

Upclose With Peter Hitchens

British journalist Peter Hitchens believes faith is reasonable, and that's no small feat. The brother of popular God Is Not Great author Christopher Hitchens embraced atheism as a teenager and burned his Bible when he was 15. But at age 30, he began to drift slowly back toward Christianity. Now part of the Church of England, Hitchens says there is "a good, firm, reasonable case for belief in God," which he explains in his newly released memoir The Rage Against God. Recently he talked with Charisma about his book, his journey to faith and the future of Christianity in Britain.

Do you see others in your generation returning to faith?

I think my generation is particularly hostile to faith in Britain. There's something about the way they were brought up, the circumstances they were brought up in. It's one of the big differences between not just Britain and the United States, but Europe and the United States. The huge damage which the early part of the 20th century did to religious faith in general, particularly the First World War, it just went very deep. And we caught a sort of rather large after shock of that, I think. When I go to church now, there are people there who are older than me and there are people there who are younger than me, but very few are the same age. Mine is just a particularly secular generation. And it's one that's been very lucky so therefore not as most generations in human existence have been compelled to confront the sort of things, which make people think about the broader, deeper subjects which lead you toward faith. We just haven't needed to. Now that we're all approaching the grave, it might become more urgent, but I think most people would say I don't practice. I don't think it will really come to it. You've got an awful lot of British people who don't know what it means declaring that they're atheist these days, of my generation. It's a matter of pride and something that distinguishes them in some way.

Do you think younger generations will bring a shift back toward faith in Christ?

To some extent. There's been quite a big evangelical revival in Britain, and most of the churches that are full are part of the exuberant, evangelical type. Possibly this stems from the Billy Graham tour to Britain in the 1950s, which began that revival, which is half in and half out of the established church. It's now there's been a very successful thing called the Alpha Course, which was devised by a church of England vicar called Nicky Gumbel in London, which has spread out which very much appeals to people in their 20s. A lot of their children are going to go to church and they're going to see full churches and see Christianity as a normal thing in their lives in a way that wouldn't have been the case perhaps 20 or 30 years ago. So to a limited extent. But I think a very large part of the country is now secular not through hostility but through hostility and ignorance. They simply have been brought up in schools and families where religion is not mentioned, where it's not a feature of life. They go past churches without any clear idea what goes on inside them. They are in that rather dispiriting expression unchurched.

Do you see similar trends in the United States?

I don't know. I could be very prejudiced by the experience when I came over to debate with my brother a couple of years ago in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They'd come to hear him because he's a superstar, but I had thought there would be a part of this rather large audience who would be sympathetic to the religious case. And I got the impression not. It seemed to me there must be an awful lot of people going through college who are much more sympathetic to what Christopher is saying. His own accounts of the audiences he gets seem to suggest there is a very large anti-God wave among the college generation. I'm not surprised by that particularly because I think that a lot of the purpose of college is to alienate young people from their parents and from tradition and from their upbringing and to expose them to radical and revolutionary thought, and its'

quite effective in doing that. They're suddenly taken away from home life and all the restraints and influences of that and given the impression that they're independent when they're not really. College courses are full of atheistic radicalism in their very nature, so I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Universities as at present constituted, certainly in Britain and America, places where people are taught not to believe in conservative things.

The burning of your Bible was sort of a dramatic expression of your atheist belief. Was there a moment for you when you realized you had become a Christian?

The burning of the Bible was a culmination in itself. I had been for some time developing the view that I didn't really believe all this stuff, then I got to the stage where I wanted to make a sort of noisy public demonstration of this. The supposedly dramatic moment almost always follows a long period gestation, where it wouldn't have been obvious to anyone else that it was going on. But it was clear to me that something was going on. They were both culminations.

It would never have occurred to me to embrace any other kind of identity, given my upbringing as a Christian. That stuck. So when I eventually came back, it wasn't a question, shall I be a Buddhist or Muslim or a Hindu or a Jew or anything else. Christianity would be the unquestioned route that I was bound to take because quite a lot of what I had been taught had gone pretty deep and was familiar and in some ways inescapable. Was there a moment? No I can't describe a particular moment. But you spend a lot of time when you don't want to believe in something fending it off. That's what I did. I didn't really welcome this. It wasn't a wholly voluntary process. I was at the mercy of facts and reason, which I think are things which ultimately led me to where I am. It just seemed to me I'd been hiding various facts from myself and also concealing from myself the ultimate destination of the logic of what I was observing, which a lot of people do. I think I say in the book

that people deceive themselves all the time. And they deliberately shut down thought processes which they instinctively know will lead to places they don't want to go.

Was it difficult for you to acknowledge, even to yourself, that you no longer disbelieved?

Immensely, yes. There's always this difficulty of being unable to acknowledge that you've been wrong about something. And it's one of the greatest difficulties we all face, actually saying sorry properly is one of the hardest things to do even if it's over some quite minor domestic squabble, it takes a lot of effort to do. And it's the same process, isn't it, realizing deep down that a lot of what you've been saying and thinking and the basis of your behavior has been wrong and you as a result have been doing wrong things. Even today, at the end of an evening, I examine as I try to do, my behavior during the day. I quite often find things that I'm reluctant to admit were wrong, even though I know they were. That never ceases. Obviously, human pride is always there. I think I use the word arrogant quite a lot.