



## I Don't Believe in Atheists

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## **I Don't Believe in Atheists** Chris Hedges

The bestselling author of *The New Fascists* speaks out against religious and secular fundamentalism as he explores the New Atheists: those who attack religion to advance their causes.

### **I Don't Believe in Atheists Details**

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## From Reader Review I Don't Believe in Atheists for online ebook

### **Joshua Stein says**

I swore to a friend that I would give this book a chance, and for a few moments I expected Hedges to provide a serious answer to the quandries offered to apologists by the Four Horsemen of atheism (Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens). The book, unfortunately, failed me, as you can plainly see by my rating.

The fact is, Hedges' triteness makes the text unbearable and the fact that he does not even really provide any original ideas makes it all the more painful. The tooth-pulling sensation I got while working through the tiny book (a chore which reminded me of shoveling manuer on a ranch, without the perk of sunshine) made me wonder if it were even possible to cram so much crap into so small a manuscript.

I like apologetics, generally speaking. I like that they make me think about my position, make me dissect and change my premises and alter my conclusions. I like the way that they force me to reconsider my views about the world. What Hedges' offers, though, is not that wonderful, optimistic, debatable form of apologetics that fuel my mind, it is the monotonous droning of a power drill being run through my skull and into my brain, whirring as I become stupider to the point of death.

Hedges' arguments are not even arguments. He makes claims that anyone who has read the works of Harris and Dawkins and Hitchens knows are false. He constructs strawmen out of bullshit and lights it on fire so that it might add to the pollution in the ozone.

Generally, I am open for entertaining books that I disagree with, and I encourage those I talk to about books and belief to do the same. Avoid Hedges. It is not pleasant.

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### **Clif Hostetler says**

This book provides the best critic of the so called "new atheism" that I've encountered thus far. The book articulates the position that seeking the transcendent experience is an integral part of the human experience. Suggestions that progress in human knowledge and science make religion unnecessary is labeled as arrogance out of touch with human nature. The author comes from a Christian background; He even has seminary training. However, this book is a defense of all religions, not just Christianity. The author indicates that he seldom attends church services, and when he does he rolls his eyes at the things said which indicate that the members consider themselves to be honorary sinners. So he's certainly not defending any religious organization as an institution. But rather he's defending it from the standpoint of human psychology, sociology, politics and history.

To my tastes, the author was a bit guilty of demonizing the targets of his criticism. He describes Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris as being irrationally extreme to the same degree as the radical religious fundamentalists on the other end of the spectrum. Apparently Hitchens and Harris have made comments that indicate that it may be necessary to make a preemptive military strike against radical Islamists to save civilization. (I don't think Dawkins has said anything like that.) Comments such as those don't deserve support. But I'm inclined to feel more accepting of atheist with a humanist inclination than I am of conservative religionists who seem to hate everything human. By painting his opponents in the worst possible light the author makes discrediting them easier. Ironically, that's the same tactic that Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris use against religion.

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## Jason says

Reading this book was painful. There seems to be absolutely no logical structure to Hedges' argument. Hedges also presents himself as an expert on "human nature," making all types of conclusive statements and generalizations on the subject. Quotes from the "new atheists" are often presented with little context. He also doesn't really grapple much with the logical arguments for or against the existence of a supernatural omnipotent being. I think Hedges is a smart guy, but this was a really sad effort on his part.

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## Tulipesh Patel says

The story of how *When Atheism Becomes a Religion* got into my hands is almost more interesting than what's contained within its pages. In 2009, whilst working at the University of California, Los Angeles, a friend tried to post me a copy, having found it in a Borders bargain bin and thinking, quite rightly, that it would be something I would be interested in. Two weeks later it was returned to her with "Unauthorized Circulation: Religious Content (Int'l) RTS" written on the package. She kept the packaging and waited until she returned to the UK to give the book to me in person last year.

My immediate reaction to hearing that the book had been returned was to cook up a conspiracy theory about censorship by the American postal system – but, knowing that the simplest explanation is usually the most likely, I quickly dismissed the idea. Months later I found out that it was actually the family that my friend was staying with in LA, who are devoutly Christian, who stopped the package being sent. It seems that it was enough for a member of my friend's host family to object to the package for the post office to deem it 'unauthorised circulation'.

My friend wrote of her surprise that the host family would do such a thing as she knew them to be religious, but "... this didn't even cross my mind, since I don't even think they're anti-religious...". I'm more bothered with why the post office complied and wrote such an explicit message on the front. The ironic twist to this whole saga is that *\*When Atheism Becomes a Religion\** is written by a Christian about the putative faults of atheism.

I knew from the off that I was in for an interesting read when a pro-religion/anti-atheism book uses the label 'religion' pejoratively in its title. In light of all the drama of getting hold of the book, and having read on the back that Hedges has won literary awards, including the 2002 Amnesty International Global Award for Human Rights Journalism, I was really looking forward to it.

With *\*When Atheism Becomes a Religion\**, Chris Hedges aims to draw parallels between the dangers of Christian fundamentalists and the rise of the New Atheists. First, let's just get this out of the way: careful consideration of the definition of faith and its concomitants shows atheism is clearly not a religion. AC Grayling has stated it most clearly: "Faith is the negation of reason. Reason is the faculty of proportioning judgement to evidence, after first weighing the evidence. Faith is belief even in the face of contrary evidence" (see Søren Kierkegaard's famous 'leap of [or rather to] faith').

Hedges establishes his tone and 'reasoning' (I use the word lightly) very early on by distinguishing between Christian fundamentalism and his own moderate, 'liberal' Presbyterian Christianity, but conveniently lumps

atheism, science (or rather scientism) and rationality into a homogenous fundamentalist ideology. Hedges' main problem with New Atheists (Hedges specifically targets the Four Horsemen (Daniel Dennet, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens), but generalises to mean all those who do not believe in god and place importance on science, reason and rationality), is that they [all] "... believe, like the Christian Right, that we are moving forward to a paradise, a state of human perfection ..." all the while ignoring original sin and "the acceptance that there will never be a final victory over evil, that the struggle for morality is a battle will always be fought."

The book is steeped in defeatism and allusions to end-times philosophy. It is obvious that Hedges' career as foreign correspondent and reporter of war have made a serious, and understandable, contribution to his bleak outlook on human society and its future (passages on the Balkan wars, for example, are a difficult read). Hedges argues that "We are all flawed. Human ambitions and pursuits are vanity." If this were just essays on how vicious and vindictive people can be to each other, I wouldn't really have much of a problem with it, it's the second part I struggle with.

There is no question that those who apply science and reason are, on the whole, striving to make the world a better place. In his new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker argues that Enlightenment values have contributed to an overall decrease in violence over time. But even if Pinker is right, it does not make rationalists de facto Utopians. Humanist morality stems from the understanding that people have the capacity for evil, but that shared values can help minimise suffering. Equally importantly, understanding violence and evil is not the same as thinking that we can eradicate it, or eradicate people that commit violent or evil acts, which is one of Hedges' more specious, incendiary arguments.

My main problem with this book is Hedges' conflation of atheism (and the science/reason that underpins it) with political, racial and economic ideologies that have caused and are causing countless deaths and acts of violence. He is at pains to draw parallels between atheist and religious (specifically, Christian) fundamentalism, but seem to forget that few people have been killed by atheists for not believing in god. Throughout the book there are repeated references to the Enlightenment being directly responsible for fascism, the World Wars, the atomic bomb, the millions killed under Communist regimes, genocides, the war in Iraq and the invasion of Afghanistan. This is a seriously misguided view. Science is simply a process of discovery; there is no agenda other than to understand. What is done with the knowledge that is gained is up to people, and people are not always rationed, reasonable or benevolent. In all the cases that Hedges cites, it is not unbelief in god that is at the root of the destruction, but struggles for power and domination.

You have to admire the sheer balls of Hedges for labelling Christopher Hitchens illiterate for questioning 'who created the Creator'. Indeed, what room is there for reasoned discussion when suggestions that people enjoy their sex lives as long as they don't harm anyone else, or that parents should not indoctrinate their children, but teach them to evaluate evidence, are dismissed as "... hollow, liberal platitudes that casually deny the seductive lusts of violence, evil and abuse – lusts the biblical writers who write the {ten} commandments understood and feared."

But then, having conceded that Darwin "obliterated reliance on the Bible as the literal word of God", Hedges also suffers from the same problem that all pick 'n' mix religious apologist must confront: if you disagree with something decreed in your holy text (and therefore with God), where does this moral sense come from? By explicitly eschewing the parts of Christianity that are flawed or 'morally indefensible' (claims of creation, the misogyny, the punitive violence, the homophobia, the racism etc. etc., ad infinitum), Hedges seem to think that he will come across as even-handed and sensible, but instead does nothing but remind you that the very things that his liberal Presbyterian interpretation of religion disregards are done so because of basic appeals to human respect and decency, and of course rationality and reason – the very things his book

denounces.

Hedges arguments are constantly undermined by the contradictions and non sequiturs that litter this book. To flick through it and pluck a random example: "To believe in this deity [god] required abstract thinking. It made possible the moral life." So there you have it. Morals come from the ability to think about the fact that god doesn't exist in the real world. "The atheists believe they know religions' inadequacies even though they have never investigated religious thought." The old chestnut of "if you really thought about it you wouldn't have a problem with religion; you're only sceptical because you haven't thought about it enough". Indeed the same could be said for Hedges, who seems to have ignored the vast swathes of literature on humanist ethics, rational explanations of altruism, and morality without god.

At several points in the book I thought I had been fooled into reading ingenious satire, a feeling which culminated in reading Hedges' summation of his arguments against atheism (pg. 178):

"The contemporary atheist, while many are noted scientists, are deluded products of this image-based and culturally illiterate world. They speak about religion, human progress and meaning in impoverished language of television slogans. They play to our fears, especially of what we do not understand. Their words are sensational, fragmented and devoid of content. They appeal to our subliminal and irrational desires. They select a few facts and use them to dismiss historical, political, and cultural realities. They tell us what we want to believe about ourselves. They assure us that we are good. They proclaim the violence employed in our name as a virtue. They champion ignorance as knowledge. They assure us that there is no reason to investigate other ways of being." And later on the same page: "Religious thought is a guide to morality. It points to inquiry. It seeks to unfetter the mind from prejudices that blunt reflection and self-criticism."

If you swap the words 'atheist' and 'religion', and 'rational' for 'religious', you have one of the most succinct destructions of religion going. That Hedges writes this in complete earnest in a book written in criticism of atheism is beyond satire or even simple comprehension.

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## **Shannon says**

This is truly bad. I kind of wanted to throw the book into a fire.

Chris Hedges makes sweeping generalizations about the "new atheists", ones that make it impossible to take his points seriously. I can't tell if he's being intentionally daft and lazy, in failing to cite almost ANY specifics (ie, say, a quote, because some of the things he says that Dawkins, for example, claim, are clearly taken way out of context and misconstrued). Or he really believes the conclusions he has reached, through really shitty logic. Either way, bad times. (I'd give specific examples myself, but since Hedges didn't seem to bother in his PUBLISHED BOOK, I'm not going to in my goodreads review).

Hedges clearly has an angry emotional reaction to the "militant atheism" movement, which has impeded greatly on his ability to make a rational, objective, response to it.

And trust me, it's not that I don't want to read something that is critical of my existing beliefs- I'm currently reading "The Devil's Delusion" which is along the same lines as this book, in subject matter, but actually cites specific examples, is well thought out, and well-written. A good critique is an awesome thing to read. This, however, is just some drivel-y, whiny, nonsense.

You get an F, Chris Hedges. I'd expect more from a "journalist".

(I'm not even going to dignify this with "non-fiction" shelving).

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### **Murtaza says**

Couldn't put this book down, a must-read.

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### **Philip says**

To see the Hedges/Harris debate, go to YouTube and search, "Religion, politics and the end of the world." (I know I put this later in the review, but I thought it was worth it to go back and put it at the top.)

Premise: People do not advance morally at the same rate as they advance scientifically. "Those who teach that religion is evil and science and reason will save us are as deluded as those who believe in angels and demons. ...Science and human reason, like institutional religion, have delivered as much suffering as comfort." (p.28)

Premise: The problem is not religious fundamentalist fanatics; the problem is fundamentalist fanatics (religious or non-religious)

Premise: One cannot discount sin and human nature when looking at the progress of mankind. "We have nothing to fear from those who do or do not believe in God; we have much to fear from those who do not believe in sin." (p.13)

Premise: The "progress of mankind" is a myth. "Human history is not a long chronicle of human advancement... history is not progressive." (p.42)

Hedges goes on from these points to write the rest of his book. Throughout the book he makes points that are not always intended to be directed at atheists, but fundamentalists in general, although I think this is lost on some people who reviewed the book. He writes on many topics that link back to his main point, specifically the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He purports that it would have been better to have left the aftermath of 9/11 in the hands of the intelligence community, but the nation was humiliated and demanded retaliation.

My problems with the book: Coming at it from a Christian fundamentalist view, I feel Hedges distorts what I believe. Just one example would be when he claims Christians view themselves as more moral than others. (p.87) Although this may have been true in the past, I believe this mindset to be the exception today. I do feel that most people believe Christians to have this mentality, but they are misinterpreting Christian belief, as Hedges did here. He also says that "The moment the writers of the gospels began to set down the words of Jesus they began to kill his message." (p.95) ... Yeah, either that, or they made it possible for his words to endure. People may claim Hedges is a Christian, but from these passages and some others later in the book, I would argue that he's a Universalist who sees many ways to heaven.

If you're one of the people that read the 1 starred goodreads review and saw the claim that Hedges left the fillers in for Sam Harris, but took them out when he was speaking, I encourage you to go to the debate and

look at it yourself. Search YouTube for “Religion, politics and the end of the world.” You’ll find what was excerpted on part 8/9. The excerpt in the book is on page 72. My contention is that it was selective perception on Stu’s behalf, but maybe it’s selective perception on mine.

I’ll comment on his review when I have more time.

If you watch the debate with Harris, or the Hitchens/Hitchens debate or any of the like, you see a common thread. What’s implied by the atheists is that if we cast off religion and embrace atheism, we can advance as a society. Hedges argues that moral advancement doesn’t necessarily keep up.

One last problem with Harris, Harris wrongly attributes religious violence with stronger belief. He implies that if everyone truly believed their purported religion, people would be more violent. But it’s not belief, it is interpretation. What he says is like saying if you truly believe in evolution, you believe in racial superiority. If you follow all the precepts held in the book “On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life,” I would suggest you are a racist. BUT, it’s not how strongly you believe in evolution that leads you to racism, it’s how you interpret the theory. Harris implies the Amish have less faith because they’re not violently radical... Maybe I’m the only one who sees a problem here.

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### **Jsb says**

I was inclined to like this book just from its premise, but I was totally disappointed. Hedges claims that Hitchens, Dawkins, et al as mirror-image fundamentalists to Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, a view I cannot hold. Hedges rants and rants against atheist "fundamentalism" with hardly a citation.

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### **Katinka says**

I see how a lot of people pan this book, and I think maybe it is because people are afraid to open their eyes and see the similarities between the New Atheists and fundamentalism. This book resonates with me, as it should with anyone who knows well people of all faiths. It is a call for moderation. It is a call to question whether science can answer all things. Hedges, and I, think it can't. Hedges points out the universe physically is morally neutral, our ability to learn and use the universe around us can be for great good or great evil, and that human beings are irrational. The book is a bit all over the place at times, but the mosaic Hedges offers encourages us towards pondering concepts that science doesn't answer- reverence, humility, answers that are beyond the material universe. It is a MUST READ nowadays, with everything going on about this stupid video about Muhammed everyone is up in arms about.

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### **Mike (the Paladin) says**

I doubt I can review this without causing some consternation for some. I read another book by this author and found that it was a misinformed book. The ideas and impressions in the book were what I'd call mis or ill-informed.

Upon reading this I think I'm beginning to see the problem. I'm sure that Mr. Hedges is quite sincere in all he says and he's working on being honest.

That said he is I believe (based on what he says) laboring under some "preexisting ideas". In other words a certain amount of prejudice. He says and reports things that are at best based on the worst case scenarios.

In other words the Westboro Baptist church is not a typical Baptist church. It has only a few members and most are members of one family.

But still it simply gets called a Baptist church.

The same happens a lot here. I assume he believes himself to have an open mind and I get that. Still while there's some small amount of interesting content here (for me that is) I found the book mostly badly off center.

Of course I get many will disagree with me. And I get that in his own way Mr. Hedges is expressing his own understanding. To be fair I would guess that he's had some very bad experiences with people "referring to themselves" as Christians or Christians who are failing to live as Christians.

Decide for yourself, a book with a controversial subject and somewhat questionable viewpoint. It seems to me that it's "probably" a case of judging an entire group of people by the worst examples available... and examples who are "self described". I mean, a person can call him or herself anything they want but it doesn't make what they claim so. Ask the veterans who have been told non-veterans can claim to be veterans under freedom of speech.

Christians are human and have failings...real Christians want to walk with God and become more like him, loving, forgiving and full of grace.

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### **Chris Gager says**

There are some crappy reviews of this book up there but I'll give it a try.

I'm into this a ways now and am a bit puzzled. The author attacks a few atheism advocates like Hitchens as if they were at the forefront of some worldwide movement. I'm not seeing that. Is he anti-progressivism? Does he oppose movements that seek to make the world a better place and effectively address our many problems? Seems like he's kind of all over the place. I believe he was involved in some debate with Hitchens and others sometime in the recent past. Hitchens is dead now, of course. That'll learn him! Hedges' verbal assault on modern atheists seems to be the product of being verbally bullied or something. In that debate maybe? Were his opponents scornful of the Bible etc. ? Weird ...

That said, the author writes well and addresses many of the all-too-real problems we face these days. I find myself in agreement with him in a lot of ways. I like the Bible, but don't consider it any more valuable than many other bits of literature in telling me and others how to live our lives. I'm not religious but I accept that for many people some religious involvement serves them well in their lives. I go to 12-step meetings. We say that these are spiritual in nature, not religious. I have to say that I detect a faint whiff(at minimum) of the religiously fanatic in the author's dismissive attitude. I do not fear science or atheism. Both have their limitations in terms of moral instruction. However, I try to insist on a clear understanding of the physical

reality of existence and history in my own mind as a basis for understanding the world. I do my best!

I have to confess I'm getting tired of reading this repetitious tirade but I will probably finish as the book's fairly readable and not too long. Thus far the author has made no attempt to justify a religious faith that's based on the supernatural and loaded with unverifiable mythology. I.E. "God-ism." Since he is a modern religious thinker I assume if does that he will resort to murky rhetorical gymnastics. OF COURSE religious teachings can provide valuable moral lessons for individuals and cultures, BUT ... what's it all based on??? If he and others want to believe in some non-physical God that they claim to know a lot about, that's OK with me, but(in my opinion) us humans ultimately need to make our decisions about the world and what we do with it based on what's in front of us. I think that the desire for a better world and better human behavior CAN be enough to produce a humanistic and moral way of being and living. I don't see why we need religion for that. Do we need to be wary of the uses of science and reason/logic? OF COURSE! Sheesh ...

Finished yesterday and as I suspected the author became more interested in cataloguing the woes of modern culture and promoting religion as a means of dealing with them than he was in keeping to the topic of evil atheists. Oh well ... as I've already mentioned I'm on board with his citation of and condemnation of a number of those seemingly intractable problems. Still not seeing that formal, aggressive atheism is a big problem, however, and certainly not as much of one as Bible-squeezing or any other form of rigid, orthodox religionism. Intellectual religionists like Hedges seem to be able to see and feel the possibilities much better than the "rest of us". It's just more gobble-de-gook to one such as me.

- Sci-fi writers like to address the same issues that Hedges raises - see Cordwainer Smith for instance.

- Why does the author capitalized the "H" in "Him" when referring to Jesus??? Does he think that "He" was not a mortal human being??? If not, why not???

- 2.75\* rounds up to 3\* as this highly flawed book still has enough interesting stuff to boost it beyond a 2\* rating.

I just found out(7-11-17 that CH and I are grads of the same prep school - Loomis(Loomis Chaffee). That makes three(that I can think of off-hand) authors on my "read" list from Loomis.

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### **Trevor says**

The title of this one was bound to annoy me. I had, about a year ago, started another book with a similar title – God Does Not Believe in Atheists – and quickly came to the conclusion that God's problem, in this case, is that he doesn't exist and therefore can't believe in anything.

Ginnie pointed to this book as worth reading and said that the title wasn't a very good title or reflection of his main point in writing the book. It is not the title I would have chosen for the book, but then, it is not the book I would have written either.

Being an atheist, being told that someone does not believe I exist just makes me think they have a very limited imagination. I think that I should be easier to believe in than, say, the virgin birth or the resurrection, but apparently not.

This was not as stupid a book as I had imagined it might be – and was so well written that it has distracted

me from other things I was reading and I've finished it in little more than a day. It is a particularly short book, though. In much the same way that Harris' 'Letter to a Christian Nation' is also a short book.

I also need to start off by saying that the central thesis of this book, summed up by the subtitle 'The Dangerous Rise of the Secular Fundamentalist' – also strikes me as overwrought. If this book is seeking to 'fight fire with fire' I think the author really could have done with a hot cup of tea and a nice lie down before starting to write. I think it is also a bit of a stretch to judge the whole of Atheism (whatever such a phrase could possibly mean) on the basis of the rantings of a few controversialists, such as Harris, Hitchens, Dawkins or Dennett. There is no necessary nexus between being unable to believe in the existence of a universal creative power variously named (and just as often left unnamed) and a belief that Islam is the world's greatest enemy and we need a 'rational' war against these religious fanatics (as Hedges says Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins believe).

Hedges central thesis is much more subtle and interesting than these rhetorical flourishes might have you think. I'm not even going to bother talking about why rationalism is not 'fundamentalist' – I believe this is such a complete confusion of terms that it amounts to little other than the casting of meaningless insults which do little to progress the discussion. This was, of course, my main criticism of the book and one that took away, I feel, from the central ideas of the book which were much more difficult to 'dismiss out of hand' in the way these hollow insults encourage.

The central idea is that the new atheists, not unlike the new fundamentalist Christians, are convinced they know 'the truth'. That those who know 'the truth' have been the most dangerous people to be around ever since the dawn of time and that these 'truth knowers' tend to delight in purifying the world of those who have been lead astray by 'ignorance' of 'the truth'. (That is, the rest of us).

I have a lot of sympathy with this view. He also points out that few of the things that are done in the name of 'the good' as defined by any human construction of what is 'good' is rarely unequivocally 'good'. Everything good has other bad consequences. Good and evil are twins, rather than opposites. Religion, he feels, gets us to focus on the necessity of evil in the world and thereby reminds us of our common humanity in that we are all both good and evil in some respects. As one who has never had too much trouble agreeing with my mate Hamlet, "I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me:" And so Hedges is preaching to the converted with this stuff. He uses Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' to show how hideous deeds are often clothed in beautiful gowns of moral rectitude and these are the most powerful sections of the book.

If I am ever to be tempted to the side of religion over the side of atheism it is going to be around the Western world's arrogance and disgraceful excesses in the third world. The discussions in this book about the Iraq war, the disgusting passages describing Hiroshima, and the other passages reminding us of how we bare a moral responsibility for these actions, and yet turn away from them and thousands of others done in our name and done with our silent complicity, should be difficult for any first world person to read. Hedges makes a very strong case that all of the new atheists are chauvinists when it comes to the 'war on terror' and that chauvinism is precisely the last thing we self-congratulatory Westerners really need. He also points out that to define one fifth of humanity as morally stunted due to their religious belief in Islam (and therefore they are all worthy of death, torture and repression by any means available – as Harris and Hitchens do seem to put forward) is objectionable in the extreme. Objectionable and totally unwarranted and contrary to reality, which, as always, is much more complex.

Hedges also makes quite a point of showing his distaste for organised religion and when he talks about his religious beliefs at all talks mostly about Ecclesiastes – a book of the Bible I still need to read and one which

I take it from what I've read about it, is perhaps the least 'religious' books of the Bible. Again, my problem with moderate religious people is in trying to understand what their 'religion' actually amounts to.

I have to admit that I really do not understand religion. Hedges claims his main problem with the criticism the new atheists make of religion is that it is so simple-minded. I got into an email argument with the guy who ran the Religion Report on Radio National after he had Alister McGrath on his show talking about, 'The Dawkins Delusion'. I wrote to say that it was a very strange show as McGrath did not seem to address any of the criticisms Dawkins made in his book and, in fact, raised others during the show which Dawkins had carefully dealt with in his book as if Dawkins had never mentioned them. I received a very strange email from Crittenden informing me that he felt Dawkins' book was the 'stupidest book' he had read all year. So much for intellectual debate in Australia.

I have no idea why accepting that man is a mixture of good and bad impulses and that all attempts to 'perfect' humanity are bound to fail necessarily leads one to believe in either religion or God. Hedges seems to think that this syllogism is so self-evident that it does not even need to be established. He spends quite a bit of the book quoting Freud, but doesn't mention that Freud was an atheist. This would seem to blunt his argument somewhat, at the very least.

Hedges' skimming over the parts of the Bible which are clearly obnoxious still seems disingenuous to me. I would have preferred him to tell me why religion is better than philosophy – which I would have thought would allow more picking and choosing. I'm not sure how good a book of moral instruction – which I assume the Bible must be at least in part – can be if you can choose which bits to be instructed by and which bits to ignore.

The problem addressed in this book about the new atheists is that they take a very simple version of religion, and that is either fundamentalist or organised religion (the world was literally created in 6 days or Cardinal Pell today supported the Pope's view on AIDS and condoms), and parade these idiocies as if they said something about religion in its full manifestation. Okay, I'm open to hearing why this is not the case – but I didn't come away from this book having any idea of just what religion actually is. I know what Hedges thinks it is not – it is not any actual manifestation of religion, particularly not something with churches and other buildings. I also got the idea that it is 'the transcendent', whatever that might be. But I couldn't see why I should become religious or what becoming religious would offer that is not offered by, say, philosophy, art or social theory. It seems these are things one must 'just know' and if you don't get it, well, bad luck.

He spends a lot of time quoting Nietzsche, and this is interesting, I think. Nietzsche is an atheist, but a very particular kind of atheist – a religious atheist, I think. To Nietzsche we need myths, and therefore we need religion, it is just that all the current religions no longer make sense.

The book was substantially better and more thoughtful and thought-provoking than I expected from either the title or subtitle. And if we must spend time in the trenches, I do feel the war against Western chauvinism is a much more important battle to be won than the war against a non-existent God (and so I feel much more closely allied with someone who talks about this war than anyone who calls for a crusade against Islam) – all the same, I was left unable to agree with the central idea that atheists are as dangerous as fundamentalists. I feel this despite the disturbing quotes he gives from Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins that do seem to justify Western atrocities in Iraq, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Like I said, it was hard for me to get any sense of what this guy's religion meant (if it meant anything at all) – and so, the fact he is as repulsed by Western actions in the third world as I am made him my ally.

A curious book, but worth a read for reasons other than its central thesis, which I don't feel it establishes.

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## Mic says

This is the best book I've read in a long time with the worst title I've ever seen.

Despite my love for Chris Hedges I shelved this book for awhile because the prologue focuses on Sam Harris, and I thought to myself, "I like Sam Harris but I don't need you to tell me he's a racist; that doesn't discount the non-Islamophobic things he says."

This book is not really about atheism. It's about the current wave of "new atheists" which, in Hedges mind, err just as foolishly as their Religious Right counterparts by harkening the day when mankind will approach a utopia through reason. As a lifetime war correspondent, I think it's safe to say Hedges has no faith in mankind's better nature and is not awaiting any kind of utopia. Hedges persuasively argues that the important thing about religion is not the kindly-old-man-in-the-clouds straw man figure the new atheists have built up to break down, but the idea of sin, that man is inherently flawed. Hedges argues that belief that religion causes atrocity is misplaced, and he provides ample examples in recent global history in which secular belief in science and reason has nonetheless led to atrocities just as much, if not more, than religious faith. At no point in the book does Hedges claim that religion can prevent atrocities or is necessary for a moral life. He only cautions that ideologies which don't believe in the dark potential of human nature are dangerous, and blind faith in "reason" is misplaced, leading people to believe in a utopia just as specious as medieval peasants awaiting heaven.

This is a quick read, but a really good one. Pick it up!

Quote time!!!

"The liberal church also usually buys into the myth that we can morally progress as a species. It, too, accepts along with atheists and the fundamentalists, Pangloss's rosy vision in Voltaire's Candide that we live in, "the best of all possible worlds." and that if we have faith and trust in the forces around us, "all is for the best/" It is this naïve belief in our goodness and decency-- this inability to face the dark reality of human nature, our capacity for evil and the morally neutral universe we inhabit-- that is the most disturbing aspect of all of these systems."

"Reigns of terror are thus the bastard child of the Enlightenment. Terror in the name of utopian ideals would rise again and again in the coming centuries. The Nazi death camps and the Soviet gulags were spawned by the enlightenment. Fascists and communists were bred on visions of human perfectibility. Tens of millions of people have been murdered in the futile effort to reform human nature and build utopian societies. During these reigns of terror, science and reason served, as they continue to serve, interests purportedly devoted to the common good-- and to vast mechanisms of repression and mass killing. The belief in human perfectibility, in history as a march towards a glorious culmination, is a malformed theology."

"Environmental catastrophe, and wars fought for water and oil and other natural resources will become our collective reality. Terrorism will not be eradicated. We must accept our limitations as a species and curb our wanton disregard for the interconnectedness of life. We need to investigate and understand the desperation of those who oppose us. If we continue to dismiss those who oppose us as satanic or as religious zealots who must be silenced or eradicated, we stumble into the fundamentalist trap of a binary world of blacks and whites, a world without nuance. To explain is not an excuse. To understand is not to forgive. Those who look

at others as simple, one-dimensional caricatures fuel the rage of the dispossessed. They answer violence with violence. These utopian belief systems, these forms of faith, are well-trod paths of self-delusion and self-destruction. They allow us to sleepwalk into disaster."

"We carry on a never-ending struggle with "the evil that I would not that I do, " as Paul wrote. It is this capacity for empathy, remorse and self-reflection that saves us from ourselves. The struggle for survival, the interplay between prey and predator, does not appear to engender feelings of guilt or remorse among animals. But as human beings, we can imagine and empathize with the plight of others. It is this remorse, this capacity for empathy, which plagues many of those who return from combat. The knowledge that we have the capacity to impose indignities on other human beings is the essence of human dignity. Non sum dignus. When we lose this capacity for empathy, when we see the other as someone who must be "educated" to embrace our values or eliminated, we slip swiftly back into the world of animals."

"A democratic state begins from the assumption that most of those who gravitate toward power are mediocre and probably immoral. It assumes that we must always protect ourselves from bad government. We must be prepared for the worst leaders even as we hope for the best. And as Karl Popper wrote, this understanding leads to a new approach to power, for "it forces us to replace the question: Who shall rule? By the new question: How can we so organize political institutions that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?"

"Science can be as inexact and intuitive as theology, philosophy and every other human endeavor. The German chemist August Kekule fell asleep in his study after a fruitless struggle to identify the chemical structure of benzene. He dreamed of a snake eating its own tail and awoke instantly. The dream gave him, through the ancient subconscious language of symbolism, the circular structure of the benzene ring that had eluded his conscious mind. The dream may have had its basis in Kekule's experiments, but it was the nonrational that brought him his discovery. Many physicists see " string theory "-in which the structure of the universe is made up of resonating, one-dimensional submicroscopic strings-as plausible. Yet no scientist has

ever seen a string. No direct experimentation has established very firm ground for them. Cosmology routinely bases arguments on things that cannot be seen in order to explain things that can, as in the case of "dark" matter, which, it is argued, must exist since its effects can be seen throughout the universe. Quantum physics demolished the assumption that physical elements are governed by laws pervious to prediction and conventional analysis, meaning we cannot ever know the ultimate workings of the universe beyond the expedient of probability."

"James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, spoke of the "old triumvirate of tyrants in the human soul, the libido sciendi, the libido sentiendi, and the libido dominandi" [The lust of the mind, the lust of the flesh and the lust for power] . Adams, who worked with the anti-Nazi church leader Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1935 and 1936 in Germany, warned us that these lusts are universal and intractable. They lurk beneath the surface of the most refined cultures and civilizations. "We may call these tendencies by any name we wish," he said, "but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them."

The belief that science or religion can eradicate these lusts leads to the worship of human potential and human power. These lusts are woven into our genetic map. We can ameliorate them, but they are always with us; we will never ultimately defeat them. The attempt to deny the lusts within us empowers this triumvirate. They surface, unexamined and unheeded, to commit evil in the name of good. We are not saved by reason. We are not saved by religion. We are saved by turning away from projects that tempt us to become God, and by accepting our own contamination and the limitations of being human."

"The atheists and Christian fundamentalists, because they serve mechanisms of power, because they refuse to deal in complexity, reduce the rage and violence of the world's dispossessed to human imperfections that can be eradicated. If the disaffected can be converted to Christianity or become endowed with reason, we will all be safe and happy. If not, we must do away with them. They do not investigate the brutality and injustice of imperial aggression, the callousness of totalitarian capitalism and the role of poverty and repression as triggers for violence and terrorism. They blame the victims."

"Obermensch, Nietzsche wrote, rejects the sentimental tenets of traditional Christian civilization. The Obermensch creates his own morality based on human instincts, drive and will. The will to power means, for Nietzsche, that the modern man has gone "beyond good and evil." The modern man spurns established, traditional religious values. He has the moral fortitude and wisdom to create his own values.

This belief creates a human deity. Religion, which has failed humankind, will be banished. We will all become Obermenschen.

The absurdity of this human deity did not prevent Nietzsche from seeing where it could lead. Nietzsche warned that this new faith might, in fact, prefigure something else-a pathetic, middle-class farce. Nietzsche foresaw the deadening effects of the bourgeois lust for comfort and personal self-satisfaction. Science and technology might, instead, bring about a race of Dauermenschen, of Last Men."

"They promote, as Chalmers Johnson says, a "consumerist Sparta." It is the poor and desperate who fight our wars. The impoverished, often without legal rights, do the dirty work for a bloated, self-absorbed oligarchy and its compliant middle-class managers. Curtis White in *The Middle Mind* argues that most Americans are aware of the brutality

and injustice used to maintain the excesses of their consumer society and empire. He suspects they do not care. They don't want to see what is done in their name. They do not want to look at the rows of flag-draped coffins or the horribly maimed bodies and faces of veterans who return home or the hundreds of thousands we have killed in Iraq. It is too upsetting. They do not want to read about the nation's growing legions of underemployed and poor, or the child laborers in sweat shops who make our clothing and our shoes. Government and media censorship-increasingly common since the attacks of 2001-are appreciated. Most prefer to be entertained."

"The new atheists respond to this human hunger for telos, a belief that all that has gone before us is leading us somewhere. This desire for moral advancement has repeatedly corrupted religious and secular ideologies. We want to believe that human suffering and deprivation is meaningful, that it has a purpose and that our lives make sense. This

yearning for telos creates imaginary narratives of moral and historical progress. It feeds into the faith that human society will finally become reasonable and work collectively for the common good. It is a way to ward off the awful fact that things often do not get better, that they often get worse, and that the irrational urges of human nature will never be conquered."

"The United States of Andrew Jackson or George Washington is not the United States of Frederick Douglass or Sitting Bull. But we present our history from the perspective of the winners, from those in power"

"Europeans, many of whom enthusiastically greeted the war, participated between 1914 and 1918 in collective suicide."

"Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, but the utopian project of the Bush administration to remake Iraq by force has created a hell that rivals the mass killing carried out by Hussein, including the genocidal campaign against the Kurds and the Shiites. Violence as an instrument of change alters landscapes so radically that it

creates a new reality often as bloody as the one it attempted to halt....Time and patience would have worked to undo his regime. This was a policy built on the possible. It accepted our own limitations as an imperial power.

Utopian visions of a restructured Middle East, however, blinded the Bush administration and many of their supporters, including many liberal interventionists, to the endemic factionalism in Iraq and difficulty of occupation. They believed their utopian visions. They ignored the reality of Iraq. And because of their folly and blindness, their failure to work within the confines of reality, hundreds of thousands are dead, and Iraq no longer exists as a unified country."

"The occupation of Iraq, along with Afghanistan, has furthered the spread of failed states. It has increased authoritarianism, savage violence, instability and anarchy. It has swelled the ranks of our real enemies-the Islamic terrorists-and opened up voids of lawlessness where they can operate and plot against us. It has nearly scuttled the art of diplomacy. It has given us an outlaw state creating more outlaw states. It has empowered Iran, as well as Russia and China, which sit on the sidelines gleefully watching our selfimmolation.

This is what George W. Bush and all the "reluctant hawks" who supported him have bequeathed us. They bequeathed this to us because they turned away from the real and the possible to believe that American firepower could shape the world in our own image, in our own utopia"

"In a 2005 interview in *The American Conservative*, Pape said: "Since 1990, the United States has stationed tens of thousands of ground troops on the Arabian Peninsula, and that is the main mobilization appeal of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. People who make the argument that it is a good thing to have them attacking us over there are missing that suicide terrorism is not a supply-limited phenomenon where there are just a few hundred around the world willing to do it because they are religious fanatics. It is a demand-driven phenomenon. That is, it is driven by the presence of foreign forces on the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. The operation in Iraq has stimulated suicide terrorism and has given suicide terrorism a new lease on life."

"The United States, as Lifton states, "becomes a Sisyphus with bombs, able to set off explosions but unable to cope with its own burden, unable to roll its heavy stone to the top of the hill in Hades."

"Terrorists arise in all cultures, all nations and all religions. Terrorists lurk within our own society. The bombing on April 19, 1995, of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people-19 of them children-and injured hundreds. It was carried out by an American citizen named Timothy McVeigh. William Karr and Judith Bruey of Noonday, Texas, pleaded guilty in 2003 to possession of a weapon of mass destruction. Investigators found inside their home and in three storage facilities a sodium cyanide bomb capable of killing thousands, more than a hundred explosives, half a million rounds of ammunition, dozens of illegal weapons, and a mound of white-supremacist and antigovernment literature. McVeigh was not a Muslim; neither was Karr or Bruey."

"Terror is delivered in many forms. The industrial nations are not immune from employing terror. The only country that has deployed the greatest weapon of mass terror-the atomic bomb-is the United States. General Dwight Eisenhower opposed using the atomic bomb on a civilian population. He was overruled. The bomb was dropped for its psychological and emotional impact. It was meant to shock and demoralize not only the Japanese population, who were already on the verge of surrender, but also the Soviets, who, political leaders in Washington hoped, would be intimidated by the devastating effects of the blast."

"The American military planners picked Hiroshima because the bombers would face less anti-aircraft fire. They calculated that the effect of obliterating a huge civilian population would be dramatic and terrifying. The "Strategic Bombing Survey, " conducted at President Harry Truman's request after the bomb hit Hiroshima on April 6, 1945,

noted that "nearly all the school children . . . were at work in the open," to be exploded, irradiated or incinerated in the perfect firestorm. Thousands of children on their way to school in Hiroshima and Nagasaki died. It had, as the planners at the University of California-run Los Alamos Lab envisioned, the maximum psychological impact.

The 370,000 overall deaths attributed to the bombings, 85 percent of which were civilian, do not permit us to place ourselves on a higher moral plane than terrorists. The use of an atomic weapon on noncombatants is not "regrettable but necessary." It is not part of the cost of war. It is morally indefensible. But heading into this kind of introspection is disturbing. It raises questions that shatter our self-image and question our moral purity. It is this realization of our own innate capacity for barbarity that sees Kurtz sputter at the end of his life: "The horror, the horror! "

""The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding," wrote Albert Camus in *The Plague*. "On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill." "

""Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime, therefore, we are saved by hope," Reinhold Niebuhr wrote. "Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; Therefore, we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.""

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### **Serge Boucher says**

What a dreadful book. It has its moments ("We have nothing to fear from those who do, or do not, believe in God. We have much to fear from those who don't believe in sin.") but as an attack on the new atheists, which is how the author presents it, it's appalling.

Hedges central argument mixes all the new atheists in one big lump, referring to them usually as "these atheists", and claims that what "they" offer is a utopian vision, some perfect society that we could all enjoy if only all their opponents were silenced. He compares this view with religious fundamentalism or communism, and claims it should be attacked for the same reasons.

The problem with this is: none of the new atheists say anything like that. Hedges doesn't quote any passage from Dawkins, Harris or Hitchens, that would confirm that their project is indeed a utopian one, and for good reason: these passages don't exist.

So much of the book's argument resides on this gross misrepresentation of the opposite side's view that it's hard for anyone cognisant of the works of Harris or Hitchens to see this as anything more than a crude fraud. Especially when so much of Hedges' writing is gratuitously arrogant and insulting to the other side. He repeatedly asserts that "these atheists" know nothing about the middle east, religion, scripture, history or philosophy, even going as far as calling Christopher Hitchens (a polarising figure but almost universally-

recognised as one of the greatest writer and critic of his generation) an "illiterate".

What's most frustrating is that there is a good book hidden somewhere in this mess. Hedges is right when he points out the differences between religious practice and fundamentalism, or denounces the simplistic view by atheists of scriptures as mere instruction manuals. There is room, need even, for a serious book about these flaws in at least some new atheist discourse. But instead of writing that, Hedges was seemingly so full of rage against what he saw as the fundamentalism of new atheists, he chose to write a long rant that only tangentially refers to actual NA writing. He blew it.

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## **Kaelan Ratcliffe?K??λον P?τκλιφ???????? ?????????? says**

### **\*\*\*\*\* Secular Fundamentalism \*\*\*\*\***

Oh boy. This one was fun.

There's some pre-planning for the reader to do before engaging with this extended essay. A good place to start would be *Chris Hedges* debate with *Christopher Hitchens*, as well as the debate Hedges also engaged in with *Sam Harris*. Both events are pretty illuminating and thought provoking, especially seeing as despite Hitchens death back in 2011 his following has not lessened one iota (if anything it's larger than ever due to today's ever polarising political landscape).

Having gotten the above out of the way, let's talk about the book. Honestly, I can see why this might, to put it bluntly, piss some people off. Despite knowing full well Hedges view on this topic, as well as having watched interviews with him discussing his feelings toward the New Atheists, I was still surprised at just how uncompromising he is in his criticisms. Hedges is brutal in his attack on the New Atheist movement, pretty much denouncing them to be as dogmatic and illiterate as the opponents they claim to despise. He criticises the binary world view of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens and feels they assault a childish version of the monotheistic traditions, and ignore anything that contradicts their argument or presents a more three-dimensional shade of grey. It's pretty compelling reading, and certainly should be respected as a book that defends the opposing view quite fluently.

Not only this, but Hedges at times manages to be quite prophetic, his connection of the movement to an older issue of western supremacy is quite convincing, especially if the reader is to remove any ego from the equation and simply look at the argument from a birds-eye perspective.

Ultimately, I stand with Hedges on this topic, however I don't doubt it is sure to divide people for years to come.

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