

Fire in a Crowded Theatre

Christopher Hitchens speaking at Hart House, University of Toronto,
November 15th, 2006

FIRE! Fire, fire... fire. Now you've heard it. Not shouted in a crowded theatre, admittedly, as I realise I seem now to have shouted it in the Hogwarts dining room – but the point is made. Everyone knows the fatuous verdict of the greatly over-praised Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who, asked for an actual example of when it would be proper to limit speech or define it as an action, gave that of shouting “fire” in a crowded theatre.

It's very often forgotten what he was doing in that case was sending to prison a group of Yiddish speaking socialists, whose literature was printed in a language most Americans couldn't read, opposing President Wilson's participation in the First World War and the dragging of the United States into this sanguinary conflict, which the Yiddish speaking socialists had fled from Russia to escape.

In fact it could be just as plausibly argued that the Yiddish speaking socialists, who were jailed by the excellent and over-praised Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, were the real fire fighters, were the ones shouting “fire” when there really *was* a fire, in a very crowded theatre indeed.

And who is to decide? Well, keep that question if you would –ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, I hope I may say comrades and friends– before your minds.

I exempt myself from the speaker's kind offer of protection that was so generously [offered] at the opening of this evening. Anyone who wants to say anything abusive about or to me is quite free to do so, and welcome in fact, at their own risk.

But before they do that they must have taken, as I'm sure we all should, a short refresher course on the classic texts on this matter. Which are John Milton's *Areopagitica*, “Areopagitica” being the great hill of Athens for discussion and free expression. Thomas Paine's introduction to *The Age of Reason*. And I would say John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* in which it is variously said –I'll be very daring and summarize all three of these great gentlemen of the great tradition of, especially, English liberty, in one go:–

What they say is it's not just the right of the person who speaks to be heard, it is the right of everyone in the audience to listen, and to hear. And every time you silence someone you make yourself a prisoner of your own action because you deny yourself the right to hear something. In

other words, your own right to hear and be exposed is as much involved in all these cases as is the right of the other to voice his or her view.

Indeed, as John Stuart Mill said, if all in society were agreed on the truth and beauty and value of one proposition, all except one person, it would be most important, in fact it would become *even more* important, that that one heretic be heard, because we would still benefit from his perhaps outrageous or appalling view.

In more modern times this has been put, I think, best by a personal heroine of mine, Rosa Luxembourg, who said that freedom of speech is meaningless unless it means the freedom of the person who thinks differently.

My great friend John O' Sullivan, former editor of the *National Review*, and I think probably my most conservative and reactionary Catholic friend, once said –it's a tiny thought experiment– he says, if you hear the Pope saying he believes in God, you think, “well, the Pope is doing his job again today”. If you hear the Pope saying he's really begun to doubt the existence of God, you begin to think he might be on to something.

Well, if everybody in North America is forced to attend, at school, training in sensitivity on Holocaust awareness and is taught to study the Final Solution, about which nothing was actually done by this country, or North America, or the United Kingdom while it was going on; but let's say as if in compensation for that everyone is made to swallow an official and unalterable story of it now, and it is taught as the great moral exemplar, the moral equivalent of the morally lacking elements of the Second World War, a way of stilling our uneasy conscience about that combat...

If that's the case with everybody, as it more or less is, and one person gets up and says, “You know what, this Holocaust, I'm not sure it even happened. In fact, I'm pretty certain it didn't. Indeed, I begin to wonder if the only thing [isn't] that the Jews brought a little bit of violence on themselves.”

[Then] That person doesn't just have a right to speak, that person's right to speak must be given extra protection. Because what he has to say must have taken him some effort to come up with, *might contain* a grain of historical truth, *might* in any case get people to think about “why do they know what they already think they know”. How do I know that I know this, except that I've always been taught this and never heard anything else?

It's always worth establishing first principles. It's always worth saying “what would you do if you met a Flat Earth Society member?” Come to think of it, how can I prove the earth is round? Am I sure about the theory of evolution? I know it's supposed to be true. Here's someone who says there's no such thing; it's all intelligent design. How sure am I of my own views? Don't take refuge in the false security of consensus, and the feeling that whatever you think you're bound to be OK, because you're in the safely moral majority.

One of the proudest moments of my life, that's to say, in the recent past, has been defending the British historian David Irving who is now in prison in Austria for nothing more than the *potential* of uttering an unwelcome thought on Austrian soil. He didn't actually say anything in Austria. He wasn't even accused of saying anything. He was accused of perhaps planning to say something that violated an Austrian law that says *only one version of the history of the Second World War* may be taught in our brave little Tyrolean republic.

The republic that gave us Kurt Waldheim as Secretary General of the United Nations, a man wanted in several countries for war crimes. You know the country that has Jorge Haider, the leader of its own fascist party, in the cabinet that sent David Irving to jail.

You know the two things that have made Austria famous and given it its reputation by any chance? Just while I've got you. I hope there are some Austrians here to be upset by it. Well, a pity if not, but the two great achievements of Austria are to have convinced the world that Hitler was German and that Beethoven was Viennese.

Now to this proud record they can add, they have the courage finally to face their past and lock up a British historian who has committed no crime except that of thought in writing. And that's a scandal. I can't find a seconder usually when I propose this but I don't care. I don't need a seconder. My own opinion is enough for me and I claim the right to have it defended against any consensus... any majority... anywhere... any place, any time. And anyone who disagrees with this can pick a number, get in line – and... kiss my ass.

Now, I don't know how many of you don't feel you're grown up enough to decide for yourselves and think you need to be protected from David Irving's edition of the *Goebbels Diaries* for example, out of which I learned more about the Third Reich than I had from studying Hugh Trevor-Roper and A. J. B. Taylor combined when I was at Oxford. But for those of you who do, I'd recommend another short course of revision.

Go again and see not just the film and the play, but read the text of Robert Bolt's wonderful play *A Man For All Seasons* –some of you must have seen it. Where Sir Thomas More decides that he would rather die than lie or betray his faith. And one moment More is arguing with the particularly vicious witch-hunting prosecutor. A servant of the king and a hungry and ambitious man.

And More says to this man,

– You'd break the law to punish the devil, wouldn't you?

And the prosecutor, the witch-hunter, says,

– Break it? –he said– I'd cut down, I'd cut down every law in England if I could do that, if I could capture him!

– Yes you would, wouldn't you? And then when you would have cornered the devil, and the devil'd turn around to meet you, where would you run for protection, all the laws of England having been

cut down and flattened? Who would protect you then?

Bear in mind, ladies and gentleman, that every time you violate, or propose to violate, the right to free speech of someone else, you *in potentia* [are] making a rod for your own back. Because the other question raised by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes is simply this: *who's going to decide*, to whom do you award the right to decide which speech is harmful, or who is the harmful speaker? Or to determine in advance what the harmful consequences [are] going to be that we know enough about in advance to prevent? To whom would you give this job? To whom are you going to award the task of being the censor?

Isn't a famous old story that the man who has to read all the pornography, in order to decide what's fit to be passed and what is [not], is the man most likely to become debauched?

Did you hear any speaker in the opposition to this motion, eloquent as one of them was, to whom you would delegate the task of deciding *for you* what you could read? To whom you would give the job to decide for you? Relieve *you* of the responsibility of hearing what you might have to hear? Do you know any one –hands up– do you know any one to whom you'd give this job? Does anyone have a nominee?

You mean there is no one in Canada who is good enough to decide what I can read? Or hear? I had no idea...

But there's a law that says there must be such a person, or some sub-section some piddling law that says it.

Well to Hell with that law then. It is inviting you to be liars and hypocrites and to deny what you evidently know already, about this censorious instinct.

We basically know already what we need to know, and we've known it for a long time, it comes from an old story about another great Englishman –sorry to sound particular about that this evening– Dr Samuel Johnson, the great lexicographer, compiler of the first great dictionary of the English language. When it was complete Dr Johnson was waited upon by various delegations of people to congratulate him. Of the nobility, [...] of the Common, of the Lords and also by a delegation of respectable ladies of London who attended on him in his Fleet Street lodgings and congratulated him.

– “Dr Johnson”, they said, “We are delighted to find that you've not included any indecent or obscene words in your dictionary.”

– “Ladies”, said Dr Johnson, “I congratulate you on being able to look them up.”

Anyone who can understand that joke –and I'm pleased to see that about ten per cent of you can– gets the point about censorship, especially *prior restraint* as it is known in the United States, where it is banned by the First Amendment to the Constitution. It may not be determined in advance what words are apt or inapt. No one has the knowledge that would be required to make that call and –

more to the point— one has to suspect the motives of those who do so. In particular those who are determined to be offended, of those who will go through a treasure house of English —like Dr Johnson’s first lexicon— in search of filthy words, to satisfy themselves, and some instinct about which I dare not speculate...

Now, I am absolutely convinced that the main source of hatred in the world is religion, and organized religion. Absolutely convinced of it. And I am glad that you applaud, because it’s a very great problem for those who oppose this motion. How are they going to ban religion? How are they going to stop the expression of religious loathing, hatred and bigotry?

I speak as someone who is a fairly regular target of this, and not just in rhetorical form. I have been the target of many death threats, I know, within a short distance of where I am currently living in Washington, I can name two or three people, whose names you probably know, who can’t go anywhere now without a security detail because of the criticisms they’ve made on one monotheism in particular. And this is in the capital city of the United States.

So I know what I’m talking about, and I also have to notice, that the sort of people who ring me up and say they know where my children go to school —and they certainly know what my home number is and where I live, and what they are going to do to them and to my wife and to me— and whom I have to take seriously because they already have done it to people I know, are just the people who are going to seek the protection of the hate speech law, if I say what I think about their religion, which I am now going to do.

Because I don’t have any what you might call ethnic bias, I have no grudge of that sort, I can rub along with pretty much anyone of any —as it were— origin or sexual orientation, or language group — except people from Yorkshire of course, who are completely untakable— and I’m beginning to resent the confusion that’s being imposed on us now —and there was some of it this evening— between religious belief, blasphemy, ethnicity, profanity and what one might call “multicultural etiquette”.

It’s quite common these days, [for example,] for people now to use the expression “anti-Islamic racism”, as if an attack on a religion was an attack on an ethnic group. The word *Islamophobia* in fact is beginning to acquire the opprobrium that was once reserved for racial prejudice. This is a subtle and very nasty insinuation that needs to be met head on.

Who said “what if Falwell says he hates fags? What if people act upon that?” The *Bible* says you have to hate fags. If Falwell says he is saying it because the Bible says so, he’s right. Yes, it might make people go out and use violence. What are you going to do about that? You’re up against a group of people who will say “you put your hands on our Bible and we’ll call the hate speech police”. Now what are you going to do when you’ve dug that trap for yourself?

Somebody said that the anti-Semitism and *Kristallnacht* in Germany was the result of ten years of Jew-baiting. Ten years? You must be joking! It's the result of two thousand years of Christianity, based on one verse of one chapter of St. John's Gospel, which led to a pogrom after every Easter sermon every year for hundreds of years. Because it claims that the Jews demanded the blood of Christ be on the heads of themselves and all their children to the remotest generation. That's the warrant and license for, and incitement to, anti-Jewish pogroms. What are you going to do about that? Where is your piddling sub-section now? Does it say St. John's Gospel must be censored?

Do I, who have read Freud and know what the future of an illusion really is, and know that religious belief is ineradicable as long as we remain a stupid, poorly evolved mammalian species, think that some Canadian law is going to solve this problem? Please!

No, our problem is this: our pre-frontal lobes are too small. And our adrenaline glands are too big. And our thumb/finger opposition isn't all that it might be. And we're afraid of the dark, and we're afraid to die, and we believe in the truths of holy books that are so stupid and so fabricated that a child can –and all children do, as you can tell by their questions– actually see through them. And I think it should be –religion– treated with ridicule, and hatred and contempt. And I claim that right.

Now let's not dance around, not all monotheisms are exactly the same, at the moment. They're all based on the same illusion, they're all plagiarisms of each other, but there is one in particular that at the moment is proposing a serious menace not just to freedom of speech and freedom of expression, but to quite a lot of other freedoms too. And this is the religion that exhibits the horrible trio of self-hatred, self-righteousness and self-pity. I am talking about militant Islam.

Globally it's a gigantic power. It controls an enormous amount of oil wealth, several large countries and states with an enormous fortune, it's pumping the ideology of Wahhabism and Salafism around the world, poisoning societies where it goes, ruining the minds of children, stultifying the young and its madrases, training people in violence, making a culture death and suicide and murder. That's what it does globally, it's quite strong.

In our society it poses as a cringing minority, whose faith you might offend, which deserves all the protection that a small and vulnerable group might need.

Now, it makes quite large claims for itself. Doesn't it? It says it's the final revelation. It says that God spoke to one illiterate businessman in the Arabian Peninsula three times through an archangel, and the resulting material (which as you can see when you read it is largely [and ineptly] plagiarized from the Old and the New Testament [...]) is to be accepted as a divine revelation, and as the final and unalterable one, and those who do not accept this revelation are fit to be treated as cattle, infidels, potential chattel, slaves and victims.

Well I tell you what, I don't think Mohammad ever heard those voices. I don't believe it. And the likelihood that I'm right, as opposed to the likelihood that a businessman who couldn't read, had bits of the Old and New Testament re-dictated to him by an archangel, I think puts me much more near the position of being objectively correct.

But who is the one under threat? The person who propagates this and says "I'd better listen because if I don't I'm in danger", or me who says "No, I think this is so silly you could even publish a cartoon about it"?

And up go the placards, and up go the yells and the howls and the screams, "Behead those..." –this is in London, this is in Toronto, this is in New York, it is right in our midst now– "Behead those, Behead those who cartoon Islam".

Do they get arrested for hate speech? No. Might I get in trouble for saying what I've just said about the prophet Mohammad? Yes, I might.

Where are your priorities ladies and gentlemen? You're giving away what's most precious in your own society, and you're giving it away without a fight, and you're even praising the people who want to deny you the right to resist it. Shame on you while you do this. Make the best use of the time you've got left. This is really serious.

Now, if you look anywhere you like,

–because [tonight] we had invocations of a rather drivelling and sickly kind of our sympathy: "what about the poor fags, what about the poor Jews, the wretched women who can't take the abuse and the slaves and their descendants and the tribes who didn't make it and were told that land was forfeit..."–,

look anywhere you like in the world for slavery, for the subjection of women as chattel, for the burning and flogging of homosexuals, for ethnic cleansing, for anti-Semitism, for all of this, you look *no further* than a famous book that's on every pulpit in this city, and in every synagogue and in every mosque.

And then just see whether you can square the fact that the force that is the main source of hatred is also the main caller for censorship. And when you've realized that you're therefore this evening faced with a gigantic false antithesis, I hope that still won't stop you from giving the motion before you the resounding endorsement that it deserves. Thanks awfully.

'Night, night. Stay cool.

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[square brackets indicate minor edits made for clarity during the transcript from a video recording]