



A Serious Encounter

by Jonathan Aitken

THE NEW ATHEISM, AN INTELLECTUAL CULT ardently promoted by the likes of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, is increasingly fashionable in today's secular Europe. By contrast, old-fashioned Christian apologetics are on the back foot. A reversal of this trend in the public square is unusual, to say the least. So, Oyez! Oyez! Come hear the news of a star-studded Faith vs. Atheism debate that ended in a most unexpected voting result at the recent Edinburgh International Festival (EIF).

The home of John Knox might seem an unlikely venue to provide a platform for the author of *God Is Not Great* (Hitchens) to propose the motion "The New Europe should prefer the New Atheism." But the Scottish capital's annual arts festival specializes in putting on avant-garde productions of one sort or another. In that spirit EIF's chief executive, Jonathan Mills, found space in his program schedule for this ground-breaking debate, giving it prime time and a prime location. It was a high-risk enterprise.

Three weeks before the EIF opened, only 300 tickets for the event had been sold. There were worries that we could be heading for commercial and spiritual failure. I was as worried as anyone, having been responsible for persuading Mills to stage the debate and raising the sponsorship for it through American supporters of The Trinity Forum (TTF). But it was beginning to look as though my efforts as a Christian impresario were going to have the opposite effect on TTF's mission as a faith-based discussion group. When the Dawkins website launched a campaign for all good Scottish free thinkers to come and support Hitchens I started to have nightmares that we would end up with a

half-empty auditorium and a propaganda victory for atheism.

On the day of the debate, 1,400 festival goers filled the Usher Hall, happily putting an end to the first anxiety. Before the debaters were called to speak, moderator James Naughtie, chief presenter of the BBC's "Today" program, asked for a show of hands to determine where the audience's initial sympathies lay. The result was an evenly split vote: One-third favored the atheist motion, one third opposed it, and one-third did not know which side they supported.

Christopher Hitchens opened the proceedings in the best knockabout traditions of Oxford Union debating—a mixture of enjoyable jokes and questionable assertions. He ridiculed all religions *en bloc*, from the extremisms of Islam to the capitulations of Anglicanism. Their influence was universally pernicious, he argued, savaging a number of easy targets that began with Algerian jihadists and ended up with Archbishop Rowan Williams "doing his convincing impersonation of a confused sheep—that's what you get from a church based on the family values of King Henry VIII."

Because the opening day of the EIF coincided with Putin's invasion of Georgia, Hitchens was able to strike some political blows against his personal perceptions of the Orthodox Church. Conjuring up images of Dmitry Medvedev kissing an icon as he swore his inaugural oath to become the new president of Russia, of Slobodan Milošević claiming God was on his side as he ordered the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, and of the Kremlin's tanks rolling into South Ossetia, Hitchens gave a gruesome picture of what

he called “the imperialism of Russian Orthodoxy.” Protestant America’s evangelical churches “forever perverting creationism” fared little better in this rogues gallery of pilloried denominations, while Pope Benedict was given a good rubbishing too, as was the alleged dearth of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. All in all, Hitchens produced a colorful display of atheistic fireworks. His hearers were amused, but were they convinced?

The Christian gladiator in the debate was John Lennox, the recently appointed professor of mathematics at Oxford University. Avuncular in style, and donnish in content, he began with the disarming admission, “I agree with everything Christopher Hitchens has said.” But having accepted his opponent’s critique of bad religion, Lennox began his demolition job with the line, “Being against religion for its evils is like opposing science because it produces pollution.” Drawing an interesting distinction between faith and blind faith, Lennox argued on historical, philosophical, and biblical grounds that intelligent practical faith was as essential for the development of a healthy Europe in the 21st century as it had been in the previous two millennia. Pointing out that Christianity had given Europe the universities that taught atheists about liberal freedom, the professor hit out against his real target, which was not “postmodernist chatter” but the atheism that became inseparable from Communism. “God had to go. Murder followed....So we had Stalin, the Gulag, Mao and Pol Pot....Such men killed millions of people, but according to atheism they can’t be called good or evil because they’re simply dancing to their DNA....By contrast, our faith believes that the Stalins and the Hitlers are held accountable after their deaths, for Christianity upholds the values written on the conscience of all human beings.”

Hitchens was not at his best in answering this onslaught. Nor did he deal convincingly with the sub-theme of Lennox’s speech, to the effect that science and God are not in competition. For as many eminent scientists who are also Christians have maintained, science cannot answer the spiritual questions of a child such as: What are we here for? or What is the meaning of life? Unwilling to enter this science vs. God territory, Hitchens tried to seize the polemical high ground by a denunciation of Christianity’s “Big brother invigilation which convicts you of thought crime around the clock.” Lennox responded by saying he felt sad for Christopher Hitchens being worried by the notion of God as a

bully, rounding off his rebuttal with a paean of praise for the God of love.

AFTER THE MAIN SPEECHES a 30-minute Q & A session generated more heat than light. The tone of the contributions from the floor (including one from Mrs. Richard Dawkins) was more strident than the cool intellectual arguments from the principal debaters. Most of the questioners

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were opposed to the Christian position advocated by Lennox. As their points were greeted with loud applause from their supporters across this predominantly young audience, the impression grew that the atheists had won the day. So the final vote came as a surprise. By a decisive 55–40 percent majority the notion was defeated, with around 5 percent abstaining.

What was the point of it all? God is not entertainment, and to be fair neither the debaters nor the festival audience behaved as if He were. This was a clash of *hommes sérieux* opening up important theological, cultural, and historical issues. It was evident from the shift of opinion between the beginning and end of the event that those issues were carefully considered. Perhaps that was an achievement in its own right before a large and televised audience. As John Milton once asked in the context of 17th-century religious controversy, “Whoever saw truth put to flight by fair and open encounter?” One difference between the 17th and 21st centuries is that there are now far too few serious encounters between faith and secularism. Putting these subjects high on the agenda of a leading international arts festival was surely something of a breakthrough. ❁

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