

Hitler vs. Mother Theresa: Antithesis or Symbiosis?

The Ever-Hasty Presumption of Antithesis

In developing [an argument for the existence of a god](#), Paveille introduces the topic of morality and asks the following question:

What is the difference between Mother Theresa and Hitler? To most people this question is outlandish and the answer is simple: Mother Theresa helped people and Hitler killed people. One was good, the other bad. Such distinctions are important because they imply and absolute Moral Law.

Many thinkers, particularly Christians who want to defend the bizarre claim that their religion offers man the only reliable standard of morality, seek to draw our attention to the differences between Adolf Hitler and Mother Theresa, not simply because the differences are so *prima facie* striking, but also because both individuals are thought to represent diametrically opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Such comparisons are typically introduced only long enough to score an immediate debating point on behalf of religion, one that is primarily emotional in nature, and beyond that the contrast loses argumentative stamina. Typically it is taken for granted that Mother Theresa represents the ideal model of moral behavior while Hitler serves as the pinnacle of viciousness.

It is true that, *on the surface*, Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler appear to register at different ends of the moral spectrum. After all, Mother Theresa dedicated her life to "helping others" while Hitler dedicated his life to ruling and slaughtering others. This is why it would seem "outlandish" to ask what distinguishes the one from the other. In fact, it might strike many thinkers that an even more "outlandish" question would be: What is the *similarity* between Mother Theresa and Hitler? This is the question we should be willing to explore precisely for the very reason Christians are reluctant to ask it, for in fact there is a fundamental similarity between Mother Theresa and Adolf Hitler, and it's more than simply the fact that both had lungs and donned footwear.

The Philosophical Common Denominator

The fact - uncomfortable especially to theists - is that *both Hitler and Mother Theresa lived their lives by the same code of morality*, namely a morality based on *sacrifice*. The difference is that Mother Theresa assumed the role of the sanctioning *victim*, perpetually sacrificing herself to others, while Hitler assumed the role of the tyrannical *victimizer*, perpetually demanding and collecting the sacrifices of others. While Mother Theresa saw herself as the means to someone else's ends, Hitler saw others as a means to his ends. Thus, contrary to what Christians will want to highlight when they invoke the tiresome Mother Theresa-vs.-Hitler dichotomy, *in terms of principle, a Hitler cannot exist without a Mother Theresa, and a Mother Theresa cannot exist without a Hitler!* Indeed, those who choose to sacrifice themselves to someone else's ends needs someone who views others as a means to their own ends. This may sound a little extreme, but in terms of *principle* this is accurate.

The point should be easy enough to grasp once we look past the outward features of the symbiotic moral roles assumed by Hitler and Mother Theresa respectively. The point is that both roles - sanctioning victim and despotic victimizer - *are two sides of the same moral coin*. Since both sides accept as an unquestionable given that morality consists of and requires sacrifice, both sides need each other to complement their roles and give them purpose, for *neither is complete without the other*. A Hitler can get nowhere without those who enable him through their self-sacrifice, and those who think they have a duty to sacrifice themselves cannot actualize their moral ideals without someone who is willing to collect their sacrifices. Thus the apparent antithesis between the two is little more than a mirage masking a hideous symbiosis, and the root of that symbiosis is religious in nature.

Philosophically speaking, the cause of a Mother Theresa is clearly religious. Religionists are actually quite proud of the example Mother Theresa provided, even if most of them do not follow her model or align themselves with her particular theology. (Perhaps Mother Theresa really believed her religion's teachings, and the typical "believer" is in it only for lipservice and afternoon banquets.) But we should not forget the fact that the cause of a Hitler is *also* religious in nature. Both Mother Theresa *and* Adolf Hitler were raised in the Catholic tradition, a religion which takes the claim that the Jesus of the New Testament is Messiah or "divine incarnation," and it can be confidently said that it was thus the *influence of Christianity* which set their lives in motion. In terms of philosophical essentials, both ascribed to the notion that there is a supernatural consciousness which *determines reality, judges men's spirits*, and

demands sacrifice. Thus both ascribed to a worldview of supernaturalism, specifically the *subjective* premise that there exists a cosmic ruling consciousness whose *wishes* are the final arbiter of reality, truth, and right and wrong. This of course necessitates a *faith-based* epistemology in which "knowledge" originates from consulting an internal source while the evidence of the senses must submit and be "interpreted" according to dogmatic views accepted as "divinely revealed," all resulting in a worldview of unquestioning obedience to personal authority. This lethal combination of obedience to commandments held up as a virtue, belief in the supernatural and the assumption that sacrifice is essential to morality, makes for a worldview that is tailor-made for both a Hitler and a world full of self-sacrificing Mother Therasas. In truth, religion is not the solution, *it's the source of the problem*.

The bible says that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (I Tim. 6:10), and yet the most notorious examples of evil are not men who were after money. And even though it was later learned that Hitler evaded paying taxes on the proceeds from his seminal book *Mein Kampf*, in which he wrote "a man does not die for business, but for ideals," tax evasion is not what made Hitler evil. Rather, his brutal tyranny over others is what made him evil, specifically his use of force to compel other human beings to sacrifice themselves to his aims. (Notice the primacy of consciousness in operation here: Hitler's *wishes* are to hold *moral primacy* over the life needs of other human beings.) Neither Hitler, nor Stalin, nor Mussolini, nor Mao Tse Tung were "in it for the money." If anything, money was just a means to other other ends, namely in the interest of increasing their power over others. "It may be that today gold has become the exclusive ruler of life," wrote Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, "but the time will come when man will again bow down before a higher god."

The Culpable Bible

The bible's teachings actually *encourage* the despotism of such tyrants by exhorting believers to obey masters (Col. 3:22), offer themselves as "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1), generally to just "go with the flow" while supposing that "rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil" (Rom. 13:3). Believers are "to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates" (Tit. 3:1), for they are instructed to "obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves" (Heb. 13:17). In addition to the repeated exhortations of indiscriminate submission to even secular authorities, believers are commanded to "resist not evil" (Mt. 5:39), which can only mean that believers cannot suppose that their worldview will back them up if they choose to act in their own self-defense. After all, since "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50), why should believers care what happens to their earthly lives?

The instruction found in 1 Peter 2:13-17 is particularly chilling in this regard:

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

The influence of Christianity has seen to it that we do not have to imagine a society of men who take such instructions seriously, "honoring" of all monsters an Adolf Hitler as he gives the order to fill the gas chambers to capacity in order to solve "the Jewish problem."

We should not forget that Germany was one of the most religious societies in Europe in the years leading up to Hitler's meteoric rise to power, and that his ascension to *Reichskanzler* would not have been possible without the herdlike mentality of the German populace so reliably fostered by religion. Christianity, which was by far the dominant religion of Nazi Germany (ask any surviving Jews if you dispute this), is well known for its use of *sheep* as a metaphor for characterizing the desired mindset of the faithful (cf. Mt. 25:32-33, Mk. 6:34, Lk. 15:6, Jn. 10:1-27, Rom. 8:36, 1 Pet. 2:25, et al.). As Hitler himself wrote,

...for the masses, faith is often the sole foundation of a moral attitude. ...if religious doctrine and faith are really to embrace the broad masses, the unconditional authority of the content of this faith is the foundation of all efficacy. (*Mein Kampf*)

Like Mother Theresa, Hitler understood that pleasing the supernatural ruling consciousness requires *sacrifice*. "A sacrifice to be real," [said Mother Theresa](#), "must cost, must hurt, must empty ourselves." Likewise Adolf Hitler also prized self-sacrifice, writing in his book *Mein Kampf*, "the most sacred sacrifice [is] the blood that a man sheds for this earth." Compare John 15:13, which says: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." According to what Mother Theresa said, the sacrifice that Hitler commended was a *real* sacrifice, for the

shedding of blood surely costs, surely hurts, and surely empties a man. A society which adopts any variation of the ethics of self-sacrifice is literally a "dog eat dog" society: one "dog" must be willing to sacrifice itself to another "dog," and the other "dog" must be willing to be the collector of that sacrifice. Thus a nation of Mother Therasas would be nothing if there were no Hitlers to give them a sense of *purpose*.

The Persistence of Delusion

Christian apologist Phil Fernandes, in [his debate with Michael Martin](#), makes use of the apparent contrast between Hitler and Mother Theresa in framing an argument from undesirable outcomes:

Would life have any ultimate meaning if there is no God? If nonexistence is what awaits us, can we really make sense of life? You live and then you die. There are no eternal consequences. Hitler and Mother Theresa have the same destiny. We all finish our meaningless journeys in total nothingness.

Of course, this line of reasoning could only make sense if we accept the unargued premise that one's destiny can only be found in death rather than in life. But if life is an end in itself, as rational philosophy teaches, then Fernandes' concern reduces to emotive rhetoric. Moreover, as a pillar in his cumulative case for the existence of the Christian god, Fernandes essentially endorses *consequentialism*, the view that the issue in question cannot be the case because the consequences which would obtain if it were the case would be unacceptable. Consequences are certainly a factor to consider in determining a specific course of action to take. For instance, if Jones is running late and wants to take a shortcut to work, he opts against driving through his neighbor's backyard even though doing so would allow him to avoid two stoplights, because he does not want to damage his car or his neighbor's property. But the supposition that the outcome of a certain *fact* will be disappointing or unsatisfying, is not a criterion for establishing truth. If something is true, it's true whether we like it or not. Fernandes' point is an example of basing what he wants to accept as truth on the premise that if what he *wants* to be true were not true, the resulting state of affairs would be unacceptable. Apparently we're supposed to think that the Christian god exists because otherwise "Hitler and Mother Theresa have the same destiny," and who wants to think this? Therefore, the Christian god must exist, otherwise we have a very depressing fact to contend with.

This kind of "argument" is actually quite persuasive for many uncritical thinkers, especially those who have been automated to think that one needs to believe in a ruling consciousness in order to have a "meaningful" life. This is the view that man should not presume to choose his own purpose for his own life, but rather should allow someone else to determine it for him. And we already saw above that Christians have no philosophical defense against a tyrant who seeks to tell everyone what their purpose in life is supposed to be. As Christian Gary North writes in his article [Mother Theresa: The Efficiency of Self-Sacrifice](#):

there is no doubt that everyone can strive to be more like leaders who adopt self-sacrifice as their way of life. I once saw a forgettable movie in which Stockard Channing uttered this memorable line: "I always wanted to be somewhere in between Mother Teresa and Imelda Marcos." Better to model ourselves by the former than the latter.

You go, girl. As for me, I'll not arbitrarily restrict myself to such needless dichotomies, for I know of good models to admire and follow, and their greatness is in what they *achieved*, not in what they "gave up."

The Neglected Archetype

Religionists tell us all about their worldview when they hold up Adolf Hitler and Mother Theresa as the archetypes representing moral opposites. They tell us that their worldview considers sacrifice to be non-negotiable. But why posture as if Hitler and Mother Theresa represented the only moral options available to human beings? Why not consider other models? Personally, I admire men like Thomas Edison, a prolific inventor and creator of boundless wealth who did not dedicate his life to seeking gain at the expense of others, or to enable others to gain at his expense. "Without Thomas Edison," [writes David Harriman](#),

we would have no light bulbs, recorded music or hundreds of other inventions. Yet his goal was not to sacrifice for others, but to pursue and prove his passionately held ideas, no matter what others wanted of him. Do we really wish that he had dedicated himself to "citizen service," perhaps by collecting donations to buy candles for the poor?

As a musician who has made numerous recordings of original compositions, I am definitely one who can appreciate the

astounding achievements which Edison brought to fruition. Similarly, I am thankful to those who invented and developed musical instruments, magnetic tape, four-track home recorders, high-definition equalization, distortion pedals, CD players and CD burners. These inventions have served to enhance my profoundly selfish pleasure of music-making for over 25 years. The *lust* for *achievement*, not the duty to sacrifice, is what made them possible. And what made the achievements possible if not uncompromising determination, indeed the *refusal* to sacrifice one's ideals for the wishes of others? Take a tour sometime of a manufacturing plant, a printing house, a lumber mill or other facility which *produces values*. If there were ever a genuinely rational "house of worship," it would be one of these establishments, not some sterile church with a wooden scarecrow nailed to the wall in front of which some incompetent nobody postures as having everyone's best "spiritual" interest in mind, droning on and on about how miserable humanity is. They speak for themselves.

Religionists are welcome to uphold Mother Theresa as their moral ideal - they can have her! And they can have the Hitlers that such models inevitably invite. I'll go with the great achievers, the religionists can enshrine their great losers.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [4:00 AM](#)

7 Comments:

[Jerry](#) said...

"Thus a nation of Mother Therasas would be nothing if there were no Hitlers to give them a sense of purpose."

That sums it up right there!

[April 09, 2006 7:34 AM](#)

[Kevin Parry](#) said...

In their apologetic book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, Norman Geisler and Frank Turek also use the Mother Theresa-Hitler argument. Until now I could not think of an adequate rebuttal, so thank you for this excellent post.

However, I think that the apologist might respond to your post by arguing that Hitler was not a Christian, but then various quotes from *Mein Kamph* suggest otherwise.

Keep up the good work.

All the best
Kevin

[Memoirs of an ex-Christian](#)

[April 16, 2006 10:15 PM](#)

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

Dawson - I invite you to join the War on Relativism :
<http://hellboundallee.blogspot.com/2006/05/war-on-relativism.html>

And yes, that includes Christian relativism... a topic with which you are plenty familiar. ;)

[April 17, 2006 12:13 AM](#)

[Vic](#) said...

An excellent post, Dawson.

Is any of your music available? Online samples, perhaps?

[April 17, 2006 5:55 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Kevin,

Thanks for your comments. I think the only rebuttal one needs to Geisler & Turek is: I'm too honest to be a Christian. That pretty much sums it up for me. Imagine trying to believe that it takes more faith to have no faith in invisible magic beings than it does to believe that the stories we read in the bible are true. Either these authors are hyper-deluded, or they're downright dishonest.

To answer the easy-to-anticipate rebuttal that Hitler was not a Christian, yes, you can pull the many quotes from Hitler's book and his many speeches which invoke Christian themes. These are often dismissed as political pandering, which may be partially the case, at least by the 30's when his rise to power needed to invogorate the masses in terms that they would readily accept (which in itself says a lot, doesn't it?). I wouldn't be too hasty, however, in dismissing Hitler's use of biblical quotes and allusions in *Mein Kampf* since they are so integral to his condemnation of Jews. The seeds of anti-Semitism in the New Testament are pretty hard to miss.

But whether or not Hitler can safely be said to have been a Christian is really not the issue here. As I make clear in my blog, Hitler's fundamental philosophical commitments share every essential with Christianity, namely belief in supernaturalism in metaphysics, mysticism in epistemology, sacrifice in ethics, collectivism in politics, etc. In this way, Christian or not, Hitler's worldview mirrors that of Mother Theresa in terms of fundamentals, which is where a sober inquiry needs to start. The fundamentals are there, the apologist just needs to own up to them, and given the clear association, he'll have a hard time doing so, even though the philosophical legacy is inescapable.

Now, there's another angle to play when dealing with an apologist who wants to object by saying that Hitler was not really a Christian. On the contrary, he will likely want to say that Hitler was a non-Christian. So be it. Presuppositionalists are all the time telling us that non-Christians must *borrow* their morality from the Christian worldview. I would contend that many, *including Hitler*, have done just that. Thus my overall point prevails while granting the apologist two of his, namely that a) Hitler was a non-Christian, and b) (some) non-Christians borrow their morality from the Christian worldview. Here you give them a taste of their own medicine, and now you have the philosophical substance to back it up.

Case closed.

Regards,
Dawson

[April 17, 2006 6:29 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Franc,

Thanks for stopping by my blog! And for the invite! I will surely look into it. Unfortunately my time these days is pretty much consumed with work and other priorities. And to complicate matters my computer at home is having some real issues (I'm using my computer at work right now). Perhaps the Christian god sabotaged it after [I showed Paul that he should tend to his fanny a little better on the issue of induction](#). The poor guy seems to be having a really hard time learning his lessons, doesn't he? Why is that?

Regards,
Dawson

[April 17, 2006 6:44 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Vic,

None of my music is available online at this time. I haven't really explored this to date, so I'm not sure how I could make it available. Can I just upload a wave file and add a link? You have to keep in mind that my stuff is thoroughly home-grown, so listeners who are used to finished products off the shelf at the record shop may not appreciate it

very much.

By the way, I'm a HUGE fan of Iommi. Listen to him soar on "Lonely is the Word."

Regards,
Dawson

[April 17, 2006 6:55 AM](#)