The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice Study Guide

The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice by Christopher Hitchens

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice, by Christopher Hitchens, investigates the motives and actions of a Catholic nun who, for many, epitomizes love and charity throughout the world. Published in 1995, when Mother Teresa was in her mid-eighties and two years before her death, the book relies on research from articles, books, documentary film, still photography, unpublished manuscripts, personal contact, and eyewitness accounts to construct an argument that the nun's first allegiance is neither to helping the poor nor to spiritual matters, but to aiding the worldly ambitions of the Church. Hitchens, a well-known journalist and nonfiction book writer, has forged a career on playing the devil's advocate. He delights in taking unorthodox or surprising positions, and then defending them with eloquently reasoned arguments based on thorough research. In this book, he is stymied by the secrecy of the Catholic Church and the inaccessibility of its financial dealings, yet his attack on Mother Teresa is uninhibited. Hitchens, who later wrote an influential book that defends atheism, succeeds at least in making the reader wonder if there is more to Mother Teresa than meets the eye.

Mother Teresa has long been considered a candidate for canonization by the Church, which would officially make her a saint. In the book, Hitchens claims that this widespread belief in her saintliness, held by Catholics and many others, is a huge advantage to Mother Teresa in her efforts to enrich and empower the Church. He says it protects her from scrutiny by the media or, indeed, from any skepticism concerning the purity of her intentions. Hitchens doesn't make the case that Mother Teresa cares about sainthood, or that it was originally part of a plan. Rather, he believes that her increasing fame over the years also increases her ability to successfully solicit donations and to curry favor in places where the Church wants to strengthen its presence. The pope recognizes Mother Teresa's power and uses her for these fund-raising and political purposes, Hitchens contends. For her part, Mother Teresa claims to be a simple, humble nun doing the work of God, but Hitchens believes she isn't so naive. He cites several instances of her saying she knows little about politics and does not do the bidding of the rich and powerful, to which Hitchens responds that she frequently courts such people.

He shows her in the company of leaders of government and other organizations, many of whom have reputations for unethical and even despotic behavior. He makes connections between her praise of such people and the awards and money she receives from them. He shows how Mother Teresa is silent when the bad behavior of such people is exposed, and how she occasionally even publicly rises to their defense. Hitchens does not connect the millions of dollars Mother Teresa raises to any personal gain, but he charges her with helping to misapply much of it. Instead of improving the lot of the poor with the money, she lets the Church use it to enhance its own position in the world, the author claims. However, he is unable to provide solid evidence of how much money she raises, or of how it is used. He says these facts are kept a close secret by the Church. Instead, Hitchens builds a case that Mother Teresa's hostels do not adequately care for the sick and poor, especially given the huge donations she receives.

Mother Teresa's rationale is that the suffering of the poor is good for the world, Hitchens writes. He makes no attempt to disguise his outrage over what he sees as her exploitation, cunning, and arrogance.

Foreword and Acknowledgments, and Introduction

Foreword and Acknowledgments, and Introduction Summary and Analysis

The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice, by Christopher Hitchens, is a no-holds-barred attack on the credibility and integrity of one of the most revered human beings of her time. It makes the case that the Catholic nun, Mother Teresa, is an emissary and a pawn of the worldwide political, economic, and institutional power-mongering of the Catholic Church.Starting with the book's title, Hitchens signals his irreverent intentions. On a literal level, The Missionary Position refers to the "position" of Mother Teresa as a missionary. In that case, it should be called The Missionary's Position, but this would lose the punning reference to a position of sexual intercourse. This rather crude jibe at a Catholic nun, who is required to take a vow of chastity, casts the book's otherwise neutral subtitle, Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice, into a skeptical light by implying that she might not practice what she preaches. Before the start of his text, Hitchens displays three quotations. The first is from eighteenth century philosopher David Hume, an early proponent of scientific reasoning. The second is from the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, to the effect that God and death should not be feared. The third quote is from Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, who suggests that questions of religion promote all sorts of dishonesty among people.

In the Foreword and Acknowledgments, Hitchens' first sentence wonders why anyone would "pick on" Mother Teresa. This rhetorical question, reminiscent of a lawyer's argument, is quickly answered with the charge that Mother Teresa is the head of an international enterprise, and it is astonishing that nobody has taken an objective look at the financial and political machinery behind her activities. He mentions his 1994 BBC documentary, Hell's Angel, which investigated Mother Teresa, and characterizes this book of the following year as a small part in an unending argument between religious people who "know" they are right and non-religious people who use reason to examine questions of theology. He aligns himself with such "freethinking humanists" as the renowned authors Gore Vidal and Salman Rushdie. In the Introduction, Hitchens describes a photograph of Mother Teresa congratulating Michele Duvalier, wife of the despotic then-president of Haiti, on her wedding anniversary. Hitchens reports that Mother Teresa, who praised Michele Duvalier's love of the poor, received an honor from Haiti, and never said anything ill of Michele or her husband even after they stole much of the National Treasury and escaped permanently to France.

Next, Hitchens describes a photo of Mother Teresa with a cult leader Hitchens describes as a notorious fraud named John-Roger, who gave her a $10,000 donation on the condition that she pose with him in a studio shot that later was doctored to make it look

like they were standing with the poor of Calcutta. Hitchens quotes Mother Teresa saying at a press conference that she thinks the world is "much helped by the suffering of the poor people." He makes a literature search that turns up twenty devotional books on Mother Teresa, all with titles that stress her saintly qualities, as if she already has been canonized. He gives statistics that show a big upswing in canonizations by the Catholic Church in recent years, but he suggests that Mother Teresa's principal goal is not sainthood. She is an emissary of the pope, and her world travels are carefully planned to further the power and prestige of the Church, Hitchens claims. It is easier for Mother Teresa to help increase the wealth and influence of the Church if Catholics and non-Catholics think of her as a saint.

A Miracle

A Miracle Summary and Analysis

To begin a section simply titled, "A Miracle," Hitchens quotes another passage from the philosopher David Hume that the most extraordinary events in life make people feel religious. He follows this with a quote from the American colonial writer Tom Paine that miracles and prophecy help to turn religion into a trade. Finally, he offers another quote from Sigmund Freud, who says people call a belief an illusion when it is motivated largely by the fulfillment of a wish.

Hitchens' text resumes by pointing out that the Catholic Church requires evidence of a miracle performed by someone before that person can be declared a saint. It traces the rise of Mother Teresa's fame to a 1971 book by the British writer and television personality Malcolm Muggeridge, Something Beautiful for God, which itself arose from a 1969 BBC documentary of the same name. Muggeridge makes the case that Calcutta, in India, where Mother Teresa is based, is a hellhole. This perception is essential to Mother Teresa's argument that Calcutta suffers from being too distant from Jesus. Hitchens says his own visit to the city revealed that it is not an abject place, even though it has the poverty, crowds, and dirt of a large city in that part of the world. He gets a guided tour by Mother Teresa of an orphanage run by her organization, the Missionaries of Charity. He says the place is small, clean, and has an encouraging air, but he is appalled when Mother Teresa says to him, "See, this is how we fight abortion and contraception." Her statement reveals to him that Calcutta is simply a front in a much larger, ideological war.

He quotes Muggeridge's description of the Home for the Dying in Calcutta, which was filmed for the BBC documentary. Muggeridge writes that the interior was too dark to film, but the cameraman tried anyway. When the film was processed, the interior shots were bathed in a beautiful light, which Muggeridge decided was supernatural. Hitchens quotes the "direct testimony" of the cameraman, who says the effect was made possible by a new Kodak film, yet Muggeridge's conviction that it was divine light made people think a miracle had been witnessed. Ever since then, Hitchens contends, Mother Teresa has regularly claimed a special and personal relationship with Jesus. Hitchens quotes interview segments between Muggeridge and Mother Teresa in which she says that there can never be too many children in India, because they are God's creations and He will provide. Her work with the poor is only an expression of love for Christ, she says. Hitchens notes a poignant moment in the documentary film when Mother Teresa picks up a sickly baby and declares that there is life in her. Yet Hitchens argues that she spoils this moment by her other comments, which show that her life's work is a mere exercise in propaganda for the Vatican's population policy. To her, the poor are merely an occasion for piety, and her work is nothing more than a fundamentalist religious campaign, he concludes.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1 of a section titled, "Good Works and Heroic Virtues" is preceded by three quotes. The first, from Confucius, says that wisdom involves keeping one's distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence. The second, from the novelist Joseph Conrad, suggests there is no real religion without a little fetishism. The third quote, from the novelist Salman Rushdie, asserts that the universe is disinterested in us, and there are no guiding stars. Chapter 1 opens with an attempt to show that rather than being essentially humane, Mother Teresa's work is aimed at creating propaganda for the Church. Hitchens describes a 1994 visit to the nun in Calcutta by Dr. Robin Fox, then-editor of the respected medical journal, The Lancet. In a subsequent article for the journal, Dr. Fox decries the lack of basic medical treatment and supplies for people at the clinic. Hitchens points out that Mother Teresa has been running such clinics in Calcutta for forty-five years, most of which time she has been heavily funded. He alleges that the care is poor because she wants it to be. Hitchens then quotes Mary Loudon, a volunteer in Calcutta, who describes crowded rooms of patients with shaved heads on stretcher beds, with no chairs, no garden or yard, not enough drips, needles that are being washed in cold water, and not much more than aspirin for patients dying of cancer and other diseases. Loudon speaks to an American doctor there who is angry at the situation but is also resigned to it.

Hitchens stresses Mother Teresa's massive global income. He says after his documentary film appeared about Mother Teresa, Hell's Angel, he was approached by many people with eyewitness tales similar to that of Mary Loudon. He quotes at length from an unpublished manuscript by Susan Shields, who was in the Missionaries of Charity order for almost a decade. One of her tales concerns plans for a new home for the poor in the Bronx that were scrapped by Mother Teresa despite the donation of the building itself, because the government regulations required an elevator for the handicapped. The city offered to pay for the elevator, but Mother Teresa said an elevator was unacceptable, and the entire project was scrapped. Hitchens quotes Shields that about $50 million in donations had been collected in one checking account in the Bronx. Shields also writes that dying non-Catholics were asked by sisters if they wanted a ticket to heaven, after which a cool towel would be applied to their foreheads and they would be secretly baptized. Hitchens quotes a letter from a nurse named Emily Lewis who met Mother Teresa at a function in Washington, DC, where the nun publicly said she would never allow a woman or couple who had had an abortion to adopt one of "her" babies. Hitchens concludes that the poor and helpless are merely opportunities for Mother Teresa to demonstrate compassion, but truly helping them is not her goal, because she is really a servant of earthly powers.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 2 is preceded by a number of photographs that show Mother Teresa in her Calcutta mission and with various famous people around the world. Some of these celebrities are widely respected, such as Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Others have notorious public images, such as Michele Duvalier, convicted American swindler Charles Keating, and shady British newspaper mogul Robert Maxwell. The text begins with the assertion that the Catholic Church fascinates many people because of its attitudes toward sex and procreation. Homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex, and solitary sex are all taboo. A woman experiencing danger in childbirth is expected to die rather than sacrifice the unborn baby. Hitchens says following mass rapes in wars, Mother Teresa and the pope appealed to women not to abort the resultant pregnancies. He analyses the Catholic prohibition against abortion in the light of undeveloped fetuses in early pregnancies, and in connection to human miseries compounded by rapid population growth. Hitchens cites China's repressive one-child-per-family policy and an attempt by Indira Gandhi to sterilize males in India as examples of the severity of the population problem.

Hitchens mentions dissent the Church has faced in recent decades in Latin America, Western Europe and the United States over the celibacy requirement for priests, prohibitions against contraceptive birth control, and the failure to accept homosexuals as true Catholics. Mother Teresa has been the most reactionary figure in all these debates, Hitchens contends. He mentions that when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, few people asked what she had ever done for peace. In her acceptance speech, she said everyone present had been wanted by their parents, and she characterized millions of abortions worldwide as the worst evil. She asked if a mother could kill her own child, where would the killing end. Hitchens responds that these millions of abortions, added to the millions who die from pestilence and malnutrition, offer no hope for Mother Teresa's adoption efforts, which are tiny by comparison. Moreover, he says her abortion figures should at least compel her admirers to admit that not all pregnancies are wanted. At an open-air mass in Ireland in 1992, Mother Teresa declared to attendees that no abortions or contraceptives would be allowed in Ireland, which Hitchens characterizes as an offense to Ireland, a largely secular society with a huge Protestant majority. He says the Church tries to make law for believers and unbelievers alike, wherever it is strong enough to do so. Hitchens claims that opposition to birth control, which he sees as one of the few means ever devised for suffering humanity to emancipate itself, is especially grotesque coming from an elderly virgin whose chief occupation is ministering to the very people who suffer as a result of over-population.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 3 of this section, Hitchens returns to Malcolm Muggeridge's documentary film about Mother Teresa, in which she declares that her order gives free service to the poor, which means they cannot accept money for the work they do. Hitchens says this seems to exempt the Missionaries of Charity from the financial cunning that has disfigured Christianity in the past, and it might make the unwary person conclude that no money is solicited from the wealthy by the nuns. He claims that the order's affectation of poverty obscures the huge sums of money it actually receives. Also, he adds, Mother Teresa frequently gives the impression to the media that a donation arrives just at the moment when it is most needed, as if divinely directed, which Hitchens describes as an old trick of missionary fund-raisers. He quotes from an adoring book on Mother Teresa by Dr. Lush Gjergji, which relates a request to the nun by another sister for a home for children in the Indian city of Agra. Mother Teresa replies that she has nothing to give, but shortly thereafter, she gets a phone call saying she has won an award which pays the exact sum required for the children's home. She says the Lord wants the home to be built. Hitchens recounts a long string of awards and monies received by Mother Teresa as her television reputation spreads, from 1971 through the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Mother Teresa's apologists claim she is too innocent to count money or to analyze those who offer it, Hitchens writes. He recounts a fund-raising scheme set up by the British newspaper magnate Robert Maxwell with Mother Teresa's full cooperation, after which Maxwell ran off with the money. She might have been blameless, Hitchens acknowledges, but not in the case of Charles Keating, who engineered a Savings and Loan fraud that was one of the worst to that point in American history. When Keating, who was sentenced to ten years in prison, was being tried, Mother Teresa wrote a letter to the judge asking him to look in his heart, as Jesus would do. She said she had no understanding of the legalities, but Keating always had been kind and generous to her. In fact, he had donated $1.25 million to her organization, Hitchens says. He thinks her letter, which he reproduces, is false in its pretention of innocence and in an uncharacteristic failure to correct its grammatical errors. Keating's prosecutor agrees, and he sends a letter to Mother Teresa explaining that Keating stole $252 million from 17,000 people. He asks her to look in her heart and follow the example of Jesus, as she asked the judge to do, and return the stolen money Keating gave her, but she never replies to his letter. Hitchens describes this as the best-documented evidence against the nun's hypocritical comments on the beauty of poverty and the claims of her apologists that she is an unworldly innocent.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The section titled "Ubiquity" is preceded by two quotes. The first is a long one from the novelist Gore Vidal to the effect that it would be nice to know the answers to apparently unanswerable questions such as, say, the true meaning of "finite" and "infinite," but aside from these exceptions there is no mystery at the heart of things, because philosophy lays open all that can be answered. The second is from a Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, president of Haiti: "The Bible commands us to love our enemies. I love the Pope very much." The chapter explores a question that arose in the medieval history of the Church of Rome. If a person's soul could be redeemed only through belief in Jesus Christ, what would become of those who died before Christ's time on earth, or those who never were aware of Christianity? Not much could be done for the predecessors of Christ, but for those in non-Christian lands, conversion was imperative. Hitchens observes that conflicts between different branches of Christianity frequently accompanied early missionary efforts. Later, missionaries of various denominations became associated with trade and military occupation. In India, the effect of Christianity has been slight, and only Mother Teresa has made any significant impact there because of her worldwide reputation, Hitchens says. He sketches her biography, beginning with her birth in 1910 as Agnes Bojaxhiu to a Catholic family in Albania, where missionary zeal was part of the national tradition. At eighteen, she left her strongly religious family to enter a convent, from which she soon traveled to Ireland, and then to Bengal in India.

Hitchens relates that Albanians of the time were divided between the Tosk and Gheg peoples, both primarily Muslim, although the Ghegs had a small Catholic minority to which the Bojaxhiu family belonged. In 1927, Albania became a protectorate of the Italian fascist government, which helped the Catholics to open many schools in Albania. A communist government took over Albania after World War II, but quiet loyalty to Italy and Catholicism persisted even among Catholics loyal to the communist regime, Hitchens writes. He quotes an account in a book published by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University that Mother Teresa placed a bouquet on the grave of the former Albanian communist leader, Enver Hoxha, and said nothing of his ruthless suppression of religion. Hitchens believes this is part of her loyalty to Greater Albania, a hoped-for nation that includes parts of several contemporary countries, including Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece. Hitchens asks why Mother Teresa would pay homage to the likes of Enver Hoxha, or to Michele Duvalier in Haiti. In the latter case, he says the Vatican long had supported the repressive Duvalier regime, even against the Catholic priest, the Reverend Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who eventually became president after being suspended from his order by the Church. Mother Teresa's activism for Duvalier represented the Vatican as the only government in the world that supported him. Regarding Albania, the war between Croatia and Serbia that broke out after Yugoslavia disintegrated as a country renewed the memories from pre-World War II of Croatians massacring Jews with the support of the Vatican and Germany, Hitchens charges. Greater Albania, centered in Macedonia and in Croatia, is seen as a response

to Greater Serbia, he says, and the zealots of Greater Albania flourish their pictures of Mother Teresa.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Mother Teresa claims to spiritually transcend politics, but all such claims demand scrutiny, Hitchens writes. He thinks she has a kind of genius about the most effective ways to deliver her message, citing as an example her reaction to a toxic chemical spill from a Union Carbide plant in the Indian town of Bhopal. Union Carbide subsequently was found to be guilty of negligence. After the spill, Mother Teresa visited the town and when asked for advice, simply said, "Forgive." Hitchens asks who she thought should be forgiven, and he sees her appearance there as an attempt to contain public indignation. He describes a film clip shot in Madrid, where Mother Teresa arrives to support clerics who oppose legislation that would enable divorce, abortion, and birth control. Hitchens then mentions a visit the nun paid in 1988 to then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London, to discuss a proposed bill to limit the availability of abortion. Next, he describes photographs of Mother Teresa in 1985 with then-President Ronald Reagan, who Hitchens says is in a delicate position with Catholics because his administration backs a regime in Central America that recently murdered four nuns and an archbishop. Mother Teresa, who is in Washington to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, publicly lauds the President for quickly responding to her plea to him to help starving people in Ethiopia. This is too much for Hitchens, who points out that the American government supports an Ethiopian dictator whose control over the country was exerted with the weapon of starvation. The human rights community is shocked by Mother Teresa's statements, he notes, but the media are typically uncritical of her.

Also in the mid-1980s, Mother Teresa visited Nicaragua and publicly admonished the Sandanista revolutionaries, who were fighting against the vicious government of the contras, Hitchens writes. The official patron and confessor of the contras at this time is a Catholic cardinal and archbishop, Miguel Obando y Bravo, who is also on the payroll of the Central Intelligence Agency. The United States is openly backing the contras against the Sandanistas, which Hitchens declares makes it obvious that Mother Teresa's involvement cannot be considered non-political. He says more lives were taken by the contras in Nicaragua than ever were saved by missionaries in Calcutta, but such calculations are never made against Mother Teresa. Hitchens ends the chapter by describing a visit Mother Teresa made to Guatemala around the same time, when the planned extermination of the Guatemalan Indians was becoming an international headline. He reports that Mother Teresa's comment was that everything was peaceful in areas that she visited, and she doesn't get involved in that sort of politics. At least for once, Hitchens sighs, she did not say that everything was "beautiful."

Afterword

Afterword Summary and Analysis

Two quotes begin the "Afterword." The first, from Ralph Reed, chairman of Pat Robertson's fundamentalist Christian Coalition, speaking in 1995, refers to an undescribed position the Coalition has taken. Reed says the position is not partisan, but is based on the values of morality and compassion that Mother Teresa represents. The second is from an Ann Landers column in 1995. Someone writes to Ann Landers that when Mother Teresa was asked how people without money or power could make a difference in the world, she said they should smile more often. Ann Landers characterizes the nun's reply as "splendid." Hitchens writes that troubled people contact Ann Landers every day, and she responds with cheery, useless advice about seeking counseling, or speaking to their ministers, or pulling their socks up and looking on the bright side. Yet he thinks the advice he has quoted from her column would be too stupid even for Ann Landers, if it hadn't come through Mother Teresa. Anticipating a charge of intellectual snobbery, he argues that true intellectual snobbery resides in people who are too sophisticated to believe in God, yet do believe in religion for the poor and dispossessed. Religion is a means of marketing hope, and a cheap way to instill ethics, and a form of discipline, he argues. Invoking the late American political guru Leo Strauss, who had a profound influence on the Republican right wing, Hitchens says Strauss' followers explicitly pointed out these advantages of religion.

Hitchens describes the thinking of the Straussian followers as: "There should be philosophy and knowledge for the elect, religion and sentimentality for the masses." He writes that these Straussian forces are aligned with Christian fundamentalists such as Pat Robertson, represented in public by Ralph Reed. Hitchens says the quote from Reed was in response to a question by the television interviewer Charlie Rose about whether the Christian Coalition's view of a "Christian America" is to care for people before they are born and after they are dead, but to merely coerce them via clerics all the rest of the time. Reed responds by aligning his organization with Mother Teresa. Hitchens is amazed at this, because the Christian Coalition is strongly anti-Catholic, but the author reasons to himself that all Christians unite against secular humanists. He says Mother Teresa is perfectly aware that her name is used by people like Ralph Reed, just as she is used for many of the other causes Hitchens has outlined in his book. She is not simple and humble, she is cunning and single-minded. He ends the book with an observation by the historian of ancient Rome, Edward Gibbon, that different modes of worship were considered by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false, and by the magistrate as equally useful. Mother Teresa descends from this ugly thinking, Hitchens claims, and it is past time she was subjected to the scrutiny that she has evaded so arrogantly for so long.

Characters

Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa, the subject of this book, is eventually identified in it as Agnes Bojaxhiu, born in 1910 in Skopje, Albania, to a staunchly Catholic family. The author discovers that young Agnes had a happy childhood and did not wish to become a nun until the age of eighteen, when she entered a convent. Typically of Mother Teresa, this early information, and most information about her later life, is very sketchy. Christopher Hitchens writes that she is close-mouthed about herself, giving only the barest details even to her most trusted admirers in the media. In a fragmentary biography of Mother Teresa written by a devotee, Hitchens learns and relates to the reader that the young novitiate traveled to Yugoslavia, and then to Ireland, and then to India, where she remained based as a Catholic missionary for four-and-a-half decades. The characterization Hitchens offers of Mother Teresa in this book is that of an outwardly humble, gracious woman who needs very little to live and prefers the simplest of clothing and the barest of necessities. Inwardly, Hitchens contends, Mother Teresa is a calculating person who has learned how to manipulate people into giving vast sums of money for her missionary work, without even questioning how she uses it. Hitchens says Mother Teresa's intentions and policies are not to use most of the donations for helping the poor, ill, and dispossessed people in her care. She is not a social worker, she is an emissary and a high functionary of the Catholic Church, which is a powerful institution with a huge appetite for funds. Mother Teresa understands this, Hitchens writes, and she uses the poor to get money for the Church's worldly goals.

Malcolm Muggeridge

Malcolm Muggeridge is a journalist and television personality who makes a documentary film about Mother Teresa released in 1969, which he follows up with a book about her. These two relatively early devotional works on the life of the nun are largely responsible for starting the cult of Mother Teresa that soon escalates to a general belief among Catholics and non-Catholics that she is a saintly woman, Hitchens argues. Muggeridge even contends in the documentary film that footage shot in poor lighting within one of Mother Teresa's facilities for the poor turned out to be beautifully lit, because of divine influence. Hitchens portrays Muggeridge as foolish and deluded, and the clear implication that Muggeridge's lack of journalistic rigor in accepting Mother Teresa at face value has done a disservice to his audience and to the world at large, by helping to turn her into a stereotype of saintliness.

Susan Shields

Susan Shields served for nine-and-a-half years as a member of Mother Teresa's order, the Missionaries of Charity. She wrote an unpublished manuscript, In Mother's House,

from which Hitchens quotes. In it, Shields writes that total, unquestioning obedience to Mother Teresa was demanded of everyone. One story she tells is of plans to start a home for the poor in the Bronx that were scrapped, despite donation of the building and labor to renovate it, because Mother Teresa thought it extravagant to have an elevator put in the building for the handicapped, as required by government regulations.

Charles Keating

Charles Keating is a money manager who was serving ten years in prison when this book was published for his part in a notorious Savings and Loan fraud in America. Hitchens points out that Keating stole $252 million from 17,000 individuals, and that he donated about $1 million of these stolen funds to the Catholic Church through Mother Teresa, who wrote the judge to ask for clemency during Keating's trial. Afterwards, when Keating's prosecutor wrote to Mother Teresa, described the convicted man's crimes, and asked her to return the money, she did not respond and the money was never returned.

Michele Duvalier

Michele Duvalier, the wife of former Haitian president Jean-Claude Duvalier, was photographed with Mother Teresa when the nun received an honor from Haiti and attended the anniversary of the Duvaliers' wedding. Michele was a divorcee whose marriage to Jean-Claude created controversy in Haiti, particularly because of its huge expense in the poor nation. Hitchens claims that the couple escaped from Haiti with a great deal of the country's National Treasury in their pockets.

Dr. Lush Gjergji

Dr. Lush Gjergji, an Albanian Catholic, is one of about twenty authors whose books on Mother Teresa are found by Hitchens in his search of the electronic index at the Library of Congress. All these books praise Mother Teresa, but the one that Hitchens uses most to describe her early life and to show how loving these authors are toward her is Dr. Gjergji's book, which Hitchens calls the most neutral one among them. Even so, Hitchens describes the book, called Mother Teresa: Her Life, Her Works, as a "sort of devotional pamphlet in the guise of a biography."

John-Roger

John-Roger is the leader of a cult sometimes known as Insight but more accurately as the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA), pronounced "Messiah." Hitchens says John-Roger, a major fraud, has repeatedly claimed to have a spiritual consciousness superior to that of Jesus Christ, which Mother Teresa should find blasphemous. Instead, she poses with John-Roger for a studio photograph that is later doctored to show them standing among the poor of Calcutta. The photograph, says

Hitchens, was required by John-Roger in return for giving Mother Teresa a $10,000 donation.

Emily Lewis

Emily Lewis is a 75-year-old nurse at the time this book was published, who wrote a letter to Hitchens after his documentary film questioning the motives of Mother Teresa was released. In Lewis' letter, she describes meeting Mother Teresa in Washington, DC, in 1989. Mother Teresa was receiving an award, and in her speech, she discussed her opposition to contraception and homosexuality, frequently referring to what God wants us to think or do. Her words caused Emily Lewis to ask Hitchens if it would be going too far to liken Mother Teresa to televangelists, who also tell their audiences what is going on in God's heart and mind while encouraging and accepting all donations.

Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan, President of the United States during most of the 1980s, awarded Mother Teresa the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1985. In her acceptance speech, she praises Reagan for his tender love of the people. She cites her last trip to Washington, DC, when she was approached by a nun from Ethiopia, who said her people were starving. Mother Teresa wrote to Reagan, who sent food. Hitchens finds this speech appalling, since the repressive regime of the Ethiopian people had used the weapon of starvation against insurgents, and the regime was being supported by America.

Robert Maxwell

Robert Maxwell was a well-known British media magnate who got into a great deal of legal trouble for his activities before his death. Hitchens says that Maxwell and Mother Teresa jointly entered into a fund-raising scheme run through Maxwell's newspapers, but then he made off with all the money raised.

Objects/Places

Calcutta

Calcutta is the city in India where Mother Teresa has operated many hospices for the poor, for more than four decades.Malcolm Muggeridge and others in the book describe it as a horrible place, but Hitchens contends that it is no worse than many other cities in the developing world.

Haiti

Haiti is a Caribbean island country whose president, the despotic Jean-Claude Duvalier, was married to Michele Duvalier, praised by Mother Teresa for her love of the people. Haiti is a poor country whose citizens suffered from starvation, and the Duvaliers ran away to Europe with much of Haiti's national funds, according to Hitchens.

Greater Albania

Greater Albania is a term that describes an idealized Albania that would include in its geographic boundaries Kosovo, parts of Serbia and Montenegro, a large part of the Macedonia in the former Yugoslavia, and part of modern Greece. It represents a complicated view of Albania's political and historical place in the world to which Mother Teresa apparently subscribes, which makes her anything but the non-political person she claims to be, says Hitchens.

Home for Dying Destitutes

The Home for Dying Destitutes is perhaps the best-known hospice run by Mother Teresa in Calcutta. Hitchens visits it, and from several other eyewitnesses he draws accounts of the facility's stark simplicity and the poor care that people receive there.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the African country that Mother Teresa talks about when she receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Ronald Reagan in 1985. She uses Ethiopia as an example of Reagan's love of people, because he responded to her request to send food to the starving people. Hitchens finds this ridiculous, because America was supporting an Ethiopian despot who was deliberately starving people to prevent insurrection.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is the Latin American country where the Sandanista revolutionaries were fighting against the repressive contras, who were supported by the United States. Mother Teresa publicly reprimanded the Sandanistas, which Hitchens takes as clear evidence of her political involvement, despite her purported non-political stance.

Something Beautiful for God

Something Beautiful for God is the title of the 1969 documentary film made by British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, as well as the 1971 book he wrote, which Hitchens credits with starting the idolization of Mother Teresa that led to her worldwide fame.

Hell's Angel

Hell's Angel is the title of the 1994 documentary film by Christopher Hitchens that questioned the methods and motives of Mother Teresa. It followed two magazine articles he wrote on the subject that didn't raise a great deal of interest, he says, but the documentary outraged many people.

Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity

The Missionaries of Charity is the name of Mother Teresa's organization of nuns, which she founded in Calcutta. It eventually spread to many countries, embracing 4,000 nuns and 40,000 lay workers.

Washington, D.C.

Washington, DC is the city Mother Teresa visits to receive several awards during the course of this book, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In the book, she is portrayed hobnobbing with the rich and famous in Washington.

Themes

Disguise and Deception

At least as far back as Shakespeare, disguise and deception have been prominent among literary themes. When a character pretends to be someone or something other than who that person really is, disguise and deception work on both literal and symbolic levels. Agnes Bojaxhiu dons a nun's habit and becomes Mother Teresa, saintly provider for the poor of the world, which prompts Christopher Hitchens to ask if she really is who she appears to be. He asks if she might be someone else, with different motives and goals than those that perceived on the surface. If people who encounter her are being deceived by her or by her public image, it is then logical to ask about Mother Teresa's self-image. Is she deceived by her own disguise? Does she really know herself? Such are the questions that arise from the initial one: is Agnes Bojaxhiu in disguise, and is she deceiving us? The question is shocking, because the "disguise" is a nun's habit and demeanor, which we associate with good intentions. Yet Hitchens warns us that the power of the disguise (in his opinion) is the very fact that it produces these positive feelings. Without it, we might look upon Agnes Bojaxhiu with more skepticism, and wonder if she really is putting the money she gets in donations to good use. We might wonder why the poor in her care don't have better living conditions and medical help. We might clamor for an accounting of where all the donations go. We don't do this, Hitchens argues, because the disguise of a nun and the deceptiveness of the idea that all nuns are good, protects Mother Teresa from being questioned.

The Danger of Religion

Perhaps foremost among the many books in world literature questioning the value of organized religion are ones of philosophy and history. In general, philosophers critical of religion argue against its ability to satisfactorily answer the eternal questions about why we are here and how to live a moral life. Historians who criticize religion usually point to wars and other forms of degradation or repression that are perpetrated in the name of various religious creeds. Christopher Hitchens is firmly among those who believe that religion does much more harm than good in the world. In this book, he makes a case that truly good people, who have the best of intentions, are fooled into giving money to the Catholic Church through Mother Teresa because they believe it will be used to help the poor and sick. Even bad people give some of their ill-gotten gains to the Church, so they can be associated with goodness, he argues. Yet Mother Teresa and the Church have other motives and uses for the money than to provide for the destitute, Hitchens says. He suspects that most of the donations go toward enhancing the power and prestige of the Church as a worldly institution, rather than toward doing good works. The danger of this is not primarily that the donors are tricked, however. It is that the poor and piety become mere instruments of the fund-raising efforts headed by Mother Teresa. Hitchens complains that throughout history, religion has been a way to enrich the rich, to the detriment of the poor to whom it is supposed to give comfort and aid.

The Importance of Vigilance

The practice of investigative journalism derives from the premise that the reporter is a watchdog over those whose greed and corruption harm society, and whose damaging activities must not go unchallenged. In digging beneath the surface of matters to find evidence of wrongdoing that the offending person or organization has tried to hide, the reporter refuses to take anything at face value. The principle at the heart of such investigative work is what the Romans called caveat emptor, or buyer beware. In this case, what is being "bought," Christopher Hitchens would argue, is the idea that Mother Teresa uses most of the donations she receives to help the poor. Hitchens refuses to accept this widespread belief, despite the pressure he encounters from many people who think an investigation of a person as revered as Mother Teresa is unacceptable. Hitchens' attitude may bother others, but it follows a line of thinking that can be summarized by another famous phrase, this one often attributed to Thomas Jefferson: the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. In Hitchens' view, eternal vigilance is required over the actions of people who might be manipulating others for their own benefit. The liberty that is being protected by this vigilance is that of decent people to make good choices. If people give money to a cause they believe is just, but if that cause is unjust and the donors never discover that their good intentions have been cheated, then their freedom to make a difference in the world has been stolen from them. Only by uncovering the wrongdoing can that liberty be restored and protected.

Style

Perspective

The stance Hitchens adopts in this book is both entertaining and typical of his penchant for taking a surprising or unpopular position on a subject, and then using intelligent argument to attempt to convince readers that he is correct. In the case of this book, he begins with the startling premise that Mother Teresa is a manipulator who cares less about helping the poor than she does about advancing the political and economic aims of the Church. Each step of the way, he not only builds on that premise, but his criticism of Mother Teresa escalates along with the evidence he presents. The reader might react with skepticism, applause, horror, or disgust, but indifference is unlikely. Principally a political commentator, Hitchens' method is nothing like traditional, objective journalism, but it is an excellent example of subjective journalism, in which the reporter's opinion is central to the story. In that regard, it is similar to the political commentary heard and seen throughout the electronic media nowadays. An element of entertainment, even of the sort that might infuriate many readers, is central to this approach. There also is something manipulative about it, although not in a particularly bad way, because by taking a controversial or contrarian position, he immediately rouses the reader's interest. This is not dishonest, however, because Hitchens' personal attitude toward organized religion is fiercely negative. He has published two books on atheism that have placed him at the forefront of contemporary intellectuals who condemn, as the subtitle of one of his books puts it, "How religion poisons everything."

Tone

From the outset, the tone of this book is satirical and even contemptuous, but it grows increasingly outraged as Hitchens presents information that he obviously feels weighs against the integrity of Mother Teresa. Part of the effectiveness of the book as an attack on the nun and the Catholic Church is Hitchens' conviction that his cause is just. In that sense, the book is a kind of propaganda, or a polemic. If Hitchens had presented his evidence dispassionately, as an objective assembly of information about how Mother Teresa operates her organization, the overall effect of the text would have been much different. In a more balanced report, other facts and details that contradicted or at least softened the harsh assessment of Mother Teresa would have been provided. This new information about good things the nun had done would have diluted the impact of Hitchens' findings against her. The implication of such an approach is that readers would have been asked to make up their minds. In the current book, however, readers are told what to think by the author, and their response is likely to be polarized: either they will agree with him or they will angrily disagree. A shortcoming of this approach is that because readers know what to expect from the outset, those who do not wish to hear anything bad about Mother Teresa are likely to shun the book, which leaves the author preaching to the converted.

The evidence Hitchens gathers of Mother Teresa calculating manipulation of gullible donors in order to further the Catholic Church's worldly ambitions is largely circumstantial. He is unable to provide hard facts that indisputably prove his contentions. Without access to the critical financial figures that would show how much money Mother Teresa raises and how much is spent on helping the poor compared to how much goes toward advancing the power and prestige of the Church, Hitchens cannot afford a calm tone in his writing. Outrage is a necessary part of the effectiveness of an argument that lacks the damning evidence of the "smoking gun." The tone of this book is reminiscent of a lawyer's closing argument in a jury trial. Pacing back and forth, wringing his hands, his voice alternately rising and falling for effect, Hitchens gives a theatrical performance that he hopes will sway the jury (in this case, the reader) at least as much as the circumstantial evidence he has compiled.

Structure

The book's structure is a little unusual, perhaps because the text is not long. It has a Foreword and Acknowledgments that read like the beginning of the author's argument, and an Introduction that definitely belongs to the body of the text. Both these segments are preceded by quotations about God and religion from well-known people throughout history, and such quotes, which continue to be offered before other sections of the book, are provocative. Believers in Christianity would find some of them to be incendiary. The rest of the book is divided into three sections and an Afterword. Each of the three sections, preceded by quotations from other writers, is given a title but is not numbered or otherwise identified as a discrete part of the book. The first section, "A Miracle," stands alone but the second section, "Good Works and Heroic Virtues," is divided into three chapters, and the third section, "Ubiquity," has two chapters. The Afterword, again preceded by quotes, does not add information concerning events or findings that came after that within the rest of the book, which is usually the point of an Afterword. This one is really just another short chapter and a final attempt to further strengthen the author's argument.

One other important aspect of the book's structure is the use of photographs. They appear, with captions, in the middle of the Foreword and Acknowledgments, and in the section titled, "Good Works and Heroic Virtues." Each of these black-and-white photographs shows Mother Teresa with famous or notorious people, or tending the poor and afflicted. The situation in which each photograph was taken is discussed in Hitchens' text, which lends much more human interest to the images. Both supporters and detractors of Mother Teresa would no doubt find these photos especially fascinating in the context of Hitchens' argument.

Quotes

"It was once well said, of the criticism of religion, that the critic should pluck the flowers from the chain, not in order that people should wear the chain without consolation but so they might break the chain and cull the living flower." Page xiii

"Image and perception are everything, and those who possess them have the ability to determine their own myth, to be taken at their own valuation." Page 6

"The picture, and its context, announce Mother Teresa as what she is: a religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer and an accomplice of worldly, secular powers." Page 11.

"In the gradual manufacture of an illusion, the conjurer is only the instrument of the audience." Page 15

"Modesty and humility are popularly supposed to be saintly attributes, yet Mother Teresa can scarcely grant an audience without claiming a special and personal relationship with Jesus Christ." Page 29

"As might be expected, when the requirements of dogma clash with the needs of the poor, it is the latter which give way." Page 46

"The sisters were rarely allowed to spend money on the poor they were trying to help. Instead they were forced to plead poverty, thus manipulating generous, credulous people and enterprises into giving more goods, services and cash." Page 47

"As ever, the true address of the missionary is to the self-satisfaction of the sponsor and the donor, and not to the needs of the downtrodden." Page 50

"When mass rapes occurred in the course of aggressive war in Bangladesh and later in Bosnia, Mother Teresa in the first case ad the Pope in the second made strenuous appeals to the victims not to abort the seed of the invader and the violator." Page 52

"The Church's teaching seems to deny any connection at all between the rapid exponential growth in human population and the spread and persistence of disease, famine, squalor, ignorance and environmental calamity." Page 54

"Even prominent Catholic writers of the conservative wing, such as William Buckley and Clare Booth Luce, have made the obvious point that an unyielding opposition to contraception, and the ranking of it as a sin more or less equivalent to abortion, is, among other things, a cheapening of the moral position on abortion itself." Page 55

"But given how much this Church allows the fanatical Mother Teresa to preach, it might be added that the call to go forth and multiply, and to take no thought for the morrow,

sounds grotesque when uttered by an elderly virgin whose chief claim to reverence is that she ministers to the inevitable losers in this very lottery." Page 59

"Nobody has troubled to total the amount of prize money received from governments and quasi-government organizations by the Missionaries of Charity, and nobody has ever asked what became of the funds." Page 63

"There is no conceit equal to false modesty, and there is no politics like antipolitics, just as there is no worldliness to compare with ostentatious antimaterialism." Page 86

"Time and again, since I began the project of judging Mother Teresa's reputation by her actions and words rather than her actions and words by her reputation, I have been rebuked and admonished for ridiculing the household gods of the simple folk; for sneering at a women who, to employ an old citation, 'gives those in the gutter a glimpse of the stars.'" Page 96-97

"Her success is not, therefore a triumph of humility and simplicity. It is another chapter in a millennial story which stretches back to the superstitious childhood of our species, and which depends on the exploitation of the simple and the humble by the cunning and the single-minded." Page 98

Topics for Discussion

Do you think it's fair and wise of the author to disparage Mother Teresa while investigating her activities? Would it be better to approach the investigation with a less caustic attitude, or does the author's obvious distrust of Mother Teresa help his argument?

It seems to be important that Mother Teresa is seen as an unworldly person, or someone who has no great interest in the money, power, and possessions of this world. Why is this of any significance in a consideration of her character and actions?

The irritation, and even disgust, that Christopher Hitchens displays in this book are very obvious. Why do think he is so angry? Could there be more than one reason?

Aside from Mother Teresa's accomplishments, why do you think people throughout the world, both Catholic and non-Catholic, are eager to applaud and revere her? What does this willingness to see her as saintly say about the hopes and attitudes of people?

The impact of a book on the public is often difficult to assess. This book was published in 1995. Do you think it had an effect on readers, and on others who might have heard about it but didn't read it? What sort of response would you suppose it generated among people?

Do you think Mother Teresa is wrong or right to oppose birth control? Your response should be offered in light of Christopher Hitchens' argument that many of the problems of the sick and poor, especially in developing countries, arise from overpopulation.

As a nun, Mother Teresa is answerable to the government of the Catholic Church, which is headed by the Pope in the Vatican. Given that her calling is to do the Pope's bidding, isn't she simply following the orders of the Church? Do you think this means she should be safe from criticism?