

# The Unbeliever

## Hitchens argues that religion is man-made and murderous.

Reviewed by Stephen Prothero  
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### *GOD IS NOT GREAT*

*How Religion Poisons Everything*

By Christopher Hitchens

307 pp. \$24.99

A century and a half ago Pope Pius IX published the Syllabus of Errors, a rhetorical tour de force against the high crimes and misdemeanors of the modern world. *God Is Not Great*, by the British journalist and professional provocateur Christopher Hitchens, is the atheists' equivalent: an unrelenting enumeration of religion's sins and wickedness, written with much of the rhetorical pomp and all of the imperial condescension of a Vatican encyclical.

Hitchens, who once described Mother Teresa as "a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud," is notorious for making mincemeat out of sacred cows, but in this book it is the sacred itself that is skewered. Religion, Hitchens writes, is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children." Channeling the anti-supernatural spirits of other acolytes of the "new atheism," Hitchens argues that religion is "man-made" and murderous, originating in fear and sustained by brute force. Like Richard Dawkins, he denounces the religious education of young people as child abuse. Like Sam Harris, he fires away at the Koran as well as the Bible. And like Daniel Dennett, he views faith as wish-fulfillment.

Historian George Marsden once described fundamentalism as evangelicalism that is mad about something. If so, these evangelistic atheists have something in common with their fundamentalist foes, and Hitchens is the maddest of the lot. Protestant theologian John Calvin was "a sadist and torturer and killer," Hitchens writes, and the Bible "contain[s] a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre."

As should be obvious to any reasonable person -- unlike Hitchens I do not exclude believers from this category -- horrors and good deeds are performed by believers and non-believers alike. But in Hitchens's Manichaean world, religion does little good and secularism hardly any evil. Indeed, Hitchens arrives at the conclusion that the secular murderousness of Stalin's purges wasn't really secular at all, since, as he quotes George Orwell, "a totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy." And in North Korea today, what has gone awry is not communism but Confucianism.

Hitchens is not so forgiving when it comes to religion's transgressions. He aims his poison pen at the Dalai Lama, St. Francis and Gandhi. Among religious leaders only the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. comes off well. But in the gospel according to Hitchens whatever good King did accrues to his humanism rather than his Christianity. In fact, King was not actually a Christian at all,

argues Hitchens, since he rejected the sadism that characterizes the teachings of Jesus. "No supernatural force was required to make the case against racism" in postwar America, writes Hitchens. But he's wrong. It was the prophetic faith of black believers that gave them the strength to stand up to the indignities of fire hoses and police dogs. As for those white liberals inspired by Paine, Mencken and Hitchens's other secular heroes, well, they stood down.

Hitchens says a lot of true things in this wrongheaded book. He is right that you can be moral without being religious. He is right to track contemporary sexism and sexual repression to ancient religious beliefs. And his attack on "intelligent design" is not only convincing but comical, coursing as it does through the crude architecture of the appendix and our inconvenient "urinogenital arrangements."

What Hitchens gets wrong is religion itself.

Hitchens claims that some of his best friends are believers. If so, he doesn't know much about his best friends. He writes about religious people the way northern racists used to talk about "Negroes" -- with feigned knowing and a sneer. *God Is Not Great* assumes a childish definition of religion and then criticizes religious people for believing such foolery. But it is Hitchens who is the naïf. To read this oddly innocent book as gospel is to believe that ordinary Catholics are proud of the Inquisition, that ordinary Hindus view masturbation as an offense against Krishna, and that ordinary Jews cheer when a renegade Orthodox rebbe sucks the blood off a freshly circumcised penis. It is to believe that faith is always blind and rituals always empty -- that there is no difference between taking communion and drinking the Kool-Aid (a beverage Hitchens feels compelled to mention no fewer than three times).

If this is religion, then by all means we should have less of it. But the only people who believe that religion is about believing blindly in a God who blesses and curses on demand and sees science and reason as spawns of Satan are unlettered fundamentalists and their atheistic doppelgangers. Hitchens describes the religious mind as "literal and limited" and the atheistic mind as "ironic and inquiring." Readers with any sense of irony -- and here I do not exclude believers -- will be surprised to see how little inquiring Hitchens has done and how limited and literal is his own ill-prepared reduction of religion.

Christopher Hitchens is a brilliant man, and there is no living journalist I more enjoy reading. But I have never encountered a book whose author is so fundamentally unacquainted with its subject. In the end, this maddeningly dogmatic book does little more than illustrate one of Hitchens's pet themes -- the ability of dogma to put reason to sleep. ·

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