

# Myth 2: Religion Does More Harm Than Good

## A Theologian Answers the Atheists

by Father Thomas Williams, LC

In their attacks on God and religion, the neo-atheist authors such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are especially vehement in their accusations concerning the effects of religion on the public order. The atheists charge that religion is a net evil for civilization, and allege that, on the whole, our society would be healthier and more secure without religious belief. Hitchens, for instance, in his book *God Is Not Great*, asks whether the net effect of religion is positive or negative. Does religion do more harm than good (p. 217)? He answers with a resounding "Yes!"

Religion is the cause of all social woes. The provocative subtitle of his book — *How Religion Poisons Everything* — seems to imply that religion does nothing but harm. This may strike us as strange, since the common wisdom of humanity has always held that religion makes people better, not worse. Our own experience often backs this up. So what possible reasons could the atheists have to make the extravagant claim that religious belief has a negative effect on people's behavior? What evidence do they put forward? On close examination, it turns out that the atheists' real evidence is rather thin. Rather than examine religious teachings and practice to discover their effects on society, Hitchens, for example, prefers to offer anecdotal evidence for his claim. He begins his 13th chapter titled "Does Religion Make People Behave Better?" with a personal attack on Martin Luther King Jr.

Here Hitchens makes a clever, though absurd, assertion. He asks whether King's Christianity made him a better person. His answer is that yes, Martin Luther King did all sorts of good things for society in the area of civil rights, but ... here's the kicker ... he wasn't a Christian. He may have said he was a Christian and thought he was a Christian, but he was mistaken, and Hitchens knows better. "In no real as opposed to nominal sense," Hitchens avers, "was [King] a Christian" (p. 176).

By what rhetorical legerdemain does Hitchens arrive at this conclusion? The only proof he puts forward to back up this thesis is that King didn't advocate violence and didn't threaten people with hell, so he must not have been a true Christian. This is like saying that Hitchens couldn't be a true atheist, since he is too nice a guy.

So what do our neo-atheist authors make of Christianity's undeniable contributions to society? They basically start with the Martin Luther King premise: If a person did good things, he couldn't have been religious. If he did bad things, he must have been religious — despite whatever evidence to the contrary. And if a clearly religious person did something good, he must have done it despite his being religious, and not because of it. And so the deck is hopelessly stacked against religion from the start.

Hitchens and company claim to follow the Gospel principle of judging a tree by its fruits, but as for the tree of religion, they consider only the rotten fruits, never the good ones. The innumerable saints, geniuses and benefactors nourished by the Christian faith simply count for nothing.

In making their case, Hitchens and company refrain from considering the almost countless ways that Christianity has benefited the world as we know it today. What of the hospitals? What of the orders of nuns established to care for the dying or educate young girls? What of the soup kitchens and orphanages? What of the preservation of classical culture? What of the artistic and literary treasures? Instead, they choose to enumerate the things that Christianity hasn't done to better the world or hasn't done well enough or has simply done too slowly!

This pseudo-methodology can be used to discredit anything. Let's take the example of one of the most beneficent disciplines there is: medicine. Imagine if you were to undertake a study of the biggest blunders committed in the name of medicine throughout history — from botched surgeries, to bleeding with leeches, to cranial boring, to the hellish experimentation afflicted by Nazi doctors on war prisoners — and used such research as an indictment of the entire field of medicine.

During the unprincipled years of the late 19th century, for instance, medical quackery abounded, and hundreds of traveling medicine shows extolled the virtues of worthless potions and products, from Dr. Kilmer's Swamp Root, to Dr. Pierce's Nasal Douche, to Kickapoo Indian Sagwa, to Dr. Hercules Sanche's Oxydonor.

By Hitchens' standard, medicine has been an unmitigated disaster for humanity, and all doctors should be shuffled off to the guillotine! Yet if there can be good medicine and bad medicine, why can't there be good religion and bad religion? Moreover, in their search for historical examples to make their case, the atheist authors spill very little ink calmly confronting the teachings and practices of religions today (except in the case of Islamic fundamentalists) and instead spend page after page describing the most hideous examples they can find of errors committed in the name of religion in centuries past. For example, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II before him have repeated over and over again that God and religion cannot be co-opted to justify violence. Violence in the name of religion is an aberration. Yet nowhere do Hitchens or his cronies acknowledge this. Time after time Hitchens makes the claim that anything done in the name of religion could just as well be done in the name of secular humanism. Thus — he says — religion really contributes nothing.

He seems to miss the more important point: People actually do many good things by religious motivation that they wouldn't do otherwise. People could be compassionate and selfless in the name of secular humanism, but the fact remains that they more often are compassionate and unselfish in the name of religion.

There is no doubt that religious people could do more, and Hitchens' accusations, though mean-spirited, do oblige us to a serious examination of conscience and a renewed commitment to offer a more consistent witness. Yet an impartial examination of the facts will lead any objective observer to the conclusion that religion, and Christianity in particular, has been and continues to be an overwhelming force for personal and social good.

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