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Gerson, Hitchens & God

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Distinctly Catholic

Michael Gerson appears simultaneously intrigued and baffled by Christopher Hitchens. He has come to recognize that Hitch is a personal tour de force, a profoundly moralistic man who achieved his morality without help from any faith. Gerson's essay, however, makes me less intrigued and more baffled about its author than its subject.

Gerson writes, "Of course we can be good without God, but why the hell bother?" You need not stray far from the self to attain most moral convictions: It is better not to steal than to steal, it is better not to cheat on one's wife and risk the marriage than it is to seek gratifications away from the marital bed, being kind to another makes both the giver and the receiver of the kindness feel warm inside. So what? A possum cares for its newborns. My three dogs, who are each from different rescues and unrelated, are insanely devoted to each other and quite defensive of each other too.

The problem with Gerson's question lies elsewhere. Are we to believe from Gerson's question that the real reason to be moral is because we do not want to risk God's wrath? Does not fear inspire as many evil passions as noble ones? Hitch is right to denounce this God and he is in good company. The parable of the talents – which is not a paean to capitalism – illustrates how fear corrupts human relationships.

Gerson has an additional, and more salient, objection to Hitchens' non-religious moralism, believing its relativism is a danger, and so it is, although he goes on to note the many ways Hitchens' worldview is consistent, not relativistic. Hitchens is not Hobbes. Gerson cites Hitchens' brother Peter who observed that "any journey becomes difficult when a compass points differently at different times," although this formulation begs the question: Perhaps Christopher, as opposed to Peter, does not see life as a "journey" and sees teleology as a burden not a blessing. There is warrant for such a view: Those who have committed the greatest atrocities in the long history of human cruelty have always done so in the name of

large ends. Hitler and Stalin and Mao were evil, but they aimed big and they did not lack confidence in the truth of their compasses.

How many times must it be said? The reason to be a Christian has nothing to do with standard morality which is accessible to any and is as often traduced by Christians as by others. The reason to be a Christian has to do with the very thing that makes moralists nervous: desire. We desire more than living well. We desire more than doing good. We desire more than the love of our family and friends. We desire to live forever with those we love and, in the person of the Risen Christ, we find the fulfillment of that desire. The evidence of the apostles coheres with the evidence of our longing hearts and life without Christ becomes unimaginable.

We then discover a different ground for our moral life, and different demands too. Any atheist may stumble upon noble human instincts, but I wonder if they can discover that suffering is salvific. I wonder if an atheist can discover that humility and forbearance are also ennobling. I wonder if they can ever find the reason we Christians have to create beauty. I wonder what they praise and adore that is worthy of praise and adoration.

This morning, I woke about an hour early and could not get back to sleep. So, I made my morning walk early. The sun had not yet risen, and most of the homes were dark. But, a few blocks away, one home was lit. It is the Sacred Heart child care center, and the sisters were at Mass. One of them had to step away because a mother was at the door dropping off her two young children. I do not know what an atheist makes of those nuns at prayer. I do know that they, in their praise and prayer, in the humbleness and selflessness of their lives, in their love for other people's children, and most especially in the joy with which the good sisters approach their many tasks, they give me all the evidence I need to believe that the Lord is Risen and that my faith is true.

Hitchens is right to walk away from the angry, judging God that Gerson sees as the source of moral life. (And, Hitch is right to prefer a life of joy to a life of moral conformity, although we Christians like our scotch as much as he does!) And, Hitch has every right to resist the temptations to faith that his condition invites. But, if he could permit himself to see the beauty I saw this morning, walking past the Sacred Heart child care center this morning, looking at those nuns at Mass, Hitchens might see something that speaks to his soul if not his intellect, something that corresponds to the yearnings of his own heart, something better than a life well lived: He might encounter a life lived forever and ever.

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