

## Vatican II and the Year of Faith: What Difference Does Faith Make?

Before his death in 2011, the atheist writer Christopher Hitchens frequently challenged religious believers: "What difference does your faith make? What good can a believer do that an atheist cannot do?" Hitchens thought it obvious that faith brings nothing to the table. Even worse, Hitchens tried to demonstrate that faith was positively *harmful*. His view was that individuals and society would be better off adopting a thoroughly secular, materialistic worldview.

How would you respond to Hitchens's challenge? Perhaps the most humorous answer so far has come from Protestant minister Doug Wilson. Hitchens asked him once in a public debate, "What good deed can only be done by a believer?" Wilson shot back, "Tithing!" This got a good laugh from the audience, but there is a better answer. The truth is that only a religious believer can offer the world a transcendent hope.

In the absence of religious belief, individuals and society tend to nihilism or relativism. (Each of these philosophies denies that there are objective or intrinsic values.) Atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg is unapologetic about this. In his book *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, Rosenberg writes, "We need to face the fact that nihilism is true." (p. 95) Sociologist Peter Berger has also documented extensively the relationship between secularization and moral relativism.

The problem for humanity is that relativism and nihilism offer literally nothing truly meaningful to live for. In a dig at Christian writer Rick Warren, Rosenberg titles one of his chapters "Farewell to the Purpose Driven Life." This may not bother the healthy and well-fed atheist very much, but a wealth of evidence and a little honest introspection demonstrate that a life of meaning is crucial to human flourishing. Especially in times of crisis, meaning and purpose can literally make the difference between life and death. In his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Psychologist and holocaust survivor Victor Frankl recounted that only those prisoners who found meaning could survive the atrocities of the concentration camps.

But what is true for individuals is also true for cultures. Declining religious belief leads to the eventual dissolution of society. Demographers Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have shown that the loss of religious meaning is principally responsible for declining birth rates throughout the world. (*Sacred and Secular*, Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 231.) This, in turn, has disastrous consequences for certain industries, national economies, public debt, and the welfare state. In an ironic twist, growing secularization in the West may result in the eventual demographic victory of the deeply religious, as it is only faithful believers who tend to have children at or above the population replacement rate. (On this topics, see Eric Kaufman's book *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?: Demography and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*)

The connection between transcendent hope and human flourishing was one of the themes of Vatican II. Especially in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the council fathers urged that authentic human development cannot take place on an atheistic basis. They wrote:

When a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that men succumb to despair.

The value of transcendent hope was also the theme of Pope Benedict's encyclical *Spe Salvi*. In it he recounts the story of former slave St. Josephine Bakhita. She grew up a slave in the Sudan in a life that reflected the central thesis of modern atheism: that the human person is of literally no objective value. When she encountered the gospel of Christ, however, her whole perspective on life was radically changed. She could then say, "I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good."

The atheist, of course, would balk at all of this. "Wishful thinking!" he would object. The life of nihilism is just the harsh reality he thinks we must accept. There is a lot we can offer in response: philosophical proofs for the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of objective value. We can point out the contradictions inherent in a thorough-going atheism. We can also say that we have met Hitchen's challenge. The atheist cannot offer transcendent hope precisely because he thinks it only wishful thinking. But, since it is Easter, we can simply conclude by paraphrasing the words of St. Paul. We *need* transcendent hope. Atheism cannot deliver it. But, God has given us adequate proof . . . by raising Christ from the dead! (Acts 17:31)