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INTRODUCTION: UNPACKING A CONTROVERSIAL CRITIQUE

Few figures in modern history have been as universally venerated as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For decades, she was the living symbol of compassion, self-

sacrifice, and unwavering faith, a beacon of hope for the poorest of the poor. Yet, in 1995, the late journalist and polemicist **Christopher Hitchens** published a slim but incendiary volume that sought to dismantle this saintly image entirely. That book — ***The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*** — remains one of the most provocative and fiercely

debated critiques of a humanitarian icon. In this article, we will explore the core arguments of Hitchens' work, examine the distinction between the idealized "theory" of Mother Teresa's mission and the harsh "practice" he documented, and consider the lasting impact of this literary grenade on our understanding of charity, faith, and public perception.

WHAT IS THE MISSIONARY POSITION? A SYNOPSIS

Christopher Hitchens' ***The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*** is not a biography in the traditional sense. It is a polemical essay — a ruthless, meticulously sourced indictment of Mother Teresa's organizations, her public persona, and the global media's complicity in creating

an untouchable myth. The title itself is a pointed double entendre, referencing both the literal missionary work in Calcutta and a critique of the power dynamics embedded in that work. Hitchens sets out to answer a single question: **Was Mother Teresa truly a selfless servant of the poor, or was she something far more complicated — and far less admirable?**

The book is divided into short, sharp chapters. It examines her origins in Skopje, her founding of the Missionaries of Charity, her globe-trotting celebrity, and her controversial stances on issues such as abortion, contraception, and poverty. But the heart of the book is the chasm between the *theory* — the widely accepted narrative of a humble nun dispensing love and care — and the

practice — the reality Hitchens claims to have uncovered through investigative reporting, medical testimony, and leaked internal documents.

THE HEART OF THE CRITIQUE: THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

The Theoretical Saint: A Media Creation

In the public imagination, the "theory" of Mother Teresa was almost flawless. She was portrayed as a living saint who devoted her life to the "poorest of the poor" in the slums of Kolkata (then

Calcutta). She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, praised by world leaders, and beatified by the Catholic Church in record time. The media, Hitchens argues, fell in love with this narrative because it was simple, emotionally gratifying, and required no critical thought. The theory held that Mother Teresa's work was a pure expression of Christian charity, where **love** and **faith** mattered more than modern medicine or systemic change.

The Harsh Practice: What

Hitchens Documented

Hitchens challenges this theory with a litany of damning practical observations:

- **Medical Standards:** He cites former volunteers and doctors who reported that the homes for the dying and sick in Calcutta lacked basic diagnostic equipment, painkillers, and sterile procedures. Patients with curable illnesses were sometimes left to suffer without proper treatment because the order's philosophy prioritized a "beautiful death" over curative care.
- **Pain and Suffering:** Hitchens highlights the order's reluctance to use modern analgesics. He quotes a volunteer who claimed that the only painkillers available were weak doses of aspirin, despite the presence of severe cancer and tuberculosis patients. The theory of redemptive suffering — that pain brings one closer to Christ — seemed to override the practice of compassionate medical relief.
- **Finances and Donations:** Perhaps the most explosive charge was that Mother Teresa's organization received hundreds of millions of dollars in donations, yet the clinics remained squalid and under-equipped. Hitchens argued that funds were funneled to the

Vatican and used for missionary expansion rather than for upgrading facilities or providing state-of-the-art care. He labeled this a "cult of suffering" that needed poverty to persist in order to maintain its *raison d'être*.

- **Political Alliances:** Hitchens condemned Mother Teresa's close ties to authoritarian regimes and disreputable figures — from the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti to the convicted fraudster Charles Keating, from whom she accepted a \$1.25 million donation despite his role in the savings and loan scandal. The theory of apolitical charity was belied by the practice of convenient partnerships.
- **Stance on Abortion and**

Contraception: In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Mother Teresa famously equated abortion with the greatest threat to world peace. Hitchens saw this as a dogmatic imposition of Catholic doctrine that actively harmed the very women she claimed to serve, particularly in overpopulated, impoverished regions where family planning could have alleviated suffering.

ANALYZING THE CORE ARGUMENTS: FAITH, SUFFERING, AND THE CULT OF CELEBRITY

To understand ***The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice***, one must consider Hitchens' broader worldview. A committed atheist and anti-theist,

Hitchens did not merely attack a person; he attacked the entire system of belief that elevated her above scrutiny. He argued that the canonization of Mother Teresa served as a **propaganda tool** for the Catholic Church, distracting from its own institutional failures and reinforcing a regressive, pre-modern approach to social problems.

One of the book's most memorable passages describes the experience of visiting a Missionaries of Charity home. Hitchens noted the strange silence, the lack of activity or rehabilitation programs, the rows of patients lying on thin mats with little to do but await death. He contrasted this with the energetic, evidence-based work of secular charities like Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). For

Hitchens, the practice of Mother Teresa's mission was not about alleviating suffering but about **sanctifying it** — turning misery into a spiritual commodity.

He also took aim at the Western media's role. Journalists, he claimed, were so eager for a heartwarming story that they ignored obvious red flags. The theory of the "Saint of the Gutters" was so deeply embedded in popular culture that questioning it seemed sacrilegious. Hitchens delighted in playing the role of the heretic, shining a harsh light where others had only offered hagiography.

RECEPTION AND CONTROVERSY: DEFENDERS AND DETRACTORS

Not surprisingly, *The Missionary Position* ignited a firestorm. Defenders of Mother

Teresa — including many Catholic apologists, former volunteers, and biographers — accused Hitchens of cherry-picking evidence, misrepresenting the order's philosophy, and being motivated by anti-religious bigotry. They pointed out that the homes for the dying provided a place of dignity for those who would otherwise die alone on the streets, and that the lack of high-tech medicine was a pragmatic choice, not a moral failing.

Some critics acknowledged that Hitchens raised valid points about financial opacity and the quality of care, but argued that his tone was relentlessly dismissive. **Malcolm Muggeridge**, an early biographer who helped create the saintly myth, was a particular target of Hitchens' scorn. Later investigations,

such as a 1994 study by a group of medical professionals in the *Lancet*, partially corroborated Hitchens' claims about inadequate pain management and lack of hygiene. Yet even that study noted that the sisters were hardworking and dedicated, if misguided.

The debate over ***The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*** continues to this day. After Mother Teresa's canonization in 2016, the book saw a resurgence in sales, as a new generation of readers sought a counter-narrative to the official Vatican line.

LEGACY OF THE BOOK: HOW HITCHENS CHANGED THE

Whether one agrees with Hitchens or not, it is impossible to deny that *The Missionary Position* forced a more critical examination of charitable icons. Before Hitchens, Mother Teresa was effectively immune to journalistic scrutiny. Afterward, articles appeared that asked harder questions about the cost of canonization and the ethics of faith-based aid. The book also set a template for what came to be called "debunking" — the systematic dismantling of public figures who are protected by sentimentality and religious deference.

Hitchens' work is often paired with **Aroup Chatterjee's** earlier book *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict*, which covers much of the same ground.

Together, these works have influenced how historians and biographers approach the subject. While Mother Teresa remains a beloved figure to millions, the image of the flawless, angelic nun has been permanently complicated.

From an SEO perspective, the phrase **The Missionary Position Mother Teresa In Theory And Practice Christopher Hitchens** remains a high-interest search term for those researching debates about charity, religion, and media manipulation. The book's provocative thesis ensures that it will be discussed for decades to come.

CONCLUSION: A NECESSARY CHALLENGE TO UNQUESTIONING

REVERENCE

The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice is not a comfortable read. It challenges deeply held beliefs about kindness, faith, and altruism. Christopher Hitchens may have been guilty of venomous rhetoric at times, and his secular fundamentalism sometimes blinded him to the genuine good that individuals can find in religious practice. However, his central question remains as relevant today as it was in 1995: **Should we judge a humanitarian by her intentions or**

by the measurable outcomes of her work?

In the end, the book is a powerful plea for accountability, transparency, and a refusal to let sentimentality override evidence. Whether you view Mother Teresa as a saint or a charlatan, Hitchens' polemic forces us to think critically about the theory of charity versus its practice — a lesson that applies far beyond the slums of Kolkata. For that reason alone, *The Missionary Position* deserves a place in any serious discussion of modern humanitarianism and the ethics of icon-making.