

# the WICKED HITCH

BY RUTH MCCANN

A quick peep at the *Vanity Fair* website yields, to the interested seeker, a slideshow of journalist Christopher Hitchens getting his teeth capped and his balls waxed. All this is done in the name of self-improvement and, surely, journalistic pay dirt. But thanks to some strategic towel placement, the slideshow isn't a crude series of photos by any means - all we really see is Hitchens looking, by turns, Satanic, impish, babyish, clever, and tremendously pained. In the ball-waxing shots, Hitchens lies prostrate on a medical-style examination table, a profusion of hair and pallid flesh. Flanking him are two blasé spa professionals in the midst of administering a sanga, the male version of the dreaded Brazilian bikini wax. The sanga, as Hitchens informs us, is known to those in the waxing industry as the 'sack, back, and crack.'

It seems that the sort of man who would allow photographs of his sanga to surface online, or indeed would undergo a sanga at all, is the sort of man who is unafraid of disclosure - a man who is willing to lie back and reveal the entire - albeit hairy - truth. This particular act of testicular baring attests to the directness, the openness, the in-your-face self-criticism, and, dare one say, the ballsiness that characterizes Hitchens' notorious persona as a foreign correspondent, literary critic, infamous atheist, and generally roguish public intellectual. As the strangely charming wonderL: slideshow betrays, this ex-Brit is both a theatrical and a confrontational personality. And when Hitchens appeared at Stanford in Dinkelspiel Auditorium on January 27 for a debate on 'atheism vs. theism,' it was undeniably apparent that There's something about Christopher. And that something, whether it makes you love or hate Hitchens, sells tickets.

BETWEEN the Hitchens-haters and the

Hitchens-obsessed, Dinkelspiel is packed, which in itself is unusual, given that said auditorium is usually only entered by flute enthusiasts and the intensely bored. There are throngs outside in the drizzle, hoping to join the audience, which comprises an unimaginable variety of the Stanford-and-nearby-area population. There are the enthusiasts sitting in tizzied cliques, hopping into the aisles to pass out pamphlets. There are piqued professors, enthused professors, strangely eager older people from Palo Alto, and the Atheists of Silicon Valley society. There are apathetic students, pathetic students, super-godly youth, pagan youth, and, most noticeably, and the kids who are organizing the thing - young minions from the anally conservative *Stanford Review*, a club called IDEA (Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness), and *Vox Clara*, a Christian journal. These young things are whippersnapping about in their best suits, checking tickets, fixing mics, closing doors.

A painfully clean-cut theist leaps onstage and shuts everyone up. He's hosting the televised broadcast of the debate, which is being done through the Christian Communication Network. As Theist Man tells the audience to look normal and ignore the cameras, everyone immediately stares straight into the lenses with manic glee. The already heady apprehension coursing through Dinkelspiel is reaching fever pitch, something like the pre-match anticipatory excitement that is surely felt by WWE patrons. Teasing the tension to fever pitch, our celebrity guest shuffles his be-sneakered way onstage.

Decked out in a suit, pink Oxford, and tan sneakers, Ben Stein is functioning in the dubious capacity of 'host.' One may remember Stein's infamous cameo in the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, which features Stein as a soporific econ teacher droning on about 'voodoo economics.' This is also the

same Ben Stein of *Win Ben Stein's Money* and *Turn Ben Stein On*. Also the same Ben Stein who wrote speeches for Nixon and is, as it turns out, a pretty militant theist. He elicits applause. But why is Ben Stein *here*? One wonders.

Stein opens with what he clearly believes to be a zinger: "There are no atheists in foxholes, but there are plenty in universities." There are also, he claims, atheists in big cities and among beautiful people. It's clear that Stein is atheist-phobic, not to mention slightly batty; it's also clear that the deck has been shamelessly stacked against Hitchens. The host and moderator are both theists, the network broadcasting the event is a Christian one, the questions that will be phoned and faxed in come from Midwestern creationists, and the kids who set up the event are overwhelmingly theists. There seem to be great number of people involved in the debate who would so dearly love to see Hitchens get a nice smackdown.

The man who is being sent into the arena to grapple with Hitchens is the mild-mannered Jay Richards, a research fellow and the media director at the Acton Institute, a Michigan-based foundation that combines a frankly odd mix of Christianity and rampant capitalism. Their website announces, "It is our hope that by demonstrating the compatibility of faith, liberty, and free economic activity, religious leaders and entrepreneurs can contribute by helping to shape a society that is secure, free, and virtuous." Although Richards handles Acton's media, he's certainly also qualified to talk about God; he has a number of degrees, including a combined PhD in philosophy and theology. But he's not a scientist. For that matter, neither is Hitchens. And it seems frankly odd that "the scientific evidence of intelligent design" should even be on the table. Why bring in two philosophy-types to talk evolution? Why not bring in Richard Dawkins instead and let him chat up a Catholic biologist? Knotty questions indeed, but more on this later.

SUMMONED into the ring by the drawling Stein, Richards and Hitchens enter and station themselves at their faux-wood podiums. Richards is a tall, bounding, gangly Aryan specimen with a leonine shock of blonde hair, and he looks so *wholesome*. At times, he almost resembles a bespectacled, string-bean-y Ellen Degeneres. Hitchens, on

the other hand, looks haggard. He's shortish, pudgy, silver-haired, a bit hunched, and his expression is one of rapt, unflinching attention. With his sharp features, graying skin, and peak-y eyebrows, one might almost say he looks Mephistophelean. Hitchens is called upon to make the first rhetorical move by Michael Cromartie, the debate moderator. Cromartie was, incidentally, President Bush's choice for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and is, predictably, a staunch theist.

Hitchens begins his opening remarks by mocking Stanford, mocking Ben Stein, and scoffing, "I can't imagine it'll take me fourteen minutes to demolish intelligent design, as I refuse to call it." He then launches into a rapid-fire précis of his atheistic treatise, *God is Not Great*. The book was published in May of 2007, almost a year after Richard Dawkins (his bosom friend) published *The God Delusion*, which covers much the same territory as Hitchens' treatise. The two much-celebrated books are both anti-God, both anti-religion, and both written by suave, heathenish Brits. Dawkins makes an elegant case, drawing parallels between Darwinian evolution and the coming-into-being of the universe, after which he sets in on the evils of religion. Hitchens is a far sight bitchier than Dawkins, and more flamingly anti-religious. He devotes few pages to disproving the existence of God, choosing rather to anecdotally enumerate religion's varied crimes against humanity. Read together, Dawkins & Hitchens are a nice good cop/ bad cop pairing.

Leaning heavily on his podium, Hitchens plows through atheism's Greatest Hits: we cannot explain evil in the light of God; nature is wasteful; the Earth's very existence teeters on a 'knife edge'; we can explain everything in the universe *without* intelligent design, etc. But amidst these incisive atheist talking points are dispersed pulpit-pounding barks that throw tact and humility to the winds. At one point, Hitchens imagines God's rationale for the crucifixion of Christ: "What they need is a human sacrifice - that might cheer them up a bit!" The audience is too shocked to decide whether laughter is appropriate. But by the time Hitchens reaches his closing remarks, he has broken the crowd down, and peals of laughter accompany his Sharpton-esque send-off: "Ladies and gentlemen, brothers

and sisters, don't do it! You all know better! Now you all know better!"

The man is consciously, indulgently entertaining. Although his plummy smoker's growl gives the impression that Hitchens is perpetually bored, his sentences are so carefully crafted and so deftly witty that it soon becomes clear exactly how hard Hitchens is working for his audience's delight. But this star quality proves distracting to many debate-watchers, including the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life at Stanford and a one-time atheist. "He was making quips and he's clever and he's funny and obnoxious," said McLennan, "so it's hard to get through all that to the substance."

The idea that entertainment has no place in a serious debate is one that Hitchens would scoff at. In his March column for *Vanity Fair*, Hitchens claimed that "Wit, after all, is the unailing symptom of intelligence." (The column is, incidentally, called *Why Women Aren't Funny*, and it has received almost as much negative press as Charlotte Allen's most recent little piece of misogyny.) Being funny is, for Hitchens, a serious, intelligence-proving business, which is perhaps why he is making such an effort at hurling caustic hilarity into Richards' puppy face. And most of audience members laugh - partly because they're indulging their inner bitches, but partly because Hitchens has a point, and they know it.

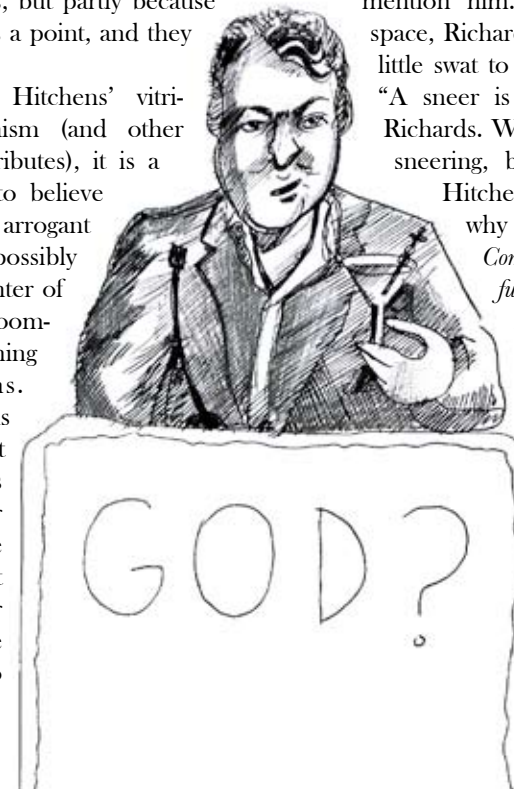
Given Hitchens' vitriolic chauvinism (and other unsavory attributes), it is a bit difficult to believe that such an arrogant boor could possibly win the laughter of an entire roomful of discerning Stanfordians. True, he is wicked smart and stands for a number of very noble things. But this is, after all, the same man who defended the Iraq war on *The Daily*

*Show*. Also the same man who is almost capriciously anti-Clinton, who came out as anti-abortion, who dumped his first wife for a hotter one, etc. etc. What's not to hate? But despite everything, there remains the fact that Hitchens is, dare one say, charming.

A notorious alcoholic and chain-smoker, Hitchens spends the whole debate drumming his fingers against the podium with the endearingly manic irritation of the nicotine-starved and the evangelist-plagued. Whipping his glasses on and off, Hitchens rarely raises his voice above his low, (dangerously sexy) British murmur. He can provoke the audience to uproarious laughter while riffing on nearly any subject; *nothing* is sacred for Hitchens. He is mercilessly witty, rhetorically lithe, and unafraid to meet any subject head-on. How could you just plain hate him? How could you not feel about Hitchens the same way one feels about Frank Sinatra? Yes, Frankie was embroiled in that deplorable mafia Vegas *crap*, but who cares about all that when he sings *Come Fly With Me*?

AFTER Hitchens works his magic, Richards begins his remarks in vaguely Midwestern tones, pitching his address to "Mr. Hitchens," who has incidentally hardly deigned to *look* at Richards, let alone mention him. As Hitchens stares into space, Richards attempts to administer a little swat to Hitchens' proverbial nose: "A sneer is not an argument," pouts Richards. Well, yes, Hitchens has been sneering, but the audience loves it.

Hitchens has ignited blood lust. So why won't Richards sneer back? *Come on, Richards, you can be funny!* But, no. Richards is not funny. He is sweet. And he is smart and earnest, but he cannot argue. Instead, he spends his fourteen minutes expounding a rambling "list of facts" about our world that makes theism 'a better fit' than atheism. His logic rests heavily on the concept of an innate morality 'written on our hearts,' which Richards cites as evidence for the existence of God.



Ever polite, Richards asserts that atheists *can* be moral individuals and that belief in God is not necessary to morality, but is simply a better explanation than atheism for life in general. Richards also nods to the fact that this debate is impossible to resolve, given the time, the topic, and the Hitch in the matter. And indeed the two will agree on almost nothing during their hours together. Talking to Stanfordinians afterwards, it appears that they have all formed firm opinions about Richards and Hitchens, but none of them has changed her mind about God.

Adriana Vasquez, a junior, came to the debate as an atheist and left as an atheist, having formed only one new opinion: that Hitchens is a “\_\_\_\_\_” (rhymes with *ruche* and *swoosh*). Dissatisfied by Hitchens’ arguments for atheism, Adriana was disappointed that religion and God weren’t discussed as abstract concepts. “It was the same old ‘let’s attack belief in God by attacking the church’ strategy,” she said, “which was really missing the entire point of the debate.”

The Rev. Scotty McLennan, too, lamented Hitchens’ determination to slag off on religion and ignore a wider, deistic perspective on God. “I think it’s too bad,” he said, “that a lot of the atheists don’t spend some time with a much broader view of religion and of God, which would allow them to have real dialogue with people who don’t take a very narrow, literalist view of scripture.” McLennan himself is one such person. His view of religion is refreshingly un-fraught by leaps of faith and doctrinal minutiae that collect on most religions like lint on black. McLennan conceives of God as the proverbial watchmaker who crafted the universe, set it into motion, and it now leaving it very much alone.

This Deistic conception of an abstract, non-meddling God has been embraced by such intellectual greats as Thomas Jefferson, whom Hitchens incidentally biographized. Although Hitchens is certainly familiar with Deism, he is also convinced that accepting the nonexistence of God is a necessary, honest, rational act that is amply supported by science, thus leaving no motive for considering the hypothetical Watchmaker. Hitchens would rather address the problems that have been created by the miracle-causing Yahweh-in-the-sky-with-Jesus. His beef is with that Lourdes-ish, snowy-bearded Jehovah, and not with Thomas Jefferson’s

god.

It would certainly be interesting to see Hitchens tackle some of the more pointed theological arguments for a non-interfering God – the sort of God that McLennan and other non-creationist types promote. But putting Richards and Hitchens together in the same room guaranteed that no such abstract conversations could be had. With creationism and bitchiness flowing hotly between the two debaters, there was little time to discuss the Deistic elephant lurking in the room.

WHEN the debate heats up, Cromartie, the moderator, doles out questions on Darwinism, evolution, and the ‘cause’ of the universe. Never mind that neither of the debaters is a scientist; both have done their research, and they are able to dip into science-chat with ease. The debate boils down to the weary question of irreducible complexity: is there, or is there not, some facet of the natural world that cannot be explained through Darwinian evolution? The former-favorite example used to be the human eye, which, until its evolutionary development was explained, was considered an example of something so complicated and ingenious that it could not possibly have developed through evolution; only that wily God fellow could have fashioned it.

Hitchens simply sneers at Richards’ updated version of the eye example, which is something flagellum-related. Here, the ‘debate’ dips briefly into a Yes-No-Yes-No catfight before Hitchens gets fed up. He asks Richards whether he believes in Christ’s resurrection and the Virgin birth. Richards says Yes and Yes. Hitchens snaps, “I rest my case. This is an honest guy who has just made it very clear science has *nothing* to do with his world view.”

Hitchens has just crafted an incisive rebuttal, but will his lucidity be obscured by the fact that he is, indeed, a dick? But after setting aside the showboat-ery, one can glimpse Hitchens’ provocative point: if Richards chooses to apply science only to isolated phenomena, how can Hitchens or Dawkins or anyone else be expected to engage in a debate on this sex-ed up version of creationism? Darwinism and intelligent design simply aren’t on the same plane – one makes exceptions for miracles, and one doesn’t. Hitchens finds his evidence in that which Darwinism explains, and Richards

fashions his rebuttal out of what Darwinism fails to explain. The debate is impossible. Resolution is impossible. Who picked this topic, and why?

It is not Hitchens’ and Richards’ fault that their conversation is about as cooperative and intellectually productive as a chat between Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. Part of what makes the debate unproductive is the impossibility of the topic: Atheism vs. Theism and the Scientific Evidence of Intelligent Design. Are they meant to discuss individual belief? Organized religion? Monotheism? And what good is it to throw creationism in the path of Hitchens? As the Rev. Scotty McLennan mused, “By this time in our history, intelligent design is pretty much a red herring. I think it’s a waste of time for virtually everyone.”

AS Hitchens performs his rhetorical aerobics, Ben Stein sits antily on stage left, barely able to cope with the discussion. He gets incensed just *asking* a question of Hitchens. So he deals with his alternating boredom and fury by doodling on his notepad and consuming, in slow succession, a large cup of coffee, a bag of chips pulled out of his briefcase, and a peppermint, which he unwraps perilously close to his mic. Why is Ben Stein here? We find out as soon as the broadcasted portion of the debate ends. Clean-Cut Theist springs onstage and announces that those watching the CCN will, for the next 90 seconds, be viewing a preview of Ben Stein’s upcoming documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. Further investigation reveals that the film, released in February of this year, follows Ben Stein as he ‘investigates’ the university-level stigma against questioning intelligent design. With the song *Bad to the Bone* playing in the background, one trailer for *Expelled* features Ben Stein interviewing a small, balding Scottish man who pipes cheerily, “Just stand up and question Darwinism, and you’ll find out how risky that is.” Another trailer simply shows Stein in knee socks and a schoolboy uniform looking impish.

Wonder of wonders, the event is being jointly funded by the CCN and by the producers of *Expelled*. So Stein is here to flog his creationism flick. But that celebrity host is having difficulty sitting still; he huffs during Hitchens’ answers, shaking his head and raising his arms in frustration. And he jumps straight into the debate, asking

if Hitchens thinks he is just plain smarter than the huge majority of humans who believe in God. Yes, Hitchens says, he *is* smarter than most people, and, what’s more, his superior genes will eventually be naturally selected over believers’ inferior ones. Stein nearly explodes. Hitchens dips into a more measured discussion of ways in which cognitive psychology can explain such phenomena as altruism, morality, and faith in a creator. But, as Hitchens is quick to say, religious belief isn’t necessarily helpful. Hitchens quips that the Catholic Church’s slogan has been, of late, “No child’s behind left.”

Exasperated, Stein asks Hitchens where “the laws of the universe come from.” Here, Hitchens, who refers to Ben alternately as “Dear chap” and “Comrade Stein,” invokes an argument that he, Dawkins, and other major-league atheists have employed; in broad terms, the idea that the whole process of evolution demonstrates a way in which something very complex can arise out of something very simple. This lends us speculative insight into the ways in which our universe could, despite humble origins, have become so large and complicated.

Hitchens crows that theism, however, demands that we believe that something complex (our universe) came out of something *more* complex (God). While Darwinism postulates simple origins, theism demands that we believe in unimaginably complex origins. And this, Hitchens emphasizes, creates an infinite regress in which we are stuck asking who created God. Ben Stein attempts to rebut. Richards speaks. Distracted, and possibly nicotine-starved, Hitchens drops his glasses and simultaneously disconnects his body mic. “*Shit*,” he says.

Richards rebuts the infinite regress claim, saying that not everything has to have a beginning, and Hitchens can only shake his head. Again, it’s clear that the two are arguing with totally different assumptions, and there is no way in hell there will be resolution. Hitchens can only growl, “Oh, *come on!*”

When one curious believer calls in to ask, *What is the purpose of life?*, the discussion becomes largely unsalvageable. Richards replies that the purpose of life is “to glorify God and forever worship him.” Hitchens snaps back that the purpose of his own life is engaging in *schadenfreude* and the

act of procreation. Stanford is helpless with giggles. Hitchens has won the audience, if nothing else.

Richards flounders and begs the audience to “look at how many irrelevant topics and insults are being thrown around,” and the audience begrudges him some applause. True, Hitchens isn’t playing fair. But, then, neither is Richards. As Richards oscillates wildly between science and mystery, Hitchens pouts, “It’s all knickers, isn’t it, to argue like that!” The debate inevitably devolves to the irate question of whether we are all descended from monkeys. Recalling Mike Huckabee’s remarks on the issue, Hitchens furiously barks that if Huckabee knew better, he would know that Darwinism doesn’t claim that humans are ‘descended from monkeys.’ “If we *were* descended from monkeys,” Hitchens spits, “we might look a bit more like Governor Huckabee!”

Riding a wave of unfettered snark, Hitchens makes quick work of arguments for religion in a remark that faintly recalls his glorious sanga days: ‘It’s not that I don’t want God to tell me what to do with my *gigantic* [genitalia], it’s that I don’t want a priest or Jerry Falwell or a nun to tell me what to do.’ Hitchens almost never cracks a smile, but his delight at the audience’s amusement – especially their ecstatic response to phallic humor – is palpable.

CCN cuts to the *Expelled* trailer, and Hitchens dashes offstage (to pee? to smoke?). He returns in the middle of Clean Cut Christian’s closing remarks. And we’re off-air. Microphones are sent out into the audience, and the Stanford/Palo Alto contingent starts in with atheist-friendly questions. The discussion centers on Hitchens’ insistence that theism is laden with a burden of proof, while atheism is simply “the lack of reason to believe.” As Hitchens elaborates in *God Is Not Great*, he believes that contemporary science offers us ways to explain almost everything that goes on around us, and belief in God is merely an option. And if that option isn’t backed up with proof, Hitchens argues, what reason is there to endorse it?

As the debate winds down, Richards looks flushed, and Hitchens relaxes into a post-coital calm. “Thanks,” he mutters to the audience, “for sticking around.”

AS Dawkins and others have opined, living without God isn’t always a party.

Christopher himself admits it’s a bummer that he’s not going to live forever, but he presses on stoically. As he says, there simply isn’t evidence for God and heaven and angels, and he simply isn’t going to be a self-deluder. But, one must wonder: if God and religion are removed, how can we fill the God-shaped emptiness? It takes most atheists a great deal of thought (and, in many cases, liquor) to come to peace with their own nonbelief and find solace in secular sources of ‘wonder.’ In *God is Not Great*, Hitchens writes that he has the marvels of the arts, literature, nature, etc. to keep him going. But is this voyage of replacing-God-with-other-things a journey that humanity is ready or willing to take *en masse*? When that comfortable little bath mat of hope is pulled out from under the world’s feet, what’s next? Are large chunks of the polis capable of replacing Jesus with *Tristan Und Isolde* or *The Sound and the Fury*?

At the conclusion of *God is Not Great*, Hitchens calls for a secular enlightenment in which humanity will become independent from religion’s efforts to ‘poison everything.’ And we may well ask, ‘What then?’ But perhaps it is enough that Hitchens has brought his readers and his faithful to this place, where the ‘hows’ are not quite worked out, but the ‘whys’ are abundantly clear. And, like it or not, Hitchens has made his smoker’s rasp heard. Yes, he has turned off herds of theists and atheists alike by being snarky and abrasive, but perhaps his bitchiness isn’t gratuitous. He is, after all, living and writing in a country where the religious vote is astoundingly powerful and only about 5% of citizens identify as atheist or agnostic. And bitchiness is an understandable reaction to the smothering evangelical right. But Hitchens doesn’t need his excuses made for him. He is knowingly, unabashedly *Christopher*, and one suspects that he has always been this way, that he popped out of the birth canal with a G&T in one hand and a Marlboro in the other. Perhaps this is his truly redeeming quality: by being himself, Hitchens has drawn people into debate, into thought. He is tirelessly shouting his message, and – if his audience’s attentive giggles are anything to judge by – people are listening.