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Unbelievable: That's what religion is, says Christopher Hitchens in his profoundly skeptical manifesto

by Daniel C. Dennett, The Boston Globe

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Unbelievable: That's what religion is, says Christopher Hitchens in his profoundly skeptical manifesto

God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything

By Christopher Hitchens

Twelve, 307 pp., **\$24.99**

In earlier ages reliable information was rather hard to get, and in general people could be excused for taking the founding myths of their religions on faith. These were the "facts" that "everyone knew," and anybody who had a skeptical itch could check it out with the local priest or rabbi or imam, or other religious authority. Today, there is really no excuse for such ignorance. It may not be your fault if you don't know the facts about the history and tenets of your own religion, but it is somebody's fault. Or more charitably, perhaps we have all been victimized by an accumulation of tradition that

strongly enjoins us to lapse into a polite lack of curiosity about these facts, for fear of causing offense. It is rude, after all, to point out somebody's ignorance or gullibility. Besides, if you start calling attention to the frankly incredible creeds and deeds of other religions, they may retaliate and expose some of the embarrassing signs of all-too-human tampering with the heroic tales and traditions of your own tribe.

So only atheists are in a comfortable position to cast the first stone, and Christopher Hitchens, in "God Is Not Great," relishes the role. He has the credentials, as both a combative journalist and a surprisingly erudite literary scholar, and he wants to break the diplomacy barrier and expose the preposterous presumptions and ignoble machinations that stain the history of all religions, bringing discredit that tends to get magnified over the years by a persistent pattern of coverup, veils of illusion, and denial of one design or another. These efforts at obfuscation are quite transparent under Hitchens' s merciless scrutiny, and the results are often quite comical. As Dana Carvey's Church Lady would say, "How convenient!" For instance, how many Christians know that " the Greek demigod Perseus was born when the god Jupiter visited the virgin Danaë as a shower of gold and got her with child. The god Buddha was born through an opening in his mother's flank. Catlicus the serpent-skirted caught a little ball of feathers from the sky and hid it in her bosom, and the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli was thus conceived. . . . Krishna was born of the virgin Devaka. . . . For some reason, many religions force themselves to think of the birth canal as a one-way street, and even the Koran treats the Virgin Mary with reverence ."

And how many Muslims know that Uthman, some years after Mohammed's death, not only arranged the standard Arabic edition of the Koran, declaring many rival texts apocryphal, but "ordered that all earlier and rival editions be destroyed"? How convenient! And then there is the Hadith, the compilations of the words and deeds of Mohammed. Bukhari, who scrupulously collected 300,000 attestations several centuries after Mohammed's death, culled all but 10,000 of the most credible of these, some of which are quite evidently borrowings from the Torah and the Gospels, ancient Persian maxims, and the like. Still, in the great Ijtihad period of Islamic reformation in the ninth century, the learned scholars categorized many of these presumably high-quality attestations as "lies told for material gain and lies told for ideological advantage." Like sausage-making and legislating, the process of assembling the inerrant word of God is not always a pretty sight.

Religions, Hitchens insists, are "man-made," and anybody who doesn't know this is either willfully ignorant or else a victim of fraud. In what sense, though, are religions man-made? Are the design innovations he detects always or even often the foresighted schemes of specific deceivers, or are they more plausibly explained as the result of a series of unconsciously adopted variations that happened to prove more effective than their adopters dreamt? Probably the more recent the

invention, the more culpably knowing it is, and Hitchens is a master at exposing the elements of stagecraft.

Hitchens is an equal - opportunity embarrassment. "If Jesus could heal a blind person he happened to meet, then why not heal blindness?" He recounts the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary as a handy bit of recent (1851) "reverse-engineering" to deflect attention from some awkward conflicts in the Gospels' accounts of her life, and her Assumption as an even more recent bit of tinkering (finalized in 1951). The Mormons' Joseph Smith comes in for some uncomfortable exposure, but so do Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and even the Dalai Lama. Must we really be so mean as to pull these heroes from their pedestals? Why not let them continue to grow in mythic stature, as fine examples for us all? Because, Hitchens insists, religion poisons everything. Does it really? Hitchens makes no attempt to give an evenhanded survey of both the sins and the good deeds of religion. We have been told countless times about the goodness of religion; he gives the case for the prosecution.

At their best, his indictments are trenchant and witty, and the book is a treasure house of zingers worthy of Mark Twain or H. L. Mencken. At other times, his impatience with the smug denial of the self-righteous gets the better of him, and then he strikes glancing blows at best, and occasionally adopts a double standard, excusing his naturalist heroes for their few lapses into religious gullibility on the grounds that they couldn't have known any better at the time, while leaving no such wiggle room for the defenders of religion over the ages. But these excesses are themselves a valuable element of this wake-up call. They say to every complacent but ignorant churchgoer: look how angry this well-informed critic of religion is. Perhaps when you know what he has uncovered about the words and deeds of religions around the world you will share his sense of betrayal of what is best in humankind.

Daniel C. Dennett is a professor at Tufts University and the author, most recently, of "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon."

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