

Christian Faith—Fantasy or Truth?

Psalm 133; John 20:19-31

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Christopher Hitchens is one of the so-called Four Horsemen of the New Atheist movement. He and his colleagues Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris have written books with titles like *The God Delusion*, *God Is Not Great*, and *The End of Faith*. This is what Hitchens writes in his book, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*:

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.

Honesty compels me to admit that this movement of New Atheists makes some valid criticisms of Christianity and other religions of the world. There I stand in agreement with them. However, I also find many of their criticisms to be quite superficial, setting up straw men just knock the down. One of the criticisms that continues to rise generation after generation is that Christian faith is only an escape, the opiate of the people, as Hitchens says, “consolation and solidarity and uplift.” Christian faith is comforting, sustaining, and brings encouragement during times of trouble. That, critics say, is precisely the reason Christian faith developed, not because it is objectively true but because it is subjectively comforting. So in book after book these days Christian faith is presented as a lovely, comforting fantasy. It creates a world of make believe where women and men can escape the harsh cruelty of the world. Its real story, they say, is not believable.

Granted there are parts of the Christian story that challenge even the most faithful. “I will not believe,” Thomas told the other disciples of Jesus. Thomas was not with them after the resurrection when Jesus appeared to them. “Peace be with you,” Jesus said to them. Thomas was

no one's fool, though. No one got up from *that*. No one came back from a crucifixion. With the certainty of a postmodern atheist, Thomas let them know where he stood, "Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Fantasy or truth? Thomas had to decide. We all must. As you evaluate the plethora of ideas before you today, factor this into your decision.

First, we must challenge the notion that Christian faith exists primarily to be pleasant and comforting. To depict religion mainly as a search for comfort is a contradiction of the facts. We just honored the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Would he say that he found Christian faith to be primarily pleasant and comforting? No, I think he found in Christian faith a demand for social justice, fairness, a call to stand up for the oppressed, the man left on the side of the road, the woman about to be stoned, the African American who had been enslaved. Motivated by the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, Dr. King gave his oratorical skill and leadership to create the Civil Rights Movement. He fought with the power of ideas and the might of faith, using at all times non-violent resistance. He did so believing that he might not live long enough to see justice for his people. And he was right. He was assassinated at age 39. Was his a religion of comforting fantasy? I don't think so. Great religion has never been first a search for comfort, but a search for righteousness and truth.

Second, as you make your decision, challenge the false claim that only the material world is real and everything else fantasy. Thomas knew the material world. He knew what happened after a man was crucified. The process of decomposition set in. That's the way the material world works. With plants. With animals. With humans. We're all subject to it.

The material world is real. We know that. But can a non-material world be true too? When I hold my little granddaughter, Harper, and she smiles at me, I feel something that is non-material. Is what I feel real? When I look across a room at my wife of 37 years, think of the wonderful journey we have had, our daughters, the devotion, the

challenges, and anticipate the joy of growing old together, is what I feel real? When we hear a call to duty, honor, and it resonates somewhere deep inside, is that real? When we experience ideas that change our life, is that real? Great religion operates in this realm. The material world is real, for sure. But let us make room for the truth of the non-material world too.

Third, as you make your decision, consider the powerful personalities, real men and women, who have chosen to believe Christian faith, Judaism, Islam or one of the other great religions. Some of the most brilliant people to walk this earth have been people of deep faith. Some of the noblest souls have been motivated by their faith. Some of the most loving, giving, and sacrificial people have simply been following the pattern of Jesus Christ.

Discount the foolish. Discount those who never think deeply about faith. Discount those who make a sham of faith. Discount every charlatan. But those great personalities, that's different. We mustn't just discount them. Instead, I say we must discount any system that says these great personalities are just deluded.

Can religion be primarily comforting? Can it be an opiate of the people? Can some turn to religion as a fantasy of wishful thinking just to escape the harsh cruelty of the world? Yes to all the above!

But it is cheap and superficial to lump great religion with its caricatures. We do not judge great architecture by the mechanic's shack. We do not judge great music by the sounds coming from the neighbor's garage. Let us not judge great religion by its frivolous imitations. Great religion has been the soul of the human family. It has had its low periods, for sure. We must accept and own that. But those low periods do not tell the entire story.

"I will not believe," Thomas said. Until he did. "Put your finger here and see my hands," Jesus invited. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." And he did. When presented with the Body of Christ, he believed and declared, "My Lord and my God."

Fantasy or truth. Like Thomas, we all must decide.

A Prayer of Confession before the Table of the Lord is printed in your worship guide. Join me as we confess our sins together.