



JEWISH COMMENTARY

Christopher Hitchens Wasn't Great

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“THIS IS THE SEASON to remember Christopher Hitchens.” So my fellow COMMENTARY columnist Matthew Continetti wrote in December in a Washington Free Beacon essay marking the 10th anniversary of the controversial writer’s untimely death. Continetti’s tribute to Hitchens is one of many over the years by authors I admire, and that is why I feel compelled—if ’tis truly the season—to explain why I consider Hitchens’s legacy to be so unworthy of celebration. In his writings about faith, and especially in his critiques of Judaism and the State of Israel, Hitchens reflected, with disconcerting constancy, the very vices that he purported to criticize throughout his career: bigotry, dishonesty, and ignorance.

The bestselling book of Hitchens’s career, and the one for which he is most known, is *God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*. It is easy to document historical horrors committed in the name of religion. What sets this book apart—as Benjamin Kerstein documented in *Jewish Ideas Daily*—is the casual statements about Judaism that are *obviously* untrue, as well as its obsession with Judaism. Hitch-

ens not only criticizes biblical commandments that stand in tension with the zeitgeist; he attacks what he calls the “pitiless teachings of the God of Moses, who never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all.” This is a strange thing to say about a Pentateuch that begins by banning murder because all humanity is created in the image of God, and concludes in Deuteronomy with the exhortation to “love the stranger” and to not abhor the Edomite, “for he is your brother.”

Similarly, Hitchens mourns the events marked by Hanukkah, because if Antiochus Epiphanes’s assaults on Judaism had succeeded, Judaism would have been eradicated. Antiochus, he insisted, “weaned many people away from the sacrifices, the circumcisions, the belief in a special relationship with God, and the other reactionary manifestations of an ancient and cruel faith.” Leaving aside the manifold murders of Antiochus’s regime documented in classical texts, it is strange to say that the pagan Antiochus weaned his subjects off sacrifices; one need only visit, or Google, ancient Athens to find the “Temple of Olympian Zeus” commissioned by Antiochus. Its existence illustrated just how important the act of sacrifice was to the Seleucid emperor. “What can be asserted without evidence,” Hitchens famously asserted, “can also be dismissed without evidence.” But what are we to make about statements that are contrary to all obvious

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evidence—evidence that even rudimentary research would reveal? Are Hitchens’s assertions *against obvious evidence* not evidence itself that his assaults are expressions of deliberate dishonesty?

Some admirers of Hitchens on the right concede how troubling this is. Former Reagan speechwriter Peter Robinson said he had always known that, on religion, “Hitch could be unfair—willfully so—and quite capable of presenting as fresh and new arguments that had grown stale a century ago.” Robinson added, “What I hadn’t quite realized, though, was that Hitch was also deeply ignorant—in particular, that in discussing the scriptures Hitch simply had no idea what he was talking about.” Robinson’s admiration for Hitchens, as he wrote in 2011, stems from the fact that Hitchens “held his head up for a flag of all the free.” Similarly, Continetti concludes that the lesson of Hitchens’s life is that “freedom needs champions.” Indeed it does, but Hitchens’s comments about faith illustrate that he learned the wrong lessons from a 20th century marked by battles between liberty and tyranny.

His penchant for intentionally eliding evidence was reflected in his description of faith as “the origin of all dictatorship.” These were words written by a man who had witnessed a century marked by militantly atheist Communist dictatorships that murdered more members of humanity than any faith community in history. His brother, Peter, has powerfully pointed out that Hitchens’s religion writings were recycled talking points of the very regimes he claimed to oppose:

I am also baffled and frustrated by the strange insistence of my anti-theist brother that the cruelty of Communist anti-theist regimes does not reflect badly on his case and on his cause. It unquestionably does. Soviet Communism is organically linked to atheism, materialist rationalism and most of the other causes the new atheists support. It used the same language, treasured the same hopes and appealed to the same constituency as atheism does today.

Meanwhile, as his life came to a close, Hitchens’s criticisms of Israel grew more and more vile. In 2010, he published an infamous article in Slate titled “Israel’s Shabbos Goy,” wherein he asserted that America’s support for Israel embodied the “old concept of the *shabbos goy*—the non-Jew who is paid a trifling fee to turn out the lights or turn on the stove, or whatever else is needful to get around the more annoying regulations of the Sabbath.” As Kerstein notes, this

sentence combines all sorts of anti-Semitic talking points in a single go. It is, if you will, a demagogic literary triple lutz. It fuses a classical trope according to which Jews are pharisaic charlatans with the more modern stereotype of Jews as dishonest, and tops it all off with the contemporary progressive assault on the Jewish state.

This execrable essay points to an interesting aspect of Hitchens’s legacy and life. Why would a man who inveighed with such passion about the War on Terror continue to write in such a putrid way about the very country that was on that war’s front lines? I am not certain of the answer, but I do have a guess. What drove Hitchens above all was his hatred of faith; he began *God Is Not Great* by explaining, “I have been writing this book my whole life.” Perhaps the one fact that Hitchens was never able to explain, the best piece of evidence for the existence of God that would not go away, was Israel itself.

Thousands of years ago, Jewish scripture claimed that Abraham’s family would affect the world far beyond its numbers, that there was one land linked to its destiny, that this tiny people would experience exile, that it would survive all efforts to destroy it and would one day return from around the world. Then the most unexpected event of all occurred: It all came true. How does Hitchens explain that? What can be asserted *without* evidence can be dismissed; but the evidence was there, right in front of his face. If Israel, despite its mistakes and flaws, truly was the beacon of freedom in the very War on Terror he was now supporting, then his insipid atheism was under threat. And so Israel had to be assaulted, with all Hitchens’s eloquence, even if it required the mustering of anti-Semitic tropes whose history he understood all too well.

In reading the many tributes that were written 10 years ago and today, it is obvious that Hitchens was a loyal friend, filled with *joie de vivre*, and a man of many talents. Watching his last interviews, it is painful to see someone who so clearly relished life battling against the dying of the light. But in my pastoral experience, I have seen many die too young, men and women who filled their lives with love and friendship without devoting so much of their time on earth to hateful and irresponsible invective. So 10 years later, I will not celebrate a man who attacked all I hold dear in so shallow, callous, and deceitful a manner. And because I am unwilling to dismiss the evidence that anti-religious dictatorship has provided us, I believe that freedom in the West is made more secure when Hitchens’s writings about religion are exposed for the scurrilous, ignorant assertions that they are. 🍷