20 years after discovering his Jewish heritage, atheist Christopher Hitchens has "ineradicable" misgivings about Israel, but condemns ‘two-faced’ supporters of Islamic fundamentalists.

In four decades as a political pugilist and literary critic, writing for *The Nation, Vanity Fair* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, Christopher Hitchens has never lost his capacity to be outraged – and outrageous. He remains, he acknowledges, “insufferably cocky.”

At 60, Hitchens is too young to be a “curmudgeon.” Nor does he like being described as a “contrarian.” Convinced that he’s earned a reputation as a man who thinks for himself, he has decided to steal a march on his characterizers with a memoir.

In *Hitch-22* he covers a lot of ground. Hitchens provides an engaging and erudite account of his formative experiences at Balliol College, Oxford; his friendships with Martin Amis, James Fenton and Salman Rushdie; his estrangement from Noam Chomsky and Edward Said; and his discovery, about 20 years ago, that his mother was Jewish. Most importantly, he provides an aggressive defense of his political odyssey: from left-wing opponent of Western oppression, at home and abroad, to supporter of the war in Iraq.

Hitchens can be delightfully digressive. The acronym WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant), he suggests, is best understood as a description of class rather than ethnicity. The “W” is a redundancy, since by definition there can be no BASPs or JASPs. William F. Buckley, an Irish Catholic, moreover, surely “radiated the demeanor for which the word WASP had been coined to begin with,” while Alabama governor George Wallace and the Reverend Jerry Falwell surely didn’t.

The memoir often reflects Hitchens’s signature ad hominem style. Henry Kissinger, he writes, is a “liar, murderer, war criminal, pseudo-academic, bore.” Jimmy Carter is a “pious, born-again creep.” Ronald Reagan could “fix the camera with a folksy smirk... and proceed to utter the most resounding untruths.” Bill Clinton, a “habitual and professional liar,” may well have been “the snitch” who informed the CIA about American anti-war students when he was a student at Oxford.

Hitchens is equally combative in discussing his “roots.” His mother, whose ancestors came from “a rather distraught small town in German-Polish Prussia,” he learned, hadn’t wanted to be a Jew. A light brunette, with hazel-ish eyes, she found out that she could pass. So, Yvonne decided not to tell Eric Hitchens, a career navy man, “about the long line of milliners, tailors, kosher butchers and (to be fair) dentists” from which she had sprung. Determined that if “there was to be an upper class” in post-World War II England, “Christopher is going to be in it,” she kept the secret from him as well. After the Yom Kippur War of 1973 – and the end of her marriage – Yvonne told her son that she was thinking of emigrating to Israel. She took her own life before he could figure out why.

Hitchens has embraced his semi-Semite status. After his own fashion. If anti-Jewish fascism comes to the Christian or Muslim world, he’ll consider it his obligation to resist. A militant atheist, however, he’ll enter a
synagogue only for the bar or bat mitzva of a friend’s child, “in order to have a debate with the faithful” or, when abroad, in a country where Jews are “under threat, dying out or were once persecuted.”

His misgivings about the State of Israel remain “ineradicable.” Take away the Bible-based claims on which the “occupation” and the idea of a separate state are based, Hitchens claims, and Israelis become “land thieves,” worse than the Turks and Brits because they coveted the land without the people. Rejecting the “ghetto thinking” of Zionism, which leads, inevitably to expansion, expulsion and colonization, he yearns for a “realization that will have to come: Israeli Jews are part of a diaspora, not a group that has escaped it.”

To be sure, Hitchens does condemn the second intifada, but that’s largely because Palestinian “rejectionists” are, increasingly, Islamic fundamentalists. And because he regards so many of their supporters as “two-faced” anti-Western ideologues, eager to excoriate Israelis as ethnic cleansers and torturers while excusing the suicide-murder of Jewish civilians.

Hitchens’s shift to the Right can be attributed, in no small measure, to his deep disappointment with his former friends on the postmodern, multicultural Left. Instead of perceiving the fatwa against Salman Rushdie as a moral crisis for free expression, he asserts, in a generalization some will find suspect, they “looked for a neutral hiding place.” Following 9/11, they referred, almost reflexively, to “chickens coming home to roost,” comparing al-Qaida’s attack with Bill Clinton’s use of cruise missiles against Sudan, and denouncing the American attack on Afghanistan as a “silent genocide.”

Hitchens took it upon himself to defend his adopted homeland. And then passed the point of no return by joining with American neoconservatives in urging regime change in Iraq. He remains a fan of Ahmed Chalabi and Paul Wolfowitz. He dismisses and disdains anyone who believes that Saddam Hussein had been “contained” by the US and the UN or that president George W. Bush and prime minister Tony Blair were “acting on panic reports” on weapons of mass destruction, fabricated by “self-interested provocateurs.”

Hitchens is a masterful debater. Nonetheless, the cases he makes in Hitch-22 are more than a few inches short of a slam dunk. As he’s changed places on the political spectrum, it appears, he’s forgotten his own good advice: A public intellectual should always be open to doubt and self-criticism.

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