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Former atheist sounds a wake-up call

by Diane Scharper

THE RAGE AGAINST GOD: HOW ATHEISM LED ME TO FAITH

By Peter Hitchens

Published by Zondervan, \$22.99

Like many self-righteous adolescents, Peter Hitchens, brother of well-known contrarian Christopher Hitchens, had numerous reasons for abandoning his belief in God.

But the real reason, suggests journalist and author Peter Hitchens in *The Rage Against God*, is that he felt entitled to do whatever he wished. A similar sense of entitlement fuels today's anti-theist philosophy, and it has pushed Western civilization to the brink of chaos.



That's the premise of this thought-provoking, carefully written book, which isn't

as much about atheism and how it led Peter to faith (despite the subtitle) as it is about the death throes of Christianity and religion in the West, mainly in the United States and England. In *The Rage Against God*, Peter, who has since returned to his Anglican beliefs, sounds a wake-up call.

Hitchens' older brother, Christopher, fills his bestsellers with references to his atheist philosophy and

sexual escapades. He makes headlines with his views on everything from the existence of God to the career of Mother Teresa of Calcutta to the rightness of George W. Bush's war in Iraq. His most recent release, *Hitch-22*, has been reviewed by nearly every major newspaper and magazine.

By contrast, Peter's *The Rage Against God*, published in the United States in May, has largely been ignored, although it earlier received some attention in Britain, where it had a different, more accurate subtitle: "Why Faith Is the Foundation of Civilisation."

Written mostly to refute another of his brother's highly-touted books, *God Is Not Great* (2007), *The Rage Against God* shoots down some of his brother's theories, such as his notion that the order to love thy neighbor as thyself is too extreme to be obeyed. Or that religious education is tantamount to child abuse.

Ultimately, as Peter Hitchens sees it, the relativism and secularism propounded by his brother and other atheists have replaced Christian principles, not just relegating those principles to the sidelines but also diminishing Christian influence in education, law and nearly every aspect of Western culture.

Memoir, argument and cultural history, *The Rage Against God* contends that secularism is a political movement that "seeks to remove the remaining Christian restraints on power." And in an age of power worship, "the Christian religion has become the principal obstacle to the desire for absolute power." Peter describes the abuses of power he saw at the end of the Cold War when he lived in the Soviet Union as a foreign correspondent. He shows how these abuses have seeped into British and American society. Now, he says, secularism is poisoning culture and replacing liberty with tyranny.

Other circumstances have also contributed to the collapse of religious belief in the West, Hitchens argues. Patriotism is often conflated with religion -- as happened during the world wars, Vietnam, and the invasion of Iraq. People are persuaded that God is on their side. When they learn of wartime atrocities, they grow disenchanted with patriots and priests.

He writes that the "anything-goes" era of the 1960s and 1970s added to the decline of belief and moral standards, as did the sexual revolution and a spirit of rebellion that seemed to consume young people.

Equally disturbing to Hitchens, Anglican and Roman Catholic liturgies have watered down their services into pep rallies hoping to attract youth and increase the number of parishioners. They've replaced poetry and tradition, he writes, with "denatured committee-designed prayers and services" that are "ugly."

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Decrying the loss of traditional prayers, Hitchens poignantly describes the beauty of chants "spiraling up into chilly stone vaults at Evensong ... and the mysterious ... poetry of the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis."

Only poetry, Hitchens says, can truly counter atheism and "ambush" the heart.

Even so, faith is the bottom line.

Accepting God's existence is a matter of faith, he says. And since no one can prove or disprove the existence of God, atheism is also a matter of faith. Despite his brother's atheism, Peter Hitchens insists it's "better by far to believe."

He makes that point in a compelling book that deserves more attention than it has received.

[Diane Scharper teaches English at Towson University in Maryland. She and her son, Philip Scharper, edited *Reading Lips*, prize-winning memoirs about coping with a disability.]

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