

A Lesson from Hitch: When Rudeness is Called for

I've just been reviewing my experiences with Christopher Hitchens. He informed me, entertained me, provoked me like nobody else, and I will miss his antic spirit more than I can say. I didn't know him for long, though I'd been reading his pieces, with mixed reactions, for years. We met in early 2007, and had dinner in Las Vegas, where we were both appearing in an Amazing Randi meeting. He kindled a happy bonfire of discussion that continued intermittently in meetings and emails. One moment stands out, and it was, in fact, the last time I saw him face to face, in November of 2009, more than two years ago. We were both appearing in a debate as part of the program of Ciudad de las Ideas, an excellent gathering modeled on TED held annually in Puebla, Mexico. (My nickname for it is TED Mex. Go. It's well worth the visit.) One of the speakers for the other side, the God side, was Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, and after our short set pieces, the rebuttals started with the Rabbi. We each were allotted four minutes only for rebuttal, and the Rabbi launched into a series of outrageous claims trying to besmirch Darwin and evolutionary biology by claiming that Hitler was inspired by Darwin to organize slaughters to ensure the survival of his race. I sat there, dumfounded and appalled, and tried to figure out how best to rebut this obscene misrepresentation when my turn came.

Christopher didn't wait his turn. "Shame! Shame!" he bellowed, interrupting Boteach in mid-sentence. It worked. Boteach backpedaled, insisting he was only quoting somebody who had thus opined at the time. Christopher had broken the spell, and a particularly noxious spell it was.

Why hadn't I interrupted? Why had I let this disgusting tirade continue, politely waiting my turn? Because I was in diplomacy mode, polite and respectful, in a foreign country, following my host's directions for how to conduct the debate. But what Christopher showed me—and I keep it in mind now wherever I speak—is that there is a time for politeness and there is a time when you are obliged to be rude, as rude as you have to be to stop such pollution of young minds in its tracks with a quick, unignorable shock. Of course I knew that as a general principle, but I needed to be reminded, to be awakened from my diplomatic slumbers by his example.

We have all heard, endlessly, about how angry and rude the New Atheists are. Take a good hard look at their work, at the books and talks by Hitchens, Dawkins and Harris, and you will find that they are more civil, less sneering, less given to name-calling than, say, Terry Eagleton or Alvin Plantinga or Leon Wieseltier. It is just that many people are shocked to see religious institutions, ideas, and spokespeople challenged as intensely as we expect banks, big pharma, and the oil industry to be challenged. Of all the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" Hitchens was clearly the least gentle, the angriest, the one most likely to insult his interlocutor. But in my experience, he only did it when rudeness was well deserved—which is actually quite often when religion is the topic. Most spokespeople for religion expect to be treated not just with respect but with a special deference that is supposedly their due because the cause they champion is so

righteous. Then they often abuse that privilege by using their time on the stage to misrepresent both their own institutions and the criticisms of them being offered.

How should one respond to such impostures? There are actually two effective methods, and I recommend both of them, depending on the circumstances: you can follow Hitch and interrupt (“Liar, liar, pants on fire!” or its equivalent). Or you can try something a *little* bit more diplomatic: you can call the person a *faith fibber*, my mock-diplomatic term for those who are liars for God. If you are sure your interlocutor is just another religious bully, go Hitch’s route: call him a liar, and don’t stop until he stops. If you think your interlocutor may have been lured a little over the line of truth by otherwise commendable zeal, you can ask them if they aren’t indulging in a little faith fibbing. That works on occasion too.

The main point is this: don’t let *anybody* play the God card in these discussions as if it was a “Get Out of Jail Free” card that excuses misrepresentation. Hitch would not hesitate to call out the pope, or Mother Theresa, or anybody else. Honor his memory by following his example.