

Idol smasher

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



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Conservative columnist Ross Douthat sparked a minor but fascinating skirmish over religion when he penned a piece in the *New York Times* about the late Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great*. Calling him "the believer's atheist," Douthat marveled that Hitchens was beloved by so many religious believers even though he ferociously dismissed all religion as a poisonous delusion. "Intellectually minded Christians, in particular," wrote Douthat, "had a habit of talking about Hitchens as though he were one of them already—a convert in the making."

Christians are commanded to love their enemies, but when it came to Hitchens, Douthat thought that the loving was not so difficult. Christians found him lovable—partly because of his openness and charm, and partly because any atheist who admired the King James Bible and enjoyed *Brideshead Revisited* surely had a poetic imagination akin to religious vision.

Hitchens remained an unrelenting unbeliever to the end (he sniffed that deathbed conversions were "a hucksterish choice"). But Douthat, who converted to Catholicism in his teens, claimed that everything about Hitchens pointed to an embrace of life and a refusal to give in to despair. "My hope," concluded Douthat, ". . . is that now he finally knows why."

A rejoinder was not long in coming. Two days later Roger Cohen, another *Times* columnist, responded in a fit of pique, as if Hitchens—one of his heroes in the battle for intellectual honesty—had been suddenly captured by the Salvation Army, fitted

for a uniform and publicly paraded around as a prisoner of war. Snapped Cohen, "There's a half-baked theory that Hitchens the atheist was loved by God-fearing America . . . that, deep down, he was one of them. I don't believe it." Hitchens was instead "a free spirit, a contrarian," whose only creed was a passionate belief in freedom.

Attempting to stand in solidarity with Hitchens's atheism, Cohen advanced his own half-baked theory about religion. "Ultimately," he said, "I believe religion stems from humanity's fear of death, an understandable man-made reaction to the mystery of life . . . but no more plausible for being near-universal."

One thing we see in this salvo is how delicate and difficult public religious conversation is in an increasingly secular society. Douthat's views spring, I am confident, from a deeply generous theology, a hope that Hitchens has found a gracious God, the true ground of hope. But this laudable confidence in ultimate grace can easily slip into a religious imperialism, a refusal to take honest doubt and atheism seriously, a too-easy dismissal of hard-edged skepticism with, "Well, you'll know better by and by."

In his memoir *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*, Julian Barnes recalls a conversation between Isaac Bashevis Singer and Edmund Wilson. Singer confessed that he believed in life after death. Atheist Wilson recoiled, saying he didn't *want* life after death. Singer quipped, "If survival has been arranged, you'll have no choice in the matter." Barnes replied, "Ah, the fury of the resurrected atheist: that would be something worth seeing."

On Cohen's side, I think we see a foreshadowing of that righteous fury, a refusal to let honest disbelief be too swiftly trumped by a religion with "no choice in the matter." Nevertheless, Cohen evidences yet another reason why religious discourse is problematic: the tendency of opponents to treat religion reductionistically, as nothing but the narcotic of the masses or the projection of the ego or, in Cohen's case, a humanly constructed reaction to the fear of death.

Surely Cohen is aware that the Abrahamic faith story is not about wishful thinking in the face of death. It gets going only when a 75-year-old Abram is told to leave home and venture on a perilous pilgrimage to an unknown destination. As for Christianity, Jesus seems to want his disciples to pick up a cross and follow him—an odd feature to construct if the only motivation is skittishness about death. As Terry Eagleton

notes, "the New Testament is a brutal destroyer of human illusions. If you follow Jesus and don't end up dead, it appears you have some explaining to do."

Who's right here, Douthat hoping for grace or Cohen defending Hitchens's freedom and unyielding atheism? Another generous spirit, Paul Ricœur, provides wisdom. Looking into the faces of the great "masters of suspicion"—Freud, Marx and Nietzsche—Ricœur did not flinch. Yes, they were reductionists, denying the full range of power for religious symbols. But religion, said Ricœur, urgently needs their furious efforts to "liquidate the idols." Only through the most nihilistic and destructive criticism can people of faith be freed from idolatry to discover anew religious truth. "It may be," said Ricœur, "that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning."

I share Douthat's hope that Hitchens is sailing on a sea of mercy. But before we hand Hitchens a chalice, let's let him keep his sledgehammer a little longer. Perhaps he still has the Lord's work to do, smashing idols in the sanctuary.