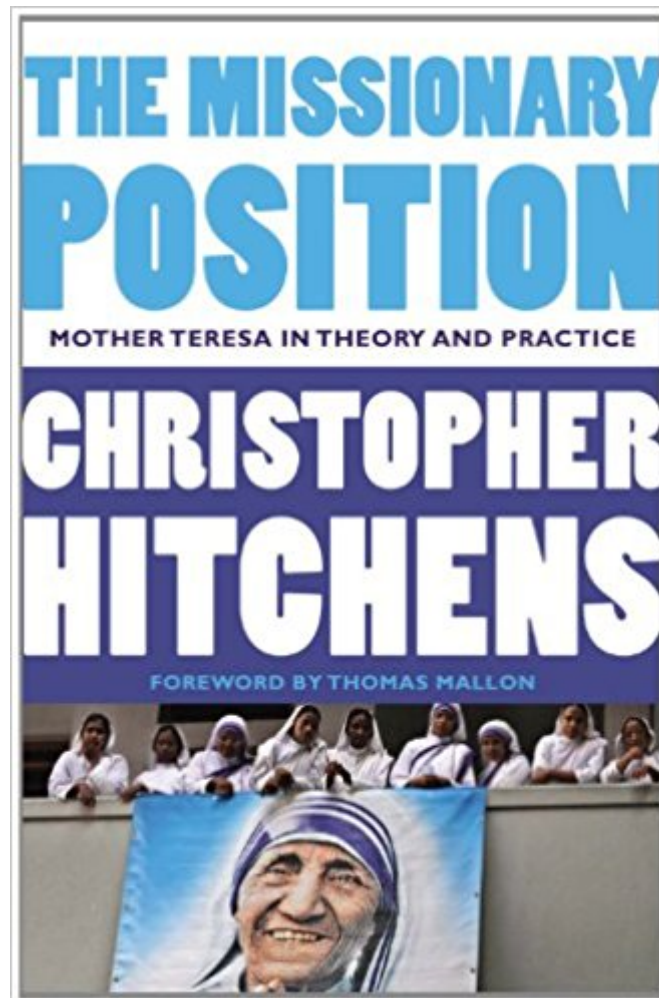




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The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa In Theory And Practice



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

What's next--The Girl Scouts: The Untold Story? How could anybody write a debunking book about Mother Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity order? Well, in this little cruise missile of a book, Hitchens quickly establishes that the idea is not without point. After all, what is Mother Teresa doing hanging out with a dictator's wife in Haiti and accepting over a million dollars from Charles Keating? The most riveting material in the book is contained in two letters: one from Mother Teresa to Judge

Lance Ito--then weighing what sentence to dole out to the convicted Keating--which cited all the work Keating has done "to help the poor," and another from a Los Angeles deputy D.A., Paul Turley, back to Mother Teresa that eloquently stated that rather than working to reduce Keating's sentence, she should return the money he gave her to its rightful owners, the defrauded bond-holders. (Significantly, Mother Teresa never replied.) And why do former missionary workers and visiting doctors consistently observe that the order's medical practices seem so inadequate, especially given all the money that comes in? (Hitchens acidly observes that on the other hand, Mother Teresa herself always manages to receive world-class medical care.) Hitchens's answer is that Mother Teresa is first and foremost interested not in providing medical treatment, but in furthering Catholic doctrine and--quite literally--becoming a saint. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

An extended, nun-busting polemic from the The Nation columnist. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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. Much of it comes from people

who worked for Mother Teresa and can be independently verified. Personal attacks on Hitchens or his religious views cannot in any way negate this evidence. One key witness is Susan Shields, who wrote about her experience in *Free Inquiry Magazine* (Vol. 18 no. 1, Winter 1997/1998). Shields was a sister in the Missionaries of Charity. She lived with them in the Bronx, Rome, and San Francisco. According to Shields, the philosophy that guided the Missionary Sisters both considered suffering a virtue and strongly discouraged attachments of any kind to the people served. The inevitable result of this combination was an indifference to human suffering. If suffering is good, and if feeling emotional responses toward the patients is bad, then any uncomfortable emotions that may arise from witnessing their suffering must be quickly switched off. This makes true compassion difficult if not impossible. The Missionary Sisters were not bad people. Most of them meant well. They tried their best to be obedient, and did not know that the great bulk of donations their order received remained hidden unused in Mother's bank accounts. Shields knows this because one of her assigned tasks was recording those donations. "We wrote receipts for checks of \$50,000 and more on a regular basis," she reports. Since poverty was also considered a virtue, little of that money could be spent either on the order or on the patients. As Shields tells us: "Mother was very concerned that we preserve our spirit of poverty. Spending money would destroy that poverty. She seemed obsessed with using only the simplest of means for our work. Was this in the best interests of the people we were trying to help, or were we in fact using them as a tool to advance our own 'sanctity?' In Haiti, to keep the spirit of poverty, the sisters reused needles until they became blunt. Seeing the pain caused by the blunt needles, some of the volunteers offered to procure more needles, but the sisters refused." Hitchens quotes parts of Shields' unpublished manuscript, but her article in *Free Inquiry* may easily be found online and is worth reading in full. Another eyewitness Hitchens quotes is Dr. Robin Fox, who in 1994 was editor of *The Lancet* and who reported his findings in that journal in an article entitled "Mother Theresa's Care for the Dying" (September 17, 1994). While noting that the residents of the home were at least well fed, Fox nevertheless observes that their medical care was inadequate. He calls it "haphazard," refusing to permit normal diagnostic procedures like blood films because such practices "tend toward materialism." He concludes: "I was disturbed to learn that the formulary includes no strong analgesics. Along with the neglect of diagnosis, the lack of good analgesia marks Mother Theresa's approach as clearly separate from the hospice movement. I know which I prefer." Hitchens points out that this state of affairs at the Home for the Dying cannot be excused by any plea of poverty. Mother Teresa had at her disposal "immense quantities of money and material." The home was as it was because it reflected Mother Teresa's philosophy of suffering and the poor. Dr. Fox's account is supplemented by the

observations of Mary Loudon, a volunteer at the Home of the Dying whose testimony Hitchens obtained. In Loudon's words, "This is two rooms with fifty to sixty men in one, fifty to sixty women in another. They're dying. They're not being given a great deal of medical care. They're not being given painkillers really beyond aspirin and maybe if you're lucky some Brufen [ibuprofen] or something, for the sort of pain that goes with terminal cancer and the things they were dying of." I have years of experience working in hospice. Cancer pain can be unimaginable, and considerable intravenous morphine infusions are often scarcely enough to contain it. But if you have cancer in Mother Teresa's home, you'll get aspirin for your pain or maybe Advil if you're lucky. Loudon goes on to observe that needles were reused continually and not sterilized but only rinsed at the cold water tap - another false show of poverty at the expense of the residents' well being. Mother Teresa apparently considered pain sacred - as long as it happens to somebody else, and as long as that person is poor. Hitchens mentions (p. 41) a filmed interview in which Mother Teresa says with a smile what she told a patient suffering unbearable pain from terminal cancer: "You are suffering like Christ on the cross. So Jesus must be kissing you." The patient's response: "Then please tell him to stop kissing me." It is supremely arrogant to tell someone in agony to be grateful for the blessing of pain while availing oneself of the best and most expensive hospitals in the West during one's own illnesses, as Mother Teresa did. Did Mother Teresa not wish to be kissed by Jesus too? Another witness Hitchens quotes is author and journalist Elgy Gillespie, who spent time at Mother Teresa's San Francisco hostel for people with AIDS. She reports that the ones who were not too sick to care were extremely depressed because they were not permitted to watch TV or have friends come over, even when they were dying. She mentions one patient in particular who was able to escape the hostel for a while, because a caring friend of Gillespie's offered to take him in. When his illness worsened and this friend could no longer care for him, he begged her not to send him back to the hostel. He was afraid that at the hostel he would be denied necessary medication, including morphine for his pain. How can one possibly excuse the willful denial of pain medication to people who are terminally ill, regardless of the theology behind it? How does one call somebody who does this a saint? Those who try to discredit Hitchens' book by attacking Hitchens personally are ethically irresponsible. They would also have to attack and discredit Susan Shields, Dr. Robin Fox, Mary Loudon, and Elgy Gillespie. So far to my knowledge, no one has. Now why on earth would anyone withhold pain medication from people in intense pain, especially if one had millions to pay for such medication? Who can really discern another person's motives? One can only observe the obvious: there is no credit for helping the poor if they are not poor, the suffering if they are not suffering, and the disabled if they are independent. Mother Teresa made a great show of helping only the poor. In

an interview with Malcolm Muggeridge she stated: "We cannot work for the rich; neither can we accept any money for the work we do. Ours has to be a free service, and to the poor" (p. 60). Another quote from Mother: "I think it is very beautiful for the poor to accept their lot, to share it with the passion of Christ. I think the world is being much helped by the suffering of the poor people" (p.11). There you have it. Mother's theology glorifies suffering. Suffering is good. It is the kiss of Christ. The suffering of the poor helps the world. So one can be a saint only by helping the suffering poor. There is no saintliness in helping the non-suffering non-poor. So collect millions in the name of the suffering poor; just don't spend it on relieving their pain or restoring their dignity. Nothing illustrates this attitude better than a bizarre incident that took place in New York in 1990. The city gave two buildings it had seized for back taxes to the Missionary Sisters for one dollar apiece. The sisters planned to convert them into a homeless shelter. But there was a wrinkle. The city required that the residence be accessible to people with disabilities, and so asked that the sisters install an elevator. Mother Teresa adamantly refused. She even rejected the city's offer to pay for the elevator (never mind that she could easily have afforded to pay for it herself). So the nuns abandoned the project. What's so bad about an elevator? The nuns wanted the residents to experience the charity of people who would care for them in their poverty. "The sisters said that if anyone couldn't walk up the stairs, they'd carry them, just like they do in Calcutta," said Anne Emerman, director of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, who opposed the nuns' request for a waiver from the city's handicapped access law. Emerman was vilified in some quarters for her opposition to the great saint, but to the disabled community she was a hero. "We have different ideas here of personal dignity" she said. "Some people might not want to be carried." Indeed, some disabled people might actually prefer to be independent and to have their independence respected. But promoting independence just doesn't have quite the same flash as service to the poor. (Hitchens mentions this incident in a quote from Susan Shields on pp. 45-46, but full details can be found in these two articles: Associated Press, "Mother Teresa Group Gives Up NY Shelter Plan over Elevators" [Boston Globe, September 18, 1990], and Sam Roberts, "Fight City Hall? Nope, Not Even Mother Teresa" [New York Times, September 17, 1990].) Now what if New York City had not offered to pay for an elevator? Could the Missionaries of Charity plead poverty as an excuse not to build it? Well they could, but it would hardly be credible. Mother Teresa ranked with the best in her ability to manipulate people's guilt to elicit funding. By all accounts she could be very persistent. In an article entitled "Mother Teresa: Where Are Her Millions?" which appeared in German's Stern magazine (September 10, 1998), Walter Wuellenweber notes several examples: "For purchase or rent of property, the sisters do not need to touch their bank accounts. `Mother always said, we don't spend

for that,' remembers Sunita Kumar, one the richest women in Calcutta and supposedly Mother T's closest associate outside the order. 'If Mother needed a house, she went straight to the owner, whether it was the State or a private person, and worked on him for so long that she eventually got it free.'..."Mother Teresa saw it as her God given right never to have to pay anyone for anything. Once she bought food for her nuns in London for GB £500. When she was told she'd have to pay at the till, the diminutive seemingly harmless nun showed her Balkan temper and shouted, 'This is for the work of God!' She raged so loud and so long that eventually a businessman waiting in the queue paid up on her behalf."So the question remains: If Mother Teresa was so good at raising funds and did in fact raise millions, why is there no money for clean needles in hospices? Where does the money go? As one man said after asking Mother for help in building housing for 4,000 of Calcutta's homeless and failing even to receive a response, "I don't understand why you educated people in the West have made this woman into such a goddess! I went to her place three times. She did not even listen to what I had to say. Everyone on earth knows that the sisters have a lot of money. But no one knows what they do with it!"It seems no one can answer that question completely. But Wuellenweber continues:"The fortune of this famous charitable organisation is controlled from Rome, - from an account at the Vatican bank. And what happens with monies at the Vatican Bank is so secret that even God is not allowed to know about it. One thing is sure however - Mother's outlets in poor countries do not benefit from largesse of the rich countries. The official biographer of Mother Teresa, Kathryn Spink, writes, 'As soon as the sisters became established in a certain country, Mother normally withdrew all financial support.' Branches in very needy countries therefore only receive start-up assistance. Most of the money remains in the Vatican Bank."Wherever the money did end up, most of it never went to the poor Mother Teresa was supposed to be serving. In her Free Inquiry article Susan Shields states: "The donations rolled in and were deposited in the bank, but they had no effect on our ascetic lives and very little effect on the lives of the poor we were trying to help." Reporter Donal MacIntyre, writing in the New Statesman (London; August 22, 2005), describes conditions in Mother Teresa's orphanage that were not only squalid but sometimes even cruel:"I worked undercover for a week in Mother Teresa's flagship home for disabled boys and girls to record Mother Teresa's Legacy, a special report for Five News broadcast earlier this month. I winced at the rough handling by some of the full-time staff and Missionary sisters. I saw children with their mouths gagged open to be given medicine, their hands flaying in distress, visible testimony to the pain they were in. Tiny babies were bound with cloths at feeding time. Rough hands wrenched heads into position for feeding. Some of the children retched and coughed as rushed staff crammed food into their mouths. Boys and girls were

abandoned on open toilets for up to 20 minutes at a time. Slumped, untended, some dribbling, some sleeping, they were a pathetic sight. Their treatment was an affront to their dignity, and dangerously unhygienic."Volunteers (from Italy, Sweden, the United States and the UK) did their best to cradle and wash the children who had soiled themselves. But there were no nappies, and only cold water. Soap and disinfectant were in short supply. Workers washed down beds with dirty water and dirty cloths. Food was prepared on the floor in the corridor. A senior member of staff mixed medicine with her hands. Some did their best to give love and affection - at least some of the time. But, for the most part, the care the children received was inept, unprofessional and, in some cases, rough and dangerous. 'They seem to be warehousing people rather than caring for them,' commented the former operations director of Mencap Martin Gallagher, after viewing our undercover footage."This is the best care that millions of charity dollars could afford? No money even for soap and diapers?Mother Teresa's entire attitude towards money seems rather odd. Apparently it is virtuous to give, as long as the giving is to the Catholic Church (and never even reaches the poor) and regardless of how the funds given were obtained. Charles Keating, a sort of Bernie Madoff of the 80's, donated 1.25 million dollars to Mother Teresa in return for the respectability of being associated with her. When Keating was tried in 1992 Mother Teresa wrote to the court asking clemency for him. Hitchens reproduces her letter to the judge on p. 67. In it she says that Keating "has always been kind and generous to God's poor" and asks the judge "to do what Jesus would do."One of the prosecutors wrote back to Mother Teresa explaining (just in case she did not know) that among those whom Keating defrauded may also be counted some of "the least of these" whom Mother claims to serve, including "a poor carpenter who did not speak English and had his life savings stolen by Mr. Keating's fraud" (p. 69). He continued: "No church, no charity, no organization should allow itself to be used as salve for the conscience of the criminal." He urged Mother Teresa to do the right thing: "Ask yourself what Jesus would do if he were given the fruits of a crime; what Jesus would do if he were in possession of money that had been stolen; what Jesus would do if he were being exploited by a thief to ease his conscience? I submit that Jesus would promptly and unhesitatingly return the stolen property to its rightful owners. You should do the same. You have been given money by Mr. Keating that he has been convicted of stealing by fraud. Do not permit him the 'indulgence' he desires. Do not keep the money. Return it to those who worked for it and earned it! If you contact me I will put you in direct contact with the rightful owners of the property now in your possession."Mother Teresa never replied.So what can we make of all this? It is a shame that whatever good Mother Teresa may have done has been tainted by her exploitation of the very same people she made a show of helping. Perhaps we need to choose our saints a little more carefully.It

is easy to find superficial fault with Hitchens' book. Its title, "The Missionary Position," is juvenile. Its citations are sloppy. And Hitchens is no expert in the Bible or theology, so sometimes he gets things wrong, as when he says (p. 29) that Jesus broke the box of costly ointment on his own feet. But Hitchens' antipathy towards religion in no way mitigates the testimony he presents from several eyewitnesses. The cynical use of the poor to promote either oneself or one's church only gives ammunition to those who already find religion loathsome. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward" (Matthew 6:2). I will end this lengthy review with a question: Should Mother Teresa be canonized? That is for the Catholic Church to decide.

I loved this book. How pitifully sad that millions of dollars were raised for the facilities she ran yet her vow of poverty was so strict that she refused to spend even a few pennies on the people who were dying of starvation and poverty. Needles were rinsed in cold water and used over and over. Medication that could have brought thousands to health and eased the suffering of those who would never recover were strictly forbidden. While she enjoyed the best medical care money could buy. She enjoyed kudos from Presidents and officials all over the world. How pious and long suffering she was. How meek and obedient. Balderdash! She was a silent killer who needed to be stopped! She is responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths! What a shame. And she continues to be lauded as a healer and a faithful servant of God. It's just sick and wrong.

Despite your personal opinions of Mother Teresa, Christopher Hitchens exposes her as a fraud who steals from the poor and gives to the church. Furthermore, Hitchens details the atrocious medical malpractices taking place within her homes for the sick/dying. Hitchens effectively exposes Mother Teresa's health centers as a place for the sick and dying to be forgotten, which obviously contradicts the general public's beliefs

We are continually being fed trite nonsense by political and religious leaders who refuse to understand the natural and healthy behaviors of humans. It is deeply refreshing to have an insight into the life of this pious fraud Agnes Bojaxhiu

Christopher Hitchens has arguably (no pun intended!) done more slaughtering of sacred cows than any journalist or polemicist in recent memory. This book is no disappointment and is a testament to

the danger of the kind of zeitgeist-wide acceptance certain cultural figures have been privileged too without, seemingly, much if any close critique. Hitchens brings to bear very specific criticisms of a few of Mother Teresa's doctrinal and political views that should make any decent person uncomfortable as well as larger, more philosophical criticisms. Chief among these is a dismantling of the narrative that Mother Teresa did terribly much for the poor and sick, but actually celebrated these tragedies as blessings from God to be spiritually cherished--a searing hypocrisy for a woman who, Hitchens notes, was quick to take herself into the comfortable and expensive clinics of the world when falling ill herself. After finishing this slim but thorough thrashing, it's hard to think of Mother Teresa as worthy of attention or applause, much less sainthood.

Not much to say without getting into the specifics of the content but this book is well-written, a quick read because it's short, and very informative. I had heard some things about Mother Theresa in the past but nothing like this. I have, since, read and learned more, and it all checks out, so this is not propaganda or slander. Okay, to give just one teaser: She had her volunteers/nurses use blunt/dirty needles on people rather than buy new ones and/or proper equipment to clean them using the millions of dollars her organization clearly had, and this was because suffering (and, in particular, the suffering of the poor) was beautiful, she believed. Though Hitchens doesn't push this particular angle, to me, by the end, it seemed as if this woman was just nuts, in a sense--and it's scary because, really, it all begins with her simply TAKING SERIOUSLY the idea, pushed by Christianity, that suffering is good or for a good reason. A sad, anger-inducing, sometimes-flabbergasting but important read.

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