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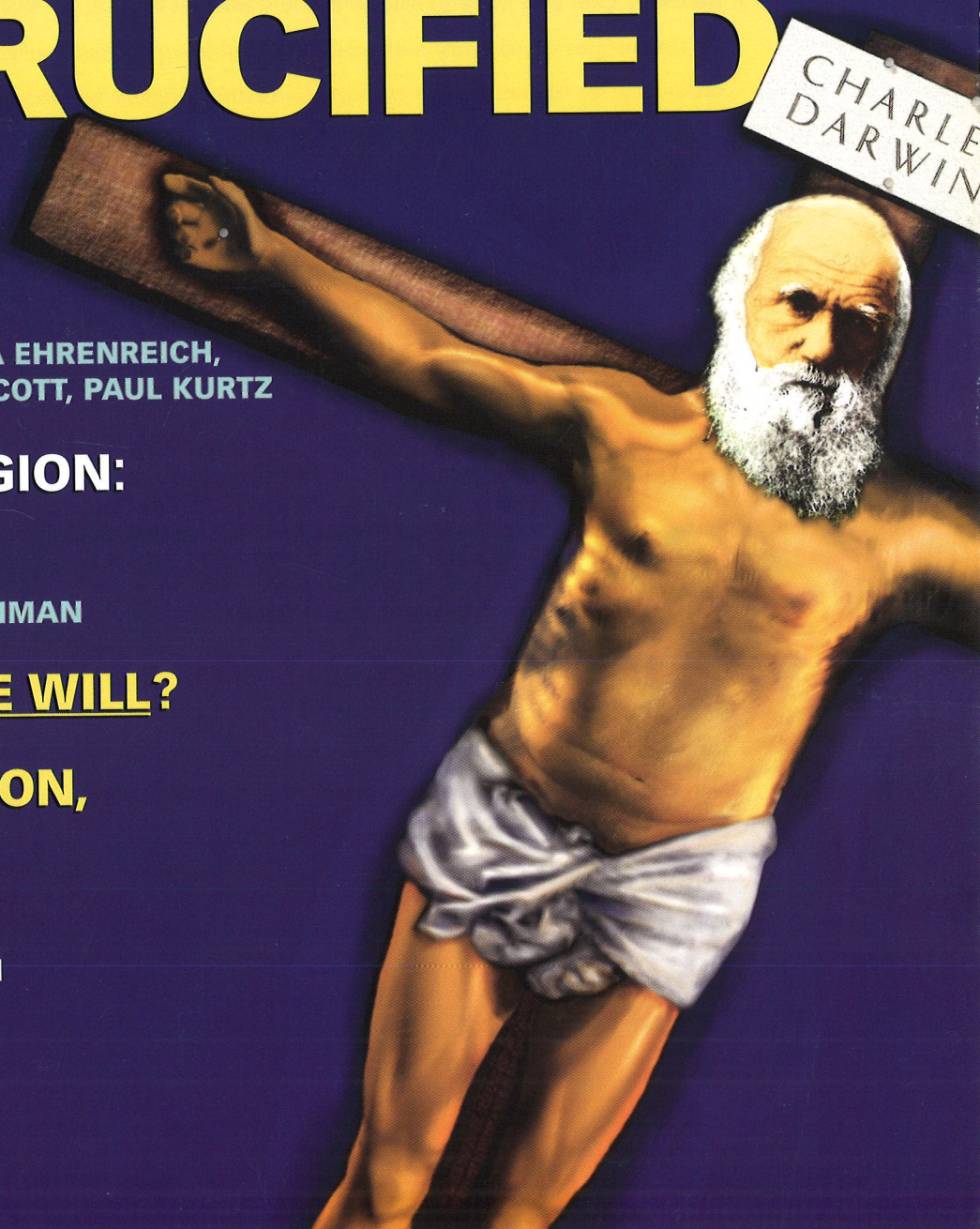
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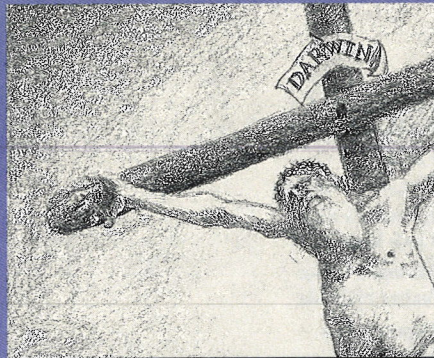
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# Journalists or Defenders of the Faith?

John H. Summers

For a few days early last November, calls of protest flooded the office of the president of the University of Rochester (UR). Local television stations and newspapers ran prominent stories warning of community outrage. Anxious campus administrators called emergency meetings and prepared for the worst, while security personnel mobilized the university's forces, rehearsed plans "A" and "B," and recruited plain-clothed police officers for strategic deployment.

*Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice.* With Mother Teresa's recent death, it seemed a particularly good time to hear his dissenting views, which looked rather mercilessly upon the legacy of Calcutta's Nobel Laureate. Indeed, I knew that Hitchens, who writes for the *Nation* and *Vanity Fair*, believed Mother Teresa had been a "thieving, fanatical dwarf," a "right-wing demagogue," and a dissimulating fraud. However bemusing (or offensive, if you like) these epithets, *The Missionary Position* and its

## In exposing Mother Teresa's myopic fundamentalism, Hitchens provoked important questions about philanthropy, post-colonial poverty, and what he called 'virtual living.'

What accounted for the uproar? Something, it seemed, to perturb dispositions both heavenly and earthly: Christopher Hitchens had been invited to UR to criticize Mother Teresa.

As the organizer of the event, I had been warned to expect some trouble. I had asked Hitchens to speak about his 1995 book, *The Missionary Position*:

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accompanying television documentary tendered rather devastating allegations, most of which had been ignored by the fawning, religiously correct American media.

For example, Hitchens challenged Mother Teresa's belief that "poverty is a gift from God" (her words). He disputed her contention that abortion and contraception are moral equivalents. And he asked why she had cavorted so frequently with the leaders of murderous regimes in Haiti,

Albania, and Guatemala, and traded favors with swindlers like Charles Keating. Calcutta's own press had written scathing obituaries that accused her of bequeathing little more than hunger and exploitation. Other than proselytization, what had she accomplished with the tens of millions of dollars that had come her way?

In exposing Mother Teresa's myopic fundamentalism (even the papacy once considered her a dangerous zealot), Hitchens provoked important questions about philanthropy, post-colonial poverty, and what he called "virtual living." Here was iconoclasm at its best.

### BIASED MEDIA COVERAGE

The advertisements for the lecture had attracted some interest on campus. But the positive feedback was quickly overshadowed by community "outrage," which, I later discovered, had been largely generated by the local media. The chief culprit was Gannett's *Democrat and Chronicle*, the city's largest, most influential, and, alas, only daily newspaper.

What did the *D&C* tell its readers about Christopher Hitchens? Almost nothing worthwhile. It, with local television affiliates in tow, reduced the imminent lecture to an elementary, and misleading, formula: "controversy," "abortion," "atheist journalist," and "saintly Mother Teresa."

Three days before the lecture, the *D&C* announced on page one that Catholics were "enraged" at the impending speech. It reported that a protest of perhaps "more than 200 people" was afoot. In truth, the threat of protest was the work of a small cult of anti-abortion guerrillas—the "Lambs of Christ." Other faithful churchgoers seemed at least open to the idea of a fresh perspective on this issue. They included Bishop Matthew

Clark, who insisted that universities were obligated to entertain dissenting viewpoints—hardly an “enraged” comment. Nonetheless, the *D&C* had winnowed the event to a manageable melodrama: an insolent atheist would speak at the university, gleefully offending every Catholic in sight and furnishing nothing of substance to an inevitably hostile audience. Please protest if you aren’t busy.

The coverage following the lecture was again dominated by descriptions of protests. There were colorful photos of middle-aged hooligans standing athwart and wielding lighted candles. No matter that less than three score had actually turned out, about 150 fewer “enraged Catholics” than the *D&C* had predicted, for there was no recalling that disembodied calculation. Most distressing, I suppose, was that the article imputed to Hitchens a pro-abortion agenda. In fact, he quite explicitly confessed his ambivalence on this issue—it was Mother Teresa’s conflation of contraception and abortion to which he objected.

The *D&C*’s last and most egregious swipe appeared in an article on November 12. This, a particularly befuddling editorial masquerading as a rejoinder to Hitchens, bore hardly any relation to the ideas expressed in his speech. I phoned its author for an explanation. In the course of our conversation he related that: (1) He had not attended the lecture; (2) He had neither read Hitchens’s book nor viewed his documentary; (3) Hitherto he had never heard of Hitchens; and (4) He claimed no particular expertise or insight into the meaning of Mother Teresa’s vocation. Even more, he refused to concede that there was anything less than average about his standards.

## OTHER VOICES

Once, editorialists claimed to write informed opinions. Now, it seems, they don’t even pretend to consider the ideas about which they write.

Which brings me back to the

“protest” I had been warned to expect. Was the protest such as it was, inevitable? Perhaps, but the *D&C*’s coverage makes the question difficult to answer.

What if Rochester’s journalists—print and television alike—had faithfully rendered Hitchens’s criticisms of Mother Teresa? What if they had trusted their readers to digest and assimilate unpleasant ideas?

Thankfully, the city’s smaller, semi-independent news outlets did just that. The *Catholic Courier*, the diocese’s own weekly, dispensed a truthful and fair-minded accounting of the lecture. It summoned an “authority” on Teresa for an earnest refutation, but the piece left no doubt about the merits of Hitchens’s analysis and was refreshingly absent of hagiography.

## When will the media take seriously the notion that they should engage, not pander to, their audiences?

The alternative *City Paper* linked Hitchens’s evaluation of fundamentalism with the larger problem of charity, as did a local public radio program, which allocated him nearly a full hour of airtime. This program registered only a single recalcitrant caller, against more than a dozen respectful questioners. This was no surprise to Hitchens, who insists that thoughtful people greet him virtually everywhere his work is treated with care.

Despite the negative publicity and the accompanying calls for a boycott, nearly 500 people overflowed the auditorium. Hitchens and his audience—some from campus, some from the community—debated complex matters like idolatry in a secular society and the politics of poverty. Nearly everyone was well behaved. The participants, by no means all convinced, nonetheless seemed to appreciate Hitchens’s forthright judgments, as well as his willingness to consider their disagreements. They stayed for more

than three hours. Indeed, one of my professors, a faculty member at the university for several decades, remarked later that it had been the most interesting and provocative lecture on campus in many years.

Was the Rochester episode unique? Hitchens’s prior appearance at Johns Hopkins University suggests otherwise. When word of his visit reached Baltimore’s conservative Catholics, reports Mark Crispin Miller—noted media critic and director of the film series in which Hitchens was scheduled to appear—Archbishop William H. Keeler and his conservative flock reacted in an “explosion of indignation.” Keeler quickly organized a campaign of angry phone calls, threatened a protest, and denounced the entire affair as a simple-minded attack on the

faithful. Like the *D&C* in Rochester, the *Baltimore Sun* scurried to assist, smearing Hitchens on its front page.

The efforts of Keeler and his co-conspirators at the *Sun*, however, failed miserably. The event generated an “astonishing turnout,” says Miller. As for the protest, Miller tells me that it was a “pathetic demonstration,” attracting few of the churlish callers that had earlier besieged him and his sponsors. Most pathetic, perhaps, was the *Sun*’s post-lecture attempt at redemption. The Times-Mirror-owned paper now called the Hitchens visit a “blow for freedom of expression.” When will the media take seriously the notion that they should engage, not pander to, its audiences?

A healthy democracy demands journalistic integrity and intelligence. Alas, as things currently stand, tough ideas in the wastelands of Gannett and Times-Mirror are too often fugitives: rarely sighted, never captured. We deserve better. **Fi**