



## Time to confront the holy grail!

**It is said that many people turn towards religion as they approach the end of their road. For me, and to date, it has been something towards the opposite; though I guess one can never be quite sure what might come to pass – as 007 might say - when the chips are down.**

I have for long admired the late *Christopher Hitchens*: his accumulated knowledge, his profound literary skills, and in later years his scathing attacks on anything to do with religion, even to the extent of labelling Mother Theresa a lackey of the corporate world.

Just a few years before death, he published a remarkable collection of thoughts under the title: *god is not great* (using the small g to add emphasis to the fact). Then when nearing the final curtain, his memoirs – *Hitch-22* – were published, which also contained lengthy rants against religion. In fact, almost to his last gasp - even though his once-eloquent voice was becoming strained by throat cancer, and hair disappeared by chemotherapy – he continued to deliver and debate on that same topic.: the greatness of god ... or otherwise. He had become the attack dog for anyone who dared oppose his view. Very few dared, and if they did, they did not win.

This gelled marvelously with a view of the world that I had been forming, since I was in my teens. It fanned the flames underneath my cauldron, helping to stir the variety of potions contained therein, and then when the results had been brought to the boil, assisted in putting the lid firmly on top, to keep the contents in place.

I admired others in the same circle and mostly around the same vintage as Hitchens: *Salman Rushdie, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Fry, Martin Amis*. All remarkable, non-god-fearing intellectuals in their own right, but none could hold a candle to Hitch, in terms of bringing it all together: on paper and at the podium, sometimes with stand-up comedy skills that rivalled an on-form *Peter Cooke* or *Dudley Moore*, delivered with an impish sense of humour that could cause offense to all but those with the thickest of skins.

In the early years, my anti-Christ thoughts, by definition, related solely to Christianity: that was all I knew. I began to think, why would people of sound mind – both male and female, well-educated and employed - gather in a tall-roofed building, for an hour or two every Sunday, to say words,, sing songs and kneel down before some supernatural being? It made no sense. When one thought about it in an objective way it seemed ludicrous: like following your horoscope: many people did it for a laugh; but most of them knew it was bullshit!

Later, I began to take on board other creeds, which in various ways made even less sense. In most, men appeared to be exalted, while women were subjected to those men's needs and wants, which in our 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries did not seem to match modern ways of thinking, as related to feminism and human rights. In some faiths I learnt that the most devout would turn their thoughts to extreme actions, by flailing their bodies with whips and wires, or bloodying their foreheads with over-indulgence in prayer. And the same people that fronted up on their allotted Sabbath, in extreme cases torturing themselves, were law court judges and stock market supremos, corporate heads and professors of academia. While most things I learnt appeared grounded at least in some sort of reality – Maths or Science, Geography or History – in my mind, this topic that was somehow steeped in mystery just did not seem to make much sense.

Things began to form into a cohesive whole when I went first to India and then to Africa. In India I was turned on by the Hindu faith: it seemed a fun religion. Whether there were 30,000, or three million colourfully animated Gods, no one seemed to know. Gods could be a human form with an elephant or perhaps a monkey's head. Anything was possible. There was no compulsion to attend mass meetings; your temple could be at home in a corner of the living room, and on occasions you could make a long-distance and fun pilgrimage to Tirriputti, or some other revered hill-top, or river-based shrine. Then after a few years of admiring the vibrant faith led by Vishnu and Rama and others, I came to realise that Hinduism too had its dark side, when fundamentalism took over from fun.

In Africa I came to understand another aspect: that education (or lack of it) can impact on the fervour of religious belief. I found it mildly amusing that the Brits were berated for being bad colonialists, yet African men wore polyester suits in 30-degree heat, dark skinned judges sported long white wigs, and many sub-Saharan parliaments mirrored the holy grail in Westminster. On top of all that, people without a bean to their name, would gather on Sundays (and sometimes on many other days) to sing and dance for hours in deference to Christ Almighty, who had been brought into their midst by those dreaded colonialists from the North, whilst of course, back in Britain young people were rejecting the God concept in droves.

In the case of Kenya, I came to feel that devotion to God was in many ways a necessary prop; it meant that for a few hours each week, people could get together to enjoy singing and dancing, with family and friends, at a venue away from their troubles. For the other 150 plus hours in each week, life was a bit of a grind: fortunate if you could find the four dollars to feed your family ... unfortunate if not. What turned me off a bit, was the men (they were nearly always men) who stood at the front and growled in a rasping voice, at their compliant congregation. This seemed like some sort of subjugation of the poor (both male and female), often with the intention of wringing the last coin from their pockets. It was hard to believe people would fall for this stuff, but in

many ways, they were using it as their relief valve. Citizens of Britain have the NHS and the dole to fall back on; in Africa they make do with the church.

*Hitch* had a way with words, particularly when it came to his pet theme. He talked about the bible as something a bunch of illiterate peasants had dreamt up some 2000 years ago, at a time when the Earth was flat, and travel was by donkey. He spoke of religions beginning to get much closer to the truth, as they reduced their godly numbers from thousands, to hundreds, then down to one; and he castigated Mother Theresa, alongside Henry Kissinger and Bill Clinton, as particularly unsavoury characters. But while I was never fully convinced by his accusations towards the devout Mother of Calcutta, I could (and still can) empathise fully with his disparaging account related to the origins of the Christian church, and in similar vein, the magic carpet on which all faiths are based: withdraw the carpet and the whole belief system comes tumbling down, like a tower built from playing cards!

Like others that think about these things – and I guess most of us do, at different points along life's path – I needed to reconcile all this with my inner-most conscience. It was *Hitch*, in a sense more than anyone, who provided grist for my mill. It wasn't as if I had started out an atheist. I was the one who had sat on the two-berth stool, turning the pages, as my grandfather negotiated the menu of hymns for the day, in that small village church next to my school. I remember watching him as he pounded the three tiers of organ keys with unbridled enthusiasm – his white hair falling over his brow - pulling and pushing the knobs to form the rich harmonies that sailed up those long, tall pipes, to the heavens above. Indeed, some of the favoured evergreens, even today - decades later - come back to me in the shower, impossible to erase.

And perhaps that is the main issue. I myself did manage to make my escape, in tandem with achieving puberty, but for all those steeped in their particular version of faithful creed, it becomes an almost impossible task to erase that which has flooded our mind and overrun our being since the time we learned to walk and talk. It never ceases to amaze me just how much religion pervades our daily lives. Even the non-religious say

things every day of their lives which refer to God: *Oh my God! God almighty! God knows, and Jesus Christ!* Then there are many others slightly removed, but still closely connected involuntary sayings, such as: *for goodness sake, for heaven's sake, or, there but for the grace of god, go I* (the last one being especially pertinent in my case).

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Yet despite the fact that I had spurned the particular creed of my family in Cornwall, it never really ceased to be a part of my life. I had disowned the fact that I signed the pledge (at an age when writing my name was a novel accomplishment), as well as having discarded the trappings – the carpets and furniture – of a faithful soul, but the surrounding framework – the floor, walls and ceiling – of religion, were still there, engulfing my being, whenever I chose to return. I continued without fail, to attend the weddings, christenings and funerals of family and friends; brass bands pumped out Christmas carols on bleak winter evenings, and I attended the school nativity plays that my kids were so excited to be a part of (the same plays in which I myself had eagerly participated, in that very same church-affiliated school, many years before).

The *bruncl*e of course was always in the background, watching over and impacting on proceedings. My mother, Dorothy, was already a teacher of religion at high school, before I was born; and it's a fair assumption that to teach is to know, and more importantly, to believe. Thus, having had half her heart and soul removed when she left me and the sunny shores of England behind, as she sailed away to Australia, she turned to religion to support the half that remained.

Before leaving, her family – indeed my family - belonged to the John Wesley tradition of the protestant church: almost as far left protestant (if there is such a thing) as one could be. On arrival in Ballarat, as part of the family of her newfound husband, she had to gravitate to the right, or upwards, to a higher form of the Anglican church. While indeed it was the same Jesus Christ whom both churches followed, the methodology used to pay homage was intrinsically different. I can only assume that the service, bordering on

Catholicism in nature, with holy communion and long golden robes, was something of an anathema, and something from which she rebelled.

Thus a few years after arrival in the once frontier, gold-mining town of Ballarat, Dorothy began to turn to a new creed; this was a much more devout and soul-searching faith than the once-a-week Church of England communion service she had come to know, and to some degree despise.

The faith that my mother turned to in those guilt-ridden days was Christian Science; the US-based church, founded by Mary Baker Eddy. Here she found a creed she could immerse herself in, and like-minded souls in the vicinity of her new home, whom she could turn to for advice and succour. Christian Science is not to be confused with the Scientology of Tom Cruise; it is a religion which perhaps more than most, asks its devotees to search their souls for inner goodness and to believe that love is the value that heals all ailments. In fact my mother took this value of love on board in no uncertain terms, refusing all medical intervention for any and every family illness or accident, until in her 94<sup>th</sup> year and nearing her last moments, she gave in to her doctor's advice.

I was suitably intrigued, though never convinced. My mother would hand me the latest *Christian Science Newsletter* whenever I visited, and while most of them – I have to now admit – were dispatched to the bin, I would sometimes sit down to read a page or two. A few years after this fairly harmless form of proselitization had commenced – and after I had moved into the global education sphere - I was quite taken by the fact that writings in these newsletters often took a very informed and bold stance on issues to do with development; a stance with which I usually concurred.

So it was to some degree confrontational: no, I didn't want religion, but yes, what this religion said – on love as the supreme value, on non-violence, on social justice - actually made good sense. From that, I began to view my mother in a new light; a light which told me she had sought out what perhaps (to my mind at least) was the best religion, in a bad bunch. She had needed to immerse herself in a new world, to surround herself with

like-minded souls. It was in some ways a prop – similar to the prop that the poor in Africa used to forget their daily grind - but for her, it was a prop to help her forget the guilt of her past; of leaving me behind, when in her heart she knew she should have insisted on taking me with her. Later the prop became a shield, when she knew that I, and her younger children, all knew the truth; then *Christian Science* became the shield to hide behind, and co-habit with. Looking back, I should have had the good sense and fortitude to sit together with my mother and some of her confidants, thus together unravelling the past; freeing Dorothy of her guilt, and creating a new belief set.

This second if somewhat arms-length encounter with religion, was for me a good teacher. It taught me not to purge religion in what might be viewed a wholesale, across-the-board sense. Of course, It is true that religion is a myth, based on illogical and misguided thinking that confounds the science we know in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I believe that wholeheartedly. But at the same time religion can be a means of support for the poor, of solace for the guilty, and friendship for the lonely. If religion can project itself in this way, then even though its underlying framework is not based on truth, it could be a force for good in an ever-more scientific and technological world: good fake news in a hard truth world perhaps.

Of course, *IF* is a big word here.

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