

# The Atheist's Redemption

In my last appearance in this space, I wrote erroneously that Christopher Hitchens had favored both Anglo-American wars on Iraq. In fact, he strongly opposed the first one, back in 1991. I remember this so vividly (I was delighted with him at the time) that I can't understand how I could be so embarrassingly forgetful when I wrote as I did. I owe him an apology, which I cheerfully offer.

Still, I can't help suspecting that the current war, which he does support, may help explain his newly aggressive atheism. By applauding Bush's war, a quasi-Trotskyite venture in "global democratic revolution," Hitch, as his friends call him, has lost a lot of face among his old comrades on the left. Attacking "religion" was the perfect way to recoup. So Michael Kinsley was probably right to praise his book *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* as a shrewd career move.

However, as Dr. Johnson said of Rousseau, "A man who talks nonsense so well must know he is talking nonsense." Is Hitch (or should we, by analogy with "god," call him "hitch"?) pulling the public's leg just a bit? When he speaks of religion as belief in a "celestial dictatorship," he betrays the Trotskyite reduction of all relations to raw power; surely, he is aware that Christians regard God—or "god," if you like—as a loving Father, not a gigantic bully. But when he says (on page 114) that Jesus' very historical existence is "highly questionable," you have to wonder if he is lying, insane, or just full of hitch.

Can he be serious? The most famous and influential man who ever lived . . . never lived? Can anyone really suppose such a marvelous character was invented? That a few unschooled and inartistic writers could have thought up immortal words suitable to Him? That countless martyrs would endure agonizing death to bear witness to One whose reality was in doubt? Tell us another one, hitch. Better yet, say one thing even your fellow unbelievers will find worthy of Jesus, one thing men will quote a year—or two thousand—from now.

The hitchbook is open to many objections, but one of its oddities is its startling

profusion of anachronistic indignations. Why should a materialist get so sore about the supposed evils of war, racism, sexism, bigotry, Nazism, "the" Inquisition (was there only one?), caste systems, and Mel Gibson? Did "religion" cause all of these things, and if so, so what? Why shouldn't they exist in hitch's universe? Couldn't they have evolved on other planets anyway? Isn't hitch guilty of humanism? If we discovered a Mel Gibson on Mars, why should we care? And why does hitch single out Martin Luther King, Jr., as the only praiseworthy Christian? And why, after renouncing communism, is he so forgiving toward communists, including King's pals?

And why don't these obvious questions occur to hitch himself?

One reason I'm a Christian is that Jesus predicted books such as this: He warned us that, just as the world hated Him, it would always hate us, too, and so it does, after 2,000 years.

Another reason is more personal. Life has been so kind to me. It has warped me with blessings. I've had a few minor complaints lately, but, as a child, I was so showered with love that I can't disbelieve in God or believe that He is cruel.

Nor can I take hitch seriously, except as a man who appears to be pitifully indisposed to gratitude. He can imagine "religion" only in what a believer recognizes as its most deformed versions, which prove nothing at all about its normal, lovely, and perfect form: the Catholic Faith. He's looking for reasons to hate it, while never acknowledging even one of the things that make millions of men love it. If I were an atheist, I might write a book in praise of such a gorgeous illusion.

One of hitch's sneakiest moves is his at-

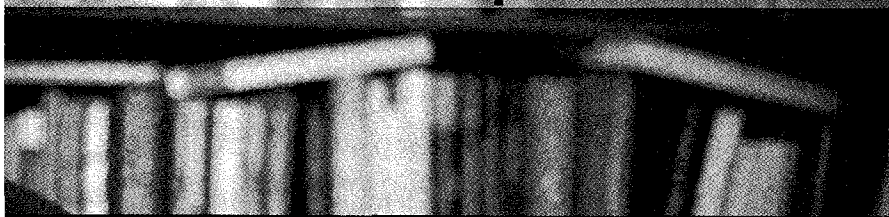


tempt to pin the label "totalitarian" on religion. Surely, he knows that the essence of the totalitarian is the utterly arbitrary authority of the ruler, who can switch all the rules at any moment.

No Muslim, Jewish, or Catholic ruler has ever claimed the right to do anything so absurd—to be "above" morality. (The U.S. Supreme Court may do so.) It would defeat the whole purpose of having an unchanging Scripture. At one point, hitch himself even seems to admit this, but he plunges on like a fast-talking salesman who hopes you won't notice the self-contradiction. Safely "audacious," he treats communism not as a vicious crime (like those of Mel Gibson) but as an amiable, if slightly regrettable, weakness. After all, it's one he shared until late in his life, something more than a youthful flirtation. But any sense of guilt he may feel doesn't make him swerve from his mission, which is not to confess but to accuse.

Hitch accuses Christians of "wish-thinking," but fails to see how the same charge may apply to atheists who think they may ignore and violate the Ten Commandments with utter impunity. The man who fears he is in danger of damnation, on the other hand, would seem to deserve exemption from any such imputation. Me, I'd rather not spend eternity in Hell. ©

**Purchase books, tapes, and CDs at**



**[www.ChroniclesMagazine.org](http://www.ChroniclesMagazine.org)**

# Sex, Propaganda, and Higher Education

## Inside the Opinion Mill

by Tom Landess

Over the past few years, college administrators and faculty committees have been tackling a relatively new ethical question raised on campuses across the nation: *What about sex between faculty members and students?* Older professors can remember when the answer to that question would have been obvious. Some can even recall a time when the question would never have been asked.

Today, however, with mixed dorms and mixed roommates, how can the old-fashioned barrier that separates teacher and student be permitted to stand? After all, if engaging in sex has become a right enjoyed by all consenting adults, then what possible objection can anyone offer to a consenting student and faculty member exercising that right together? While the academy has not yet reached a consensus on this question, the fact that it has been raised at all is symptomatic of a sea change in higher education, a substantive redefinition of the idea of a university.

For generations, the university was regarded as a free market of ideas, a place where diverse opinions were encouraged and where students learned to think by weighing one point of view against another. Hence the concept of academic freedom, the doctrine that a professor had a right to express whatever ideas he championed, both in the classroom and in the community at large. This doctrine was grounded in the assumption that the academy as an institution didn't take sides. Even Cardinal Newman, when describing the ideal Catholic university, insisted that no indoctrination take place, that the student be taught *how* to think rather than *what* to think. This view prevailed in American universities up until the 1960's—or, at least, the academy paid lip service to it.

While faculty members came to believe that the twin doctrines of academic freedom and the free market of ideas were invented solely to protect them, these ideals protected students as well, given their intellectual naiveté and, hence, their vulnerability to manipulation. After all, the university did not exist so that teachers could prance about campuses, expressing eccentric opinions, quarreling with one another and the world. It existed to train the minds of the young. Thus, it was originally student-centered rather than faculty-centered. Somewhere along the way, professors forgot for whom the university existed.

In his 1965 book *Repressive Tolerance*, Herbert Marcuse became the philosopher of late-20th-century academia. In essence, he advocated the repeal of academic freedom and the suppression of all ideas hostile to social and economic revolution. As he put it, "Certain things cannot be said; certain ideas

cannot be expressed; certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted without making tolerance an instrument for the continuation of servitude." It was a typically Marxist pronouncement—blunt, arrogant, and without so much as a rhetorical bow to conventional wisdom.

This statement still seems outrageous to professors over 70 and to their graying former students. However, few current academics share this sense of outrage. Indeed, in this single sentence, Marcuse produced a new creed for higher education in America and helped to inaugurate the vision of a new institution—no longer a university in the traditional sense but an opinion mill, an arm of the revolution.

The motive behind this crushing of all dissent was the drive to recruit students in a Second American Revolution, which, in the 1960's and 70's, seemed all but inevitable. For generations, American students had behaved themselves—except for periodically swallowing goldfish, conducting panty raids, or jamming themselves into telephone booths. Then the war in Vietnam followed on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, and leftist professors became professional agitators, seizing on the opportunity to use students in the same way their counterparts had for decades used them in Europe and South America—to destabilize an orderly society. The students were predictably pliant; when manipulated by their professors, they always are.

Why? Because when they go off to college, young people leave a relatively complex world and enter a relatively simple one—a kingdom where abstractions rule. In that world, those who do what is most valued are the professors, with their advanced degrees, their intellectual fiefdoms, their air of certitude. A few examples of *argumentum ad misericordiam*, a few tales of oppression, a line or two from John Lennon's "Imagine," and young people charge into the streets, teeth grinding, nostrils flaring, waving whatever insolent banner their teachers hand them. So, by the late 60's, middle-class students were rioting on campuses all over the country, heaving rocks at police, vandalizing buildings, issuing non-negotiable demands—full of carefree, self-righteous zeal.

Few people noticed that the rapid transformation of the university into the opinion mill dramatically altered the attitude of teacher to student. In the university, students were treated as ends rather than as means to ends. The integrity of their malleable minds was regarded as inviolable. Ideally, the chief aim of instruction was to nurture their critical ability to the point at which they could make judgments independent of others, including their instructors. By contrast, the opinion mill treats students as means to an end, bodies to hurl against the ramparts of authority. They are taught to embrace a prescribed view of society without considering the possibility that alternative views might have merit. In such an institution, stu-

---

*Contributing editor Tom Landess is a retired English professor who has published a number of books and articles, many of which have appeared under his name.*