

On Hitchens, Havel, and Kim—and Totalitarianism

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 20:56 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 20:57

By Dr. Paul Kengor

Editor's note: A version of this article first appeared at TheBlaze.com.

They say that famous people die in groups of three.

I recently heard the news of the death of Christopher Hitchens, one of the world's best-known atheists and polemicists. I was saddened by Hitchens' death. I'm no atheist, but I respected the man, his writing skills, and his fierce independence of mind. When I got the news, I immediately did what Hitchens might have done: I started writing, trying to collect my feelings into words. It's how I cope with things.

Two days later, on a Sunday morning, a friend of mine at church grabbed my arm and whispered: "Did you hear that Vaclav Havel died?"

No, I hadn't. That one hurt, too. Havel is one of a handful of individuals responsible for the collapse of communism. I've lectured on the man. As I sat in the pew, I began writing again—in my head.

When I got home, I hurriedly composed an article on Havel and Hitchens both. Hitchens,

On Hitchens, Havel, and Kim—and Totalitarianism

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 20:56 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 20:57

ironically, had great respect for Havel, conceding Havel's crucial role in communism's collapse.

He did not, however, agree with Havel on matters of faith. Havel was Roman Catholic, and saw in God the source of our fundamental freedoms. Havel extolled the inalienable rights of the Declaration of Independence, and the One who endows those rights. Hitchens, by contrast, called God a "totalitarian." Havel lived under totalitarianism, one of its victims, and viewed God as the purest response to totalitarianism.

Later that day, Sunday evening, I attended a Christmas play. A colleague of mine, a fellow professor, was in the play. We were discussing the deaths of Hitchens and Havel, and the parallels. My friend recalled November 22, 1963, a remarkable day when John F. Kennedy, C. S. Lewis, and Aldous Huxley all died. We nervously chuckled: "Well, who will be the third person to die this time?"

At that very moment, our answer was unfolding in North Korea: it was Kim Jong-Il. And therein is more irony: Kim was the anti-Havel. And while Chris Hitchens commended Vaclav Havel, he excoriated Kim Jong-Il. Hitchens' best work in that regard was a May 2005 piece for Slate magazine, titled, "Worse Than 1984: North Korea, Slave State." Hitchens wrote:

"How extraordinary it is ... that it was only last week that an American president officially spoke the obvious truth about North Korea. In point of fact, Mr. Bush rather understated matters when he said that Kim Jong-Il's government runs "concentration camps." It would be truer to say that the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, as it calls itself, is a concentration camp. It would be even more accurate to say, in American idiom, that North Korea is a slave state....

"In North Korea, every person is property and is owned by a small and mad family with hereditary power. Every minute of every day, as far as regimentation can assure the fact, is spent in absolute subjection and serfdom. The private life has been entirely abolished.... Everybody in the city has to be at home and in bed by curfew time, when all the lights go off (if they haven't already failed). A recent nighttime photograph of the Korean peninsula from outer space shows something that no "free-world" propaganda could invent: a blaze of electric light all over the southern half, stopping exactly at the demilitarized zone and becoming an area of darkness in the north.

On Hitchens, Havel, and Kim—and Totalitarianism

Written by Wauneta Breeze

Friday, 06 January 2012 20:56 - Last Updated Friday, 06 January 2012 20:57

“Concealed in that pitch-black night is an imploding state where the only things that work are the police and the armed forces. The situation is actually slightly worse than indentured servitude. The slave owner historically promises, in effect, at least to keep his slaves fed. In North Korea, this compact has been broken. It is a famine state as well as a slave state.”

Now here was a form of totalitarianism that Chris Hitchens got exactly right. Kim Jong-Il was a true totalitarian, a textbook case, who portrayed himself as a god. God is not. As the late Bishop Fulton Sheen once observed, “God refuses to be a totalitarian dictator in order to abolish evil by destroying human freedom.” The evil that was Kim Jong-Il has been destroyed by death.

Hitchens was right on the relationship between Kim and evil and totalitarianism, but not on God and evil and totalitarianism. Havel, the playwright turned president, had the script right on both scores.

What, then, to make of this odd trio of deaths just before Christmas 2011?

Vaclav Havel constantly talked of “transcendence.” At his death, he hoped to ascend upward, to be with his God. Kim Jong-Il, atheist tyrant of a slave state, who persecuted believers of all stripes, expected to go nowhere but down at death—or at least opposite of where God resides.

As for Chris Hitchens, author of the enormously influential and damaging bestseller, “God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything,” my prayer at this season of hope and mercy is that he somehow remains nearer Havel than Kim.

Dr. Paul Kengor is professor of Political Science at Grove City College and executive director of The Center for Vision and Values.