

MORAL COMBAT



JOHN OLIVER HODGES

CHRIS HEDGES on WAR, FAITH, and FUNDAMENTALISM

BETHANY SALTMAN

As a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist for the New York Times, National Public Radio, and other media outlets, Chris Hedges has spent much of his adult life on the front lines, reporting on war. He has borne witness to atrocities and given a voice to victims of oppressive regimes around the globe. His writing paints such a clear picture of war that it is sometimes difficult to read.

As a boy, instead of reading comic books or *The Hobbit*, Hedges immersed himself in works about the Spanish Civil War and dreamed of fighting the fascists like his hero George Orwell. But he didn't start out to be a war correspondent. Hedges grew up the son of a Presbyterian minister, and in 1975, six days after having graduated from Colgate College, he packed up to attend Harvard Divinity School. While working toward his degree, he accepted a position at a church in Roxbury, a poor, predominantly African American Boston neighborhood. Hedges preached on Sundays, worked with inner-city youth, and harbored high hopes of helping people. But he discovered that the "gentle pastor" routine was not going to work for him there. The neighborhood boys challenged his authority and made threats, and he got tough, cursing at them and even getting physical, then hating himself for it.

One day Hedges discovered that two boys, both heroin addicts, were waiting in his house to kill him. It was time for him to go — and it was then he realized that he could go, whereas the boys he "served" could not: when it came down to it, he was one of the privileged, the oppressors. It was a turning point in his life. In his book *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The Ten Commandments in America* (Free Press), he writes, "The darkness I discovered in Roxbury was my darkness, our darkness. . . . It is knowledge of this darkness alone that makes faith possible."

From there Hedges went out to become a war correspondent, first in Central America, then in "refugee camps in Gaza; the UN feeding stations in the southern Sudan; and the cold, murderous streets of Sarajevo." After many years of living in gruesome and brutal war zones, Hedges realized he was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and he decided to take a break. He reconnected with the ordinary life of work and family and allowed himself to be warmed again by human contact.

Hedges lives in New Jersey with his wife, actor Eunice Wong, and their three young children. He is the author of numerous books, including *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (Free Press); *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Public Affairs); and, most recently, *I Don't Believe in*

Atheists (*Free Press*). In the acknowledgments of his latest book, he writes of his family: "They matter most. This is just a book. They are my life."

In addition to writing books and articles, Hedges lectures and has a weekly column on *TruthDig.com*. In person he projects the kind of passion that used to be called "religious." He is serious but gentle, angry but wise.

Saltman: In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* you say that you became "hooked on war." What exactly is the source of the high?

Hedges: I say I got "hooked" because combat can resemble, in the span of twenty-four hours or less, every possible drug trip, from speedlike adrenaline rushes, to hallucinogenic landscapes of eviscerated bodies, to zombielike states caused by sleep deprivation. It's all there, and I drank deep from that dark elixir.

War also gives you a sense of purpose, a sense of solidarity. At one point in my reporting I met a group of Bosnians who'd suffered during the war, and yet they missed it. They were in despair because the war was over. They'd never have that epic conflict to define them again.

Saltman: You write, "Combat is Zen. There is no past, no future." What do you mean?

Hedges: I mean that combat is a Zen-like experience. You're more aware of your surroundings than ever before. Even colors are brighter. You are totally present.

Saltman: You went into many life-threatening situations. Did you have a death wish?

Hedges: No, but I would take tremendous risks if I believed the payoff was worth it. For instance, when a bunch of civilians were killed in a town in Kosovo and the authorities had blocked all the roads, I walked in, even though it was dangerous, because otherwise those civilian deaths wouldn't have been recorded. But I admit I was walking in also because I liked the rush of danger. It's all wrapped up together. I think war correspondents aren't always honest about the dark motives that push them. People like getting as close as they can to the flame without getting burned. It's like Winston Churchill said: "There's nothing quite as exhilarating as being shot at without success."

By the time I ended up in the Balkans, however, I was disintegrating: morally, physically, psychologically. I realized that I had to break free from that lifestyle, or it would kill me. I was probably carrying around a few hundred traumatic or violent mental images, and I felt alienated from the world. I couldn't connect with anyone, including the people who loved me the most. I wasn't an alcoholic, but I would drink when I couldn't sleep, because at night you revisit the trauma, and you wake up in the morning exhausted and numb. Two or three nights of that in a row is brutal. You feel like you're at the bottom of a black hole, and no one can reach you. You drink at night so you won't remember your dreams.



CHRIS HEDGES

Saltman: How long did this last?

Hedges: It probably took me three years to pull myself back together. I did it mostly by connecting with my kids: becoming a "soccer dad," making lunches, going to school plays. It was that, more than anything else, that healed me. I needed to work my way back to love. Dostoyevsky said, "What is hell? Hell is the inability to love." I think when you're so cut off that you can't love, then you die.

Saltman: Did you get into therapy?

Hedges: I did, but it didn't work. Although I'm a great believer in therapy, I have this tendency to want to out-intellectualize the therapist. By the time I made an appointment, I'd read every book on post-traumatic stress disorder. I drove the therapist crazy. After three or four

sessions, he'd had enough.

Saltman: I assume that war affects different people differently, depending on how they approach it.

Hedges: I went to war as a journalist and an idealist. Other people might go to war because they're voyeurs or because they're adrenaline junkies or because they have a kind of prurient fascination with violence. I didn't want to see dead bodies — I avoided seeing them when I didn't have to — but some other reporters went to them like they were roadkill. When you spend as much time as I did in a war culture, it owns you and perverts you and destroys you.

Saltman: Whether you're a soldier or a reporter?

Hedges: Well, there's a big difference between being a soldier and being a reporter. I never killed or shot at anyone, for starters. Another difference is that I went to that region by choice and believed, despite all of my demons, that it was worthwhile to go to Sarajevo and report on the siege. Many veterans I've met didn't join the military to take part in a particular war, and some look at their combat service as "a waste," whether they were in Vietnam or have just come back from Iraq. I don't look at my efforts as wasted, and I think this allows me to cope with the trauma in ways that people who were actively engaged in the fighting often can't.

Saltman: In *Losing Moses on the Freeway* you write about George Orwell going off to fight fascism, and you say, "I wanted that epic battle to define my own life." How much of that battle is an interior one?

Hedges: I think all battles are both interior and exterior. They force us to confront our flaws and deformities. In war there's a huge divide between the powerless and the powerful. And when I covered wars, I was part of the class of the powerful. I didn't carry a weapon, but I often had bodyguards, and that breeds a kind of sickness. I had it in spades.

Saltman: Do you think the U.S. is hooked on war?

Hedges: It's the myth of war we're hooked on, not the reality. There's a huge divide between those who experience war on the ground and those who imbibe this mythic tale of honor and heroism and glory, which is rendered hollow and obscene after thirty seconds of combat.

Saltman: For you, what constitutes a just war?

Hedges: I don't like the word *just*, but I certainly supported the intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo. I don't think it was handled well, but I supported it. The lesson of the Holocaust is that if you have the capacity to stop a genocide and you don't act, then you're culpable. The U.S. was culpable in Rwanda and Cambodia.

Saltman: So you think war can be a moral endeavor?

Hedges: The world rarely offers us a choice between the moral and the immoral. It's usually a choice between the immoral and the *more* immoral. That's why moral decision making is so tough. Who was more moral in the Warsaw ghetto uprising during World War II: those people who didn't join the uprising, because they had children and feared for their safety, or those who led the suicidal fight against the Nazis? You can't say one was more moral than the other. It depended on who you were.

When I lived in Sarajevo, if the Serbs had broken through the city's perimeter, a third of the population would probably have been killed and the rest driven into refugee camps. When faced with the real possibility of their own death and the death of their families and neighbors, most people will pick up a weapon and fight back. But it's not easy for the average person to use violence, which is why the gangsters of Sarajevo were the ones who organized the defenses of the city. It's easier to be a pacifist in the U.S. It's only when the structure of a society gets torn down that you find out what you are really made of. Primo Levi and Dostoyevsky understood this, because they saw it happen. When we lead lives of opulence and safety, we have only illusions of who we are.

Saltman: So it's impossible to know who you are in this country?

Hedges: No, but it's harder, because we have to work to find out who's being killed in our name to sustain our society, whether it's happening in East New York or on the streets of Fallujah. Most people don't want to look at that. We prefer to think of ourselves as nice people.

One of the terrifying truths of war is that we all have the capacity for murder. In a time of war most of us are at least silent accomplices, if not active participants. It's frighteningly easy to co-opt decent, moral people into the project of killing, especially young males. Every roadblock I ever was stopped at in Africa or Latin America or the Balkans was manned by drunk eighteen-year-olds with automatic rifles. When you empower a young kid by handing him an automatic weapon and allowing him to kill with impunity, it takes him four days to become God. That's what is happening with the American soldiers and the mercenary army we have unleashed on the streets of Iraqi cities.

The Iraq War is different from the first Gulf War, which, with the exception of the heavy bombing of southern Iraq, was a clash between mechanized units in the open desert. This war bears all the classic characteristics of a foreign occupation, like the Israeli occupation of Gaza, or our occupation of Vietnam, or the French occupation of Algeria. A war of occupation is always the most venal and brutal kind of war, because murder

is a greater part of it — and by “murder” I mean taking the life of somebody who doesn't have the capacity to harm you, as opposed to killing other armed forces. We know from a *Lancet* study that probably six hundred thousand Iraqi civilians have been killed, while later estimates are as high as 1.2 million. These kinds of conflicts are what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton calls “atrocious-producing situations.” A soldier in the occupation of Iraq can go a year and never see the people who are trying to kill him or her. In that situation the lines between a hostile population and the enemy blur, and it becomes legitimate to strike at anyone. The machine guns mounted on the top of Humvees are belt-fed weapons that lay down lethal fire over a broad area, and they are being used daily in Iraqi cities and villages. When you think about this, you begin to get a sense of how deadly this war has become for Iraqi civilians, and how, rather than being a force for stability, we are contributing to the violence.

Saltman: What role do the mainstream media play in war?

Hedges: A pernicious one, because as the news media become more corporate and more commercialized, they care about profit at the expense of in-depth reporting. Presenting uncomfortable truths to the American public is not good for ratings, so they encourage us to imbibe the myth. It's a form of entertainment, not news.

Saltman: Where do you fit in as a reporter?

Hedges: My career as a foreign correspondent freed me from a lot of the internal pressures felt by reporters who cover U.S. politics. I could go on NPR's *Fresh Air* and be frank with Terry Gross about Slobodan Milosevic and his campaign of genocide in Bosnia. But that kind of frankness about George W. Bush is not tolerated on American soil.

Saltman: Did you find it difficult to not get co-opted by the mainstream news media?

Hedges: No, I never worried about being co-opted, because of my dad's example. As a Presbyterian minister, he was always fighting with the institutions he worked for, and they were always trying to push him aside or get rid of him. I understood from a young age how institutions, including the Church, will crush you if you let them. My father took public stances that at times cost him his job. He brought gay speakers to my university when there were no public gay organizations. I think the pain I saw inflicted on my father marked me. A lot of my anger toward movements that embrace intolerance and injustice comes from having watched my father experience retribution for standing up for what he believed in.

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JEFF PELUEGER

Saltman: Do you feel as if you've paid for your views the way your father paid for his?

Hedges: I haven't experienced the personal anguish and suffering my father did, working within an institution that was openly hostile to some of his stances. But at times I have paid for my views. In 2003 I was booed off the commencement stage at Rockford College in Illinois for speaking against the war. The story got picked up by Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal* wrote an editorial denouncing my stance. I was given a formal reprimand by my bosses at the *New York Times*, who told me to stop speaking out about the war or I'd be fired. So I left the paper. I didn't know what I was going to do. I'd been part of a team that had won the Pulitzer the year before, and now I thought I'd probably teach high school. But the irony is that, every year since I left the *Times*, I've made at least twice the salary I made at the paper. So, in a way, I didn't pay for it. And I have maintained what is most valuable to me, which is my integrity and my voice.

Saltman: What did it feel like to get booed off the stage like that?

Hedges: It was disconcerting, especially when two students approached the stage to push me off the podium. You can watch the video of it on YouTube. I'd had hecklers before,

but I'd never had anybody physically try to remove me from the podium. It was difficult to handle.

Saltman: Would you do anything differently if you had another chance?

Hedges: I might acknowledge the graduating class at the start. That was a fair criticism that some people made. I just started hammering on the war. But I had been such a vocal critic of the war for so many months that I'd assumed the university knew what they were getting. At breakfast that morning, I'd told university representatives that I would be delivering a harsh talk against the war, and they'd said that was great. Of course, nobody's invited me to give a commencement address since. But I don't regret a word I said.

Saltman: It reminds me of the work that you did in the Roxbury ghetto when you were at Harvard Divinity School. Looking back on that experience, what effect do you think you had on that community?

Hedges: I don't know. What effect can you have on teenagers who don't have many friends or role models or even stable homes? It's important to let them know someone cares, but does it change the political landscape or social conditions? No. I hope the effort was worthwhile, but the effect was probably negligible.

The effect the community had on me, on the other hand, was huge. It shook up my whole understanding of oppression, of the country I live in, and of myself. When these two heroin-addicted teens turned on me, even though I'd come to Roxbury to "help the poor," I reached for all the levers of oppression that I could pull: the police, the courts, the probation officers, the truant officers, the cops. Because I *could* do it. And they couldn't. It was a huge realization: *I'm not one of them. I'm the enemy.*

Saltman: Had you thought that maybe you were "one of them"?

Hedges: I'd never thought I was one of them, exactly, but I'd thought that I could be on their side. But when my own security was in danger, I reached for the very instruments that were destroying them. That was a profound revelation of who I was. It's who we all are when we're that frightened.

Saltman: So what did you come away with?

Hedges: If you believe that you're going to move into the ghetto and change the world, you're going to end up either a pessimist or a cynic. But if you understand your limited power and define yourself by your ability to resist injustice, rather than by what you accomplish, then I think reality is much easier to bear.

Saltman: Your latest book, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, addresses the so-called new atheists — Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens — who view religion as a dangerous threat to rational thought and scientific belief. You say the new atheists are essentially fundamentalists, no different from the religious Right. How are you defining *fundamentalism*?

Hedges: Fundamentalism can be found within either a secular or a religious framework. It's a binary worldview that divides the world into us and them, good and evil, right and wrong. It's a belief that you and those who subscribe to your ideology have found the absolute truth, which must be accepted by everyone, and those who won't accept it must be silenced or eradicated. Fundamentalism is an abdication of our moral responsibility to make difficult decisions, because within a fundamentalist movement people are told what to do. They don't believe in a plurality of truths or ways of being. Fundamentalism is anti-intellectual, because it discourages investigation of other cultures, histories, and belief systems.

Saltman: Why is this such a tenacious human tendency?

Hedges: Many theologians and philosophers have written about the anxiety of living in an "open" society. If you acknowledge the moral ambiguity of human existence and the frightening nonrational forces that drive human beings and societies, it causes anxiety or neurosis. There is always a temptation to retreat into what philosopher Karl Popper would call "tribal groups." Fundamentalism is a form of tribalism. There's a great comfort in it, because it discourages self-criticism and self-reflection. Retreating into tribal groups is a way to revert to a childlike state of security, rather than live as an adult and struggle with ambiguity.

Saltman: Can we ever tame that anxiety without resorting to fundamentalism?

Hedges: No, I think that those who remain open to other

realities must always cope with anxiety. That is the pain of being fully human. The only other choice is to live in an authoritarian system — either religious or secular — where moral choice is made for you, because you are told what is moral and what is immoral.

Saltman: Why do you think the new atheists are so popular?

Hedges: Because they speak in the television language of clichés and slogans that are antithought, just like the Christian Right does. What I'm attacking when I criticize the new atheists — or the Christian fundamentalists — is their self-exaltation. My fundamental message is "You are just as messed up as the rest of us." We're all bastards, but they won't admit it. That's why their reaction to criticism is so vitriolic. When I give talks, I meet atheists who spit as much venom at me as the Christian Right does, because I'm trying to tear down their exalted self-image. They don't see how culpable we all are, how tainted, how irrational. The Christian Right and the new atheists are at war not so much with each other as with empathy and understanding and tolerance.

Saltman: But surely you agree with the new atheists that countless conflicts in human history have been sparked by religious differences.

Hedges: Some conflicts can be defined in the history books as religious conflicts, but the driving force behind those conflicts doesn't come from religion; it's our irredeemable human depravity. Communism, fascism, religious fanaticism, neocon utopianism in Iraq — there are all sorts of ideologies that can motivate people to kill. Religion is just one.

Like political ideologies, theological systems are a human creation. God is a human concept, a flawed attempt by human beings to acknowledge, cope with, and explain the infinite, which is the only reality.

Saltman: So religion is relativistic? It's like water that flows into a container and is shaped by the container?

Hedges: Everybody, liberal or conservative, who subscribes to a particular religion reads the texts selectively, including me. There are morally repugnant statements in the Bible about women, about homosexuals, about Jews. The Gospel of John is anti-Semitic. God blesses acts of righteous genocide in Exodus. There are three different versions of the Ten Commandments, three different versions of the creation myth. How do you pick and choose? The story of Jesus's life is not the same in the four Gospels. We have to select what we feel is valuable.

Saltman: So what good is a religious text?

Hedges: That's like asking, "What good is art?" — because

A SOLDIER in the occupation of Iraq can go a year and never see the people who are trying to kill him or her. In that situation the lines between a hostile population and the enemy blur, and it becomes legitimate to strike at anyone.

that's what religion is, at its best. Like art, it's an attempt at wisdom, which doesn't come from knowledge. You can memorize as many sutras, verses, and prayers as you want, but it will never make you wise. Religion and art are both ways of grappling with those nonrational forces of love, beauty, truth, grief, and meaning that make one a whole individual. The problem is not religion. The problem is the human heart. And the new atheists don't get that. People will always find reasons to act inhumanely, whether it's religion, or nationalism, or "Liberté, égalité, fraternité," or the workers' paradise.

Saltman: It seems ironic that the new atheists and the religious Right have, in your opinion, so much in common.

Hedges: It's not ironic; it's what you might expect. Extreme ideologies are often the mirror image of each other. I saw that in the Balkans. The Croatian nationals were the mirror image of the Serbian nationals. Islamic fundamentalists are the mirror image of Christian radicals.

Saltman: You've publicly debated Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and an outspoken critic of religion. What comes of those debates?

Hedges: I don't know, but I think those ideas need to be debated. I make a kind of plea

for sanity. I worry that when we suffer another catastrophic terrorist attack, if it's deemed that the attack came from Muslims, then these two apocalyptic extremes, the new atheists and the Christian Right, will come together and call for a horrific bloodletting against Muslims — and not only Muslims outside our borders but the 6 million Muslims who live in the United States.

Saltman: Do you have any ideas for how we can bring less-fundamentalist voices into the mainstream?

Hedges: The problem is that the people who have usurped the Christian religion in this country are heretics. Jesus did not come to make us rich and powerful. Jesus did not bless our nation above other nations and exhort us to use military force to impose our vision of the world on others who are less powerful. That is a heretical interpretation of the Gospel. The tragedy of the liberal church is that it didn't stand up and fight these right-wingers, so it got crowded out of the marketplace. The word *Christian* now refers to these charlatans and demagogues and mass movements of born-again.

Since it lacked the spine to stand up and fight back, the liberal church has nothing to offer anymore except a mild message about inclusiveness and *tolerance* — a word, by the way, that Martin Luther King Jr. never used. Liberal churches have become placid, and their decline is their own fault. They are products of a self-satisfied, bourgeois upper middle class that, after having profited from American empire and indus-

trialization, left the city for the suburbs, where they talk about "empowering" people they've never met. They've been sucked into the kinds of debates the right wing wants to have, such as whether gay people should be afforded the same rights as other American citizens.

The politicized Christian Right has been leading the debate for three decades now. I was aware of it when I was a seminary student in the early 1980s. The liberal response then was to build bridges. When I was at Harvard, one of my professors invited Jerry Falwell to give a talk. That's a classic example of failing to understand the enemy. It was the equivalent of inviting the Ku Klux Klan to give a speech at an African American university. Harvard was one of maybe three or four divinity schools at that time where you could be openly gay and study for the ministry. I think 40 percent of my graduating class was openly gay.

So what did Falwell do? He showed up with his *Old-Time Gospel Hour* television crew and delivered the most insulting and demeaning talk he could, because he knew it would play well to his audience. He *wanted* to be booed off the stage. He used Harvard Divinity School, which should have denounced him for the bigot that he was, to promote himself to his flock. I had organized the campus against his visit, by the way.

Saltman: You seem to take all of this personally, which I admire.

Hedges: I take it personally because I was raised in the liberal religious tradition, and now I'm watching two extremes within American society — the Christian Right and the new atheists — seek to delegitimize that tradition. I'm tired of the fact that people don't stand up and fight back. The problem with the churches is that they're split down the middle between an aging liberal congregation and a rising group of young Evangelicals. The church leaders are trying to hold these two disparate factions together, and they're afraid they'll say something to piss off one of them. So the leaders say nothing of substance.

Saltman: Do you go to church?

Hedges: Very rarely. Most sermons drive me crazy.

Saltman: So what aspect of the tradition still calls you?

Hedges: The radical element of the Christian faith — Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Theirs, for me, is an authentic faith. I think it's hard to sustain resistance to injustice without a spiritual core.

Saltman: Why?

Hedges: Because if you have a spiritual core, then your fealty is to moral imperatives, not a political movement. It's not about your side gaining power; it's about fighting for those moral imperatives. We saw this in the antislavery movement, the civil-rights movement, and the antiwar movement — at least, among the religious activists.

You can spend your whole life struggling against war and end up with a world that's more violent than when you began, but resistance is what gives you spiritual strength. You trust that the work is worth doing and that it's helping somewhere, though perhaps evidence of that won't be apparent in your lifetime. You find self-worth in the ability to stand up and fight



back without worrying too much about what you can accomplish. That is part of being human. We're not God. We have a limited capacity to fight evil. We use the gifts and tools we've been given and trust that life is meaningful, even if everything we try to do seems to fail.

Saltman: Do you feel you have been able to live that way?

Hedges: I focus on the concrete details, not the abstractions. If the Serbs massacre people in a village, my job as a reporter is to walk in, document the story, and walk out. Does that mean Serbian paramilitaries won't go in the next day and massacre more people? No, but it is what I've been called to do as a writer. It's how I fight back. I think focusing on small, concrete acts sustains hope, whereas dealing with the abstractions of good and evil can easily demoralize us.

Saltman: It sounds as if your writing is a spiritual practice, in a sense.

Hedges: I don't like the word *spiritual*, especially as it's defined in American society, where it's essentially another form of narcissism. As a writer I am conscious of trying to give a voice to the voiceless, to stand up for them against the majority, to defy policies that I feel are immoral. But there is no such thing as a pure morality. Our motives are always a mix

of good and bad. I think anybody who starts saying, "I do this because I am moral," falls into a trap of self-worship. I admit there are reasons that I do this work that are not healthy.

Saltman: Such as?

Hedges: I am attracted to confrontation, for one. There's also some self-aggrandizement. In the first chapter of *Losing Moses on the Freeway* I ask: What did I really want when I moved into the Roxbury ghetto? I was going to live in the projects and help the poor, but I also wanted to be venerated. I think the moral life requires constant self-examination and an acceptance of our own flaws, no matter how moral we may think we are.

Saltman: But to what end?

Hedges: Because if we don't do that, we can never act morally. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "You make a moral choice, you act, and then you ask for forgiveness." That's a wise statement. You make the choice, because you can't sit around hemming and hawing forever. You ask forgiveness, because, to quote Paul, "We look through a glass darkly." What appears moral and good in our eyes may not appear good and moral in the eyes of others, even our friends. No act is absolutely moral or good, because we don't live in a utopia where we have those absolutes. ■