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HOW RELIGION POISONS EVERYTHING

Christopher Hitchens



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Chapter Five

The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False

I am a man of one book.

—THOMAS AQUINAS

We sacrifice the intellect to God.

—IGNATIUS LOYOLA

Reason is the Devil's harlot, who can do nought but
slander and harm whatever God says and does.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well

That for all they care, I can go to hell.

—W. H. AUDEN, "THE MORE LOVING ONE"

I wrote earlier that we would never again have to confront the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides (as contrasted with the blind faith of millennial or absolutist sects, of which we have an apparently unlimited and infinitely renewable supply). This is for a simple reason. Faith of that sort—the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason—is now plainly impossible. The early fathers of faith (they made very sure that there would be no

mothers) were living in a time of abysmal ignorance and fear. Maimonides did not include, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, those whom he described as not worth the effort: the “Turkish” and black and nomadic peoples whose “nature is like the nature of mute animals.” Aquinas half believed in astrology, and was convinced that the fully formed nucleus (not that he would have known the word as we do) of a human being was contained inside each individual sperm. One can only mourn over the dismal and stupid lectures on sexual continence that we might have been spared if this nonsense had been exposed earlier than it was. Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus: he was guiltily convinced that god cared about his trivial theft from some unimportant pear trees, and quite persuaded—by an analogous solipsism—that the sun revolved around the earth. He also fabricated the mad and cruel idea that the souls of unbaptized children were sent to “limbo.” Who can guess the load of misery that this diseased “theory” has placed on millions of Catholic parents down the years, until its shamefaced and only partial revision by the church in our own time? Luther was terrified of demons and believed that the mentally afflicted were the devil’s work. Muhammad is claimed by his own followers to have thought, as did Jesus, that the desert was pullulating with *djinn*s, or evil spirits.

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think—though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one—that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.

All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned

to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons. I read, for example, of some ecumenical conference of Christians who desire to show their broad-mindedness and invite some physicists along. But I am compelled to remember what I know—which is that there would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explicable. And also if humanity had not been compelled, on pain of extremely agonizing consequences, to pay the exorbitant tithes and taxes that raised the imposing edifices of religion.

It is true that scientists have sometimes been religious, or at any rate superstitious. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, was a spiritualist and alchemist of a particularly laughable kind. Fred Hoyle, an ex-agnostic who became infatuated with the idea of “design,” was the Cambridge astronomer who coined the term “big bang.” (He came up with that silly phrase, incidentally, as an attempt to discredit what is now the accepted theory of the origins of the universe. This was one of those lampoons that, so to speak, backfired, since like “Tory” and “impressionist” and “suffragette” it became adopted by those at whom it was directed.) Steven Hawking is not a believer, and when invited to Rome to meet the late Pope John Paul II asked to be shown the records of the trial of Galileo. But he does speak without embarrassment of the chance of physics “knowing the mind of God,” and this now seems quite harmless as a metaphor, as for example when the Beach Boys sing, or I say, “God only knows . . .”

Before Charles Darwin revolutionized our entire concept of our origins, and Albert Einstein did the same for the beginnings of our cosmos, many scientists and philosophers and mathematicians took what might be called the default position and professed one or another version of “deism,” which held that the order and predictability of the universe seemed indeed to imply a designer, if not necessarily a designer who took any active part in human affairs. This compromise was a logical and rational one for its time, and was especially influential among the Philadelphia and Virginia intellectuals, such as

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who managed to seize a moment of crisis and use it to enshrine Enlightenment values in the founding documents of the United States of America.

Yet as Saint Paul so unforgettably said, when one is a child one speaks and thinks as a child. But when one becomes a man, one puts away childish things. It is not quite possible to locate the exact moment when men of learning stopped spinning the coin as between a creator and a long complex process, or ceased trying to split the "deistic" difference, but humanity began to grow up a little in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth. (Charles Darwin was born in 1809, on the very same day as Abraham Lincoln, and there is no doubt as to which of them has proved to be the greater "emancipator.") If one had to emulate the foolishness of Archbishop Ussher and try to come up with the exact date on which the conceptual coin came down solidly on one side, it would be the moment when Pierre-Simon de Laplace was invited to meet Napoleon Bonaparte.

Laplace (1749–1827) was the brilliant French scientist who took the work of Newton a stage further and showed by means of mathematical calculus how the operations of the solar system were those of bodies revolving systematically in a vacuum. When he later turned his attention to the stars and the nebulae, he postulated the idea of gravitational collapse and implosion, or what we now breezily term the "black hole." In a five-volume book entitled *Celestial Mechanics* he laid all this out, and like many men of his time was also intrigued by the orrery, a working model of the solar system as seen, for the first time, from the *outside*. These are now commonplace but were then revolutionary, and the emperor asked to meet Laplace in order to be given either a set of the books or (accounts differ) a version of the orrery. I personally suspect that the gravedigger of the French Revolution wanted the toy rather than the volumes: he was a man in a hurry and had managed to get the church to baptize his dictatorship with a crown. At any event, and in his childish and demanding and imperious fashion, he wanted to know why the figure of god did not appear

in Laplace's mind-expanding calculations. And there came the cool, lofty, and considered response. "*Je n'ai pas besoin de cette hypothèse.*" Laplace was to become a marquis and could perhaps more modestly have said, "It works well enough without that idea, Your Majesty." But he simply stated that he didn't need it.

And neither do we. The decay and collapse and discredit of god-worship does not begin at any dramatic moment, such as Nietzsche's histrionic and self-contradictory pronouncement that god was dead. Nietzsche could no more have known this, or made the assumption that god had ever been alive, than a priest or witch doctor could ever declare that he knew god's will. Rather, the end of god-worship discloses itself at the moment, which is somewhat more gradually revealed, when it becomes *optional*, or only one among many possible beliefs. For the greater part of human existence, it must always be stressed, this "option" did not really exist. We know, from the many fragments of their burned and mutilated texts and confessions, that there were always human beings who were unconvinced. But from the time of Socrates, who was condemned to death for spreading unwholesome skepticism, it was considered ill-advised to emulate his example. And for billions of people down the ages, the question simply did not come up. The votaries of Baron Samedi in Haiti enjoyed the same monopoly, founded upon the same brute coercion, as did those of John Calvin in Geneva or Massachusetts: I select these examples because they are yesterday in terms of human time. Many religions now come before us with ingratiating smirks and outspread hands, like an unctuous merchant in a bazaar. They offer consolation and solidarity and uplift, competing as they do in a marketplace. But we have a right to remember how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse. And if we chance to forget what that must have been like, we have only to look to those states and societies where the clergy still has the power to dictate its own terms. The pathetic vestiges of this can still be seen, in modern societies, in the efforts made by religion to secure control over education, or to exempt itself from tax, or

to pass laws forbidding people to insult its omnipotent and omniscient deity, or even his prophet.

In our new semi-secular and mediocre condition, even the religious will speak with embarrassment of the time when theologians would dispute over futile propositions with fanatical intensity: measuring the length of angels' wings, for example, or debating how many such mythical creatures could dance on the head of a pin. Of course it is horrifying to remember how many people were tortured and killed, and how many sources of knowledge fed to the flames, in bogus arguments over the Trinity, or the Muslim hadith, or the arrival of a false Messiah. But it is better for us not to fall into relativism, or what E. P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity." The scholastic obsessives of the Middle Ages were doing the best they could on the basis of hopelessly limited information, ever-present fear of death and judgment, very low life expectancy, and an audience of illiterates. Living in often genuine fear of the consequences of error, they exerted their minds to the fullest extent then possible, and evolved quite impressive systems of logic and the dialectic. It is not the fault of men like Peter Abelard if they had to work with bits and pieces of Aristotle, many of whose writings were lost when the Christian emperor Justinian closed the schools of philosophy, but were preserved in Arabic translation in Baghdad and then retransmitted to a benighted Christian Europe by way of Jewish and Muslim Andalusia. When they got hold of the material and reluctantly conceded that there had been intelligent discussion of ethics and morality before the supposed advent of Jesus, they tried their hardest to square the circle. We have nothing much to learn from *what* they thought, but a great deal to learn from *how* they thought.

One medieval philosopher and theologian who continues to speak eloquently across the ages is William Ockham. Sometimes known as William of Ockham (or Occam) and presumably named after his native village in Surrey, England, that still boasts the name, he was born on a date unknown to us and died—probably in great agony

and fear, and probably of the horrific Black Death—in Munich in 1349. He was a Franciscan (in other words, an acolyte of the aforementioned mammal who was said to have preached to birds) and thus conditioned to a radical approach to poverty, which brought him into collision with the papacy in Avignon in 1324. The quarrel between the papacy and the emperor over secular and ecclesiastical division of powers is irrelevant to us now (since both sides ultimately "lost"), but Ockham was forced to seek even the emperor's protection in face of the worldliness of the pope. Faced with charges of heresy and the threat of excommunication, he had the fortitude to respond that the pope himself was the heretic. Nonetheless, and because he always argued within the enclosed frame of Christian reference, he is admitted even by the most orthodox Christian authorities to have been an original and courageous thinker.

He was interested, for example, in the stars. He knew far less about the nebulae than we do, or than Laplace did. In fact, he knew nothing about them at all. But he employed them for an interesting speculation. *Assuming* that god can make us feel the presence of a nonexistent entity, and further *assuming* that he need not go to this trouble if the same effect can be produced in us by the actual presence of that entity, god could still if he wished cause us to believe in the existence of stars without their being actually present. "Every effect which God causes through the mediation of a secondary cause he can produce immediately by himself." However, this does not mean that we must believe in anything absurd, since "God cannot cause in us knowledge such that by it a thing is seen evidently to be present though it is absent, for that involves a contradiction." Before you begin to drum your fingers at the huge tautology that impends here, as it does in so much theology and theodicy, consider what Father Copleston, the eminent Jesuit, has to say in commentary:

If God had annihilated the stars, he could still cause in us the act of seeing what had once been, so far as the act is considered subjectively, just as he could give us a vision of what will be in the

future. Either act would be an immediate apprehension, in the first case of what has been and in the second case of what will be.

This is actually very impressive, and not just for its time. It has taken us several hundred years since Ockham to come to the realization that when we gaze up at the stars, we very often *are* seeing light from distant bodies that have long since ceased to exist. It doesn't particularly matter that the right to look through telescopes and speculate about the result was obstructed by the church: this is not Ockham's fault and there is no general law that obliges the church to be that stupid. And, moving from the unimaginable interstellar past which sends light across distances that overwhelm our brains, we have come to the realization that we also know something about the future of our system, including the rate of its expansion and the notion of its eventual terminus. However, and crucially, we can now do this while dropping (or even, if you insist, retaining) the idea of a god. But in either case, *the theory works without that assumption*. You can believe in a divine mover if you choose, but it makes no difference at all, and belief among astronomers and physicists has become private and fairly rare.

It was actually Ockham who prepared our minds for this unwelcome (to him) conclusion. He devised a "principle of economy," popularly known as "Ockham's razor," which relied for its effect on disposing of unnecessary assumptions and accepting the first sufficient explanation or cause. "*Do not multiply entities beyond necessity.*" This principle extends itself. "Everything which is explained through positing something different from the act of understanding," he wrote, "can be explained without positing such a distinct thing." He was not afraid to follow his own logic wherever it might take him, and anticipated the coming of true science when he agreed that it was possible to know the nature of "created" things without any reference to their "creator." Indeed, Ockham stated that it cannot be strictly proved that god, if defined as a being who possesses the qualities of supremacy, perfection, uniqueness, and infinity, exists at all. However, if one in-

tends to identify a first cause of the existence of the world, one may choose to call that "god" even if one does not know the precise nature of the first cause. And even the first cause has its difficulties, since a cause will itself need another cause. "It is difficult or impossible," he wrote, "to prove against the philosophers that there cannot be an infinite regress in causes of the same kind, of which one can exist without the other." Thus the postulate of a designer or creator only raises the unanswerable question of who designed the designer or created the creator. Religion and theology and theodicy (this is now me talking and not Ockham) have consistently failed to overcome this objection. Ockham himself simply had to fall back on the hopeless position that the existence of god can only be "demonstrated" by faith.

Credibile est, quia ineptum est, as the "church father" Tertullian put it, either disarmingly or annoyingly according to your taste. "I believe it because it is absurd." It is impossible to quarrel seriously with such a view. If one must have faith in order to believe something, or believe *in* something, then the likelihood of that something having any truth or value is considerably diminished. The harder work of inquiry, proof, and demonstration is infinitely more rewarding, and has confronted us with findings far more "miraculous" and "transcendent" than any theology.

Actually, the "leap of faith"—to give it the memorable name that Soren Kierkegaard bestowed upon it—is an imposture. As he himself pointed out, it is not a "leap" that can be made once and for all. It is a leap that has to go on and on being performed, in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary. This effort is actually too much for the human mind, and leads to delusions and manias. Religion understands perfectly well that the "leap" is subject to sharply diminishing returns, which is why it often doesn't in fact rely on "faith" at all but instead corrupts faith and insults reason by offering evidence and pointing to confected "proofs." This evidence and these proofs include arguments from design, revelations, punishments, and miracles. Now that religion's monopoly has been broken, it is within the compass of any human being to see these evidences and proofs as the feeble-minded inventions that they are.

Arguments from Design

All my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is—marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. No, I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvelous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural which (take it any way you like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage on our dignity.

—JOSEPH CONRAD, AUTHOR'S NOTE TO *THE SHADOW-LINE*

There is a central paradox at the core of religion. The three great monotheisms teach people to think abjectly of themselves, as miserable and guilty sinners prostrate before an angry and jealous god who, according to discrepant accounts, fashioned them either out of dust and clay or a clot of blood. The positions for prayer are usually emulations of the supplicant serf before an ill-tempered monarch. The