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Improbable Defender of the Faith: Christopher Hitchens

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The Post's Outlook section this Sunday had an article by Rabbi David Wolpe, recounting his experiences as a debate foil for renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens. Wolpe, who authored the book *Why Faith Matters*, rehearses some of the content of those debates and that is when something perverse, or at least funny, happens. Hitchens, not Wolpe, unintentionally makes the better case for what I recognize as Catholicism.

For example, Wolpe writes: "When Hitchens told the audience that night that religion is "a wish to be loved more than you probably deserve," I countered that such a theme is always adopted by those deriding religion: I am a nonbeliever because I am reasonable, they say, and you are a believer because you need a crutch." I confess "in the event, literally "my belief that one could not better state the essence of the Christian faith than to say it is the experience of being loved more than we probably deserve. Actually, you can drop the adverb probably. Nor is the idea of the complete graciousness of God unique to the Christian faith: Judaism contains such pre-modern notions as undeserved grace as well. Regarding the crutch, the call to holiness is no crutch.

As for reasonableness, Rabbi Wolpe is correct when he writes, "Beware"of people who explain their own beliefs by reason and others' beliefs by psychology." True enough. But, he could go further and say to Hitchens and others who revel in the rationality of their atheism, that if there is water to slake my thirst, and food to answer my experience of hunger, and friendship to appease by desire to avoid loneliness, why should the desire to live forever with those we love be dismissed as mere psychological projection? Why should this one desire of my heart have no reality that corresponds to it? I would think that the burden of proof here lies with the skeptics not the believers.

Mostly, however, Wolpe is caught in a useless debate about the consequences of faith, as in the title of his

book. The questions of how or why or if faith matters are all derivative. The prior question, the necessarily prior question is if faith is true, and if it is experienced as true? Does the rabbi believe that God has made a Covenant with Eternal Israel that cannot be broken? Do we, as Catholics, believe that Christ is truly risen? And, do we find the evidence for our belief in the experience of our own heart?

Rabbi Wolpe writes that in his debates with Hitchens, "I talk about religion's contributions, its spur to altruism, and point to the mystery of consciousness and the wide testimony of religious experience." But, if religion is not a spur to altruism, the Jews are still the Chosen People? In "Brideshead Revisited" Lord Marchmain has a conversion experience on his death bed, when altruism was no longer an objective or even a possibility, yet the conversion is real. And, whether or not religion "contributes," a verb that betrays a dualism I do not quite grasp "the tomb is still empty and Jesus is still Lord. In fact, I am with Hitchens on this point too " he challenged the rabbi about why so much evil happens in a world created by a good God " and that is absolutely the right question. I would not indulge Hitchens in a debate about the sources of evil, but I would merely point out that my Catholic weltanschauung demands a radical solidarity with those who suffer evil in this world, and his does not.

Of course, it is a fool's errand to "debate" someone as smart, witty and on-point as Christopher Hitchens. And, generally, I think the idea of "debating" God's existence is a useless task. We evangelize with our love not our logic. The thing to do is to go out and get drunk with Hitch. He may console himself with the thought that his annual celebration of the Passover seder is a mere tribute to freedom, without religious overtones. But, Hitchens is smarter than that. He knows it was not the gendarmerie who smote the Egyptians. Let him come to grace in his own way. Hitchens certainly understands the essence of faith better than many who profess it.

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