

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 19, 2011 at 1:47pm

Remembering Christopher Hitchens -- though not very fondly

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NCR Today

I had never heard of Christopher Hitchens, but after a certain event in 1994, I came to know him as one of the English-speaking world's most prolific atheists.

Back then I was living and studying in London, and my community was asked by Channel Four, the alternative to BBC I and II and the commercial channel ITV, to negotiate on its behalf with our sisters in Japan to use footage from an award-winning documentary they had produced on Mother Teresa, "Mother Teresa and Her World." (It was released in 1989 and directed by Shigeki Chiba, who had just released his third film about Mother Teresa; the producer was Sister Joseph Shirai Shoko, a Daughter of St. Paul.)

I was asked to check out the producers, and they seemed excited to do a program about Mother Teresa -- and, silly me, I never thought it would be a critique so negative and unsubstantiated as to leave a very bad taste in my mouth and upset many viewers. After all, the Japanese film had won many awards! If only the Internet was then what it is today, I could have checked out the program. The sisters in Japan asked for a standard television licensing fee that came to about \$10,000, if I recall well. But the producers implored us to provide the footage gratis; after all, this was a program about Mother Teresa. So, the sisters in Japan agreed. How naïve we were and how embarrassed I was to have encouraged the sisters to let Channel Four, or the production company, use that footage.

When "Hell's Angel" appeared (you can find it on YouTube in three parts beginning here), I was incredulous at the mean-spirited attack on Mother Teresa by this obnoxious man, Christopher Hitchens, and my part in falling into his trap by being part of providing the footage without a fee. Footage that he and the producers picked over and chose out of context to substantiate their claims.

The thing that I took issue with the most was his highbrow disdain for Mother Teresa's commitment to the dying, to make sure that no one died alone. He accused her of financial improprieties and implied that her charity to the person standing or laying on the side of the road in front of her was a waste of time; that she and her Missionaries of Charity should be working to change the system that made the people poor, not picking them up off the street and caring for them. He called her a fraud.

I believe in working to change systems, but in the years it takes to do this, people are homeless, ill, hungry, sick and dying. To offer comfort, to do good to the person in front of you, seems like a good thing to me. People have different gifts: some are good at working to change power structures; others sit by the side of the dying who have no one else.

At the end of the program I called Channel Four and asked to speak to Christopher Hitchens. The young lady said he was not taking any calls. So I asked to leave a message. She was hesitant but then agreed.

"OK, please ask him to call me back and let me know when he is leaving for India to change the system there that is making people poor."

The girl wasn't saying anything, so I asked, "Did you get that?"

"Uh, yes. Sure. I will pass it on."

At that time, in 1994, Channel Four's remit included allowing time for a rebuttal, "response time" to an exposé such as that delivered by Christopher Hitchens. I submitted my name but they already had a roster of four women, I think, that would respond on air to Hitchens the following Saturday. One of them was Cristina Odone, then editor of *The Catholic Herald* (and daughter of Agosto Odone, played by Nick Nolte in the 1992 film "Lorenzo's Oil"). Another was Vicky Cosstick, a professor at the Catholic seminary who wrote for "The Tablet." I don't recall the names of the others.

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I thought the women all made valid counterpoints to Hitchens' sweeping and provocative generalizations and conclusions about Mother Teresa. Hitchens sat next to two men -- the producer, I think, and maybe a lawyer. He kept his head down and barely responded, looking for all the world like a little boy being picked on by his big sisters.

When I returned to the States and realized Hitchens was the darling of the diplomatic corps, international journalists living in the D.C. area and some talk shows, I had a very difficult time stomaching the scam he had wrought on our sisters in Japan, who deserved every penny of a licensing fee for the footage Hitchens and his producers leached off of them. Sure, if there is truth to be found, fine. We know that secular journalists did the church and the world a favor by revealing the breadth of the clergy abuse scandal in Boston and beyond. But Hitchens was not honest enough to pay for what he required for his own "exposé" of Mother Teresa, and that irked me. It still does. And it has made me question his integrity ever since.

To me, Hitchens was a journalistic dilettante whose style charmed just about everyone into not questioning him or his convictions with much gusto. To be fair, even if someone tried, Hitchens was a master at finessing the conversation his way, holding forth his own opinions as dogma (which seemed mostly unsupported to me) without listening to others or entering into well-reasoned arguments. He held

court with that elegant posh British accent that his American cousins seemed to fall for every time.

When he announced his illness, I did pray for him. Cristina Odone wrote in her blog that she admired him but that he was "spiritually illiterate."

On Facebook, many Christians I know have been praying for him and they write about him with admiration because they think he was honest.

I believe that critical thinking is essential to all aspects of modern life. Indeed, it is a life skill that is imperative to 21st century living. And as far as Hitchens engaged in questioning the powerful wherever they reign, this is well and good. But asking questions of others as if you are interested in what they have to say and then providing your own answers does not equal honesty to me.

But scamming hard-working nuns? Well, Mr. Hitchens, you only made us skeptical of media people, and you in particular. You used the same tactics you accused Mother Teresa of using.

In 2002, before I moved to Los Angeles, a call came to our provincial house that was passed on to me. A young woman from a British television company was lining up interviews in the Boston area about the clergy abuse scandal. She explained their investigative intent, and it sounded like it would be informative.

Then I asked her, "By any chance, are you the same company that produced 'Hell's Angel' for Channel Four in 1994?"

She had to ask someone, and when she came back on the phone, she said, "Yes, we are."

I explained what happened with the Mother Teresa footage and how we felt as if we had been lied to and robbed through their misrepresentation. Of course, this was a conversation stopper. "Can you assure me that you are not going to misrepresent anyone or embarrass us if we cooperate with you?"

She said she would have to speak to the management and would call back.

She never did.

May you rest in peace, Mr. Hitchens. Condolences to your family. I am thinking right now of the words of the great Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor: Most people come to God or to the church by means of which the church does not approve. I hope that people who read your books find their way to God and that maybe you did, too, all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. And if you have a chance, let us know what's going on, wherever you are. I am sure it would make a great documentary, especially if you happen to run into Mother Teresa.

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