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Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position

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Introduction: The Unflinching Gaze of Christopher Hitchens

Few writers of the late twentieth century wielded a pen with the same polemical force as **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** remains one of his most controversial and enduring works. Published in 1995, the book is a blistering critique of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a figure revered globally as an icon of selfless charity and saintly virtue. Hitchens, a self-described anti-theist and master polemicist, set out to dismantle what he saw as a carefully constructed myth. He argued that the nun celebrated for her work among the poorest of the poor was in fact a political opportunist, a friend of dictators, and a purveyor of a medieval brand of suffering. This article delves deep into the arguments, the evidence, and the lasting impact of Hitchens's tract, examining why *The Missionary Position* continues to provoke debate over two decades after its publication.

The Context: Hitchens as a Professional Troublemaker

To understand the force of **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position**, one must first appreciate the man behind the book. Hitchens was a British-American author and journalist known for his sharp wit, relentless skepticism, and disdain for what he termed the "celestial dictatorship" of organized religion. He had already made a name for himself with works like *Letters to a Young Contrarian* and a fierce critique of Henry Kissinger, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*. By the mid-1990s, he was a regular contributor to *Vanity Fair*, *The Nation*, and other publications, where he applied a rigorously rational, often merciless lens to sacred cows of both left and right.

The target of Mother Teresa was not random. To Hitchens, she represented the ultimate untouchable figure: a woman whose canonization in the public imagination had made her immune to honest scrutiny. He saw his role as that of a truth-teller, willing to ask the questions that a deferential media had refused to pose. The book's subtitle, *Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, hinted at his central accusation: that there was a profound disconnect between the noble theory of her mission and the often grim reality of her practices.

Deconstructing the Saint: Core Arguments of the Book

Hitchens's critique in **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** is multi-pronged. He does not simply attack Mother Teresa's character; he dissects the institutions she built, the sources of her funding, and the theology that underpinned her work. Below are the key pillars of his argument.

The Deathbed Conversion and the Theology of Suffering

One of the most famous segments of the book concerns Mother Teresa's view on suffering. Hitchens quotes her extensively, showing that she did not see suffering merely as an unfortunate byproduct of poverty, but as a

gift from God that brings one closer to Christ. In her own words: "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." Hitchens finds this repugnant. He argues that such a philosophy amounts to a sanctification of misery, discouraging the use of modern medicine, pain relief, and proper palliative care. He points to the conditions in the Kalighat Home for the Dying in Calcutta, where he alleges that patients were given minimal diagnostic treatment and that the sisters withheld painkillers, believing that suffering was redemptive.

The Finances: The Dark Side of the Donations

Another central theme in **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** is the handling of the hundreds of millions of dollars donated to the Missionaries of Charity. Hitchens argued that these funds, collected from governments, corporations, and ordinary individuals, were not used to build modern, hygienic hospitals. Instead, they were often used to propagate the Catholic doctrine against birth control and to maintain what he called a "cult of suffering." He questioned why, with such vast resources, the homes for the dying remained so primitive, lacking oxygen cylinders, modern diagnostic equipment, and even basic pain management. Hitchens also highlighted that a significant portion of the money was funneled to other Vatican projects, including the establishment of convents and religious houses in places like the United States, far from the "poorest of the poor."

Political Alliances: Befriending Tyrants

Perhaps the most damning section for many readers is Hitchens's documentation of Mother Teresa's political relationships. She cultivated warm ties with the Duvalier regime in Haiti, with the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha (who had persecuted Catholic priests), and most notoriously, with the Albanian communist regime that was then one of the most repressive in the world. She accepted the Legion of Honour from the French government, and she spoke approvingly of the regime of the Iranian Ayatollahs. Hitchens argues that these alliances were not accidental; they demonstrated a political naiveté or, worse, a cynical willingness to accept money and accolades from anyone, regardless of their human rights record. He contrasts this with her refusal to engage with feminists or social reformers who questioned her practices. To Hitchens, this was not the behavior of a saint, but of a shrewd operator in global power politics.

The Reception: Fury, Praise, and Enduring Debate

When **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** was published, it caused an immediate firestorm. Critics from The Vatican, conservative Catholic organizations, and even some secular humanists accused Hitchens of character assassination and of picking on a frail, elderly nun who had never sought fame. The book was dismissed as a hatchet job, lacking in nuance. Some pointed out that while Hitchens had visited the Kalighat home, he had not spent extensive time there, and that his sample of anecdotal evidence was thin. Others, however, praised the book for its courage. Medical professionals and former volunteers came forward with their own stories that corroborated Hitchens's claims about the lack of medical care. The debate was not just about one woman; it was about the veneration of religious figures and the moral duty to hold powerful institutions accountable.

The Long Shadow: Posthumous Investigations

In the years following Mother Teresa's death in 1997, and even after her beatification in 2003, the questions raised by **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** have refused to die. A landmark study published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2013 by a team of Canadian researchers examined the medical records of patients in Missionaries of Charity homes. They found that diagnoses were poor, medications were minimal, and that basic sanitary procedures were often violated. They noted that the homes were "not a place of healing," mirroring Hitchens's earlier observations. In addition, reports from former nuns and volunteers have continued to surface, including one from a woman named Mary Loudon who later wrote about her time in the organization and confirmed many of Hitchens's allegations about the lack of pain relief and the emphasis on

religious conversion over medical care.

Furthermore, Hitchens's critique of Mother Teresa's opposition to contraception and abortion has been amplified by modern development economists. In countries like Ethiopia, where the Missionaries of Charity were active, the organization actively campaigned against the use of condoms and birth control, a policy that many public health experts argue contributed to the spread of HIV and unintended pregnancies. The moral calculus that Hitchens proposed remains a vibrant topic of debate: is it better to provide a "good death" with religious comfort but minimal pain relief, or to actively work to alleviate systemic poverty through modern medicine and reproductive rights?

Stylistic and Rhetorical Power of the Book

Beyond its content, **Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position** is a masterclass in polemical writing. Hitchens's prose is sharp, often laced with irony and contempt. He structures the book almost like a legal brief, presenting evidence, interrogating witnesses, and offering a damning summation. He does not pretend to be objective. He is an advocate for the prosecution. This has both strengths and weaknesses. The strength is that the book is unputdownable. Every sentence seems designed to provoke a reaction. The weakness is that Hitchens sometimes allows his own righteous anger to overreach, making sweeping claims that are difficult to substantiate. For example, his suggestion that Mother Teresa was a "friend of the poor" only insofar as the poor were a tool for her religious agenda is a judgment that many who knew her personally dispute. Yet even his most strident critics admit that he raised legitimate questions that were otherwise ignored.

Conclusion: The Missionary Position as a Necessary Critique

Christopher Hitchens The Missionary Position remains a fiercely divisive book. For some, it is a courageous debunking of a harmful cult of personality. For others, it is a mean-spirited attack on a genuinely kind woman who did her best under difficult circumstances. What cannot be denied is that the book forced a global conversation about the ethics of charity, the role of religious institutions in healthcare, and the dangers of hagiography. In an age of "impact investing" and "effective altruism," where donors increasingly demand transparency and measurable outcomes, Hitchens's questions feel more relevant than ever. *The Missionary Position* is not a neutral biography; it is a rallying cry for critical thinking and moral accountability. Whether one agrees with Hitchens or not, reading his book is an exercise in intellectual honesty – a reminder that saintly reputations, like all others, must be able to withstand scrutiny. In the end, Hitchens may not have "killed" the saint, but he certainly made the world look more carefully at her halo.

For those interested in religious critique, investigative journalism, or the intersection of faith and politics, this short volume (barely 100 pages in many editions) packs a punch far larger than its size suggests. It stands as a monument to Hitchens's belief that no institution, no matter how revered, is beyond reproach.

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