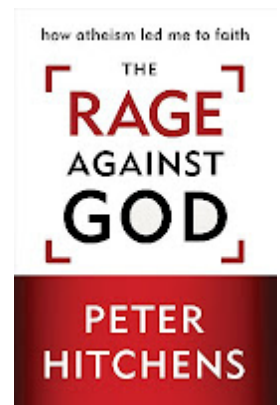


Review: The Rage Against God

Here's a lesson in "Don't judge a book by it's cover." My expectation of this book by Peter Hitchens, the Christian brother of prominent atheist polemicist, Christopher Hitchens, was guided by blurbs and dust-cover pieces that could be pronounced by the voice-over of a Bruce Willis movie trailer: *"Two brothers. Two beliefs. Two revolted. One returned."*



From the subtitle ("How atheism led me to faith") I was expecting something autobiographical mixed together with some apologetics and philosophical defense of the Christian worldview against today's myriad attacks by the neo-atheists.

I was expecting an armoured hand handing out rhetorical ammunition.

There is a very small amount of that, and you can tell that a Zondervan editor has done his or her best to shoehorn the book into that very sellable category. Which is a shame – because that is not where the heart of this book lies, and the attempt to dress it in sensationalist clothes is simply annoying.

What we do have in this book is not a broad-ranging apologetic. Rather we have an excellent analysis of 20th Century sociology, particularly with reference to the impact of socialism and communism and the associated decline in the influence of the church in Western society. In the notes I jot down as I read I included this observation: "a commentary on being British more than a commentary on being atheist."

There is some autobiography which borders on nostalgia for its own sake at times. Its value lies in his identification with a generation that "was too clever to believe" (title of Chapter 1, page 17) and allows him to use the first person as

an abstractive tool both in the singular: For instance:

I had spotted the dry, disillusioned, and apparently disinterested atheism of so many intellectuals, artists, and leaders of our age. I liked their crooked smiles, their knowing worldliness, and their air of finding human credulity amusing. I envied their confidence that we lived in a place where there was no darkness, where death was the end, the dead were gone, and there would be no judgment. It did not then cross my mind that they, like religious apologists, might have any personal reasons for holding to this disbelief. It certainly did not cross my mind that I had any low motives for it. Unlike Christians, atheists have a high opinion of their own virtue.” (Pages 24-25)

...and the plural, speaking of the attitude toward parenthood:

“...[it] has much to do with this sensation of lost control, of being pulled downward into a world of servitude, into becoming our own parents... Others may have expected and even enjoyed this transformation of themselves into mature and responsible beings. My generation, perhaps because we pitied our mothers and fathers, believed that we could escape it. In fact, we believed that we would be more mature, and more responsible, if we refused to enter into that state of life...”

The apparent ‘commentary on being British’ emphasises, quite validly I believe, the impact of the two great wars of the 20th Century on the decline of British Christianity. Hitchens speaks of “a society with Christian forms and traditions” and that “it does not know what to do with them or how to replace them.” He asserts, “Into this confusion and emptiness the new militant secularists now seek to bring an aggressive atheism.” (Page 123)

In response, according to the title of the second part of the book, he then attempts to address the “three failed arguments

of atheism.” I’m not sure if these three arguments were ever clearly enumerated. One wonders if the section title was the brainchild of the Zondervan editor.

What we do have is an extensive examination of the correlation between this “aggressive atheism” and the communist regimes of the 20th Century. Although, in my opinion, he never pulls the argument tight, the threads he draws are clear and strong. He has lived in Soviet Russia, has travelled and read extensively, and has been an avid Trotskyite (those that assert the validity of communism and that it has only failed because of poor implementation by Stalin etc.). He unpacks the inherent humanism of these movements and shows how religion – Christianity in particular – cannot be allowed to co-exist with them. Christian “concepts are safeguards against the worship of human power” (Page 135), he writes having made the point that:

God is the leftist’ chief rival. Christian belief, by subjecting all men to divine authority and by asserting in the words ‘My kingdom is not of this world’ that the ideal society does not exist in this life, is the most coherent and potent obstacle to secular utopianism. Christ’s reproof of Judas – ‘the poor always ye have with you’ -... is also a stumbling-block and an annoyance to world reformers... by stating so baldly the truth known to all conservatives that poverty cannot be eradicated, the Bible angers and frustrates those who believe the pursuit of a perfect society justifies the quest for absolute power.” (Page 134)

In such manner he warns of the danger of a fiercely anti-pluralist atheism. He sees, for instance, in the rhetoric of Richard Dawkins and his own brother Christopher, and their assertion that the teaching of religious belief to children is “child abuse”:

...if we ourselves believe – and are asked by our own children

what we believe – we will tell them, and they will instantly know if we mean it and also know how much it matters to us. They will learn from this that belief is a good thing... And for this we are to be called abusers of children? This has the stench of totalitarian slander, paving the road to suppression and persecution.” (Page 205)

And so this book is not so much a philosophical engagement with the neo-atheists. Nor is it, despite what the cover suggests, the titillating inside look into the relationship between two brothers in the public light. Rather it is a look at some of the darker sides of recent history by someone who is lived a lot of it, and a warning to see it in much of today's popular rhetoric, so that we need not repeat it.

