

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: IN MEMORIAM

Ian Hugh Clary¹

Where would Christian apologetics be if it were not for challenges to the faith? If there was no Arius, would Athanasius still have been *contra mundum*? If there were no Pelagius, would Augustine be known as *Doctor Gratiae*? In many respects, challenges to Christianity work toward giving the church further clarification on the doctrines she holds dear. With post-Enlightenment challenges from atheism, the orthodox doctrine of God, and the veracity of Christian revelation has only been strengthened; much to the chagrin of many atheists.

While this “unintended consequence” is one reason to value our opponents, we can also appreciate the good gifts that God gives to those who may use them to oppose his Word. With the death of Christopher Hitchens on December 15, 2011, the church lost an able antagonist. Though his arguments may have been outmoded and simplistic, the ferocity and style with which he attacked religion of any kind immediately raised the bar for the apologist who would defend it. Christopher Hitchens’ death is as much a loss for the church as it is for the broader culture.

Hitchens was a man of astonishing gifts. Primarily his calling was that of a writer and journalist. He worked for years at the British left-wing rag *The New Statesman* before taking a post with *The Nation* in Washington, D. C. After a much publicized break with the left, he moved on from *The Nation* and lent his visceral pen to publications such as *The Atlantic*, *Slate*, and *Vanity Fair* of which he was a contributing editor. The range of subjects that he held forth on was, to be cliché, breathtaking. His name remains on the list of a small club of journalists who have reported from every continent; he was also most-often reporting from war-torn parts of those continents in the thick of conflict-zones like Cyprus, Bosnia, or Iraq. He met

¹ Ian Clary is the Book Review Editor for Hope’s Reason and his blog can be found at www.ianhughclary.com.

foreign dignitaries, commiserated with rebels, and mingled with literary elites. Indeed, Hitchens was of the elite himself, boasting a range of close friends like Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and Ian McEwan. Though he never wrote fiction, his appreciation for literature filtered into his prose, so that the reader of a piece on White House politics might be treated to peppered-in quotations by T. S. or George Eliot. Hitchens taught literary criticism at the New School, a position he cherished because of the influence he could have on a new generation of students.

The overwhelming theme of Hitchens' life was that of anti-totalitarianism; something learned at the proverbial feet of his hero George Orwell. If one were to view Hitchens through this lens, his seemingly complex range of interests are boiled down to one simple slogan: "Down with fascism." This is why he was involved in anti-Vietnam War protests as a student at Oxford in the 60s, and why he was pro-Iraq war in the 2000s. Like Orwell, he was of the left, but also like Orwell, it was hard for the left to contain him. Ever the socialist, Hitchens horrified his comrades by embracing Bush's war against Saddam, yet maintained a firm grip on the dialectical materialism of Marx. Neither the neo-con nor the commie could claim him.

The Hitch, as he was known by friends, was just as penetrating in person as he was on paper. Whether in an interview with Bill Maher, whose audience Hitchens regularly raised the ire of, or in public debate on any subject, Hitchens could be devastating with his words and tone of moral superiority. He could speak crisply and in complete paragraphs, could quote poetry at length, and seemed to know in detail any book, personality, or movement being discussed. He was just at home speaking about Trotsky with Robert Service as he was discussing the State of Israel with Saul Bellow (even if with the latter they nearly came to blows). His use of humour was put to rhetorical effect to the degree that one might come away from a debate disagreeing with Hitchens, but feeling like somehow he had the better of his opponent anyway.

There is much that can be learned from the life of Christopher Hitchens, especially for the Christian. First and

foremost, he valued truth, even when it hurt. During the Clinton-Lewinsky debacle, Hitchens testified against the president during his impeachment, which resulted in a very public brouhaha with his former friends on the left—they became “former” after this incident. But truth trumped friendship, and Hitchens was willing to lose all to hold to what he knew was true. It is worth noting that he was not a relativist, and was no friend of postmodernism. Christians, who worship the One who called himself the Truth, have every reason to value it to a higher degree than even this devout atheist.

Second, Hitchens saw the moral element to the way one views truth. To believe one thing and to not act on it was an example of moral weak-wristedness. When Hitchens famously attacked Mother Teresa, it was not merely because she was a scion of religious zealotry, though that would have been part of it in his mind. For Hitchens, he felt morally compelled to show the world that the saint of Calcutta was in the pocket of the Duvalier regime in Haiti, a totalitarian government who preyed on the poor that Teresa had seemingly given her life to save. We too must realize the moral value of our actions, which would then compel us to consistent activism grounded in something more than mere political rhetoric of emotion. No one is morally neutral.

Third, we must defend life. Christopher Hitchens, surprisingly, was pro-life when it came to the issue of abortion. He believed that embryology taught plainly that human life begins at conception, and that a foetus has the full rights as a citizen of a free country, and should be thus protected.

Fourth, as Christians, we should appreciate the value of words. If there were two things in the literary world that Hitchens hated more, it was cliché and euphemism; and he attacked both with unending intensity. Of the two, euphemism was the worse because it was dishonest. Again, following on Orwell, euphemism was a means by which a government could pull one over on its people. This was seen most recently in the words of Robert Gates, former secretary of defense in the Obama administration, when he called the NATO engagement in Libya a “limited kinetic operation;” what he really meant was

“war.” Orwell famously satirized this in Nineteen Eighty-Four with the slogans “war is peace,” etc. As Christians, we should seek for clarity in our speech and writing, so that our yes will be yes and our no will be no.

Finally, Christopher Hitchens loved life and lived it to the full. He did so without valuing the God who gave him life and created the world—it is sad to think that had Hitchens believed in Christ and saw the world through regenerate eyes, he would have appreciated it all the more. Nonetheless, he loved food and drink, he travelled the world, read all of the great literature, and spent his time in the company of people noteworthy and unknown. As Christians, who know the Creator and Sustainer God, we should love the world in even bigger ways. We should love the world, first, by thanking God for it. It is thankfulness that is the gateway to appreciation.

After Hitchens’ death, many, many accolades were poured out on his legacy. A happy surprise was that there were as many from the evangelical community who were truly saddened by his passing as there were from the political or literary world. It was noted at GetReligion.org, in a piece called “God, ‘Hitch,’ the Baptists and Hell” that liberal Christians were conspicuously silent, while conservatives were genuinely sad at his passing and offered “gracious” commentary on his life. The article quotes Southern Seminary’s dean Russell Moore, who cautioned Christians from jumping to the conclusion that Hitchens is necessarily in hell. Of course, if he died without faith in Christ, the bible is clear that it was in hell where he first opened his eyes to eternity. But on this side of the grave, there is hope that the gospel message finally settled in his heart—the gospel that he had heard so many times from apologists like Douglas Wilson, William Lane Craig, or Larry Taunton. It is with this hope that I want to leave readers of *Hope’s Reason*. Christopher Hitchens was a remarkable man; a man who lived in God’s world, but as far as we know, never bowed the knee to Christ. Yet there is hope, that in those last moments, a work of grace happened. We cannot speculate either way, but only say that the God who created all is a just Judge and will do what is right at the last day.

For me, personally, I hope that I will see Hitch in the new heavens and new earth. I owe him a lot. I've read nearly a dozen of his books, I credit him for getting me into reading literature again, and I am now officially an Orwellian (in the good sense of the word), because of him. So I conclude saying, Christopher Hitchens, *in requiem*.