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Missionary Position Hitchens

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The Missionary Position Hitchens: A Critical Examination of Christopher Hitchens’ Famous Polemic

Few intellectual feuds of the late 20th century were as sharp, personal, and ideologically charged as the one between Christopher Hitchens and the legacy of Mother Teresa. At the heart of this confrontation lies a controversial and slim volume titled *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*. For those encountering the phrase “Missionary Position Hitchens,” the wording often evokes curiosity. It is at once a clever, biting pun and a summary of a devastating critique. Hitchens did not merely disagree with Mother Teresa’s methods; he sought to dismantle the very mythology that surrounded her. This article explores the origins, arguments, and enduring impact of Hitchens’ polemic, unpicking why the “Missionary Position” remains one of the most talked-about takedowns in modern non-fiction.

Who Was Christopher Hitchens?

Before diving into the text itself, it is essential to understand the man behind the argument. Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) was a British-American author, journalist, and public intellectual renowned for his sharp wit, erudition, and unapologetic contrarianism. He wrote for publications such as *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vanity Fair*, and was a leading figure in the “New Atheism” movement alongside Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

Hitchens was not a man who shied away from controversy. He was a fervent anti-theist, meaning he actively argued against the belief in any deity, positioning religion as a source of oppression and irrationality. This worldview informed everything he wrote, but it found its most focused and relentless expression in his critique of Mother Teresa. For Hitchens, she was not a saint but a symbol of everything wrong with organized religion: hypocrisy, suffering glorification, and a dangerous alliance with authoritarian regimes.

What Is “The Missionary Position”?

Published in 1995, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* is a short but explosive book. The title itself is a deliberate double entendre, referring both to a sexual position and to Mother Teresa’s role as a missionary. It is a work of investigative journalism as much as it is a polemic. Hitchens draws on previously published articles, medical reports, personal testimonies, and interviews to build a case against the Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

The book challenges the hagiographic portrayal of Mother Teresa that dominated mainstream media. Hitchens claims that the real story of her work in Calcutta (now Kolkata) was far more complex and far less benevolent than the public imagined. He does not attack her personal piety or intentions directly, but instead focuses on the consequences of her actions and the politics of her organization, the Missionaries of Charity.

The Core Arguments of Hitchens’ Critique

To understand the “Missionary Position Hitchens” debate, one must dissect the key arguments he

makes in the book. These arguments are structured around several overlapping themes.

1. The Quality of Medical Care

One of the most damning charges Hitchens levels is against the standard of medical care provided in Mother Teresa’s homes for the dying. He cites testimony from doctors, former volunteers, and journalists who visited the facilities. A recurring criticism is that the homes lacked basic diagnostic equipment, modern painkillers, and sterile protocols.

Hitchens reports that patients were given only rudimentary care, often without proper diagnosis or treatment. In some cases, he alleges that patients who could have been saved with modern medicine were allowed to die in discomfort, their suffering presented as a form of spiritual offering. He quotes a doctor who described the practice as “unscientific” and “medieval.”

This argument struck at the heart of Mother Teresa’s public image as a compassionate caregiver. Hitchens suggested that the organization prioritized religious ritual over medical necessity, a charge that has been repeated and debated ever since.

2. The Sanctification of Suffering

Hitchens was deeply critical of the theological underpinnings of Mother Teresa’s work. He argued that she did not seek to eliminate suffering but to give it meaning. In her own writings and speeches, Mother Teresa spoke of suffering as a gift from God and a way to resemble Christ on the cross.

For Hitchens, this was not merely passive acceptance but active promotion of suffering. He saw it as a form of cruelty disguised as piety. He contrasted this with the secular humanitarian approach, which seeks to reduce suffering through medicine, sanitation, and science. The “Missionary Position,” in his view, was a worldview that romanticized poverty and illness rather than fighting them.

3. The Handling of Donations

Another major strand of Hitchens’ critique involves money. Mother Teresa’s organization received millions of dollars in donations from governments, corporations, and individuals. Hitchens questioned where this money went. He pointed out that the homes for the dying remained spartan, lacking even basic painkillers, while the Vatican and other institutions received significant financial support.

Hitchens alleged that the Missionaries of Charity did not transparently account for their funds. He suggested that the organization accumulated wealth but did not invest it in improving the quality of care for the poor. This inconsistency between the public image of saintly poverty and the financial reality formed a key part of his indictment.

4. Political Alignments

Hitchens also attacked Mother Teresa for her political associations. He was particularly critical of her relationship with authoritarian and corrupt regimes. He noted that she accepted donations from the Duvalier regime in Haiti, one of the most brutal dictatorships in the Americas, and from the family of Charles Keating, a financier at the center of the Savings and Loan scandal in the United States.

Furthermore, Hitchens condemned her public stance on issues such as contraception, abortion, and divorce. He argued that her opposition to birth control exacerbated the very poverty she was praised for alleviating. In countries like India, where overpopulation and lack of family planning contributed to widespread suffering, her doctrine was, in his view, deeply harmful.

5. The Cult of Personality

Finally, Hitchens attacked the media’s role in creating what he called the “Mother Teresa myth.” He argued that journalists and biographers had accepted her saintly image uncritically, ignoring evidence that contradicted it. He pointed to the work of Indian journalist Aroup Chatterjee, who had written extensively about the discrepancies between the official narrative and the reality on the ground.

For Hitchens, the “Missionary Position” was not just about one woman; it was about the failure of the secular press to hold religious figures to the same standard of accountability as political leaders. He saw the adulation of Mother Teresa as a symptom of a wider cultural reluctance to criticize faith-based organizations.

The Reception and Controversy

When *The Missionary Position*was published, it provoked immediate and intense reactions. Supporters of Mother Teresa denounced Hitchens as a hateful and biased ideologue. They accused him of cherry-picking evidence, relying on disgruntled former volunteers, and ignoring the overwhelming good done by the Missionaries of Charity.

Critics of Mother Teresa, on the other hand, hailed the book as a courageous and necessary corrective. Many of the claims Hitchens made had been circulating in Indian medical and journalistic circles for years, but they had not reached a global audience. Hitchens gave them a platform and a voice.

The controversy did not die with the book’s publication. It resurfaced during the process of Mother Teresa’s beatification and canonization. Hitchens was invited to testify at the Vatican’s investigation, though his testimony was ultimately not considered sufficient to block the process. He remained an outspoken critic until his death in 2011, and his arguments continue to be cited by those who question the official narrative surrounding her life and work.

Did Hitchens Go Too Far?

This is a question that any balanced examination of the “Missionary Position Hitchens” debate must address. There is no doubt that Hitchens wrote with a polemical fury that sometimes bordered on the hyperbolic. He was not a neutral observer; he was an advocate with a cause. This rhetorical style can be both a strength and a weakness.

Supporters of Mother Teresa argue that Hitchens ignored the context of her work. They point out that the homes for the dying were never intended to be advanced medical facilities. They were places of refuge for the destitute, where people could die with dignity and companionship. The lack of modern equipment, they argue, was a reflection of the limited resources available in the slums of Calcutta, not a deliberate choice to deny care.

Furthermore, they note that many volunteers who worked with the Missionaries of Charity described their experience as profoundly positive. They speak of the love and compassion shown by the nuns, the cleanliness of the homes, and the dignity afforded to patients. These testimonials stand in stark contrast to the accounts cited by Hitchens.

However, proponents of Hitchens’ view argue that the criticisms are not about isolated incidents but about systemic issues. The question of pain management, for example, cannot be dismissed by pointing to resource constraints. If the organization could raise millions of dollars, why could it not afford morphine? The question of financial transparency remains unresolved, and the political alliances remain troubling to many secular observers.

Ultimately, whether Hitchens “went too far” depends largely on one’s starting assumptions.

For a religious believer, his attack on a revered figure may seem like an act of sacrilege. For a secular humanist, it may look like a necessary act of demystification.

The Legacy of the Book

More than two decades after its publication, *The Missionary Position*remains in print and continues to be read, discussed, and debated. It has become a classic of the anti-theist genre and a case study in how to construct a polemical argument. The phrase “Missionary Position Hitchens” has entered the lexicon as a shorthand for a certain kind of uncompromising, evidence-based critique.

The book also contributed to a broader reassessment of Mother Teresa’s legacy. In recent years, even some biographers who are broadly sympathetic to her have acknowledged that the hagiographic accounts were incomplete. The conversation has become more nuanced, and Hitchens deserves some of the credit for that.

However, it is also true that for many people, especially in the Global South, the book feels like an outsider’s attack. Mother Teresa remains a deeply beloved figure in India, where she is seen as a compassionate presence among the poorest of the poor. The Western intellectual critique, however well-argued, can seem distant and disconnected from the lived experience of those who were helped.

Critical Evaluation of Hitchens’ Sources and Methods

To evaluate the argument of the “Missionary Position,” one must consider the reliability of the sources Hitchens used. He relied heavily on the work of Aroup Chatterjee, an Indian doctor who had conducted his own investigation into the Missionaries of Charity. Chatterjee’s findings were damning, but he too faced criticism for his methods and his own ideological commitments.

Hitchens also cited a 1994 article from the German magazine *Stern*, which made explosive claims about the quality of care in the homes. However, the authors of that article later admitted to some inaccuracies in their reporting. This has been used by defenders of Mother Teresa to cast doubt on the entire edifice of Hit

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