

Christopher Hitchens: Religion Poisons Everything

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By **Jon Wiener**

In his latest book, "God Is Not Great," Christopher Hitchens makes the case against religion and for "free inquiry and open-mindedness." Hitchens, of course, is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, a visiting professor of liberal studies at the New School, and author of many books. He spoke recently with Truthdig's Jon Wiener.

Jon Wiener: You show in your book how many horrible things men have done because of religion. In Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade and Baghdad, men kill other men, and say God told them to do it. But why blame God for the bad things that men do?

Christopher Hitchens: I don't blame God. I blame religion. I don't believe there is such a thing as God. Religion makes people do wicked things they wouldn't ordinarily do. It doesn't make them behave better—it makes them behave worse. You couldn't get people to hack away at the genitals of their newborn children if they didn't think there was a religious obligation to do so. The licenses for genocide, slavery, racism, are all right there in the holy text.

Wiener: Yes, the Old Testament is full of these horrors. But it also contains the Ten Commandments, prohibiting killing, stealing, adultery, and lying—isn't this a good thing?

Hitchens: No. it's not. Because these are prefaced by a series of injunctions to fear a permanent, unalterable dictatorship. The first three commandments say "just realize who's boss." Let's assume the story of Moses is true, even though archaeologists have utterly discredited it. Do our Jewish ancestors have to put up with the insult from us at this late stage that, until they got to Sinai, they thought murder and theft and perjury were OK? Of course not. There would have been no such people if they thought that. There has never been a society or civilization that did warrant those things. And you don't need divine urging to see that they're wrong yourself.

Wiener: There's one other commandment, the tenth—thou shalt not covet.

Hitchens: That is a particularly horrible crime of dictatorship, namely the crime of thought. It says you can't even think about this. To say you're not allowed to steal your neighbor's possessions—including his wife—that's one thing. But to say you're not allowed to envy your neighbor is absurd. It's impossible. And the spirit of envy can lead to ambition and innovation and initiative. I would say that's an immoral commandment.

Wiener: Let's talk about Islam. You point out that the 9/11 terrorists said Allah wanted them to fly planes into buildings. But there are something like a billion Muslims in the world today, and only 19 of them flew planes into the World Trade Center. Why hold all of Islam responsible for the acts of those 19?

Hitchens: I don't. Islam in fact has one advantage over Christianity—it doesn't have a papacy. There is no center that can say "we condemn this" or "we support this," the way the church supported Franco Spain and said prayers in Germany on Hitler's birthday by order of the Vatican. But the centers of legislation and authority in the Islamic world, such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo, have a lot of difficulty condemning suicide bombing. In fact they've never got around to doing it. They can't seem to condemn even the blowing up of other Muslims—in Iraq, for instance, where they are blowing up each



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other's children and each other's holy places. No words seem to come from either Sunni or Shiite religious authorities there or elsewhere in the world saying "this is wrong." That's because they don't really think it is. If it's done for their cause, they surreptitiously sympathize with it, and you can detect that surreptitious sympathy if you read any of the statements from the Muslim authorities. That's a grave crisis for Islam—and for us, too.

Wiener: Are you saying Islam is worse than other religions? It seems to me your position has to be that all religions are equally bad.

Hitchens: The position I take in the book is, of course, that all religion is equally stupid and an expression of contempt for reason and an exaltation of the idea of faith, of believing things without evidence. But that doesn't mean I think a Quaker and a Bin Laden are exactly the same. They all have individual disadvantages. I would say that, with Catholicism, the mad insistence on celibacy is peculiarly deforming. With Islam, the problem is that it claims to be the last and final revelation. All that's required now is that everybody realize the truth of this book. That's extremely dangerous preaching, in my opinion.

Wiener: Don't Christian fundamentalists say pretty much the same thing?

Hitchens: Yes they do. But I think there is a real problem with Islam of intolerance in that way—it forbids itself to have a reformation. That's fanatical and actually murderous right now.

Wiener: Is the problem you have been describing religion per se, or is it the monotheistic religions of the West: Judaism, Christianity, Islam? Are Eastern religions different and better? Especially Buddhism, with its compassion for all living things; especially Tibetan Buddhism, with its impressive leader, the Dalai Lama.

Hitchens: The Dalai Lama claims to be a hereditary god and a hereditary king. I don't think any decent person can assent to that proposition. You should take a look at what Tibet was like when it was run by the lamas. Buddhism has some of the same problems as Western religion. Zen was the official ideology of Hirohito's fascism that was used to conquer and reduce the rest of Asia to subservience. The current dictatorship in Burma is officially Buddhist. The Buddhist forces in Sri Lanka are the ones who began the horrific civil war there with their pogroms against the Tamils in the 1950s and 1960s. Lon Nol's army in Cambodia was officially Buddhist.

Wiener: Let's talk about the U.S. Polls show that 94 per cent of Americans believe in God, and 89 per cent believe in heaven; of those, three-fourths think they will go to heaven, but only 2 per cent think they will go to hell. This seems laughable, but what's the harm in people believing they will go to heaven after they die—and see their mothers there?

Hitchens: All you have to do is promise them 72 virgins, and they'll kill to get there. That's what's wrong with it, along with the fact that it's a solipsistic delusion. And the spreading of delusion in the end isn't a good thing, because credulous and deluded people are easy to exploit. People arise who are aware of that fact.

If belief in heaven was private, like the tooth fairy, I'd say fine. But tooth fairy supporters don't come around to your house and try to convert you. They don't try to teach your children stultifying pseudo-science in school. They don't try to prevent access to contraception. The religious won't leave us alone. These are not just private delusions, they're ones they want to inflict on other people.

Wiener: Of course, you are right that we have Pat Robertson and, until recently, Jerry Falwell, saying horrible things in the name of religion. Both welcomed 9/11 as payback for America's tolerance of homosexuality and abortion. But we have also had Martin Luther King and Daniel Berrigan and William Sloane Coffin. Why not conclude that religion can lead people to do good things as well as bad?

Hitchens: Let me start with a question: Can you name a moral action taken, or a moral statement made, by a believer that could not have been made by an atheist? I don't think so. I'll take your case at its strongest—that would be Dr. King. Fortunately for us, he wasn't really a Christian, because if he had followed the preachments in Exodus about the long march to freedom, he would have invoked the right that the Bible gives to take the land of others, to enslave other tribes, to kill their members, to rape their women, and to destroy them down to their uttermost child. Fortunately for us, he didn't take that route.

The people who actually organized the March on Washington, Bayard Rustin and A. Phillip Randolph, were both secularists and socialists. The whole case for the emancipation of black America had already been made perfectly well by secularists. I don't particularly object to the tactic of quoting the Bible against the white Christian institutions that maintained at first slavery and then segregation. But there's no authority in the Bible for civil rights—none whatever. There is authority for slavery and segregation.

The widespread view among white liberals that black people in some way prefer to be led by preachers is a condescending one. It leaves out heroes of the movement like Rustin and Randolph, and has licensed the assumption that people like Jesse Jackson and, much worse, a complete charlatan and thug like Al Sharpton, are somehow OK because they've got the word "Reverend" in front of their names. That's done enormous damage, not just to black people, but to the country in general. It's the Falwell equivalent.

Wiener: What about practical politics for progressives: since almost all Americans believe in God, for progressives to attack, ridicule and dismiss religion as you do is political suicide that will ensure religious Republican domination forever. Instead, we must argue that God is *not* on their side, and we must respect the fact that people belong to different communities of belief.

Hitchens: If you want to argue that God is not on their side, you can't argue "that's because he's on my side"—you have to argue there is no such person. Marxism begins by arguing that people have to emancipate their minds. The beginning of that emancipation is outgrowing of religion. If religion were true, there would be no need for politics; you'd only need to have faith.

Wiener: I know you've often been told that everybody has faith in something—for most Americans, it's Jesus; for you, it's reason and science.

Hitchens: That's not faith, by definition. You can't have faith in reason. It's not a dogma. It's a conviction that this is the only way that discovery and progress can be made.

Wiener: The intelligent person's argument for religion is that religion and rationality don't compete—they deal with different parts of life. Religion answers questions that science doesn't: Why do the innocent suffer? What is the meaning of life? What happens when we die?

Hitchens: I wish it was true. But, in fact, religion doesn't keep its part of the bargain here. It incessantly seeks to limit first discoveries and innovation in science and then their application. Galileo, of course, but more recently discoveries about the possibilities of limiting the size of your family. Really, they don't want us to reconsider our place in the universe, because if we face the fact that we live on a tiny speck in an immense universe, it's going to be difficult to convince people it was all created with that tiny speck in mind. It's not possible to believe that nonsense if you have any interest in science.

Wiener: The final killer argument of your critics is that Hitler and Stalin were not religious. The worst crimes of the 20th century did not have a religious basis. They came from political ideology.

Hitchens: That's easy. Hitler never abandoned Christianity and recommends Catholicism quite highly in "Mein Kampf." Fascism, as distinct from National Socialism, was in effect a Catholic movement.

Wiener: What about Stalin? He wasn't religious.

Hitchens: Stalin—easier still. For hundreds of years, millions of Russians had been told the head of state should be a man close to God, the czar, who was head of the Russian Orthodox Church as well as absolute despot. If you're Stalin, you shouldn't be in the dictatorship business if you can't exploit the pool of servility and docility that's ready-made for you. The task of atheists is to raise people above that level of servility and credulity. No society has gone the way of gulags or concentration camps by following the path of Spinoza and Einstein and Jefferson and Thomas Paine.