

Priest, atheist debate whether belief in science makes God 'obsolete'

NEW YORK - A conversation between the Catholic theologian Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete and the outspoken atheist Christopher Hitchens was billed as an inquiry into the question "Does science make belief in God obsolete?"

In reality, the Sept. 23 post-luncheon tussle at the Pierre hotel in New York was more entertaining than enlightening, but the 325 observers didn't seem disappointed that there was no resolution to the question.

Monsignor Albacete, a former physicist, is national director of the Catholic lay group Communion and Liberation and author of "God at the Ritz: Attraction to Infinity." Mr. Hitchens is a critic and author of many books, including "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything."

The event was one in a series of "Big Questions" conversations sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation.

Monsignor Albacete said he had defended his faith in scientific circles throughout his career and was able to affirm his faith every day, in part because it is the source of honesty, he said.

When Mr. Hitchens dismissed religion as unscientific and unprovable, Monsignor Albacete quickly drew the distinction between religion and faith. He said religion is an attitude toward life and is of human origin.

"Faith identifies this mystery with a concrete reality of this world and that's where its claim has to be sustained," said Monsignor Albacete.

He explained that verifying the claim is "like trying to explain to your uncomprehending family why you are falling in love with so-and-so." And why you can't help doing so even if you understand their objections, he added.

Mr. Hitchens said religion has as its main advantage that it came before science. "If we knew what we now know, would we have ever become religious?" he asked.

Monsignor Albacete answered, "I know what is known now and I have no reason to contest it. ... It is a link between what I believe in and what makes sense in my life."

Mr. Hitchens said atheists appreciated mystery and were not interested in reducing all knowledge to formulas. Nonetheless, they "make a distinction between the numinous and the transcendent," he said.

Laughing, Monsignor Albacete said, "It's remarkable how much we agree. The birth of science is a beautiful thing. One of the reasons is its purifying power over superstition and uncritical religious convictions and practices."

The priest said "science is a blessing," the fruits of which he welcomes and admires in his own life.

"My faith encourages me to tell science that it is worthwhile to pursue its path and its integrity because science is very knowing and very beautiful. It has been as misused as religion in the history of the world. Neither has a claim to moral superiority," Monsignor Albacete said.

Mr. Hitchens said that even a miracle would not convince him of the existence of a Christian God. "If I saw a miracle, I would be inclined to doubt the evidence of my own eyes," he said.

Monsignor Albacete responded that even Jesus had a poor opinion of the efficacy of miracles near the end of his life, quoting from Chapter 16, Verse 31, of St. Luke's Gospel: "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead."

He also said that Jesus reminded his followers that only their demonstrated love for others would cause people to believe in him.

Mr. Hitchens said that no one can make love compulsory. He continued, "Compulsory love, of someone you also fear, is too much to me like a celestial North Korea," where one is compelled to offer praise and thanks each day to the all-

powerful leader and even dying doesn't release a person from the obligation.

Monsignor Albacete responded by quoting Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."