

Christopher Hitchens: An Intellectual With the Instincts of a Street Brawler

Salman Rushdie

On June 8, 2010, I was “in conversation” with Christopher Hitchens at the 92nd Street Y in New York in front of his customary sellout audience, to launch his memoir, *Hitch-22*. Christopher turned in a bravura performance that night, never sharper, never funnier, and afterwards at a small, celebratory dinner the brilliance continued. A few days later he told me that it was on the morning of the Y event that he had been given the news about his cancer. It was hard to believe that he had been so publicly magnificent on such a privately dreadful day. He had shown more than stoicism. He had flung laughter and intelligence into the face of death.

Hitch-22 was a title born of the silly word games we played, one of which was “Titles that don’t quite make it,” among which were *A Farewell to Weapons*, *For Whom the Bell Rings*, *To Kill a Hummingbird*, *The Catcher in the Wheat*, *Mr Zhivago* and *Toby-Dick*, aka

Moby-Cock. And, as the not-quite version of Joseph Heller’s comic masterpiece, *Hitch-22*.

Christopher rescued this last title from the slush pile of our catechism of failures and redeemed it by giving it to the text which now stands as his best memorial.

Laughter and Hitchens were inseparable companions, and comedy was one of the most powerful weapons in his arsenal. When we were both on *Real Time with Bill Maher* along with Mos Def, and the rapper began to offer up a series of cockeyed animadversions about Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, Christopher became almost ferally polite,

addressing Mos, as he tore into his ideas, by the faux-respectful moniker “Mr Definitely,” a name so belittlingly funny that it rendered even more risible the risible notions which Mr D was trying to advance.

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*Christopher Hitchens circa 1968,
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brilliant, though occasionally flawed, perception. The Hitch mind was indeed a sleek and purring machine trimmed with elegant fittings, but his was not a rarefied sensibility. He was an intellectual with the instincts of a street brawler, never happier than when engaged in moral or political fisticuffs. When I became involved in a public disagreement with the eminent spy novelist John le Carré, Hitchens leapt unbidden into the fray and ratcheted the insult-level up many notches, comparing the great man's conduct to "that of a man who, having relieved himself in his own hat, makes haste to clamp the brimming chapeau on his head." The argument, I'm sorry to report, grew uglier after the Hitch's intervention.

The le Carré dispute took place during the long years of argument and danger that followed the publication of my novel *The Satanic Verses* and the attack upon its author, publish-

ers, translators and booksellers by the minions and successors of the theocratic tyrant of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini. It was during these years that Christopher, a good but not intimate friend since the mid-1980s, drew closer to me, becoming the most indefatigable of allies and the most eloquent of defenders.

I have often been asked if Christopher defended me because he was my close friend. The truth is that he became my close friend because he wanted to defend me.

The spectacle of a despotic cleric with antiquated ideas issuing a death warrant for a writer living in another country, and then sending death squads to carry out the edict, changed something in Christopher. It made him understand that a new danger had been unleashed upon the earth, that a new totalizing ideology had stepped into the down-at-heel shoes of Soviet Communism. And when the brute hostility of British and American conservatives (Podhoretz and Krauthammer, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Paul Johnson) joined forces with the appeasement politics of sections of the Western left, and both sides began to offer sympathetic analyses of the assault, his outrage grew. In the eyes of the Right, I was a cultural "traitor" and, in Christopher's words, an "uppity wog," and in the opinion of the Left, the People could never be wrong, and the cause of the Oppressed People, a category into which the Islamist op-

ponents of my novel fell, was doubly justified. Voices as diverse as the Pope, the Cardinal of New York, the British Chief Rabbi, and John Berger and Germaine Greer “understood the insult” and failed to be outraged; and Christopher went to war.

He and I found ourselves describing our ideas, without conferring, in almost identical terms. I began to understand that while I had not chosen the battle, it was at least the right battle, because in it everything that I loved and valued (literature, freedom, irreverence, freedom, irreligion, freedom) was ranged against everything I detested (fanaticism, violence, bigotry, humorlessness, philistinism, and the new offence-culture of the age). Then I read Christopher using exactly the same everything-he-loved-versus-everything-he-hated trope, and felt... *understood*.

He, too, saw that the attack on *The Satanic Verses* was not an isolated occurrence; that, across the Muslim world, writers and journalists and artists were being accused of the same crimes – blasphemy, heresy, apostasy, and their modern-day associates, “insult” and “offence.” And he intuited that beyond this intellectual assault lay the possibility of an attack on a broader front. He quoted Heine to me. *Where they burn books they will afterwards burn people*. (And reminded me, with his profound sense of irony, that Heine’s line, in his play *Almansor*, had referred to the burning of the Qur’an.) And on September 11, 2001, he, and all of us, understood that what began with a book-burning in Bradford, Yorkshire, had now burst upon the whole world’s consciousness in the form of those tragically burning buildings.

During the campaign against the *fatwa*, the British government and various human rights groups pressed the case for a visit by me to the Clinton White House, to demonstrate the strength of the new administration’s support for the cause. A visit was offered, then delayed, then offered again. It was unclear until the last minute if President Clinton himself would meet me, or if the encounter would be left to National Security Adviser Anthony Lake and perhaps Warren Christopher, the Secretary of State. Hitch worked tirelessly to impress on Clinton’s people the importance of POTUS greeting me in person. His friendship with George Stephanopoulos was perhaps the critical factor. Stephanopoulos’s arguments prevailed and I was led into the Presidential presence. Stephanopoulos called Christopher at once, telling him, triumphantly: “The Eagle has landed.”

(On that visit to DC I stayed in the Hitchens apartment, and he was afterwards warned by a State Department spook that my having been his house guest might have drawn the danger towards him; maybe it would be a good idea if he moved house? He remained contemptuously unmoved.)

Christopher came to believe that the people who understood the dangers posed by radical Islam were on the Right, that his erstwhile comrades on the Left were arranging with one another to miss what seemed to him like a pretty obvious point; and so, never one to do things by halves, he made what looked to many people like a U-turn across the political highway to join forces with the warmakers of George W. Bush’s administration. He became oddly enamoured of Paul Wolfowitz. One night I happened to be at his apartment in DC when Wolfowitz,

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who had just left the administration, stopped by for a late night drink, and proceeded to deliver a critique of the Iraq war (all Rumsfeld's fault, apparently) which left me, at least, speechless. The Wolfowitz doctrine, Wolfowitz was saying, had not been Wolfowitz's idea. Indeed Wolfowitz had been anti-Wolfowitz-doctrine from the beginning. This was an argument worthy of a character from *Catch-22*. I wondered how long Christopher would be able to tolerate such bedfellows.

Paradoxically, it was God who saved Christopher Hitchens from the Right. Nobody who detested God as viscerally, intelligently, originally and comically, as C. Hitchens could stay in the pocket of god-bothered American Conservatism for long. When he bared his fangs and went for God's jugular, just as he had previously fanged Henry Kissinger, Mother Teresa and Bill Clinton, the resulting book, *God Is Not Great*, carried Hitch away from the American Right and back towards his natural, liberal, ungodly constituency. He became an extraordinarily beloved figure in his last years, and it was his magnificent war upon God, and then his equally magnificent argument with his last enemy, Death, that brought him "home" at last from the misconceived war in Iraq.

Last things.

When I completed a draft of my memoir I sent a copy to Christopher, who was by this time very unwell. I didn't expect him to do more than glance at it. Instead I received a longish email containing a full critique of the text, pointing out errors of fact and quotation I'd made about Rupert Brooke and P.G. Wodehouse.

There was a last dinner in New York, at which James Fenton and I, by previous agreement, set out to make him laugh as much as possible. Distressingly, this unleashed, at least once, a terrifying coughing fit. But he enjoyed himself that evening. It was the only gift his friends could give him near the end: an hour or two of being himself as he had always wished to be, the Hitch mighty and ample amongst the ones he loved, and not the diminishing Hitch

having the life slowly squeezed out of him by the Destroyer of Days.

Richard Dawkins wrote to Christopher ten days before he died, telling him that an asteroid had been named after him. Christopher was greatly delighted and told all his friends about the Asteroid Hitchens. "Finally!" he emailed us. "Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!" I replied, paraphrasing the last line of Lewis Carroll's verse. "Bravo! You're a tea-tray in the sky!" It was our last exchange.

On his sixty-second birthday – his last birthday, a painful phrase to write – I had been with him and Carol and other comrades at the Houston home of his friend Michael Zilkha, and we had been photographed standing on either side of a bust of Voltaire. That photograph is now one of my most treasured possessions; me and the two Voltaires, one of stone and one still very much alive. Now they are both gone, and one can only try to believe, as the philosopher Pangloss insisted to Candide in the elder Voltaire's masterpiece, that "everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds."

It doesn't feel like that today.

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Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie is a British Indian novelist and essayist. His fourth novel, The Satanic Verses (1988), was the centre of a major controversy, drawing protests from Muslims in several countries. Some of the protests were violent, in which death threats were issued to Rushdie, including a fatwa against him by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, on February 14, 1989. He was appointed a Knight Bachelor by Queen Elizabeth II for "services to literature" in June 2007. He holds the rank Commandeur in the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of France. He began a five-year term as Distinguished Writer in Residence at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, in 2007. In May 2008 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2008, The Times ranked Rushdie thirteenth on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945". His latest novel is Luka and the Fire of Life, published in November 2010. In 2010, he announced that he has begun writing his memoirs.