Christopher Hitchens On Mother Theresa (Interview)
by Matt Cherry

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Below, Matt Cherry, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, interviews Christopher Hitchens about his book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso, 1995) and his television program, which strongly criticized Mother Teresa. The interview recapitulates the most devastating critiques of Mother Teresa ever made. It also gives a very telling account by a leading journalist into the U.S. media's great reluctance to criticize religion and religious leaders.

As *Free Inquiry* was going to press, we heard that Mother Teresa was suffering from heart trouble and malaria and there was concern about her chances of survival. It was, therefore, suggested to the editors that it would be inappropriate to print an interview that contains criticism of Mother Teresa's work and influence. However, in view of the media's general failure to investigate the work of Mother Teresa or to publish critical comments about her, the editors felt it important to proceed with the publication of this revealing interview.

Christopher Hitchens is "Critic at Large" for *Vanity Fair*, writes the Minority Report column for *The Nation*, and is a frequent guest on current affairs and commentary television programs. He has written numerous books on international current affairs, including *Blood, Class and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies*.

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Free Inquiry: According to polls, Mother Teresa is the most respected woman in the world. Her name is a by-word for selfless dedication in the service of humanity. So why are you picking on this sainted old woman?

Christopher Hitchens: Partly because that impression is so widespread. But also because the sheer fact that this is considered unquestionable is a sign of what we are up against, namely the problem of credulity. One of the most salient examples of people's willingness to believe anything if it is garbed in the appearance of holiness is the uncritical acceptance of the idea of Mother Teresa as a saint by people who would normally be thinking - however lazily - in a secular or rational manner. In other words, in every sense it is an unexamined claim.

It's unexamined journalistically - no one really takes a look at what she does. And it is unexamined as to why it should be she who is spotlighted as opposed to many very selfless people who devote their lives to the relief of suffering in what we used to call the "Third World." Why is it never mentioned that her stated motive for the work is that of proselytization for religious fundamentalism, for the most extreme interpretation of Catholic doctrine? If you ask most people if they agree with the pope's views on population, for example, they say they think they are rather extreme. Well here's someone whose life's work is the propagation of the most extreme version of that.

That's the first motive. The second was a sort of journalistic curiosity as to why it was that no one had asked any serious questions about Mother Teresa's theory or practice. Regarding her practice, I couldn't help but notice that she had rallied to the side of the Duvalier family in Haiti, for instance, that she had taken money - over a million dollars - from Charles Keating, the Lincoln Savings and Loans swindler, even though it had been shown to her that the money was stolen; that she has been an ally of the most reactionary forces in India and in many other countries; that she has

campaigned recently to prevent Ireland from ceasing to be the only country in Europe with a constitutional ban on divorce, that her interventions are always timed to assist the most conservative and obscurantist forces.

FI: Do you think this is because she is a shrewd political operator or that she is just naïve and used as a tool by others?

HITCHENS: I've often been asked that. And I couldn't say from real acquaintance with her which view is correct, because I've only met her once. But from observing her I don't think that she's naïve. I don't think she is particularly intelligent or that she has a complex mind, but I think she has a certain cunning.

Her instincts are very good: she seems to know when and where she might be needed and to turn up, still looking very simple. But it's a long way from Calcutta to Port au Prince airport in Haiti, and it's a long way from the airport to the presidential palace. And one can't just, in your humble way and dressed in a simple sari, turn up there. Quite a lot of things have to be arranged and thought about and allowed for in advance. You don't end up suddenly out of sheer simple naïveté giving a speech saying that the Duvalier family love the poor. All of that involves quite a high level of planning and calculation. But I think the genius of it is to make it look simple.

One of Mother Teresa's biographers - almost all the books written about her are by completely uncritical devotees - says, with a sense of absolute wonderment, that when Mother Teresa first met the pope in the Vatican, she arrived by bus dressed only in a sari that cost one rupee. Now that would be my definition of behaving ostentatiously. A normal person would put on at least her best scarf and take a taxi. To do it in the way that she did is the reverse of the simple path. It's obviously theatrical and calculated. And yet it is immediately written down as a sign of her utter holiness and devotion. Well, one doesn't have to be too cynical to see through that.

FI: You point out that, although she is very open about promoting Catholicism, Mother Teresa has this reputation of holiness amongst many non-Catholics and even secular people. And her reputation is based upon her charitable work for the sick and dying in Calcutta. What does she actually do there? What are her care facilities like?

HITCHENS: The care facilities are grotesquely simple: rudimentary, unscientific, miles behind any modern conception of what medical science is supposed to do. There have been a number of articles - I've collected some more since my book came out - about the failure and primitivism of her treatment of lepers and the dying, of her attitude towards medication and prophylaxis. Very rightly is it said that she tends to the dying, because if you were doing anything but dying she hasn't really got much to offer.

This is interesting because, first, she only proclaims to be providing people with a Catholic death, and, second, because of the enormous amounts of money mainly donated to rather than raised by her Order. We've been unable to audit this - no one has ever demanded an accounting of how much money has flowed in her direction. With that money she could have built at least one absolutely spanking new, modern teaching hospital in Calcutta without noticing the cost.

The facilities she runs are as primitive now as when she first became a celebrity. So that's obviously not where the money goes.

FI: How much money do you reckon she receives?

HITCHENS: Well, I have the testimony of a former very active member of her Order who worked for her for many years and ended up in the office Mother Teresa maintains in New York City. She was in charge of taking the money to the bank. She estimates that there must be $50 million in that bank account alone. She said that one of the things that began to raise doubts in her mind was that the Sisters always had to go around pretending that they were very poor and they couldn't use the money for anything in the neighborhood that required alleviation. Under the cloak of

avowed poverty they were still soliciting donations, labor, food, and so on from local merchants. This she found as a matter of conscience to be offensive.

Now if that is the case for one place in New York, and since we know what huge sums she has been given by institutions like the Nobel Peace committee, other religious institutions, secular prize-giving organizations, and so on, we can speculate that if this money was being used for the relief of suffering we would be able to see the effect.

FI: So the $50 million is a very small portion of her wealth?

HITCHENS: I think it's a very small portion, and we should call for an audit of her organization. She carefully doesn't keep the money in India because the Indian government requires disclosure of foreign missionary organizations funds.

I think the answer to questions about her wealth was given by her in an interview where she said she had opened convents and nunneries in 120 countries. The money has simply been used for the greater glory of her order and the building of dogmatic, religious institutions.

FI: So she is spending the money on her own order of nuns? And that order will be named after her?

HITCHENS: Both of those suggestions are speculation, but they are good speculation. I think the order will be named after her when she becomes a saint, which is also a certainty: she is on the fast track to canonization and would be even if we didn't have a pope who was manufacturing saints by the bushel. He has canonized and beatified more people than eight of his predecessors combined.

FI: Hence the title of your book: *The Missionary Position*.

HITCHENS: That has got some people worked up. Of the very, very few people who have reviewed this book in the United States, one or two have objected to that title on the grounds that it's "sophomoric." Well, I think that a triple *entendre* requires a bit of sophistication.

FI: And your television program in the United Kingdom was called "Hell's Angel."

HITCHENS: Yes, very much over my objection, because I thought that that name had not even a single entendre to it. I wanted to call it "Sacred Cow." The book is the television program expanded by about a third. The program was limited by what we could find of Mother Teresa's activities recorded on film. In fact, I was delighted by how much of her activity was available on film: for example, her praising the Albanian dictator Enter Hoxha. There is also film of her groveling to the Duvaliers: licking the feet of the rich instead of washing the feet of the poor. But "60 Minutes" demanded a price that was greater than the whole cost of the rest of the production. So we had to use stills.

FI: How did Mother Teresa become such a great symbol of charity and saintliness?

HITCHENS: Her break into stardom came when Malcolm Muggeridge - a very pious British political and social pundit - adopted her for his pet cause. In 1969, he made a very famous film about her life - and later a book called *Something Beautiful for God*. Both the book and the film deserve the label hagiography.

Muggeridge was so credulous that he actually claimed that a miracle had occurred on camera while he was making the film. He claimed that a mysterious "kindly light" had appeared around Mother Teresa. This claim could easily be exploded by the testimony of the cameraman himself: he had some new film stock produced by Kodak for dark or difficult light conditions. The new stock was used for the interview with Mother Teresa. The light in the film looked rather odd, and the cameraman was just about to say so when Muggeridge broke in and said, "It's a miracle, it's divine light."

FI: Are we all victims of the Catholic public relations machine? Or has the West seized upon Mother Teresa as salve for its conscience?

HITCHENS: Well, you are giving me my answer in your question. For a long time the church was not quite sure what to do about her. For example, when there was the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s, there was an equivalent meeting for the Catholics of the Indian subcontinent in Bombay. Mother Teresa turned up and said she was absolutely against any reconsideration of doctrine. She said we don't need any new thinking or reflection, what we need is more work and more faith. So she has been recognized as a difficult and dogmatic woman by the Catholics in India for a long time.

I think there were others in the church who suspected she was too ambitious, that she wouldn't accept discipline, that she wanted an order of her own. She was always petitioning to be able to go off and start her own show. Traditionally, the church has tended to suspect that kind of excessive zeal. I think it was an entirely secular breakthrough sponsored by Muggeridge, who wasn't then a Catholic.

So it wasn't the result of the propaganda of the Holy Office. But when the Catholic church realized it had a winner on its hands, it was quick to adopt her. She is a very great favorite of the faithful and a very good advertisement to attract non-believers or non-Catholics. And she's very useful for the current pope as a weapon against reformists and challengers within the church.

As to why those who would normally consider themselves rationalists or skeptics have fallen for the Mother Teresa myth, I think there is an element of post-colonial condescension involved, in that most people have a slightly bad conscience about "the wretched of the Earth" and they are glad to feel that there are those who will take action. Then also there is the general problem of credulity, of people being willing - once a reputation has been established - to judge people's actions by that reputation instead of the reputation by that action.

FI: Why do you think no other major media before you had exposed Mother Teresa?

HITCHENS: I'm really surprised by it. And also I'm surprised that no one in our community - that of humanists, rationalists, and atheists - had ever thought of doing it either.

There's a laziness in my profession, of tending to make the mistake I just identified of judging people by their reputation. In other words, if you call Saudi Arabia a "moderate Arab state" that's what it becomes for reportorial purposes. It doesn't matter what it does, it's a "moderate state." Similarly for Mother Teresa: she became a symbol for virtue, so even in cartoons, jokes, movies, and television shows, if you want a synonym for selflessness and holiness she is always mentioned.

It's inconvenient if someone robs you of a handy metaphor. If you finally printed the truth it would mean admitting that you missed it the first, second, and third time around. I've noticed a strong tendency in my profession for journalists not to like to admit that they ever missed anything or got anything wrong.

I think this is partly the reason, although in England my book got quite well reviewed because of the film, in the United States there seems to be the view that this book isn't worth reviewing. And it can't be for the usual reasons that the subject is too arcane and only of minority interest, or that there's not enough name recognition.

I believe there's also a version of multi-culturalism involved in this. That is to say, to be a Catholic in America is to be a member of two kinds of community: the communion of believers and the Catholic community, which is understood in a different sense, in other words, large numbers of Irish, Italian, Croatian, and other ethnic groups, who claim to be offended if any of the tenets of their religion are publicly questioned. Thus you are in a row with a community if you choose to question the religion. Under one interpretation of the rules of multi-culturalism that is not kosher: you

can't do that because you can't offend people in their dearest identity. There are some secular people who are vulnerable to that very mistake.

I'll give you an interesting example, Walter Goodman, the *New York Times* television critic, saw my film and then wrote that he could not understand why it was not being shown on American television. He laid down a challenge to television to show this film. There was then a long silence until I got a call from Connie Chung's people in New York. They flew me up and said they would like to do a long item about the program, using excerpts from it, interviewing me and talking about the row that had resulted. They obviously wanted to put responsibility for the criticism of Mother Teresa onto me rather than adopt it themselves - they were already planning the damage control.

But they didn't make any program. And the reason they gave me was that they thought that if they did they would be accused of being Jewish and attacked in the same way as the distributors of *The Last Temptation of Christ* had been. And that this would stir up Catholic-Jewish hostility in New York. It was very honest of them to put it that way. They had already imagined what might be said and the form it might take and they had persuaded themselves that it wasn't worth it.

FI: So your film has never been shown in the United States?

HITCHENS: No, and it certainly never will be. You can make that prediction with absolute certainty; and then you can brood on what that might suggest.

FI: What was the response in Britain to your exposé of Mother Teresa? Did you get a lot of criticism for it?

HITCHENS: When the film was shown, it prompted the largest number of phone calls that the channel had ever logged. That was expected. It was also expected that there would be a certain amount of similarity in the calls. I've read the log, and many of the people rang to say exactly the same thing, often in the same words. I think there was an element of organization to it.

But what was more surprising was that it was also the largest number of calls in favor that the station had ever had. That's rare because it's usually the people who want to complain who lift the phone; people who liked the program don't ring up. That's a phenomenon well known in the trade, and it's a reason why people aren't actually all that impressed when the switchboard is jammed with protest calls. They know it won't be people calling in to praise and they know it's quite easy to organize.

A really remarkable number of people rung in to say it's high time there was a program like this. The logs scrupulously record the calls verbatim, and I noticed that the standard of English and of reasoning in the pro calls was just so much higher as to make one feel that perhaps all was not lost.

In addition to the initial viewer response, there was also a row in the press. But on the whole both sides of the case were put. Nonetheless, it was depressing to see how many people objected not to what was said but to its being said at all. Even among secular people there was an astonishment, as if I really had done something iconoclastic. People would say "Christopher Hitchens alleges that Mother Teresa keeps company with dictators" and so on, as though it hadn't been proven. But none of the critics have ever said, even the most hostile ones, that anything I say about her is untrue. No one has ever disproved any of that.

Probably the most intelligent review appeared in the Tablet, a English monthly Catholic paper. There was a long, serious and quite sympathetic review by someone who had obviously worked with the church in India and knew Mother Teresa. The reviewer said Mother Teresa's work and ideology do present some problems for the faith.

FI: But in America the idea that Mother Teresa is a sacred cow who must not be criticized won out and your book and your critique of Mother Teresa never got an airing?

HITCHENS: Yes, pretty much. Everything in American reviews depends on the New York Times Book Review. My book was only mentioned in the batch of short notices at the end. Considering that Mother Teresa had a book out at the same time, I thought this was very strange. Any book review editor with any red corpuscles at all would put both books together, look up a reviewer with an interest in religion and ask him or her to write an essay comparing and contrasting them. I have been a reviewer and worked in a newspaper office, and that is what I would have expected to happen. That it didn't is suggestive and rather depressing.

FI: The Mother Teresa myth requires the Indians to play the role of the hapless victims. What do the Indians think of Mother Teresa and of the image she gives of India?

HITCHENS: I've got an enormous pile of coverage from India, where my book was published. And the reviews seem to be overwhelmingly favorable. Of course it comes at a time when there is a big crisis in India about fundamentalism and secularism.

There are many Indians who object to the image of their society and its people that is projected. From Mother Teresa and from her fans you would receive the impression that in Calcutta there is nothing but torpor, squalor, and misery, and people barely have the energy to brush the flies from their eyes while extending a begging bowl. Really and truly that is a slander on a fantastically interesting, brave, highly evolved, and cultured city, which has universities, film schools, theaters, book shops, literary cafes, and very vibrant politics. There is indeed a terrible problem of poverty and overcrowding, but despite that there isn't all that much mendicancy. People do not tug at your sleeve and beg. They are proud of the fact that they don't.

The sources of Calcutta's woes and miseries are the very overpopulation that the church says is no problem, and the mass influx of refugees from neighboring regions that have been devastated by religious and sectarian warfare in the name of God. So those who are believers owe Calcutta big time, they should indeed be working to alleviate what they are responsible for. But the pretense that they are doing so is a big fraud.

FI: You mention in your book that Mother Teresa is used by the Religious Right and fundamentalist Protestants who traditionally are very anti-Catholic as a symbol of religious holiness with which to beat secular humanists.

HITCHENS: Yes, she's a poster girl for the right-to-life wing in America. She was used as the example of Christian idealism and family values, of all things, by Ralph Reed - the front man of the Pat Robertson forces. That's a symptom of a wider problem that I call "reverse ecumenicism," an opportunist alliance between extreme Catholics and extreme Protestants who used to exclude and anathematize one another.

In private Pat Robertson has nothing but contempt for other Christian denominations, including many other extreme Protestant ones. But in public the Christian Coalition stresses that it is very, very keen to make an alliance with Catholics. There is a shallow, opportunist ecumenicism among religious extremists, and Mother Teresa is quite willingly and happily in its service. She knows exactly who she is working for and with. But I think she is happiest when doing things like going to Ireland and intervening in the Divorce Referendum, as she did recently.

By the way, there is an interesting angle to that which has not yet appeared in print. During the Divorce Referendum the Irish Catholic church threatened to deny the sacrament to women who wanted to be remarried. There were no exceptions to be allowed: it didn't matter if you had been married to an alcoholic who beat you and sexually assaulted your children, you were not going to get a second chance in this world or the next. And that is the position that Mother Teresa intervened in Ireland to support.

Now shift the scene: Mother Teresa is a sort of confessor to Princess Diana. They have met many times. You can see the mutual interest; I'm not sure which of them needs the other the most. But Mother Teresa was interviewed by *Ladies Home Journal*, a magazine read by millions of American women, and in the course of it she says that she heard that Princess Diana was getting divorced and she really hopes so because she will be so much happier that way.

So there is forgiveness after all, but guess for whom. You couldn't have it more plain than that. I was slightly stunned myself because, although I think there are many fraudulent things about Mother Teresa, I also think there are many authentic things about her. Anyway, she was forced to issue a statement saying that marriage is God's work and can't be undone and all the usual tripe. But when she was speaking from the heart, she was more forgiving of divorce.

FI: A footnote in your book criticizes Mother Teresa for forgiving you for your film about her.

HITCHENS: I said that I didn't ask for forgiveness and I wasn't aware that she could bestow it in any case. Of all the things in the book, that is the one that has attracted most hostile comment - even from friends and people who agree with me. They ask why I object to that, what's wrong with forgiveness? My explanation is that it would be O.K. if she was going to forgive everyone. When she went to Bhopal after the Union Carbide industrial accident killed thousands, she kept saying "Forgive, forgive, forgive." It's O.K. to forgive Union Carbide for its negligence, but for a woman married to an alcoholic child abuser in Ireland who has ten children and no one to look after her, there is no forgiveness in this life or the next one. But there is forgiveness for Princess Diana.

FI: There is a Roman Catholic doctrine about the redemption of the soul through suffering. This can be seen in Mother Teresa's work: she thinks suffering is good, and she doesn't use pain relievers in her clinics and so forth. Does she take the same attitude towards her own health? Does she live in accordance with what she preaches?

HITCHENS: I hesitated to cover this in my book, but I decided I had to publish that she has said that the suffering of the poor is something very beautiful and the world is being very much helped by the nobility of this example of misery and suffering.

FI: A horrible thing to say.

HITCHENS: Yes, evil in fact. To say it was unChristian unfortunately would not be true, although many people don't realize that is what Christians believe. It is a positively immoral remark in my opinion, and it should be more widely known than it is.

She is old, she has had various episodes with her own health, and she checks into some of the costliest and finest clinics in the West herself. I hesitated to put that in the book because it seemed as though it would be *ad hominem* (or *ad feminam*) and I try never to do that. I think that the doctrine of hating the sin and loving the sinner is obviously a stupid one, because it's a false antithesis, but a version of it is morally defensible. Certainly in arguments one is only supposed to attack the arguments and not the person presenting them. But the contrast seemed so huge in this case.

It wasn't so much that it showed that her facilities weren't any good, but it showed that they weren't medical facilities at all. There wasn't any place she runs that she could go; as far as I know, their point isn't treatment. And in fairness to her, she has never really claimed that treatment is the point. Although she does accept donations from people who have fooled themselves into thinking so, I haven't found any occasion where she has given a false impression of her work. The only way she could be said to be responsible for spreading it is that she knowingly accepts what comes due to that false impression.

FI: But if people go to her clinics for the dying and they need medical care, does she send them on to the proper places?

HITCHENS: Not according to the testimony of a number of witnesses. I printed the accounts of several witnesses whose testimony I could verify and I've had many other communications from former volunteers in Calcutta and in other missions. All of them were very shocked to find when they got there that they had missed some very crucial point and that very often people who come under the false impression that they would receive medical care are either neglected or given no advice. In other words, anyone going in the hope of alleviation of a serious medical condition has made a huge mistake.

I've got so much testimony from former workers who contacted me after I wrote the book, that I almost have enough material to do a sequel.

FI: I have a question as one Englishman in America to another. You are a secular humanist Englishman who is a leading commentator on American culture and politics. Tell me, what is it about Americans and religion? Why is it that religion, often very primitive forms of religion, is so powerful in perhaps the richest, most advanced, most consumerist nation on Earth?

HITCHENS: I'm an atheist. I'm not neutral about religion, I'm hostile to it. I think it is a positively bad idea, not just a false one. And I mean not just organized religion, but religious belief itself.

Why is the United States so prone to any kind of superstition, not just organized religion, but cultism, astrology, millennial beliefs, UFOs, any form of superstition? I've thought a lot about it. I read Harold Bloom's book *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (1992) about the evolution of what he thinks of as a specifically American form of religion. There was a book by Will Herberg in the 1950s called Protestant, Catholic, Jew where he speculated that what was really evolving was the American way of life as a religion. And that this was a way of life that wasn't at all spiritual or intellectual but in a sense believed that all religion was valid as long as it underpinned this way of life. Somehow religion was a necessary ingredient. In other words, religion was functional. I think that's true but it's not the whole story.

Maybe - and this is a conclusion that I am reluctant to come to - it is because there is no established church here. A claim that is made for established churches is that in a way they domesticate and canalize and give a form and order to superstitious impulses. That's why they usually succeed in annexing all local cults and making them their own, etc. Part of their job is to soak up all the savagery around the place. I think from an anthropological point of view, that's partly true.

In a country that very honorably and uniquely founded itself on repudiating that idea and saying the church and the government would always be separate, and also a country that many people came to in the hope of practicing their own religion, you have both free competition and a sense of manifest destiny. I think it's out of that sort of stew that you have all these bubbles.

Chesterton used to say that, if people didn't have a belief in God, they wouldn't believe in nothing, they would believe in anything. The objection to that of course is that belief in God is believing in anything. But there's still a ghost of a point in there: if people are licensed to believe anything and call it spirituality, then they will.

FI: I think maybe it's not so much not having an established church as not having a dominant church. In France you have strict separation, but the Catholic church is dominant. Yet France has very high levels of nonbelief, like countries with an established church. But in America you have free competition of churches, and lots of competing cults, and much more energy as a result.

HITCHENS: I'm not sure that people in the United States are as devout as the statistics suggest. The statistics are extraordinary if you believe them: something like 88 percent of Americans regularly attend church, and 90 percent of them believe in the devil. I would like to have a look at how the questions are formulated in these polls.

FI: We have done our own polls - scientifically selected samples - in which we framed the questions ourselves, and we got very similar results to the other polls we had read. It may be that the question is not, Why do people believe this? - because perhaps they don't - but, Why do people say they believe this? There's obviously a social conditioning.

HITCHENS: Yes, that's right. People obviously feel they owe the pollsters that kind of answer.

I wonder whether the onset of the millennium is going to be as awful as I sometimes fear. There will be uneasiness among the feeble-minded and the emotionally insecure.

FI: Especially in America.

HITCHENS: American fundamentalism has one huge problem which is that the United States is nowhere pre-figured in the Bible. It worries them a lot, they keep trying to find it there, they try to interpret prophecies to refer to the United States, but they can't succeed - even to their own satisfaction - in getting it to come out right.

FI: You have to go to the Book of Mormon?

HITCHENS: Yes, and the Seventh-Day Adventists, who descended from the Millerites. I can see that Scientology now enjoys charitable status as a religion, which I think is a real triumph. I can't get over that. You can set some idea of what it would have been like to live in third-century Nicea when Christianity was being hammered together - an experience I am very glad I did not have. Religious diversity is confused with pluralism. Because of multi-culturalism and what is called "political correctness," religion has a certain protection that it couldn't expect to have if it was a state-sponsored racket like the Church of England.

FI: A lot of people who aren't religious think religion should still be beyond criticism.

HITCHENS: Certainly, because it's people's deepest and dearest beliefs, and because they are communities as well as congregations. And I suppose that in the minds of some people the feeling is "Well, you never know, it may be true and then I will go to Hell." A lot of people every now and then are visited by fear. It seems that as animals we are so constituted. At least we can know that about ourselves, but it is such a waste of the knowledge to interpret in any other way. On the other hand, I'm also impressed by the number of people who manage to get by - often without any help or support - not believing.

FI: The great thing about humanism is that so many people reach the position independently, because it is not about teachers and doctrines. You just end up a humanist by following your own questions.

HITCHENS: That's true. And it doesn't have any element of wishful-thinking in it, which is another advantage. Though it's the reason why I think it will always be hated but never eradicated.

FI: Look at the situation in Western Europe: in Holland about 55 percent say they are humanist or non-religious; and in Britain it's up to about 30 percent and among teenagers it's 50 percent. So there's an enormous movement in Western Europe towards secularism and humanism. Yet in America it seems to be getting just more and more religious. Which, considering the convergence of culture in other areas, seems quite anomalous. Sociologists are just beginning to address this issue but haven't done so properly yet.

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Mother Teresa died in September of 1997.