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The Rise of the Antitheist

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Hitchens, born in England in 1949, made his reputation as a man of the radical left. At one point, he clearly identified himself as a Trotskyist, and his formative intellectual influences have included radical theorists such as Noam Chomsky. Nevertheless, the events of September 11, 2001 transformed Hitchens’ worldview. He calls for a firm line of opposition and military action against Islamic extremism and every other form of terrorism, as well as what he calls “Theo-Fascism.”

Nevertheless, the most interesting dimension of Christopher Hitchens’ thought is not the transformation of his political theory, but the contours of his radical atheism. In an interview with *World* magazine, published in its June 3, 2006 edition, Hitchens declares himself the enemy of all religious belief.

When asked what he hates, Hitchens responds: “Religion. I quite simply identify it with barbarism and backwardness and human stupidity. The methods of theocracy in action are a cult of death.”

In his 2001 book, *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, Hitchens explains his opposition to belief in God in much greater detail. Baptized as an Anglican and educated in a Methodist boarding school, Hitchens was raised in the context of institutional Christianity. He appreciated the religious education he received as a matter of cultural influence, but suggests that he was never tempted to take the truth claims of Christianity seriously.

He recalls: “I was sitting in a Bible-study class at the age of about ten (“divinity,” as we called it, begun as mandatory as daily church attendance, and one of my favorite subjects then as now) when the teacher began to hymn the work of God in Nature. How wonderful it was, she said, that trees and vegetation were green; the most restful color to our eyes. Imagine if instead the woods and grasses were purple, or orange. I knew nothing about chlorophyll and phototropism at that age, still less from the Argument from Design or the debate on Creationism versus Evolution. I merely remember thinking, with my childish and unformed context; Oh, don’t be silly.”

Hitchens distills his thought in *Letters to a Young Contrarian* – a book intended as a briefing for young intellectual skeptics. Hitchens suggests that they might think of themselves as dissenters or freethinkers, but his choice of the word “Contrarian” to describe himself is rather fitting. Hitchens clearly enjoys upsetting the apple cart of ideas.

As he briefed his imaginary young contrarian reader, Hitchens reveals the contours of his thought concerning God.

“You seem to have guessed, from some remarks I have already made in passing, that I am not a religious believer. In order to be absolutely honest, I should not leave you with the impression that I am part of the generalised agnosticism of our culture. I am not even an atheist so much as I am an Antitheist; I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influence of churches and the effects of religious belief, are positively harmful. Reviewing the false claims of religion I do not wish, as some sentimental materialists affect to wish, that they were true. I do not envy believers their faith. I am relieved to think that the whole story is a sinister fairy tale; life would be miserable if what the faithful affirmed was actually the case.”

One can hardly accuse Hitchens of mincing words. He opposes and dismisses all belief in God as harmful, dangerous, subversive of the common good, and delusional. He goes further than many atheists in rejecting any form of sentimentality concerning the loss of faith. In this, Hitchens sets himself at some distance from the skeptics and mild atheists common to the British intelligentsia. Hitchens is not only an unbeliever – he is the enemy of belief in God.

For the most part, Hitchens does seem to understand what he rejects. He wants nothing to do with an omniscient and omnipotent Deity. “Well, there may be people who wish to live their lives under a cradle-to-grave divine supervision; a permanent surveillance and monitoring. But I cannot imagine anything more horrible or grotesque. It would be worse, in a way, if the supervision was benign.”

As Christopher Hitchens sees it, any form of belief in God is absolutely opposed to true human freedom. The very existence of God would be, he asserts, a virtual denial of human freedom and autonomy.

Furthermore, he argues that belief in God compromises the intellect of believers. “I have met many brave men and women, morally superior to myself, whose courage in adversity derives from their faith. But whenever they have chosen to speak or write about it, I have found myself appalled by the instant decline of their intellectual and moral standards.”

Yet, Hitchens’ main case against belief in God is based in his rejection of the very possibility of divine revelation. He asserts that believers in God must pose an arrogant and presumptive truth claim.

As he argues: “This arrogance and illogic is inseparable even from the meekest and most altruistic religious affirmations. A true believer must believe that he or she is here for a purpose and is an object of real interest to a Supreme Being; he or she must also claim to have at least an inkling of what the Supreme Being desires. I have been called arrogant myself in my time, and I hope to earn the title again, but to claim that I am privy to the secrets of the universe and its creator – that’s beyond my conceit. I therefore have no choice but to find something suspect even in the humblest believer, let alone in the great law-givers and edict-makers of whose ‘flock’ (and what a revealing thought *that* is) they form a part.”

In that paragraph, Hitchens gets right to the heart of the issue. The question of belief in God is inescapably linked to the question of revelation. He is on absolutely firm intellectual ground when he insists that anyone who claims to believe in God must “also claim to have at least an inkling of what that Supreme Being desires.”

Of course, Hitchens sees all claims to divine revelation as evidence of “arrogance and illogic.” Nevertheless, he does understand the basic structure of the Christian truth claim – a claim that the one true and living God has indeed spoken and has revealed Himself to His human creatures.

This argument can be turned on its head, of course. If God *has* revealed himself, we are then intellectually obligated to accept His revelation and to believe in Him. Hitchens accuses believers of moving from the conclusion of faith to its evidence, but he created his own intellectual problem by dismissing the very possibility of revelation without argument.

The important dimension of Hitchens’ argument is his recognition that belief in God and confidence in divine revelation are inseparable. This is a point that seems all too often to be missed by some theologians. In contrast to the vapid and vacuous “spiritualities” which populate America’s postmodern religious scene, Hitchens understands that a faith based on revelation is the only faith worth *rejecting*.

Hitchens is indeed a contrarian intellectual, as well as an atheist and antitheist. His rejection of Christianity extends to a rejection of the logic of atonement, redemption, and punishment. Nevertheless, his own contrarian line of thinking can help Christians to understand what is at stake in the great intellectual conflict of our times.

At the center of this conflict stands the doctrine of revelation and the existence of Scripture as the Word of God. Without this Word, we would have no basis for belief in God, Christ, the Gospel, or any hope for the future.

As has been so often the case throughout the history of the church, the sworn enemies of the Gospel often assist the believing Church to understand the crucial intellectual issues of the day. Indeed, many of these sworn enemies, understanding what truly is at stake, become converts to Christianity over time. We can only pray that this will be the case with Christopher Hitchens. In becoming a Christian believer, he would truly demonstrate his contrarian attitude against the Spirit of the Age.

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