faith-based in a secular worldview. But that is to make a category mistake.

We believers admit that ours is a faith-based assumption, but not in the sense of a blind leap of faith, as is also typically thought today. We believe that faith has its reasons. The atheist's disbelief in God is also a faith, a faith on the highest kind. It is not a faith in technology (I'll trust the tensile strength of the steel cable that is hauling me up from street level forty stories in my high-rise). It is not a faith in people (I'll be able to stand safely on the subway platform after a ten block walk from my high-rise because it's statistically probable that most people are decent enough). Rather, it is a faith about the big questions: where we came from, who we are, what will occur at death. In other words, who or what we are ultimately answerable to, ourselves, the universe, or God?

It most certainly is true, however, that the initial decisive knowing moment is not the end faith. Atheists and other believers alike will struggle with life's big questions, both inside their own heads and with adversarial positions from opposing camps. Some may eventually switch camps. Hitchens has not, yet, but throughout god is not Great he discloses many running battles he has had.

Whereas Hitchens traveled into and then out of Marxism, in my late-teens I set myself on a self-imposed course of light reading of the world's great philosophers. I started from antiquity and finished up with Nietzsche, who tried hard to sponge away the horizon for me but could not. During those years I did find myself becoming the occasional agnostic but never an atheist. Well, how could I? The daily practicum of New Age philosophy that I also had seriously committed myself to had me trying to become God. Years of philosophical eclecticism, however, left me spiritually barren. The hallucinatory effects of the desertification ended when I turned 26.

A major cultural event was taking place throughout America, the celebration of the country's bicentennial birthday. While everyone from Bar Harbor to Laguna Beach was partying heartily, egged on by politicians, the media, and event hucksters, I was deep into asceticism, living completely alone, oblivious to celebrations of any sort, and the decisive knowing moment at the Detroit Zoo about God appeared to have run its course.

But then over a three-day period, and completely unlooked-for, I had experiences well beyond anything that might be concluded as being about the general existence of God. I say experiences, but it was more like one long experience and it was something quite other than what could be called a decisive knowing moment about a general existence of God. I had a power-encounter with God in which I now knew that the message of the gospel was true. The alphabet of sin that I used to hear about but had concluded was silly had been true all along. I was shocked. I was a sinner who needed saving, and the gospel (it means "good news") was that saving. Today, more than thirty years later, despite the occasional heavy weather, the reality of Jesus Christ's forgiving love that broke in on me remains as strong and as relevant to me as day itself. It really was like being born. How may I honestly deny that?

We should not expect Hitchens to deny where he is at, either. "We are reconciled to living only once," Hitchens writes. Perhaps because atheistic materialism concerns itself only with what is seen, Hitchens has concluded that it requires no faith to believe or to preach. Yet even the very statement "we are reconciled to living only once" is a faith assumption about the ultimate nature and meaning of life.

Atheists may not wish to call their beliefs about life's big questions a faith, yet still they have not proven ? in the way that they would most assuredly like it to be proved ? scientifically ? that the end of one's life in this world is the end of one's life, full stop. I am reminded of the Capaldi and Winwood lyric, "spirit is something that no one destroys."

Copyright. Permission to reprint required.

Discuss the topic here