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The Future of an Illusion

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# Christopher Hitchens

## *The future of an illusion*

### 1

Karl Marx was neither a determinist nor a vulgar materialist and never said that religion was “the opium of the people.” What he did say, in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, was that it was at once the expression of inhuman conditions and the protest against them: “the heart of a heartless world; the sigh of the oppressed creature; the spirit of a spiritless situation.” Secular criticism, he said, had endeavored to “pluck the flowers from the chain, not in order that man shall wear the chain without consolation but so that he can break the chain and cull the living flower.” It was only in this context and with these metaphors that he described religion as an opiate, and even then not as we would now define a mind-dulling (or mind-expanding) ‘controlled substance,’ but rather as an analgesic on the Victorian model.

On his analysis, the likelihood that religion would ever wither away or go into a decline must be reckoned as very slight. However, the possibility of its becoming a private belief or a purely

personal source of comfort – rather than a matter of state and society – should not be dismissed either. Freud only extended this idea in his celebrated essay *The Future of an Illusion*, by pointing out the extraordinarily close correlation between doctrines of immortality and redemption, and the inextinguishable human desire to defeat or transcend death. For him, faith was ineradicable as long as humans were in fear of personal annihilation – a contingency that seems likely to persist. But the strength and tenacity of the belief did not make it any less of an illusion

### 2

The moral superiority of atheism (and also of what I prefer to call anti-theism and has been called miso-theism) is less often stressed than its intellectual superiority. The intellectual advantage hardly needs elaboration: we do not normally accept unprovable assertions at face value, however devoutly they are maintained, and we possess increasingly convincing explanations of matters that once lay within the province of the supernatural. Skepticism and inquiry and doubt are the means by which we have established such a civilization as we possess; professions of sheer faith are a hindrance to investigations both moral and material.

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However, there are some moral claims for atheism that may be worth putting forward. First, and most conspicuously, the atheist cannot be entirely happy with his conclusion. To be resigned to death and extinction is not always a consolation even to the Stoic – though it does have its satisfactions. Among these satisfactions, at any rate, one can include the reasonable certainty that mere wish-thinking did not help to stack one's intellectual deck. Second, the atheist can expect to be free of the pervasive solipsism that disfigures religious thought. If an earthquake should occur, or a comet fill the sky, he can be sure that this development is not all, indeed not at all, about his own brief existence and vain human aspirations. W. H. Auden put it deftly when he wrote (as a hopeful Anglican):

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well,  
That for all they care, I can go to hell.

### 3

We live in a time when physics is much more awe-inspiring than any faith or any man-made deity, and when Galileo's realization – that the solar system is not earth-centered – has itself been eclipsed and re-eclipsed, so that we can see the solar system itself as a dim and flickering bulb in an unimaginable sweep of galaxies and constellations. Paradoxically, it is those who calmly recognize that we are alone who may have the better chance of investing human life with such meaning as it might be made to possess.

Those who decide to try and lead ethical lives without an invisible authority are also 'blessed' in another way, because they do not require a church, a priesthood, or a reinforcing dogma or catechism. All that is needed is some elementary fortitude, and the willingness to follow the flickering candle of reason wherever it may lead. Despite many re-

cent fluctuations in religious fervor and allegiance, the evidence is that millions of adults now live this way (probably including in their number a fair proportion of the congregations at churches, mosques, and synagogues). The Dutch, by some accounts, now have an actual secularist majority. In Northern Ireland recently, despite British government inducements to register as Protestant or Catholic in the census – if only on the false promise of compensation for past wrongs – 12 percent of respondents declined to adopt a confessional allegiance. For me, however, the country with the most impressive and intelligent secularist movement is India – most recent victim of the stupidity and cruelty of mobilized faith.

### 4

Those who write about religion and who tell me that it stands for, or substitutes for, various nationalist or emotional or historical needs, are telling me what I already know and what nobody is trying to deny. Those who maintain that it is a strong and continuing force in human affairs are simply bashing their shoulders against an open door: I knew that too. Those who write about religion and tell me that "God does not merely create something other than himself – he also gives himself to this other," are claiming to know something that they cannot possibly know. If I made a concession in an argument with the religious, it would be this: I am willing to admit that there may be unknowable things. It's a poor return for this admission to be told that the devout already know the mind of god. That was the ground of argument to begin with – and what's the point of an ineffable deity if he can be so readily comprehended by banal mammals like ourselves? At least the faithful should be expected to display a little reverence

here. But apparently they can't wait to seize their little shred of local and temporal authority.

And why is that? Their god already controls the past and the future, and has dominion over paradise and hints on how to get there. His kingdom, as the Christians say, is not of this world. But in which world does religion actually exact the demand for obedience? In this one. How confoundedly odd.

Now you may choose to tell me that Osama bin Laden (say) is upset about Jerusalem and Mecca and Medina, and still raw about the Crusades, and that this analysis of his agitation explains his appeal. What could be more intelligible, or more trite? But how would it explain his *theology*? According to him, all is decided by heaven, and the true believer is assured eternal luxury and congratulation: a vast promise compared to the brevity and vicissitude of this vale of tears. Versions of this fantasy appear in all creeds, with discrepant degrees of literal-mindedness depending on the date and on the society.

If I truly had such a belief, it would make me happy, or at least would have a chance of doing so. But does it bring contentment to its adherents? Not at all! They can know no peace until they have coerced everyone else into sharing their good news. Does this argue for confidence in the belief? Not self-evidently. My provisional conclusion, then, is that the religious impulse lies close to the root of the authoritarian, if not the totalitarian, personality.

## 5

Some obvious connections can't avoid notice even from the most casual observer: religious absolutism makes a good match with tribal feeling and with sexual repression – two of the base ingredients of the fascistic style. This is

also true of the 'secular' forms taken by the religious mentality. Ostensibly irreligious despotisms based on faith and praise and adoration invariably take the form of cult worship. North Korea today manifests this idolatry to an extent not attained even by Hitler or Stalin or Mao. But this observation does not just mean what many take it to mean – that fanaticism or tyranny can take an atheist form. It means, rather, that fanaticism and tyranny have a strong if not ineluctable tendency to take a theistic form. The connection between Stalin and the predecessor system that regarded the Czar in the light of the divine is fairly obvious. China and especially North Korea can be shown to have modeled their precepts of authority on Confucianism. The Japanese emperor-worshiping militarists took the principles of Zen as their inspiration and employed them as a training manual. (See the fascinating new study *Zen at War*, written by Brian Victoria, a Buddhist savant.) Hitler was a pagan in some ways but he got the Roman Catholic bishops to celebrate his birthday from the pulpit every year. The other fascist leaders in Europe – Mussolini, Pavelic in Croatia, Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, Horthy in Hungary – were in more or less explicit alliance with the Vatican, and one of them (Father Tiso in Slovakia) was actually in holy orders.

Ah, but what about Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi? I would reply, first, that if religious believers are not willing to accept the connection between faith and horror as necessary, they should be careful in proposing any close connection between faith and good works. The emancipation of black America and the independence of India were not sacred causes: they were fought for by many people of no religion (and opposed by many people of profound faith). No supernatural commitment

was or is necessary in either case, and no religious claim is vindicated by it. Take the references to god out of Dr. King's speeches and they lose none of their moral force. Take the ostentatious Hinduism out of Gandhi's worldview and you increase the chance that sectarian fratricide in India could have been averted. In neither outcome, in any case, can it sensibly be argued that god intervened in human affairs.

Again, those who wish that he would had better be careful what they ask for. If their god can claim credit for miracles, then he cannot avoid responsibility for many other drastic occurrences. I would think it base and illogical to argue that suffering disproves the existence of god: there seems to be no ground for connecting the two ideas in the first place. But if I were arguing for the existence of a god, I would be careful to avoid citing happiness or good fortune, lest I arouse that same base and illogical (and corollary) thought in the minds of the unconvinced.

## 6

If Karl Rahner really said that "the mystery enfolds [me] in an ultimate and radical love which commends itself to [me] as salvation and as the real meaning of [my] existence," then why should he not be asked how anybody can know this? His statement is inoffensive enough: it does not propose a jihad or a crusade or an Inquisition. But it is circular and meaningless. So is his related claim that "The world receives God, the infinite and the ineffable mystery, to such an extent that he himself becomes its innermost life." This is just as interesting as being told by some saffron-cloaked mendicant that all things are part of the great whole. Few of us have not had some moment of 'transcendence': a feeling that there is more to life than the

strictly material. And few of us have not been tempted by harmless superstition: a sensation that something may have happened for a purpose. However, nobody has proposed any nontautological reason to suppose that this is more than an emotion, and it is quite possible to survive cheerfully enough, once having recognized that the problem of interpretation that superstition proposes has no resolution.

I was being intentionally gentle when I referred to superstition as 'harmless.' I suppose I mean that it is forgivable to be impressed by, say, apparently fateful coincidences, or moments of unusual beauty in the natural order. However, while credulity and solipsism are to be found in every person, it is not usually thought advisable to praise someone for his credulous and solipsistic aspects. It is, rather, the work of education and civilization to train the mind to employ reason and to respect evidence, and to train the individual to be modest. Somebody claiming to detect a divine design in respect of himself may phrase the idea in terms of humility, even submissiveness. But this false modesty is, as always with false modesty, a symptom of the most majestic self-centeredness. ("Don't mind me - I'm just busy doing god's work.") In individuals, I must say that I find this mainly irritating. But by all means let them devote some of their day to prayer and reflection, and to an awareness of the transience of all things.

Religion, however, is not the recognition of this private and dutiful attitude. It is its organized eruption from the private into the public realm. It is the elevation and collectivization of credulity and solipsism, and the arrangement of these into institutional dogma and creed. It is the attempt to decide what shall be taught, what shall be allowed by way of sexual conduct and speech and even

thought, and what shall be legislated. And it is the attempt to make such decisions beyond challenge, through the invocation of a supernatural authority.

In many places, the attempt to do these things has been implicitly accepted as a resounding failure as well as a historical outrage, and it will be noticed that those societies that honor pluralism and liberty the most are those that have learned to keep religion in bounds. However, there are constant efforts to undo the secular state and it is important for us never to forget what happened, and what happens, when these attempts are successful.

## 7

A word in closing on the 'anti-theist' position.

I discover when I read the claims of even the more meek Tillich-like theologians that I am relieved that they are untrue. I would positively detest the all-embracing, refulgent, stress-free embrace that they propose. I have no wish to live in some Disneyland of the mind and spirit, some Nirvana of utter null completeness. Religion's promise to deliver this is in my opinion plainly false. But what it *can* deliver me is the prospect of serfdom, mental and physical, and the chance to live under fantastic and cruel laws, or to be subjected to frantic violence.

Nobody asserts that there is a straight line of connection between faith and murder and slavery. But that there is a connection is undeniable.

When I analyze the sermons of bin Laden, I cannot see how his claim to divine authority and prompting is any better or any worse than anybody else's. And I am not content to dispute his conclusions only with people who share his essential premise.