

# ATHEISM: OPIATE OF THE INTELLECTUALS

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It was Marx who said that religion was the “opiate of the masses,” and it was the late French sociologist Raymond Aron who once said that Marxism was the “opiate of the intellectuals.” With slight emendation, it can be proffered that atheism is today’s “opiate of the intellectuals.”

Christopher Hitchens is not just an atheist, he is an angry atheist. I have debated him many times, in person and on television, and at various times have come to like him, then not like him, and so forth. He’s an interesting guy. On the life issues, he’s opposed to abortion yet welcomes euthanasia. He’s a left-wing critic of American foreign policy, though he vigorously defends our involvement in Iraq. But he’s also a socialist who has made a comfortable living in capitalist America (the English transplant recently became a citizen). The one subject where he does not vacillate is religion: he is a hater, through and through.

Hitchens would have us believe that religion, not atheism, is responsible for most mass killings in history. For example, he contends that the murderous acts committed by the totalitarian regimes of communism and fascism—both full-throated atheistic states—must be understood not as the consequence of radical secularism, but religion. But even if Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Hitler were messianic thugs, they were at bottom atheist thugs, men who took their ideological cues from secular visions of the society. And remember, Saddam Hussein was not a believing Muslim.

According to Hitchens, the Jacobins who slaughtered Catholics during the French Revolution, and the Bolsheviks who triggered

the violence that became the hallmark of the Soviet Union, were really "alternative religions." He argues that "Communist absolutists did not so much negate religion...as seek to replace it." He even blames Confucianism for the murderous regime in North Korea.

The attempt by Hitchens to rationalize the violence inherent in secular regimes is matched only by his forced dismissal of the heroic work of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust. Take, for example, the way he addresses Einstein's great praise of Pope Pius XII. *Time* magazine once ran an historic quote by Einstein that showed how incredibly disappointed he was with the universities and newspapers for saying nothing about Hitler.

"Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth," the non-believing Jewish scientist said. "I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly."

Hitchens, relying on the work of William Waterhouse, doubts whether Einstein ever made these comments. He says that *Time* did not give any source for these remarks, the "rhetoric is too florid," there was no mention of "the persecution of the Jews," and that it is "silly" to think Einstein would claim to have "despised" something in which he "never had any special interest." Waterhouse also argues that if Einstein was praising Pius XII, his words must have been written after 1938. "But the text certainly sounds as though it refers to a time shortly after the Nazis came to power," he says.

This is all nonsense. It is common practice today, and it was more so back then, for magazines to carry stories without a

byline. Do Hitchens and Waterhouse think *Time* just decided to make this up out of whole cloth? Do they think that Einstein would have allowed them to put words in his mouth? After all, the quote in question appeared in the December 23, 1940 edition of *Time*; Einstein didn't die until 1955. This quote was often cited and Einstein had plenty of time to object, but he never did.

"How strange is the lot of us mortals! Each of us is here for a brief sojourn; for what purpose he knows not, though he sometimes thinks he senses it." This is the kind of florid style we might expect of a poet—not a scientist—but in fact those are the opening words of Einstein's essay, "The World As I See It."

It is so obvious that Einstein was talking about "the persecution of the Jews" that only those living in denial would claim otherwise. Moreover, it is not all uncommon for someone to express disaffection—not merely disinterest—when he says he has no special interest in something. I have never had any special interest in becoming a Marxist, and indeed I despise Marxism; there's nothing silly about such usage. Finally, since it wasn't until "Kristallnacht" in November 1938 that the Nazis really began their pogroms, it is quite likely that Einstein's remarks were made after that time; Pius XII began his papacy in 1939.

The truth of the matter is Einstein did praise the pope, and no amount of spin from the opiate class can change history.