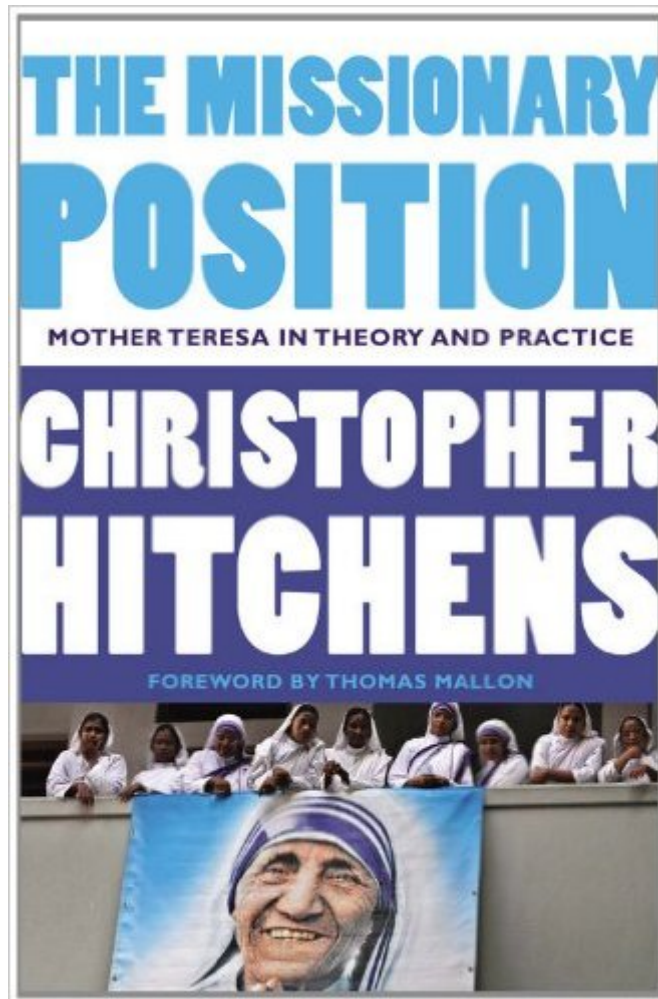


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The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa In Theory And Practice



Synopsis

"A religious fundamentalist, a political operative, a primitive sermonizer, and an accomplice of worldly secular powers. Her mission has always been of this kind. The irony is that she has never been able to induce anybody to believe her. It is past time that she was duly honored and taken at her word." Among his many books, perhaps none have sparked more outrage than *THE MISSIONARY POSITION*, Christopher Hitchens's meticulous study of the life and deeds of Mother Teresa. A Nobel Peace Prize recipient beatified by the Catholic Church in 2003, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was celebrated by heads of state and adored by millions for her work on behalf of the poor. In his measured critique, Hitchens asks only that Mother Teresa's reputation be judged by her actions-not the other way around. With characteristic élan and rhetorical dexterity, Hitchens eviscerates the fawning cult of Teresa, recasting the Albanian missionary as a spurious, despotic, and megalomaniacal operative of the wealthy who long opposed measures to end poverty, and fraternized, for financial gain, with tyrants and white-collar criminals throughout the world.

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Customer Reviews

Before discussing Hitchens' book and Mother Teresa I would just briefly mention that I have spent most of my own life working in hospices, hospitals, and nursing homes, and often for no money. I say this not because I think it makes me any better than the next guy, but only because I want to pre-empt at the outset one criticism that has appeared in many other reviews: "When you spend one day working with these poor people, then maybe you can criticize Mother Teresa." Such

concerns are beside the point. The issue should not be the reviewer; it is Mother Teresa and her work. I've read the many negative reviews of Hitchens' book, and virtually all the reviewers suffer from at least one of two flaws: 1. They focus on limited, insignificant parts of the book, overlooking the most devastating material. This suggests they either have not read that material or do not care about it. 2. They attack Hitchens the man instead of what he says and the evidence he presents. This "shooting the messenger" is known as arguing "ad hominem" and accomplishes nothing beyond gratifying the reviewer's pique. (This includes an astoundingly ignorant review by William Donohue of the Catholic League, who spends so much of it attacking Hitchens' character that one wonders whether he paid any attention to what Hitchens actually wrote.) So in taking a closer look at what Hitchens did write, let us not be deterred by the fear of attacking an icon. Let us rather be motivated by what Mother Teresa herself claimed was her dearest concern, the compassionate care of those who are poor, those who are disabled, those who are sick or dying or in great pain. If these are our concerns, then the evidence Hitchens presents is damning.

I have always thought very highly of Mother Theresa, until a few years ago, when I visited one of her clinics on a medical trip. It was a nursery, filled to the brim with pathetic crying babies, or those too scrawny and weak to even move. Many of them lay in urine soaked beds. I started to cry at the sight of their misery, it was just so appalling, and mind you, this is not the first time I have seen sick babies or dire poverty. But what was most shocking was when one of the doctors in my group asked where the money had gone. She apparently had been here last year, and she and others raised \$25,000 for this particular nursery--they had sent the money a few months before we arrived to buy cribs, diapers, formula and medicine. The nursery was exactly the same now as it had been a year ago. The sister in charge said something to the effect that they had to give the money to the main MC office--or something like that. They never saw a penny of it. One of the babies died during our visit--of starvation. He could have been saved very easily. My doubts began at that time, and I read more about Mother Theresa, how her nuns were spreading AIDS and hepatitis by using unclean needles in their clinics. You can buy bleach to sterilize needles for just a few pennies, but yet, they didn't even have that. Where then, does the millions go that is donated to this woman and her charity? If she believes that suffering is so holy, then one would think she would have wanted to be treated when she got sick, the same way that the poor are treated. But instead, Mother Theresa got top notch care. I guess when one is on the fast track to sainthood, they don't have to do their penance and suffering like the rest of us.

In swift and sly prose, Hitchens relates his personal observations of Mother Teresa's clinics in Calcutta. He tells one story of a nursery full of starving, sick babies crying in insufficient cribs, which M. Teresa describes as the way "we fight abortion." He writes of men dying of AIDS, denied pain medicine, because according to M. Teresa, their suffering will assure them of ultimate salvation. Patients too weak to object are baptized in their final hours. I have now doubt that all of this is true, and at first glance it is surprising, but it shouldn't be. M. Teresa is a Roman Catholic nun and Mother Superior; in fact, founder of an order. She is not merely Christian in a vague way, but a zealot for Catholicism. I knew this-- in fact I even knew that at one point, all she allowed her nuns was an impoverished diet of rice, and insufficient calories of that, because she thought they should the same thing as the people they served. This was not necessary, as her order had plenty of money. She began feeding her nuns a living diet only after the Pope ordered her to do so. I suppose as a Catholic nun and zealot, she's did a fine job, but I don't think most Americans, especially non-Catholic Americans, knew this. Every year, millions of dollars are donated to her order, most of which sits in banks, while patients in her hospitals suffer from insufficient care. Some of this money comes from non-Catholic Americans who know next to nothing about M. Teresa and her actual mission. All people know is some vague idea that there's a lot of hunger and inadequate medical care in Calcutta, and M. Teresa order is doing something out there to help.

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