

Review Article

“THEY MAY HAVE LIFE, AND HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY”: Mother Teresa and Her Critics

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Perhaps it was a sheer coincidence: my reading of the book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* by Christopher Hitchens (London & New York: Verso, 1995) and the life of Christopher Hitchens came to an end on the same day, to be exact on Thursday, 15 December 2011. While Mother Teresa was perceived to be instrumental in building up the lives of the least and the lost, Christopher Hitchens instrumentalized his life to pull down and destroy the life and associated public image of those personalities who were associated with the same downtrodden and the discarded in the mainstream society by employing his shrewd sophistry. It is quite strange to note that the fame of Hitchens came from the rhetorical flourish and verbal joust that he directed on the lives of those who had sacrificed their lives so that others may have life; to him the lives of great personalities such as Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi belonged only to a “universe of the mediocre and the credulous.” Indeed, as he made his fame and, consequently, a living from his unhindered critique on Mother Teresa and others, she continued her unhindered service for those who were not cared for by anybody. While people of Hitchens’ status could relish on “promise and abundance and opportunity” available in an open and ever expanding world of self-realization and self-aggrandizement, the poor and the marginalized, the sick and the dying were only subjects for their intellectual snobbery and meticulously surgical but sterile scrutiny with complicated literary jargons; such intellectual and literary geniuses would argue for the enhancement of the quality of life of others, but would not move even their small finger to transform an iota in others’ lives. Any transformation in the quality of lives of the selfsame people, however, was made only by people of Mother Teresa’s commitment and availability.

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The polemic style of Christopher Hitchens and his acumen to target persons of fame made his writings an instant attraction and a business success. Not many, however, seem to have looked into the flaws in the arguments that Hitchens had advanced to attack his targets, Mother Teresa in particular. I feel that if Hitchens' victims were endowed with the wit and wisdom to construct manipulative arguments, especially by employing polemic language, they would have easily pulled down the already questionable and easily challengeable personal and professional life of Hitchens and many of his ill-conceived and unjustifiable arguments. But they were not only least bothered about such overtures, but were all the more intent on their mission of reaching out and spending themselves for the other, as that was the only instance that would bring life and light into others' lives and make their own lives existentially meaningful.

Like many other self-styled critics of Mother Teresa, Hitchens was also intent on finding fault with her for almost everything that she did. For example, even the visit of Mother Teresa to the affected areas of Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 is vehemently criticized by Hitchens as merely a show of sympathy and a 'hasty exercise in damage control'; although no connection between the Union Carbide and Mother Teresa is alluded, the impression given to the readers is that she had something at stake. However, it is clear from the situation that she had no other intention than offering consolation to the victims of this human-made tragedy (but at her own peril, as the area was not yet safe for life) and, if possible, to be of any assistance to them in a moment of helplessness. When she was asked for advice and counsel, she spontaneously advised them to 'forgive', which is also questioned by Hitchens as if it was an unjust response. To clarify, Mother Theresa was not asked about the righteousness of the actions of the Union Carbide; in fact, immediately after the tragedy, not many knew the exact cause behind the tragedy. Further, when the situation was so tragic and the authorities were slow to contain the impact of the tragedy and the needed aids were slow to arrive, what was expected of Mother Teresa: advice the victims and their relatives that they should immediately take up arms and fight for justice in the street and make the situation more tragic? Or, ask them to calm down, and forgive whoever had been instrumental in letting it happen? Her counsel to forgive did not mean that no legal process shall be initiated against the culpable; it did not even mean that there was no moral wrong involved. However, she did positively call for forgiveness so that those victims could be helped to overcome the immediate casualties.

Hitchens could have had a more justifiable position if he had not only been outright in condemning the injustice in the whole Bhopal tragedy, but also if he could positively avail his resources to salvage the victims. However, Hitchens’ polemic condemnation of Mother Teresa for her presence in Bhopal, her words of consolation to the victims and their families, and call for forgiveness, etc., did not lend any helping hand to the affected people in Bhopal. His aggressive and condemnatory approach would have been more justifiable, if at all he could come out against the Union Carbide and had fought against them, at least with his pen, in making the multinational corporation pay a just compensation to the victims, which has not been realized even after twenty-five years. However, instead of confronting the perpetrator of evil, Hitchens’ ire is wrongly targeted on Mother Teresa, which not only was unwarranted but also ill-conceived and completely unproductive.

Further, on the sidelines, Hitchens criticized Mother Teresa not only for the very forgiving attitude she adopted, but even her having ‘forgiven’ him for the *Hell’s Angel*, a TV documentary that he, along with others, had produced, in which she was projected in a bad light. Instead of fighting against the position taken by her adversaries in the documentary, true to her conviction of being a Christian, when she was asked about *Hell’s Angel*, she said that she forgave those who had made it. Hitchens rebuked Mother Teresa even for this, and claimed that he “had not sought forgiveness from her or from anyone else.” According to him, forgiveness “is reserved to a higher power.” However, he conveniently forgets the fact that ordinary human beings forgive each other when occasions warrant the same, without reading any hierarchical relation into it. Although Hitchens does not subscribe to a Christian understanding on forgiveness, he cannot eclipse ordinary human experiences in constructing his polemic attack on anyone of substance; moreover, he should also have respected the religious sensibilities of others, even though he did not subscribe to any religion (he was a declared atheist and anti-theist). His insistence on freedom of conscience is not only his individual prerogative but a universal value.

Hitchens has a style of manipulating the facts and reading more into the text or situation than they are intended. For instance, he quotes Malcolm Muggeridge from *Something Beautiful for God* in which Mother Teresa makes the following claim: “We have to do God’s will in everything. We also take a special vow [by] which ... we cannot work for the rich; neither can we accept any money for the work we do. Ours has to be a free service, and to the poor.” Subsequently, in *The Missionary*

Position, Hitchens narrates a number of instances in which Mother Teresa was honoured and awarded with certain prizes (with which came monetary contributions as well), which she had utilized either to establish new centres to care for the sick and dying or to maintain the already existing centres in different parts of the world. He even accuses Mother Teresa for having solicited money from the rich and the powerful, saying that her declared policy (see the above quote) is that her “order does not solicit money from the rich and powerful, or accept it from them...” While the first quote in this paragraph comes from Mother Teresa, the second is a twisted statement from Hitchens, but its content is attributed to the former. Anyone who follows the intent of the first quote will not conclude from it the second quote. For the second one is a farfetched and manipulated conclusion. The noble work of Christian missionaries, the “Missionaries of Charity” in particular, does not aim at making profits, as it is usually aimed at by commercial institutions; hence, Mother Teresa made it clear that they cannot accept money for the work they do. Hitchens, however, assumes that this stand forbids Mother Teresa and her associates from soliciting or receiving any financial support from the rich and powerful. Hitchens loses his ground and logical progression in his argument. However, he was successful in deceiving his readers with a simple but faulty logic and in effecting a smear campaign against the noble person and services of Mother Teresa.

Hitches finds fault with Mother Teresa for having utilized the monetary contributions to meet the expenses at various centres; he adds on the accusation that the money thus received also is devoted “to religious and missionary work rather than for the sustained relief of deprivation.” Given the context of the dire need for monetary support in various centres, and as there was more inflow of needy people to the existing centres, and more and more invitations from different parts of the world to open centres to take care of the sick and the dying were coming in, Mother Teresa was left with only one option: that is, to reach out to as many as possible. Indeed, there is a plain argument that none can reach out to all the needy. Hitchens and other critics intended to ask Mother Teresa to restrict her work to a few and offer them high quality service (hopefully, not as it was accessed by him in his own self-justified style of excessive smoking and drinking!). This was one option; however, the option that Mother Teresa made was to reach out to as many as possible, and to offer them a feel of being human and to have the solace of human company to those who were abandoned not only by their kith and kin but also by the wider society.

When there are millions suffering from poverty and malnutrition, we cannot talk about offering sumptuous meal to a few; instead, the immediate call is to attend to as many as possible and help them to overcome their hunger; the strategic planning for a better social living could follow only afterwards. All the poor and the sick, according to Mother Teresa, must be reached out by all; but when not many (including most of her adversaries) would come out to take up such a cause, she identified that it was her Christian vocation to reach out to as many as possible, even though the *high quality* of life available to Hitchens and his companions was neither aimed at nor realized.

Another accusation that Hitchens and many of Mother Teresa’s critics have levelled against her is that the funds that she had received for the support of the poor and the sick had been utilized for religious and missionary work. Although no explanation is given as to what amounts to religious and missionary work, nor any example thereof, the general impression created among the readers is that the funds were siphoned out to carry out proselytizing or conversion activities, that is, to numerically expand the number of Christians. Although such an accusation is widely made, these critics have not been successful to indicate any instance where Mother Teresa was involved in conversion activities; there were no instance of force or coercion employed to convert anyone at all. However, if we look at the facts, Mother Teresa and her companions, along with millions of other Christians, are doing “religious and missionary activities.” For a Christian, any act of reaching out to the other, availing oneself to the needy, by way of caring for the sick and dying, and supporting the poor and the downtrodden, is genuinely a religious and missionary act: indeed, such actions only, strictly speaking, would be qualified as ‘Christian’ acts; indeed, every Christian is called to do that (Matthew 25:31-45). Of course, such a missionary work calls for self-sacrifice, even to the extent of letting one’s own life sacrificed for giving life to the other (John 12:24): exactly that was the very life of Christ himself, and the vocation of any Christian is not in any way different. The life of Mother Teresa, all through her life, exemplified this Christian vocation. That is, she let her own life be sacrificed for giving life to the other, which is exactly what her Master did so uniquely and unequivocally.

As Mother Teresa was inspired by such a wonderful Christian vision, she was ready to go any extend to be of help to anyone who was suffering, physically, emotionally, and/or religiously. She had experienced the all-embracing love of Jesus Christ and was ready to embrace all without any

discrimination of caste, creed, colour, or status. Those who were in need were closest to her heart, and no one could stop her from reaching out to them. Any resource that was accessible to her from the wider public was utilized for supporting the poor and the downtrodden, sick and the dying.

While Hitchens, who had walked out of Christianity for convenience and self-fulfilment, accused Mother Teresa of utilizing the funds for the expansion of Christendom, in fact, the latter who remained a Christian through and through – even despite the inner spiritual crises that she had been experiencing for an extended period of time – spent not only the material resources that she had gathered from others for the spreading and establishment of Christ and Christian message (not by counting the number of Christians that she had made through conversion of religion, but by winning them for Christ through their inner conversion or conversion of their hearts), but also sacrificed her own life for the same. She was true to her own Master's person and his mandate: to love and to give life, by sharing oneself for the others to the last (John 15:13). Indeed, any self-sacrificing act of charity is in itself a proclamation and realization of the Kingdom of Love, which Jesus lived and for which he finally embraced even death.

Mother Teresa is remembered primarily for being a symbol of charity in a world that is shattered by injustice and exploitation by which the downtrodden are continuously deprived of their possessions and lives. While her approach to life is appreciated, her life remains as a powerful invitation to many to continue to dedicate their lives and resources for the uplift of many who are still looking for *the* hand that would offer them solace and liberation in the form of a caring word, a loving touch, a bit of human warmth, etc., including a meal to the hungry, the necessary medical care to the wounded and dying, or empowering of the downtrodden through processes of enlightenment or institutions of education. We may not succeed fully in eliminating poverty, sickness, and ignorance from the face of the earth, but, following the model of Mother Teresa, we would offer support, however feeble and imperfect it is, to as many as possible, as much as possible, and as long as possible. Even if the whole world would be against it, condemning it with the backup of money and media, and any amount of Hitchens' style polemics and criticisms, a true Christian shall continue the ennobling model of Mother Teresa in letting other live (and die) with human dignity, and in having their life in its fullness. Transcending the narrow boundaries and average human aspirations of a parasitic existence, Mother Teresa gave her life in its fullness to let others live their life in its abundance (John 10:10).