

## ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH: THAROOR AND HITCHENS

*The Lady (I), Christopher Hitchens (CH), Shashi Tharoor (ST)*

I: ... interestingly Christopher dedicated it (his book) to President Talabani of Iraq.

CH: Yes I'd be cheeky on my part but Thomas Paine was given the key of the Bastille when he went to France by the Marquis de Lafayette who'd led storming of the Bastille and asked to bring it back across the Atlantic to give to George Washington and if you go to President Washington's home in Mount Vernon you can see it hanging on the wall to this day and Paine dedicated his Rights of Man to General Washington who was then a fairly obscure provincial politician in the fringes of the English-speaking world and I thought if I could dedicate mine to the first and only ever elected president of Iraq who had formed a People's Army of his own to vindicate the rights of the oppressed and ... and was a sworn foe of theocracy and fascism I might with the cost of the risk of impertinence try and make something like the same point and hoped that his example is emulated.

CH: Can I just add something, I don't want this to seem too pally but I know something about Shashi that he hasn't said and that you haven't said either, which is that he was for a brief time the president of the Indian PG Woodhouse society and whatever else may come between us this evening we will always have that at bond I think.

CH: There's a category in America where I live with people who are known as First Amendment absolutists, I consider myself one of them. The First Amendment of the US Constitution says the Congress may make no law of any sort respecting the abridgement of freedom of the press or of expression or free assembly and those of us who say that amendment means exactly what it says and nothing else that it's written, so to speak no wiggle room exist, are known as the First Amendment absolutist... it usually isn't Congress or the state that tries to abridge free expression or free speech. Many journalists hopes to be martyred one day by an attempt to censor in by the authorities, they live for this moment ... Actually in the present situation the main threat of free expression comes from public opinion. ...

I: Shashi can I turn to you to address initially that particular concept freedom of speech.

ST: I think this is probably where I will start disagreeing with Christopher. I am not an absolutist about that or anything else, largely because though I believe passionately in freedom of speech and freedom of the press, and chosen to exercise it in my writings and I do believe very much that this has to be upheld and protected, I tend from where I sit to see the case for responsibility as well and that is for taking into account that freedom of speech has consequences that the speaker ought to bear in mind. And since Christopher came up with an American example I think it's also worthwhile quoting the American Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who said that freedom of speech does not extend to the right to shout "Fire" falsely in a crowded theatre, in other words when your freedom of speech causes other people harm you do have to think twice about whether you can exercise it and I suppose at some point the authorities have the responsibility to ensure that freedom is exercised reasonably and that's all very well in the democracy where we like to think that the system is so constructed so that these judgements are made reasonably and fairly and not for ulterior motives. But when Christopher comes up with the question of the community that's when we get into a different sort of problem because

... it's whether you say or write or paint or do other things which cause such grievous offence to a section of people in the society in which you live that the societal being is jeopardized. ...

CH: Fire...Fire (crowd laughs) ... You could be just as liable to start a panic if there was a fire by shouting fire as you could, in fact more likely, then you would be liable to start a panic if there was not. ...

ST: This is where I go back to your earlier comment about your not choosing to be offended by other people's religious beliefs when you don't have any. I mean part of the problem I think in our world is our failures sometimes is to realize that other people aren't necessarily like us. In other words, that there are societies in different stages of cultural consciousness of sophistication. Not everyone is a Christopher Hitchens, and if there are people in sufficient number who are literalist in their beliefs and therefore will feel grievously wounded. To some degree they are to be pitied because that's a level of reaction that you would not be capable of but since they do react that way, should we not, as people producing that which is going to cause this reaction, be conscious that it might.

I: This court of public opinion is getting more and more aggressive in that people on every hand are now alleging that they have been offended and something must be done, we are offended. Now this is a recent case, the third example, only happened this week – When Asia house which was putting on an exhibition of MF Hussain's paintings of Hindu goddesses closed down the exhibition in response to a protest from the Hindu human rights organization who said that their goddesses were being depicted obscenely, now they did that and nobody has made any fuss about that. You tell me he's a very distinguished painter?

ST (In response): Oh he's India's Picasso, it's an outrageous thing that this was done. Yeah I heard about it from you, I hadn't heard about it previously but there was a similar episode in Gujarat when an exhibition of his was trashed by mob... I mean there are two fundamental things to be said about this. First that Hussain has been using Hindu goddesses in his paintings for yet he was 92 years old and he's been painting since he was 12 so this is not exactly somebody who's trying to cash in on sensationalism and he uses Hindu iconography very much neither for religious purposes nor for sacrilegious purposes. He sees it essentially as a cultural construct for him as an Indian Muslim painter, he draws, derives as it were sustenance from the cultural traditions of India and he sees therefore an image of a goddess as something that he can use in his art just as many did paintings about Kerala in the book I co-authored with him he used an elephant as a symbol of Kerala in many ways he sees goddess. I remember him doing some paintings that many of criticized at the time, praising Indira Gandhi by depicting her as the goddess Durga... so he is somebody who has used these metaphors before and no one has objected. But now we are living in a climate where intolerance is allowed to prevail and if I might say so it's particularly obnoxious to me as a believing Hindu that Hindus should do this because Hinduism is the one faith I know in which there is no such thing as a Hindu heresy. You're free

to believe pretty much anything and be a Hindu and disbelieve anything and still be a Hindu, which is what makes it an attractive religion.

CH: ... as Karl Marx so brilliantly put it, the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticism. If you don't have the right to criticize religion you have no right at all. It is the most important argument that we have ever since the dawn of civilization. Philosophy begins where religion ends. Not to be able to discuss religion without fear, without inhibition means you don't have the right to speak on anything important at all. ...but those who actually use and threaten violence, elect off, let go, get used to it or don't get used to it. Get used to it and you'll live under it. Resist it now while it can still be opposed. Joseph Priestly, the man who discovered oxygen had his laboratory in Birmingham and while he was doing his great scientific experiments he also announced that he didn't believe in divine revelation, at all, he didn't believe in the monarchy but he was effectively Unitarian and as you know the Unitarian belief is that there's one God maximum and one got at most, and a mob formed, it was called the church in King Moore, they did a lot of work in those days ... they smashed up his laboratory, they destroyed the only real scientific lab in Britain, they were so appalled that there was this scientist going on and making this profane remarks. Good for them.

ST: I suppose we'd all really enjoy living in a planet full of Christopher Hitchenses, but the fact is we don't.

CH: When you're going to condemn the blowing up of mosques in Iraq, I am an atheist I wouldn't put a mob in there, I have a natural human resistance to profanity, comes from Antigone, comes from Sophocles, it doesn't come from monotheism.

CH: Shashi, you are talking about something much softer I think from an interfaith dialogue as you (the interviewer) talked about a multi-religious community. What about the most important minority in the history of the world, those who have never believed in God, those who believe that an ethical life is possible without religion, those who have studied the stuff and know that Judaism is derived from ancient race myths and the Christianity is a plagiarism of that and Islam and even worse plagiarism of the two above. Who don't want it, there are lots of us, and actually the largest march of the humanist movement in the world is probably in India which has a wonderful secular tradition. We have to be insulted and outraged everyday by what we see what we read, by slaughter and murder and barbarism and insult and superstitious nonsense we do not reply in kind; we do not say we are going to kill you if you go and insult us like this. Do we get no credit for saying this? When has anyone ever said what's it like to be insulted as someone who thinks that civilizations a real thing. Why is it always interfaith? ... Why can't we say that all of these cults are equal and equivalent glimpses of the untrue?

CH: To the lady in the front, I do not say my belief system is no threat to anyone else's. I would hate to say that. I think my belief system is definitely a threat to those who believe in God and who wish to impose theocracy, if it wasn't I would be ashamed to have it, but if you want to make it gentle we can, we have a great tradition in this country, it goes back well a long way, the classic statements of which are in John Milton's Areopagitica and Jon Mills essay John Stuart Mill's essay on Liberty where it is said however discredited an opinion may be, to ban it would still be a huge mistake because otherwise there will be no way of finding out if you yourself had made a correct point if you had no opponent if you silenced them, there would be nothing to argue with, there would be no measure of your own ... thus it must always be the case that any

opinion no matter how unpopular must be at the front and center of the argument. Rosa Luxemburg put it even better, she said freedom of speech is meaningless unless it's for the person who thinks differently.

ST: I don't think anyone ... about legislation making things impossible because I'm not in favor of blasphemy law any more than you are but you've just made the point that I was making which is that ultimately this is a question of cultural evolution and the different cultures in different parts of the world have evolved differently and your absolutist position doesn't take sufficiently into account that other societies and cultures are not at the place that you would have them be, that's precisely my argument, you just made my point.

CH: I think the situation is much better in Indian that it is here. No one is forbidden to criticize someone else's religion but everybody knows they have a civic and social responsibility, and there is an extraordinarily large, very highly developed group of people in India who have no religion and who are fortunately very influential in politics.