**Christianity – A Force for Good?**

Holding Christianity Accountable for its Actions and Doctrines

**Introduction**

This is the second part of my… I suppose ‘rant’ is the right word, against Christianity. The first was concerned with the Bible and the alleged existence of God. I dug deeply into the Bible where I analysed the stories you often hear often recited and praised in churches by people who must clearly have not read them properly, and the sayings allegedly attributable to God, which to be fair, make a mockery of the Being supposed to be the creator of the universe. I looked at what Christians believe and compared it to cold, hard facts. I also focused on arguments for and against God to assess the plausibility of the ‘God claim.’ I found Christianity lacking on all counts.

This essay however, I have planned, allowing for a few detours where necessary, as essentially an answer to the question, “Has Christianity been a force for good?” Wherever possible, I intend to keep this overall question in mind and hopefully even the detours I expect to make, will serve to flesh out and support my claim that Christianity has definitely failed in this respect and any claims to the contrary are wishful thinking on behalf of largely well-intentioned but ultimately misguided adherents.

**Christianity**

Before we can even begin to answer the question that the title of this essay raises, we need to clearly define exactly what we are talking about. The importance of this was rammed home to me during a friendly e-mail debate I recently engaged in with a friend. We exchanged about four e-mails each and the more we talked, the more frustrated I became with the dialogue. Eventually, I came to understand that the reason for my frustration was because we had totally different conceptions of Christianity.

I had accepted, and was attacking, Christianity as it is taught in churches all across the world. Sure, there are many different ‘strains’ of Christianity and even within each denomination (perhaps I shouldn’t compare religion to a virus) every church, every pastor, even every individual has a slightly different conception of their faith, but there are consistent themes and elements that underlie all these differences.

My friend, however, held to what I have come to think of as a ‘neo-Christian’ faith. This is a faith position which interprets all doctrine in the best possible way, using all the philosophical or societal ‘enlightenment’ and ‘humanist’ advances in thought to bolster what the believer obviously perceives as a flawed system. It is a Christianity which appeals to the rational, scientifically-minded individual because it rejects all myth… maybe ‘reject’ is too harsh… it *doesn’t rely* on the myths that tend to be central to all religions. Neo-Christianity has no need to believe that Moses parted the Red Sea, or that God spoke to Abraham, or that Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, even the notion of God is a very watered-down one compared to what you have heard Christians preach for 2,000 odd years. I one day cornered my friend and he admitted that he believed in God but that there could be no contact between the Heavenly and the mortal. Hardly the God we read about in the Bible.[[1]](#footnote-1)

An example will better serve to illustrate my point. I apologise in advance to my friend who is probably tired of hearing me bleat on about it by now. I complained about the notion of original sin, that is, the teaching that every human is born into a state of sin (St Augustine would have you believe that it is transferred to the next generation through the semen[[2]](#endnote-1)) and this sin cannot be forgiven on your own, i.e. you must accept Jesus Christ as your personal saviour to wash away this black mark on your little, baby’s soul. My complaint was basically that this is a negative, life-inhibiting belief and as such, a part of the reason why I reject the idea that Christianity is a positive force in the world.

My friend countered that I had taken the notion in the worst possible light and he considered original sin to be (I’m paraphrasing here) an acknowledgement of the evil that every human is born capable of and which needs to be guarded against.

Now, my friend’s interpretation of original sin is, in a word… fine. I don’t have a problem with it and I would never argue against it. But it *isn’t* Christianity and it *isn’t* a part of Christian dogma. At the best, it’s a truism that belongs in a sociology 101 course, which makes it nice, but ultimately unhelpful (as most truisms are) and certainly out of place in a discussion about Christianity. If you have to work so hard to *re*-interpret a belief to make it palatable to you, then you should probably ask yourself if you’ve chosen the right belief system in the first place.

He had taken a negative, senseless doctrine and reinterpreted it in such a way that it became an innocent, even insightful observation about humanity. What’s wrong with that? Nothing. But it’s not Christianity. No priest will be preaching that conception of original sin from the pulpits on Sunday mornings and you won’t find it in any Biblical commentaries (of course, original sin isn’t explicitly mentioned in the Bible anyway).

Neo-Christianity can argue that parts of Christianity have been misinterpreted and misused from the very beginning and they are, in fact, setting these misinterpretations right. That is its strength – it is not bound by historical decisions and acts, everything is open to re-interpretation. Of course, that is also its weakness; if everything is open to reinterpretation then nothing is sacred, as it were. They can take such liberties with their religion that anything can be reinterpreted or reworked in the best possible light, in line with contemporary ideals and values.

As I mentioned in my next e-mail to my friend, he was finding all sorts of gems buried in Christianity only because he had already put them there himself.

So, we need a clear understanding of exactly what Christianity is. Well, in my first essay I outlined a set of nine propositions I called the ‘Myths of Christianity’ each of which I chose because they tend to transcend denominational boundaries and strike right at the heart of the religion. I have reprinted them below for your reference:

Myths of Christianity

1. God exists and loves us.
2. The devil exists and is the exact opposite of God.
3. The Holy Ghost/Holy Spirit exists.
4. Original Sin exists and afflicts every human.
5. Jesus Christ was real and was the Son of God.
6. Jesus Christ died for our sins.
7. The Bible is trustworthy and therefore accurate.
8. Heaven and hell exist – Christians will go to heaven, sinners will go to hell.
9. Jesus Christ will return to Earth at some time and save his followers.

Now, I stand by this list and think any real Christian would find nothing within these myths which conflicts with anything they believe (excluding perhaps my use of the word ‘myth’ to describe them).

In my first essay, I analysed each of these beliefs and concluded that none of them passed muster. I won’t delve into that discussion again here. I am not concerned with proving the falsehood or veracity of Christianity’s claims. As I’ve already mentioned, this essay will look at whether Christianity (as a real world institution founded on the above beliefs) has been a force for good or not. And whenever I use the word ‘Christianity’ from here on out, I am referring to the above ‘myths’ and the way they were implemented in the institution that was to become known as Christianity.

There are three more things I want to mention here. One is an expansion of my definition and the other two are explanations of why I omitted certain things which many people consider fundamentally Christian.

The expansion is a crucial point which needs to be understood if you ever hope to get to the heart of Christianity. You will notice that none of the above ‘Myths of Christianity’ mentions anything about morality or distinguishing right from wrong. This is intentional, because as Dan Barker has noted, ultimately Christianity is not a system of morality, it is a system of salvation. Christianity is founded on the premise that God exists and He will judge you after you die. If you have followed His rules, you’re off to heaven, if not, it’s hell for you.

The main focus of Christianity is on saving your eternal soul; that is, getting into heaven when you die. It’s always been about that, it’s still about that and anything else that Christians preach is a smokescreen. Admittedly, it’s not always a deliberate smokescreen being erected but it is a smokescreen nonetheless. And this neatly brings me to my second point.

What about Christian charity, Christian love and Christian goodwill? Don’t they deserve to be included in a comprehensive definition of Christianity? The problem is that these things are all contingent, as even a cursory glance at Christianity’s chequered past will reveal.

Where was Christian love during the Inquisition? Where was Christian goodwill when they were burning ‘witches’ at the stake? Where was Christian charity during the Crusades and the frequent verbal and physical attacks on Jews? Undoubtedly there have also been Christians who have espoused these values for all the right reasons but this only proves my point. They did *not* do so because of Christianity. If Christianity was the cause of these attitudes of love, charity and so on, then Christianity (as a religion) and the church (as an institution) and its leaders (as its representatives on Earth) should have been exemplars of these virtues. We just don’t find that in history.

Naturally, the Inquisitors responsible for torturing their poor victims in order to learn the names of all their accomplices felt that they were acting in full accordance with the supposed ‘virtues’ of Christianity. They were undoubtedly able to justify their behaviour; they were after all acting out of love for the innocent Christians in society who were at risk of being led astray by the devil-worshipping individual hanging from his arms above burning coals. Not only that, they were also acting out of love for the poor, lost man before them whose eternal soul was in grave danger of burning in hell for eternity.

You see, love, charity and all other ‘virtues’ of this nature are infinitely elastic and seem to be appropriate no matter what the individual is actually doing (at least to the individual him or herself). A Christian is showing Christian love equally when caring for the sick, building hospitals, burning witches or hastening hell-bound souls on their way to their fiery destination. These virtues are omnipresent, no matter the situation, and as such they lose all meaning.

But the one thing that has remained objectively constant and transcends these flexible ‘virtues’ is the belief that God is going to judge you after your death and either welcome you into heaven or condemn you to hell.

Third, Christian love is ultimately a counterfeit form of love. Christians will tell you that God is love and He loves you but in all of the Old Testament God never once says He loves His chosen people. Does that shock you? If it doesn’t I will repeat it because it should shock you… to the core. In all of the pages and pages of dialogue we have from God, He never once says He loves His chosen people. Isn’t that strange?

What’s even stranger is that God (who is famous for His supposed infinite mercy) doesn’t love us enough (or *can’t* love us enough) to forgive our great, great… ancestors Adam and Eve (it wasn’t even our fault, I didn’t eat any apples from any forbidden trees; did you?) for sinning in the Garden. Instead He demands the blood of His only begotten son as payment. Is that real love? No. That makes a mockery of love.

Let’s not forget that if you don’t love God, you go to hell, not for a sentence of five or ten years but for an *eternity* of suffering. God extends His love to us and invites us into His domain *if and only if* we love Him in return. This is conditional love and is the weakest, most jealous, most possessive form of love possible. It’s so inferior that I struggle to even call it love in the first place.

How about Jesus? Jesus merely affirms the conditional status of His and His Father’s love. John 15:10 “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” John 14:21 “And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him.”

This attitude is at the essence of all Christian virtues. It is a travesty that Christianity has been able to misappropriate and pervert these virtues until we no longer even recognise what they mean anymore. Christianity has covered its rotten core with a thin veneer of ‘virtues’ which they have, through centuries of oppression, succeeded in convincing us are genuine.

Unconditional love is just that; not contingent on anything. If my love is truly *un*conditional then it doesn’t matter whether you love me, hate me, honour me or spit on me; I will always love you. Jesus is quite clear that His love is the exact opposite of this.

The irony of the story is that paganism was far less conditional in its worship. The Greeks and the Romans were extremely accommodating of new gods. Conquered areas were often allowed to preserve their gods and goddesses, they just had to make room for one or two new members too. There was none of this jealous, possessive, monopolising love that the Christian God demanded. And yet, Christianity managed to convince us that it was somehow more genuine. It did this by throwing around popular words, like ‘love’ and ‘charity;’ words it clearly doesn’t understand.

Bertrand Russell agrees with my objections to defining Christianity with terms like, Christian ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ when he tells us that he “cannot accept such a definition. Apart from other objections to it, it seems rude to Jews, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and other non-Christians, who, so far as history shows, have been at least as apt as Christians to practice the virtues which some modern Christians arrogantly claim as distinctive of their own religion.”[[3]](#endnote-2)

The so called ‘Christian virtues’ are mere appendices, an artificial veneer lacquered over the poisoned core of Christianity. Christianity is not about acting right or treating each other well or loving or giving; it’s about mindless devotion to a jealous, insecure deity, all with an eye to where you will go after you die. This is why I reject those ‘virtues’ and emphasise the salvation aspect of Christianity in my definition.

**Some Important Preliminaries**

Looking at History without “True Faith” Blinders

The very first issue I want to deal with involves the oft-repeated exclamation about the ‘spirit’ of Christianity and what I call the ‘true faith’ blinders that many Christians don before they examine their faith’s sometimes shady past. The reason we need to dissect this pervasive idea is because it qualifies as a veritable ‘get out of jail free card’ for almost any offence non-Christians level at Christianity.

The basic defence goes something like this; “But they didn’t adhere to the real Christian spirit.” You point out the horrors of the Inquisition (and they were horrors) and Christians sombrely nod their head in agreement while saying something like, “Yes, the church lost its way… of course, *true* Christianity would never have condoned such acts.”

The Christian making the above claim has already been sucked into a fallacy which is now tainting all of his or her thoughts on the subject. The fallacy, broken down, looks like this:

1. God is good.
2. Christianity is based on / comes from God.
3. Therefore Christianity must be good.
4. Therefore the effects of anything Christian must be good.

That all might seem valid after a cursory look, but upon closer inspection we find that those first and second assumptions are actually highly uncertain.

Let’s quickly take the first one. God is good. On what evidence is this actually based? Now, it might seem, not just ridiculous, but completely absurd, almost to the point of having made a logical, *a priori* error, to even question the notion… and I hope it does. The reason I hope this, is that if it seems ludicrous to question God’s goodness then my point has already been half proven.

We must next ask ourselves why it seems this ridiculous to question God’s goodness. Is it because God has demonstrated His goodness to us? Is it because he protects His precious Christians so well that they never suffer any harm? Is it because He has told us? If you’re perfectly honest with yourself, you will find that the answer to all of those questions is in the negative.[[4]](#footnote-2)

And yet despite all of these ‘no’s’, it nevertheless seems absurd to question the goodness of God. There is a reason for that. It’s because the notion of God has been linked with goodness and rammed down your ancestor’s throats for so many centuries that the two have become inextricably interwoven. Whether it’s true or false, the **only** reason it seems so evident that God is goodness is because we have been brainwashed to believe it. And the strength of that conviction, in the face of what turns out to be absolutely no evidence at all, is the first hint that we’ve been brainwashed.

Consider this. Imagine that an acquaintance you have known and been friendly with for some time has been arrested on a murder charge. When you first hear of the accusation, what would your reaction be? I’m sure you would be surprised at the very least. You might resist the accusation. Depending on your assessment of his or her character, you might even find it impossible to believe; but there would be nothing making the claim *logically* impossible. This is important. It might be unlikely, it might even be untrue, but it’s still logically possible for your acquaintance to be a murderer. There is nothing logically preventing it from being true.

What if I suggested to you that two plus two actually equalled five? What would be your reaction to that? Well, hopefully your reaction would not just be surprise as in the first case, but downright incredulity. It doesn’t even make sense. Our entire mathematical understanding is founded in such a way that two plus two *must* equal four. My claim is not just impossible to believe, it’s *logically* impossible.

Now when I suggested to you that God may not be good; I am willing to bet that your initial reaction was not the same as if I had suggested that your acquaintance was a murderer. Instead, I bet your reaction was more like the second case in which I attempted to violate the laws of logic.

This is a revealing fact. Here’s why. Saying God isn’t good *seems* to be logically impossible… but, brace yourself… *it isn’t*. There is no logical contradiction in saying that God is not good. It doesn’t violate the laws of physics and there is no logical error in the statement. There can never be any logical inconsistency when stating attributes belonging to an entity. If I say that I am short (I am not, at least in some circles), the claim is false, but not *logically* impossible. I *could* have been short.

So, I return to the question which brought us here. Why does God being evil seem logically impossible? What can make a logically valid statement seem to be logically impossible? The **only** thing that can cause this unnatural state is being told something for so long that its opposite *becomes* apparently logically impossible for the believer. This can only happen when a notion seeps into the very consciousness of a society, when it becomes so firmly embedded in the culture that it takes on a life of its own.

Even direct experience and observation are insufficient to create a logical truth. Observing that every time I drop my apple it falls to the ground, does not make it logically impossible that on my one billionth try, the apple will mysteriously hover in mid-air or shoot up into space. Just because I experience that every time when I kiss my wife, she kisses me back, does not logically preclude me moving to kiss her one day and her drawing back and slapping me. She might never want to do it and it might in fact, never happen, but it’s still a logical possibility.

So, *even if* you believe that only a good God could have created such a perfect world for us to live in (which it manifestly isn’t), there is nothing logically inconsistent in supposing the opposite. *Even if* God Himself told you He was good, He may have been lying. (There’s nothing logically inconsistent about that either!)

And yet God being bad *seems* to be logically inconsistent.

Something that is in fact, *not* a logical impossibility can only come to seem to be, through very extensive brainwashing. And if you reflect back on our history, it’s quite apparent that that is exactly what has happened. For centuries, it was actually *illegal* to believe that God didn’t exist and that He didn’t come to us as our saviour in the form of Jesus Christ.

I have gone into quite a bit of detail here (I really wanted to cover all my bases to convince any hardliners out there who might happen to be reading this) but the bottom line is that we have simply and arbitrarily defined God as good.

We define a ‘watch’ as a device worn on our wrists which keeps time, and over centuries of use, the word has become inextricably tied to its definition… but we could have just as easily called a ‘watch,’ a ‘clock.’ And if we had, the word ‘clock’ would now have become just as inextricably tied to the definition.

The second premise in my mini-argument above, “Christianity is based on / comes from God,” is just as susceptible to exactly the same argument. Defining Christianity as something linked to God is merely an attempt to place ‘Christianity’ above criticism. This allows the whole, “It’s not *real* Christianity” argument in the first place. Linking Christianity to God and God to good is all a sham. Christianity is a real-world institution created and applied by real-world humans. Simply claiming that it and all of its actions are in some way derived from God, is not just false, but dishonest as well.

Of course, the third and fourth statements are the unsustainable conclusions drawn from those unsustainable premises. To complete the argument as it applies in my Inquisition case, we need to make two further additions:

1. The Inquisition and its effects were bad.
2. Therefore the Inquisition was not Christian.

Now these numbers 5 and 6 are applied by Christians in every case imaginable. The Crusades were bad? Just substitute out the word “Inquisition.” The Crusades were good? There’s a 5 and 6 for that too:

5. The Crusades and their effects were good.

6. Therefore the Crusades were Christian.

Hopefully by now, you can see that the final conclusion is always guaranteed to protect the sanctity and ‘goodness’ of Christianity. If you have bought into the initial 1-4 fallacy, then every 5-6 you can imagine will always leave Christianity smelling like roses. An appeal to “true” Christianity is nothing more than an excuse for acts which have turned out to look bad when viewed in light of our current values and morals.

In this essay, I will **not** allow such slippery back door escapes. I will force Christians to take their ‘true faith’ blinders off and confront their religion as it really is, in all of its glory *and* shame, as a real-world institution run by real-world people.

But, as some of you who have read my first essay may not be surprised to discover, I do not plan to rest there. I also happen to believe that even the ‘true faith’ of Christianity (as it appears to a Christian with their ‘true faith’ blinders on) does not deserve praise as a force for good in the world. Therefore, I also plan to play devil’s advocate, as it were, and confront Christianity as a religion, independent from the attitudes and actions of its human proponents and institutions.

So, with that said, there are actually two aspects of Christianity that this essay needs to focus on in order to draw a thorough conclusion. To that end, each chapter in the main part of this essay will have a twofold goal. The first will be to attempt an objective look at historical facts to determine exactly *what* happened. This will require an analysis of the real-world actions and effects of Christianity as an institution implemented and run by Christians. The second will be to see if the ‘true’ Christian spirit can be called upon to excuse or enhance those facts. This will require a detailed analysis of the, ‘theory’ if you like, behind Christianity, which is basically the doctrines that Christianity is built on and includes those nine tenets of the faith that I mentioned earlier.

These two aspects do not always coincide, for better or for worse, but they are nevertheless very different ways of interpreting and answering the question, “Has Christianity been a force for good?”

The first aspect, Christianity as a real-world institution, includes primarily the actions of the Church and the people who define themselves as Christian. To be completely fair and unbiased, we **must** include both the actions of the above groups that were positive and also those which were… less than positive.

What this means is that there will be no dodging the actions of some (as “un-Christian” or not “true Christianity”) in favour of the exemplars of the faith. We need to include all Christians and all of their actions in order to answer our question truthfully.

The second aspect, Christianity as a religion, will focus mainly on doctrine and the above nine tenets irrespective of the actions of individual Christians or Christian institutions. Obviously, we will also look to the Bible (as the Word of God this should offer a crystal clear assessment of Christianity as a faith) and the acts of Jesus; I mean Jesus/God because, of course, he was(/is?) both.

I perceive this aspect of the discussion to be just as important as the first because if we don’t thoroughly deal with the religion and the beliefs that it entails, we give Christians a bastion to return to where they think they are safe with their illusions.

Even if we conclusively demonstrate that Christianity as a real-world institution was *not* a force for good, a modern Christian might still mistakenly believe that the tenets of Christianity when applied correctly and sincerely, still lead to goodness. This is an illusion I would consider myself remiss if I did not attempt to correct.

The Person or the Creed?

We must be very careful when discussing the merits or drawbacks of any organisation not to conflate the actions of the individual with the intentions or consequences of the organisation. Sometimes there is a direct correlation between the two, but more often the alleged link is overstated or misunderstood.

An example would be someone pointing to a genuinely compassionate Christian who did a lot for the poor, say, and concluding from this that Christianity therefore promotes compassion.

The problem I have with this should be obvious. The ‘therefore’ in the above chain of logic should not be there. Just because Mr C did some good things *and* he was a Christian does not mean that Christianity as a religion should also be credited with those traits.

Naturally, my drawing attention to an atheist, Miss A, and all of the good deeds she has performed would not necessarily reflect back on atheism as a movement. There are good atheists and there are bad ones. And (believe it or not) there are also good and bad Christians. Any debate that gets locked on a “What about Mr X who did this?” and “But don’t forget Miss Y who did that” level will never resolve anything.

As Bertrand Russell once said,

*“Men tend to have the beliefs that suit their passions. Cruel men believe in a cruel God and use their belief to excuse their cruelty. Only kindly men believe in a kindly God, and they would be kindly in any case.”[[5]](#endnote-3)*

As Russell points out, good people will tend to be good and do good things, irrespective of their religious affiliation. How can you back up the claim that a Christian who did good things did them because of Christianity?

There are two problems I can see with Christian’s claiming their ‘superstars’ as being proof of Christianity’s goodness. The first is that these ‘good people’ are equally likely to have done the things they did for reasons completely unrelated to their religion. Yes, good people become good Christians, but they also become good Muslims, or good Buddhists, or good atheists. Of course, as any Christian will remind you, not every good Muslim ‘proves’ that Islam is good and not every good atheist proves that atheism is good. In fact, it proves nothing. I only ask that Christians apply the same standards to Christianity as they do to other religions.

The second problem is that those same Christians completely refuse to acknowledge the other ‘less virtuous’ Christians in the world. We will see examples of this again and again in this essay. Christians have a ridiculously one-sided view of the world, often sweeping those who don’t conform to their pre-conceived notions of Christianity as ‘not real Christians’ (which we’ve already looked at) or aberrations of some kind.

A list of Christians who did this or that tends to achieve little more than the creation of a bunch of lists. Christians build up their list of good Christians and bad atheists, I build up my list of bad Christians and good atheists… and we still haven’t touched on either Christianity or atheism.

The long and the short of it is that anyone wishing to defend the notion that Christianity was a force for good has to do more than point to one or two outstanding members of its flock. As I’ve already said, show me a good Christian and I’ll show you a bad one… or a good atheist; and we have achieved nothing.

It is often difficult to separate the people from the creed and we are so used to looking to proponents of a faith (or non-faith) for examples, but I tend to agree with Russell on this point and will strive to clearly separate the two in this essay.

Jesus

The focus on Jesus is one of the biggest differences between Christianity and Judaism. In the face of almost any criticism, Christians turn to their main man, Jesus, and they can usually find a resolution with something like “Love your enemy,” or Do unto others…” to make them feel warm and fuzzy. In this section, I just want to dissect Jesus a little and see if he is really all that he is cracked up to be.

*Jesus vs. God*

The emphasis Christians place on Jesus offers them a convenient excuse for disregarding the nonsense that God perpetrates in the Old Testament. I have already analysed the Old Testament in my first essay and won’t do so again here, but anybody who reads this first half of the Bible, after having been brought up in a Christian environment, cannot fail to be astonished at the sheer lunacy of what God says and does. He is bloodthirsty, vindictive, jealous, petty and a hundred other choice adjectives, a fair few of which Richard Dawkins identifies in *The God Delusion*. And if you read the OT, none of these things can plausibly be denied.

But Christians have the ultimate “get out of jail free” card. *None of that matters because Jesus came along and overturned everything from the OT*. While I agree that almost all of what Jesus says is in direct contradiction with God from the OT, there is a huge problem with the Christian claim that Jesus trumps the OT God.

According to Christian doctrine, Jesus *is* God. Somehow (in an explanation that takes refuge in terms like “paradox” and “Divine mystery”), he is fully human and fully God at the same time.[[6]](#footnote-3) The Bible is also accepted as the Word of God. If it isn’t, then how are we to believe anything that Jesus is purported to have said, let alone talk of the miracles he performed?

The problem is that if both of these propositions are true, then the OT God *is* Jesus and we find that God/Jesus (ever since that fateful Council of Nicaea in 325 it became *illegal* to speak of them, or even think of them, as separate beings) is contradicting himself. Is that not bizarre?

Christians claim that Jesus overturned everything from the OT (including some of God’s harsher pronouncements, like “an eye for an eye”) but in the next breath they tell us that Jesus *is* God. This is a contradiction, and even currently fashionable appeal to “paradox” will not resolve it. Christians are forced to either admit that Jesus isn’t God *or* that Jesus also said all of those terrible things in the OT and is no longer as squeaky clean as he at first seemed.

The former (Jesus isn’t God) is too central to Christianity to ever be overturned. No Christian would ever even consider this option and if you did, it would turn the whole of Christianity on its head. Which leaves the latter. Jesus/God (I considered calling this mythical hybrid “Gosus”… ah screw it, let’s do it) also said those things from the OT.

The only possible defence I can imagine to this, is that Gosus was instructing people in ways that were best for them, in ways they could understand and enact considering the situation at the time. According to this, the Israelites needed a firm hand and strict rules for hygiene, behaviour, etc. in the days of the OT, but when the Jesus half of Gosus was kicking around in Galilee, people were ready for a gentler, more humane approach.

Like everything in Christianity, if you don’t think too hard about it, this kind of makes sense… at least until you do think about it a little. When you do, you realise that this is, in fact, nonsense.

If we were looking at a situation where a more, let’s say ‘enlightened,’ human was attempting to instruct a more primitive group of people, then I could happily accept that our fictional sage might have to approach things with more tact. He or she might have to sacrifice some values in order to address more basic issues first and maybe it would be true that he or she could only impart certain truths at certain times as the primitive people became mature enough to grasp them.

However, as Christians are always telling us, Gosus is more than we can imagine, certainly much, much more than a human. And yet all of a sudden, they want us to believe that He is limited in the same way that a human would be, if placed in the same situation. This is ridiculous! Why could Gosus not have started right from ‘love thy neighbour’ instead of “let every man kill his brother.”[[7]](#footnote-4) There is simply no reason why an entity as powerful and… Divine as Gosus, should have had to ‘dumb down’ his message for a people, no matter how primitive. It would have sure saved a lot of death and tragedy if He hadn’t.

This means that it is no longer enough for Christians to smugly claim that they get their morals from Jesus and not the OT. As any sensible person must accept, they are actually the same person (at least according to the fiction of Christianity). Go Gosus!

*Love Thy Neighbour and Other Maxims*

Jesus is often credited as being the man who first encouraged the notion of universal love and universal brotherhood with things like the golden rule (do unto others…) and ‘turn the other cheek.’ While he did espouse such notions (at least according to the Bible), I have two problems with this; first, he was far from being the first to say any of these things, and second, he almost certainly didn’t mean them the way we interpret them today.

First, the golden rule appears in virtually *every single religion* *and tradition* ever known to man. Ancient Babylon, Egypt, Greece and China all formulated this basic principle hundreds, even thousands, of years before Jesus was even a glint in Mary and Joseph’s (or should I say God’s, or is that Jesus’ own?) eyes. Many people are ignorant of this fact and think that Jesus was revolutionary in teaching “That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another,”[[8]](#endnote-4) as a papyrus from Ancient Egypt puts it from around the 7th to 4th century BCE, or “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself,”[[9]](#endnote-5) as Confucius said about 500 years before Christ was born. Buddhism, Hinduism, virtually any ‘-ism’ you can imagine also incorporate this basic teaching into their philosophy.

Even more relevant, in Ancient Greece and Rome, the traditions which directly preceded Christianity, philosophers had known about and recommended the golden rule as a useful guideline for behaviour. Epictetus (a famous Stoic, although himself born after Jesus purportedly died) put it thus; “What thou avoidest suffering thyself seek not to impose on others.”[[10]](#endnote-6)

Injunctions against causing harm and even prescriptions to love your enemy are also present in all major religions and philosophies. Taoism advises “Do good unto him who has done you an injury”[[11]](#endnote-7) while Confucius says that “Those who aspire to humanity – they despise no one.”[[12]](#endnote-8) The principle of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, is fundamental to all Indian religions including Hinduism; “One should never harm the wicked or the good or even criminals meriting death”[[13]](#endnote-9) and Buddhism; “Conquer anger by love. Conquer evil by good. Conquer the stingy by giving. Conquer the liar by truth.”[[14]](#endnote-10)

Again, the Stoics independently derived their own philosophy on how to respond to enemies, as espoused here by Seneca in *De Beneficiis* VII 30.2 and 5, “’He has not repaid me with gratitude: what shall I do?’… let us give even if many of our gifts have been given in vain; none the less let us give to still others, nay, even to those at whose hands we have suffered loss.” And *De Otio* 1.4, “…give aid even to our enemies when our hand is feeble with age.”

Jesus was certainly neither the first nor the last person to have promoted such notions of universal brotherhood.

Secondly, I have reasons for doubting that the way we interpret Jesus’ claims today, was the way he necessarily intended them to be interpreted.

Modern Christians tend to view Jesus’ pronouncements of the golden rule, ‘love thy neighbour’ and ‘love thy enemies’ as endorsements for universal brotherhood and universal love. ‘Jesus was all about love’ they tell us. ‘Everyone is equal under God.’ These notions have deep connections to the humanist attitude and the resurgence of the importance of the individual which sparked to life after centuries of oppression by the Church and catapulted us into modernity through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

I don’t think Jesus had our modern day values in mind when he was making his grand claims. In support of this thesis, I will point out both specific examples where Jesus directly contradicts his supposedly lofty values, and a more general theme to his message that belies the positive slant we post-Enlightenment individuals all too frequently attribute to him.

First of all, let’s look at the impressive sounding ‘love thy neighbour.’ When we hear the word ‘neighbour,’ we tend to automatically think this word applies to any and every one, any and every race or creed. We can thank intelligent, thoughtful people (not Christianity or Jesus, although some of these intelligent people were obviously Christian) for this advance in moral thought, which, make no mistake, only occurred recently in our history.

Two thousand years ago, there would have been a very, very slim chance that Jesus was quite that expansive in his thinking. Here are a few quotes from the man himself which show he was actually quite narrow in his focus:

* Matt 15:21-28 A woman from Canaan approached Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter who is “demon-possessed.” Jesus ignores her. She urges again. This time he answers. “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Again, she begs. He responds with, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw *it* to the little dogs.” [Just in case you’re unclear here. She, being gentile, is the dog and the ‘children’ are the Jews] She continues to grovel humiliating herself before him. “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Finally, Jesus heals her daughter.
* Matt 10:5-6 As Jesus sends his disciples out to go and do wonders he commands them, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” [Those lost sheep again]

Now, Jesus is abundantly clear here that he most certainly does **not** consider non-Jews his neighbours, being willing even to withhold healings from them, which presumably cost him nothing.

So, he’s prepared to at least ignore those with a different lineage to him. How does he feel about his enemies? Is he all about loving them? Fortunately, we don’t have to interpret, extrapolate or decipher anything; Jesus is crystal clear about this;

* Matt 12:30 “He who is not with Me is against Me.” [And you thought some slick Hollywood action movie writer first came up with that, didn’t you]
* Matt 12:32 “…whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age* to come.”
* Matt 10:34 “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” [Now, if he’s not using that sword against his neighbours *or* his enemies, what’s it for?]

I hope that by now you are starting to consider the notion that maybe Jesus was not as “lovey-dovey” as many Christians seem to think. Of course, individual quotes are seldom convincing on their own but there is a far more compelling reason to knock Jesus down a rung or two.

If you are supporting your ideas with quotes, it’s not an uncommon criticism to hear that you are taking those quotes out of context and forcing the person you are quoting into a position that he or she may have never intended. In addressing this criticism, I would like to now turn to addressing Jesus’ message as a whole.

When people think of Jesus, the first things that generally come to mind are things like “love thy neighbour” and the golden rule. And why wouldn’t they? They are great maxims to live by. But here we have all slipped into that bias that comes from quoting out of context.

Yes, Jesus said those things (at least according to the Bible) but that wasn’t all he said. I have shown a few examples of some of the other beliefs he espouses, but if you ask the right question, you can reveal something that most people overlook.

That question is, “*Why* did Jesus endorse loving thy neighbour?”

Was it because, like the Stoics, Buddha, Confucius and many other great men before him, Jesus recognised that everyone, whether Roman, Greek or even barbarian (what the Greeks called any non-Greek), shared one thing in common which trumped all of their differences – their humanity? No. Was it because he recognised that doing the opposite only stunts your own growth as a human being, as Socrates thought? No.

Instead, the *primary* reason Jesus repeatedly gives for being good is, not surprisingly, one hundred percent in line with my ‘Myths of Christianity’, that is, to ensure the rewards that you will receive in heaven and avoid the punishments that could be inflicted upon you in hell. This is such a common theme in everything Jesus says, it’s no wonder Christianity was founded on these principles, fear of the Devil and hell and the promise of an afterlife. Amazingly though, we seem to have collectively forgotten that Jesus espoused these tenets just as vigorously as his less tolerant, Old Testament predecessor.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 sound beautiful when you first read them and maybe you even felt God Himself touch you as you read them for the first time. But, look at them a little closer. Every single beatitude is composed of two clauses. The first contains a character trait which Jesus valued (being meek, merciful, pure in heart, etc.) while the second is the promise of a reward (they shall inherit the earth, they shall obtain mercy, they shall see God…).

Here are some other examples where Jesus urges right action for reward (or avoidance of punishment):

* Matt 5:20 “…unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”
* Matt 5:44 “…love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”
* Mark 9:47-48 “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire – where / *‘Their worm does not die / And the fire is not quenched*.’”
* Matt 7:11 “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them…”

And these are just some of the nicer comments Jesus makes. Who could forget these other classics?

* Matt 10:33 “But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My father who is in heaven.”
* Matt 13:41-42 “The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

These quotes betray the real focus of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus was *not* all about loving thy neighbour, doing to others what you would have them do to you and universal brotherhood, as Christians seem to think; rather, he was all about pleasing the Big Guy upstairs, getting into heaven and avoiding a fiery damnation in hell. It’s not doing good because you recognise the goodness in the act, it’s doing good because your Master tells you to.

This is hardly the lofty, moral lineage that most Christians think they are heir to. Not once does Jesus even hint at anything even remotely humanistic throughout the Gospels, in fact, he explicitly states the exact opposite.

There are also a couple of uncomfortable conclusions which follow from these revelations. Isn’t it hypocritical for God to tell us we are to love our neighbour and “judge not,” yet it’s perfectly okay for God to do so? If something is good, truly good, then surely God should also do it. Jesus claims that it is wrong to respond with violence and anger (turn the other cheek) but then God (the living embodiment of Goodness, Kindness, Love and Mercy, remember) goes ahead and punishes our (also His) enemies on our behalf. How could God do something that isn’t good/right?

To say the rules don’t apply to God is a very poor excuse here. We wouldn’t think much of a King who made the rules but failed to live by any of them himself and remember, God isn’t just a good guy, He *is* goodness. If that’s true, how can He act in ways that are acknowledged as bad/wrong? It doesn’t make sense.

Not only that, instructing us to love our enemies, but with the knowledge that they will get what’s coming to them in the afterlife, is not much in the way of the ‘universal brotherhood’ that Jesus is often credited with. What Jesus is basically saying is it’s not okay for *us* to attempt to punish our enemies because God will take care of that when they die. Either way, the enemies will still be punished, just by a higher court than ours.

Many of those Christians who point to the old maxims, love thy enemies, turn the other cheek and treat others as you would have them treat you, are actually making the strong claim which other religions make, that it is undignified (they even have the nerve to say ‘unChristian’) to react with anger and violence to provocation. Think of the calm and peaceful reaction of an enlightened Buddha or the wise words of an aged Confucius here. They are saying that it takes more courage to walk away from a fight and that we shouldn’t drop to the levels of our enemies and partake in the pettier human emotions such as anger, resentment and the need for revenge. This is a noble position to take indeed and as I’ve pointed out, appears in almost all of the world’s religions and traditions.

Unfortunately, it seems Jesus didn’t agree.

While we are told not to judge and hate, it is *not* because we are all brothers and sisters united by our humanity or because those negative emotions are toxic and destructive, but rather because God has reserved the privilege of those reactions for Himself. Almost all religions recognise that it is in fact more noble to take the higher road and rise above such things… for a moment it seemed like Jesus followed them but then we saw that in the end, God Himself fails to live the creed He espouses through His only begotten son (which is really Himself). There is a word for this in English. It’s ‘hypocrisy.’ And this is the perfect description of the situation.

Here is St Paul in Romans 14:10, “But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother?” A beautiful quote, right? Don’t judge and don’t hate. Who could argue with that? Of course, I haven’t finished the quote, “For we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ.” Don’t judge and don’t hate… because only God does all of those things!

Or Jesus in Matthew 25:42 discussing what God will do after He has gathered all the nations before Him and separated them, “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels…”

Earlier I called Christianity a system of salvation. It seems we need to expand this definition because it is also clearly a system of retribution… and not even a particularly just system at that. Who would condemn a person to an eternity of hell for less than a century of not obeying God!? ““*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,”* says the Lord. And again, *“The LORD will judge His people.”* It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”[[15]](#footnote-5)

Undoubtedly, some of Jesus’ teachings had value. Who can argue with the golden rule and the prescriptions to love your neighbours *and* enemies (even if Jesus wasn’t particularly original with any of these things)? But I’m tired of Christians cherry picking the Bible and then claiming that it’s *all* love and positive maxims. If you approach the Bible with an unbiased eye and look at what Jesus says in context, you find that he was completely focused on the next life and a final Day of Judgement. Everything he did and everything he taught had this ultimate goal in mind.

In the final analysis, he also never really advocated true brotherly love and the absence of hatred and vengeance; he just delayed these things until the next life and reserved the right to dispense ‘justice’ for himself and his Father.

This is more fundamental than his exhortations to love your neighbour and turn the other cheek, and this is why, although I would never go so far as to call Jesus a bad man, I would in good conscience say that he certainly falls well short of the ideal man Christians have made him out to be.

Incidentally, Christians try to circumvent this ruthless, ‘send the bad guys to Hell’ aspect of God’s behaviour. These days, the old punisher God has gone out of fashion and so to accommodate this change of taste, neo-Christians usually completely ignore the facts (and direct quotes) and claim that Hell is not actually a place of burning fire with a pointy-eared Devil holding a pitchfork, but is actually ‘an eternity estranged from God’ or something equally nonsensical. And of course, this new kind God would never reject anyone, so God doesn’t spurn you, instead you refuse God.

This is all nonsense. And any quote from Jesus confirms this.

Sadly for Christians, in order to maintain this fiction, they are forced to completely alter the things Jesus says, and often simply ignore them, because Jesus is very clear on this point. God actively judges people and those who have failed to live up to His expectations are sent straight to Hell, do not pass go, do not collect $200.

* Luke 12:4-5 “And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Hear Him who, after He has killed has the power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!”

I’m sorry but it doesn’t get much clearer than that and on top of the “wailing and gnashing of teeth” there just isn’t any wiggle room for neo-Christians looking to put a positive (acceptable to the modern, post-Enlightenment humanist) slant on this whole being sent to Hell business.

*A Quick Note on Jesus Dying for our Sins*

While I have you here, I’m also going to quickly point out a glaring inconsistency in what became a fundamental tenet of Christianity; Jesus dying so that we can be saved.

Now, everyone knows that this notion is total nonsense anyway. I mean, God creates the Devil, creates us, and then watches while the Devil tricks us into breaking God’s rules. Plagued with the mark of original sin on our souls, God doesn’t know what to do and so He comes up with what must surely be the most insane, retarded plan ever conceived of. He impregnates a woman with Himself so that He can be born, then he allows Himself to be killed as a sacrifice to Himself, which somehow atones for that terrible sin He condemned us to in the first place.

But there is another problem which you may not be aware of. I first heard this in a mini-documentary featuring Christopher Hitchens and was immediately struck by it. Jesus came to earth in order to suffer and die so that we might achieve salvation. To fulfil this, he had to die… and yet Christians were furious at the Jews (a fury which found expression in acts of persecution for centuries afterwards, by the way), whom they blamed for killing Jesus; and Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus, also received particularly bad press for his part in this Divine tragedy.

In the days leading up to Jesus’ death, he repeatedly mentions that he knows what is coming and even accurately predicts that one of his disciples will betray him. While in Gethsemane, Judas makes a deal with the guards to point out Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. They arrest Jesus who goes without a fight eventually allowing himself to be crucified. It goes without saying that all of this happened with Jesus’ consent, because if he hadn’t wanted it to be, it wouldn’t have been; he’s God remember.

Once Jesus died, salvation was once more attainable for us (Heaven forbid that we should be able to approach God and ask for forgiveness on our own merits) and yet, despite the fact that everything apparently happened just the way Gosus (wink, wink) had foreseen/planned, later Christians got a real bee in their collective bonnet about the Jews, accusing them of being responsible for Jesus’ death as early as the 2nd century C.E.

Now, how could anyone be guilty for something which was actually good, something which God/Jesus predicted and allowed to happen? Everything happened just the way it was supposed to; God, at most planned and at least sanctioned his own murder, and yet for centuries Christians blamed Jews and demonised poor Judas, both of whom were merely pawns in a much greater game of chess God was playing with Himself.

No matter how you look at this fable, it comes out looking and sounding like nothing more than a tall tale. Hardly surprising though, is it?

**Part One:**

**Has Christianity Been a Force for Good?**

**Slavery**

This is an interesting topic and never fails to earn itself a feature in any decent apologist’s arsenal of pros for Christianity. Christians were the first to abolish slavery, they tell us. And why wouldn’t they have been? It’s all part of the Christian ethic, right? We are all equal in the eyes of God.

The Facts

For it to be true that Christianity was the sole motivating force behind abolitionism; there *must* have been a temporal consistency between the rise of the church and the start of abolitionism. If some creed (C) is claimed to be the cause of the abolishment of some behaviour (B) and C finds itself in a position of authority (through peaceful means or violent oppression, we’ll touch on this later) then B must be eliminated shortly afterwards.

If this didn’t happen, it would be like a political party completely against drugs, being voted into power but then not attempting to pass any laws regarding the distribution or taking of drugs and as a result of this the drug problem not improving. It just doesn’t make sense.

Well, one of the earliest proponents of abolitionism appears in the 16th century, a Dominican priest, Bartolome de las Casas, who was appalled by the atrocities committed by Spanish settlers in the Americas. But abolitionism didn’t really get moving until the 17th and 18th centuries when various evangelical groups condemned it as un-Christian and thinkers in the Enlightenment took issue with slavery violating the rights of man.

Now, Christianity was up and running a long, long time before this. Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the State in the 4th century, so we can consider this period to be when Christianity, as the institution we all know and love really started to take over the world.

If Christianity started its reign in the 4th century and abolitionism wasn’t even mentioned until over 1,000 years later, how in hell can anyone claim that Christianity eliminated slavery?!

I’m sorry, but that just doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s almost laughable and if it wasn’t for the fact that millions of Christians believe this nonsense, I would consider it a joke. No one can possibly construct a realistic timeline depicting Christianity’s struggle against cultural norms and finally overcoming them to succeed in outlawing slavery… 1,200 years later!! That’s a dedicated (and invisible/silent) campaign!!

Let’s consider another, more sensible option. By the 14th century, the cultural renaissance had kicked off in Italy and was sparking various humanistic values and new ways of thinking about man and his place in the universe (sorry ladies, we didn’t get around to including you for a few more centuries). It was a time of great change and all aspects of what we now call the humanities were revolutionised.

This more enlightened view of humanity, along with a gradual awareness that there were other people living totally separate (and maybe just as valid) lives halfway around the globe (thank you Christopher Columbus) encouraged a few of the more open-minded individuals in our midst at the time, to consider for the first time that maybe there was something intrinsically flawed with the notion of enslaving one man to another. As societies change, it is only natural for that society’s values and norms to change as well. At these times religion (if it wants to survive) generally picks up on those changes and aligns itself with them.[[16]](#footnote-6)

But what about the fact that, as I admitted earlier, the first abolitionists were religious? Doesn’t this show Christianity as a force for good? Well, it would, but the timing in these good Christians’ actions is a little suspicious. Why did Christianity have to wait for the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to protest against slavery?

This just doesn’t make sense until you realise that they didn’t protest against slavery because of their faith, which had been around for centuries; they protested because of the changes society was undergoing. It was a gradual evolution of norms and values which spurred abolitionism, not Christianity.

Not just that, but who were these people campaigning against? Wicked, sinning heathens? Of course not. All of the Spanish settlers in the New World that our priest was so angry with were Roman Catholics! Atheism still hadn’t been ‘invented,’ and they certainly weren’t Muslims or Buddhists! So, we have Christians fighting against other Christians over whether slavery was right or wrong. And yet they tell us that Christianity single-handedly abolished slavery.

An even more impressive example of this was the civil war in America during the 19th century. A Christian North against slavery was pitted against a Christian South for slavery. And both could quote the Bible in their defence!!

William Wilberforce’s name invariably comes up in Christian claims regarding abolitionism. Was he a vital piece in the abolition puzzle? Absolutely. Was he also a Christian? Yes (at least, after his conversion experience when he was about 26), but as I have pointed out already, we must be very wary about imputing individual’s actions to the religion they happen to be a part of.

Wilberforce is frequently championed by overzealous Christian apologists as a pillar of their fine religion, which he definitely was and I don’t want to deny that or take it from Christians. As far as I’m concerned it’s a fact. But what about all of the equally Christian Christians who defended slavery across the world and through the ages? Do you know their names? Probably not, because Christians don’t venerate these people and create websites in their names, and so on. Christians conveniently happen to ‘forget’ about those people and any incidents that don’t align with their own opinions on their religion.

For every Christian who opposed slavery, how many were there who defended it? Far, far too many. But that isn’t the startling fact. The startling fact is that Christians will stand before you and without so much as blinking, point to the few, like Bartolome de las Casas and William Wilberforce as examples of Christianity while completely ignoring the many, like the Southern States of America, or the Spanish Roman Catholic settlers as equal examples of Christianity.

I refuse to allow this one-sided thinking to continue unchallenged. If Christians are going to point to their Saints (the overwhelming minority) to make their points for them, I also demand that they acknowledge the other Christians (the overwhelming majority) who reveal the lie.

To continue the analogy I started earlier, that’s like our anti-drugs party getting into power in 2010, and not just doing absolutely nothing about drugs for 1,200 years, but continuing to use and support drug use during that time! Then, finally, in response to an overwhelmingly small minority of backbenchers in their party AND other members in other political parties AND the general population, finally trying to outlaw drugs in 3210! And then to finally kick you in the crotch, they try to take credit for it and claim that they brought about the end of drug use!

So, it’s clear that Christianity was in no way the driving force behind abolitionism. It simply cannot have been because Christians were living side by side with and actively participating in slavery for 1,200 years, but up until now we haven’t looked at many real examples. Let’s dig out the magnifying glass and our history books for a while.

Note that we still haven’t touched on Christianity as a theory, that is, the doctrines that make up Christianity, to see if that gives us any reasons for rejecting slavery. We are still locked on what actually happened; the facts.

Although it might be convincingly argued that Christianity’s response to slavery has been mixed throughout its chequered history and a number of Christians have opposed various instances of slavery, as a whole, Christianity has never condoned the *institution* of slavery.[[17]](#endnote-11)

Fair enough; Christianity didn’t start slavery. Slavery was a part of virtually every culture both before and after Christianity, but if Christians want to make the claim that their faith is fundamentally incompatible with slavery and slavery was eradicated largely thanks to them, they need to have done more than just ‘gone along with the crowd.’

Some Christians use this as a defence. *No one* thought slavery was wrong, neither Christians nor non-Christians, so, “why are you holding Christians to a higher standard than the rest of the world?”

I’m not holding Christianity to a higher standard. Christians are! When they tell me that slavery violates the principles of their religion and that they answer to God, it is they who are putting Christianity up on a pedestal.

If Christians are willing to allow their religion and its principles to have evolved and changed over time like any other human enterprise, then I will retract my claws and be done with it. But that will never happen because Christianity supposedly came from God, not humans. This ‘fact,’ while being their greatest claim to superiority, is also a thorn in their collective side because it means that throughout history it *cannot* have ever been wrong. If Christianity has erred in some way, then all of a sudden, it’s no longer perfect. It’s just another human invention. But I digress…

Right from the inception of Christianity, St Paul condoned slavery by ordering slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5-9). However, he also pointed out that masters should treat their slaves well, since the masters themselves also had a higher master, in God.

Of course, Christians weren’t the first ones to recommend that slaves be treated with respect. The Stoics, long before Christianity rose to power, also preached the same message. Seneca in one of his letters says, “Remember, if you please, that the man you call slave springs from the same seed, enjoys the same daylight, breathes like you, lives like you, dies like you…”[[18]](#endnote-12) Of course, one of the three most famous Roman Stoics, Epictetus, was a former slave himself, so his sympathy for slaves is more than understandable.

As Charles Freeman makes clear in *The Closing of the Western Mind*, not only did wealthier Christians own slaves themselves, but this attitude of St Paul’s, recommending that masters themselves remember that they are in fact slaves of God, is actually a further endorsement of slavery.

I understand that a Christian is probably unable to see this as a negative, but think about it for a second. How can any relationship where one party is master and the other servant or slave, ever be healthy? This is where what I call Christian ‘blindness’ comes in (not to be confused with the ‘true faith blinders’ I mentioned earlier). Christian blindness refers to the way, as soon as you mention God, Christians are completely unable to see anything wrong.

Mention that you have a master whom you are slave to, and every Christian (indeed any person Christian or not) would immediately react negatively. But if that master is God, Christians are suddenly pleased and proud of their slavery. Senseless.

*“But God is nothing like a human master…”* It doesn’t matter. We are still slaves according to Paul. Truth be told, modern Christians can tolerate this no more than the rest of us but they have no choice. St Paul said it so it *can’t* be wrong. Somehow they have to reconcile Paul’s unfortunate views with their modern sensibilities, and so through a wilful act of self-deception, they convince themselves that being “slaves of Christ” is actually a good thing.

*“But God is so much greater than us that we can never have an equal relationship with Him. In this way we are slaves…”* Nonsense. Even an unequal relationship between two people is NEVER, EVER described according to a master/slave framework. Why not a teacher/student or parent/child framework? Those are obviously positive relationships but Paul wasn’t content with that. He went the slave route.

I stand by my commonsense claim that a master/slave relationship is **always** negative.

The point is that Christianity (through Paul) reinforced slavery in two ways, first by “exhorting actual slaves to work hard” and the second is by “defining Christians as slaves of Christ.”[[19]](#endnote-13)

The days of the early Church basically picked up where Paul left off and didn’t improve things much.

Freeman points out that Basil of Caesarea refused escaped slaves who sought admission to monasteries unless their masters had been excessively cruel,[[20]](#endnote-14) Leo, Bishop of Rome (440-461), mandated that slaves were ineligible for ordination and St Augustine, despite not being able to justify slavery under natural law, deemed that it was God’s punishment for evil. “The prime cause… of slavery is sin, which brings man under the dominion of his fellow – that which does not happen save by the judgement of God, with whom is no unrighteousness, and who knows how to award fit punishments to every variety of offence.”[[21]](#endnote-15)

St John Chrysostom, in a passage that could have come straight from the pen of St Paul himself, wrote, “The slave should be resigned to his lot, in obeying his master he is obeying God…”[[22]](#endnote-16)

Gregory 1, in 600, ‘wisely’ noted that “All men are equal by nature but… a hidden dispensation of providence has arranged a hierarchy of merit and rulership, in that the differences between classes of men have arisen as a result of sin and are ordained by divine justice.”[[23]](#endnote-17) Translation: “Of course, all men are equal… but… ahem, God, through sin, has provided us a way of revealing those of us who are actually *not* equal, ahem…”

The Middle Ages didn’t provide much relief or ‘Christian guidance.’ Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church gradually began enforcing the rule that a Christian could not be enslaved, although of, course, the enslavement of non-Christians still remained permissible.

Both the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils in 1179 and 1215 respectively, imposed slavery on anybody helping the Saracens declaring that, not only would they be cut off from communion and excommunicated, but “if they are captured they should become the slaves of their captors.”[[24]](#endnote-18)

St Thomas Aquinas also endorsed slavery although he had to jump through some hoops to make it consistent with his formulation of natural law where all men are equal by nature. He followed Augustine in deeming slavery a punishment for sin as long as the slavery didn’t violate the slave’s rights to food, sleep, marriage, and so on.

Curiously enough though, he found that a slave woman’s children could be born into slavery and asserted that anyone who encourages a slave to escape is guilty of theft because (and here’s one of those hoops), while the slave himself isn’t property, the *labour* of the slave belongs to the master. (Try explaining that distinction to your local slave!)

J.F. Maxwell (1975) in his book *The Catholic Church and Slavery* comments on how Catholic clergy, religious orders and even Popes owned slaves. During the Age of Discovery, a period starting in the 15th century and lasting into the 17th century, slavery was rampant and two Papal Bulls from Pope Nicholas V, Dum Diversas and Romanus Pontifex, left the Church’s official position on slavery in no doubt.

Dum Diversas was issued in 1452 and explicitly authorised the Kings of Spain and Portugal to “invade, search out, capture, and subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be… and to reduce their persons into perpetual slavery.”[[25]](#endnote-19) This was a key measure in facilitating the Portuguese slave trade from West Africa.

Romanus Pontifex was issued in 1455 as a follow up to Dum Diversas and extended to the Catholic nations of Europe, dominion over all lands discovered or conquered during the Age of Discovery. It further encouraged the enslavement of (of course, non-Christian) peoples in Africa and the New World.

At this time, as the Renaissance began sweeping across Europe, feelings of social responsibility and a growing realisation of human rights and humanist sentiment began infiltrating some more enlightened members of society and debates about the morality of slavery began surfacing.

Of course, all those arguing against slavery were Christians, but that means nothing because it was essentially illegal to believe anything else (and the notion of holding no religion at all was yet to grace man’s gradually opening mind). Naturally, we must remember that all of those arguing *for* slavery were also Christians.

This is where the answer to our question rears its head most obviously if we have eyes to see. If Christians were arguing both for and against slavery then how can it possibly have been because of Christianity that abolitionism got under way? It can’t. And it didn’t. It began because culturally and socially, people began to refine their views on humanity and morality.

It’s a simple rule. When looking for the cause of a change, we naturally look for something new that was introduced into the system. Christianity had been around for a good thousand years by this time, but the intellectual and cultural transformation that had sparked in Italy was just getting under way. The humanist aspect of the Renaissance with its focus on the importance of the individual and the abilities of the human mind perfectly accounts for this change in attitude.

About the best that the Church could muster in resisting slavery were a number of Papal Bulls which condemned ‘unjust’ enslavement and mistreatment of Native Americans by Spanish and Portuguese *Christians*, which these good Christians then largely ignored.

This sounds moderately good for the Church until you reflect on the flip side of the above statement, being that ‘just’ enslavement was still accepted. ‘Just’ enslavement, was presumably enslavement that was not excessively cruel, slavery proceeding from a legitimate war or voluntary sale and of course, not imposed on Christians. This is a far cry from the ‘universal brotherhood’ and ‘we are all equal in the eyes of God’ claims made by most Christians today when they talk about slavery.

Catholic missionaries, such as the Jesuits, did work to improve conditions for slaves, but at the same time, they also owned slaves themselves! Hayes (1998) notes that Urban VIII in 1629, Innocent X in 1645 and Alexander VIII in 1661, were all personally involved in buying Muslim galley slaves.

Despite half a step taken in the right direction, the Church continued to take giant leaps backwards and even placed a number of books critical of slavery on the notorious Index of Forbidden Books, between the 16th and 19th centuries.[[26]](#endnote-20)

Finally, long after another revolutionary secular movement had gripped Europe, the Enlightenment, Pope Gregory XVI issued a Papal Bull in 1839, In Supremo Apostolatus, condemning the slave trade. Naturally, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary (just a sample of which, I have provided above) he claimed that Christianity had been working to this end for centuries. It has wisely been noted by commentators that Gregory condemned the slave trade, not slavery itself; an important point.

Making this exact point for me, just 27 years later, Pope Pius IX affirmed that, as long as the slave has not been “unjustly deprived of his liberty” and his life is not in danger, “Slavery itself… is not at all contrary to the natural and divine law”[[27]](#endnote-21)

These days, of course no Pope would ever dream of approving either ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ slavery. In 1993, Pope John Paul II included slavery in his long list of social evils alongside things like genocide and torture. He called slavery (as a part of this list) an “intrinsically evil” act which is prohibited always and everywhere, without exception.

The picture painted thus far has not been a pretty one for Christianity but that is not to say that there weren’t *any* roses in amongst the weeds. It is not my intention to make out that the whole of Christianity and all Christians have been evil; that’s absurd. The reason I am so ‘gung ho’ in pointing out Christianity’s failings is because all too often in our still predominantly Christian society, a thick veneer of ‘love’ and ‘charity’ and other vague Christian notions is pulled over our eyes to conceal its darker side.

I fully admit that the Christians who would have us believe that slavery goes against the very core of their religion and it was Christianity which paved the abolitionist road for us, aren’t intentionally trying to deceive us, but unfortunately that doesn’t make their claims any truer. They have all fallen into that fallacy I pointed out earlier. Christianity is good, slavery is bad; therefore obviously the two cannot have existed together.

I have already pointed out some Christian ‘heroes’ in the names of William Wilberforce and Bartolome De Las Casas, but, inasmuch as my list of Christian villains isn’t exhaustive, neither is my list of their heroes.

In the very early days of Christianity, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-394) St Patrick (415-493) and Acacius of Amida (400-425) all argued against slavery. St Bonaventura argued that slavery was perverting virtue but accepted its legality. And as I have already mentioned, a number of Popes throughout the Middle Ages condemned the slave trade, although they never condemned slavery itself and were frequently either involved in slavery or inconsistent in their declamations. Certain Christian orders and societies were also formed during the Middle Ages whose sole aim was the freeing of slaves… although only Christian slaves.

Before concluding this section I just want to look at Gregory of Nyssa as a mini case study in how Christian apologists distort historical facts and fall into the fallacies I pointed out earlier.

Gregory of Nyssa gets an especially warm reception from eager Christian apologists like David Bentley Hart who devotes several pages of his *Atheist Delusions* to espousing the virtues of this Christian hero. Unfortunately, as so often tends to happen, Gregory’s importance in the history of Christianity is inflated and distorted solely so that Christians can claim they were the first to condemn slavery.

Hart quite rightly points out that Gregory does in fact condemn slavery as an institution but then incorrectly claims that there is not a single precedent for this before him and that without Christianity, it would have been impossible for him to even formulate such views. This is totally false and actually a little dishonest. As I’ve already pointed out, the Roman Stoics beat Gregory to the punch by about three hundred years, all without Christianity. The Buddha also developed similar ideas on a totally different continent around eight hundred years prior to Gregory. For Gregory’s remarkable ability to transcend his era and envision a possible world where everyone is equal, he should be commended, but surely no more than Seneca or the Buddha should.

Hart also mistakenly implies that Gregory struck right to the heart of Christianity and where all other Christians were wrong, Gregory alone realised the truth. Gregory alone, with the “blinding brilliance of a lightning flash” had perceived the truth of the Christian faith.

We have already encountered the two fallacies that this assumption is built upon. First, Hart is scouring Christian history with his ‘true faith’ blinders firmly in place. He has predefined his version of the ‘true faith’ from his post-Enlightenment perspective and then gone through the history books looking for any example where a Christian acted accordingly. Unsurprisingly, he has found a solid example and then he triumphantly shouts, “Aha! See, I was right! ‘True’ Christianity is wonderful after all!”

However, in order to sustain his myth, he has to commit a couple of intellectual sins. He has to ignore or downplay every single other example where Christians did not act like good ol’ Gregory (this he does later on) and he also has to deal with the inconvenient fact that his discovery proves nothing because the opposite case could also be just as successfully argued. Consider this; if slavery was still being practiced the world over, people like Hart could define their ‘true faith’ as being consistent with slavery and then (while ignoring or downplaying the misguided few like Gregory and De Las Casas) point out, with a torrent of quotes and examples, that Christianity single-handedly carried slavery into modernity.

The second fallacy is that he has conflated the person with the creed. A single person cannot define a religion which spans more than a thousand years.[[28]](#footnote-7) This grievous affront to every thinking person’s integrity is even more obvious when Hart, in a rare moment of frankness, admits that it is “somewhat disheartening [that Gregory’s message] seems so quickly to have subsided into a pale and feeble flicker in the centuries that followed…”[[29]](#endnote-22) Of course, after this single sentence, he then goes on for another page and a half to make excuses for subsequent Christians and their participation in slavery.

Gregory of Nyssa. A good man who had great ideas. Did he have them because of Christianity though? He may have framed them in accordance with his Christian beliefs but when so many Christians throughout the years before, during and after Gregory’s lifetime upheld the exact opposite notions regarding slavery, this thesis becomes a very, very hard sell.

The Conclusion

Unfortunately, the reality is that Christianity as an institution has well and truly soiled its hands as far as slavery goes. Claims that they were the first to seek to abolish slavery are deeply flawed for three reasons:

1. Cultural movements such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were far more instrumental and reflected a greater general shift in values and morality.
2. The timing of the rise of Christianity and the start of abolitionism just don’t mesh.
3. The fact that it was abolitionist Christian vs. pro-slavery Christian, force us to look beyond religion for a motivator.

Not only was Christianity clearly not the impetus for abolitionism but slavery was rationalised, argued for and actively participated in at all levels of the Christian hierarchy throughout the whole of its history *until* society forced a change. As Christians are also a part of that society, some of those conscious individuals who worked for that change just so happened to be Christian but I trust that we will no longer fall into the mistake of thinking that Christianity was somehow responsible for their ‘goodness.’

The only legitimate claim as a ‘force for good’ that Christianity can make is that it ‘softened’ slavery by preventing the excessive cruelty that used to accompany the practice. Beyond this, Christian involvement in slavery can best be described by the legal term, ‘aiding and abetting.’

The sad fact is, as Hayes notes, that for almost all of its history the Roman Catholic Church supported and maintained slavery with all of its secular and spiritual power. This denial of basic human dignity and the dehumanising mentality that enslavement always fosters have carried over well into modernity and its cruel fingerprints can still be seen, even in modern society.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

The Theory

Can Christianity save face with an appeal to doctrine? Can they play the, “but they failed to live up to ‘true’ Christian values” card?

Sadly, the Old Testament is full of statements approving, and in some cases, recommending slavery. Some of these can be seen in my first essay but I feel for the sake of completion that they should be reprinted here:

* Gen 9:25-27 “Then he said: “Cursed *be* Canaan; / A servant of servants / He shall be to his brethren.”
* Ex 21:2 “If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years…” This particular passage goes on to stipulate that if the master gives his servant a wife and she bears him children, while the husband is free to go after six years, the wife and children belong to the master.
* Ex 21:7 “And if a man sells his daughter to be a female slave…”
* Ex 21:20-21 “And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Not withstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; **for he *is* his property.**” [my boldface]
* Lev 25:44-45 “And as for your male and female slaves whom you may have-from the nations that are around you, from them you may buy male and female slaves. Moreover you may buy the children of the strangers who dwell among you, and their families who are with you, which they beget in your land; and **they shall become your property.**” [my boldface]

Be careful that you aren’t misled by the Biblical use of the word ‘servant’ instead of ‘slave.’ I have made it quite clear, through my boldfacing, that they are talking about an individual being the master’s *property*, not just a servant as we would define the word today.

The New Testament basically boils down to the tag team duo of Jesus and Paul. I’ll deal with Jesus in a moment and we’ve already looked a little at Paul but here’s another gem to think about:

* 1 Peter 2:18 “Servants, *be* submissive to *your* masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.”

Jesus, not only never condemns slavery but on the contrary, he offers advice to slaves and masters with apparent full consent regarding the arrangement:

* Matthew 10:24-25 “A disciple is not above *his* teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher and a servant like his master.”
* Luke 12:47-48 “And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few.” Whew! Strict, right! Even if you unwittingly screw up, you’re still in for some ‘stripes.’

The same point holds about the word ‘servant’ which I raised regarding the Old Testament. Some statements from Paul have been translated as ‘servant’ but others as ‘slave.’ They are clearly referring to the same thing and, by extension, Jesus must also have had the same idea in mind.

We have to wonder, why would Jesus condone slavery? This is a real problem because Jesus is where the buck stops for Christianity. And it will continue to be a problem until we realise that we are asking the wrong question. The question should be; why *wouldn’t* Jesus condone slavery?

Everybody was fully into slavery in those days. No one imagined in even their wildest dreams that there was, or ever could be, anything wrong with treating a certain race or group of people (or even a particular gender) like they were less than human and somehow inferior. And as much as Christians will deny the fact, Jesus was just a man and he was therefore to a certain extent restricted by the values and social mores that dominated his time.

The thing is that if we refuse to accept this fact (but how shocking is it really? To claim that Jesus was a man and not a God), Jesus’ attitudes towards slavery remain forever irresolvable.[[30]](#footnote-8) How could God, in the form of Jesus, (in whose eyes, Christians would have us believe, we are all equal) have ever claimed that one group of people was ‘more equal’ than another?[[31]](#footnote-9)

As I’ve already pointed out, Christianity holds the notion that God is our supreme Master and we are all slaves in comparison to Him. St. Paul encouraged everyone to think of their relationship with God as that of master and slave. How could he not have? God is perfect and we are so, so much less.

Christianity is full of guilt over our innate, evil, sinning nature and has spent the past fifteen hundred years attempting to convince us of just how worthless we are in comparison to God. St Augustine, in particular, had an extremely low opinion of humanity, maintaining that Adam’s fall from grace had left humanity inherently flawed, unable to act correctly and completely at the mercy of God.[[32]](#endnote-23)

Ignatius of Loyola, in the 16th century, exclaimed, “I am mere dung, I must ask our Lord that when I am dead my body be thrown on the dungheap… Must this not be my wish in punishment for my sins?”[[33]](#endnote-24) John Calvin taught that we are “nothing but mud and filth both inside and outside.”[[34]](#endnote-25)

Of course, the whole notion of sin and salvation seems perfectly designed (even if it just came about by chance, although I wonder if it qualifies as irreducibly complex…?) to render us completely helpless. Like slaves, we are forced to do as our Divine Master orders in order to escape a terrifying punishment in Hell. Original sin in particular, ensures that we are all fatally guilty the moment we are born, or perhaps even conceived.[[35]](#footnote-10) This guarantees that *even if* a person lived a completely sin-free life (this is of course totally impossible though) they would still need to get their salvation through submission to Jesus.

Christianity, as a religion is also highly divisive. At the most basic level, you’re either a Christian or not. If you are, you’re destined for an eternity in heaven singing hymns to God, and if you’re not, you’re staring down the barrel at an eternity in hell being slowly grilled on a spit by a cheerful character with a pointy goatee and matching horns.

If a soul has been damned then that is the end. There is no need to try and dehumanise this person because once tainted by the devil, he or she is already, by definition, far less than one of God’s flock. They may or may not still be eligible for redemption if they repent and accept Jesus as their saviour but the point is that until such time, they are as good as dead. They are anathema to any decent, God-fearing Christian. There is a clear wedge driven between those going to heaven and those going to hell.

This is important because slavery only works when one group of people believes there is some fundamental difference between them and another group of people, which somehow makes the second group less than human. If the first group cannot find a reason to *dehumanise* the second group, then they will not be able to justify slavery to themselves, and even the worst of us need to justify our bad actions.

Since the devil is already dehumanised (by definition, literally) anyone associated with him also draws this label to themselves. And so, ‘good’ Christians were able to attend witch burnings and jeer at the poor women before they were set alight, because the witches were the epitome of evil. As C.S. Lewis weakly apologises in *Mere Christianity*, we shouldn’t be too harsh on those who carried out witch burnings because they truly believed those women were in league with the devil. If you believed that, you would also do everything you could to rid that evil from your midst.

This fundamental division between people, a key concept in Christianity, does not make slavery, or even discrimination, inevitable. It is more than possible to be Christian and not believe that non-Christians are all in league with the devil, deserving of being burned at the stake or worthy of nothing more than being slaves to the Christian betters. But it opens the door to discrimination and, as history has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, gives ample justification for having slaves.

The Conclusion

Of course, a Christian might turn around and say that Jesus also says ‘love thy neighbour’ and even the stronger ‘love thy enemy,’ which certainly doesn’t endorse discrimination. This is true, but cherry-picking these (few) examples from the Gospels unfortunately cannot save Christianity. There are three reasons for this:

1. These quotes cannot dispel the overwhelming and quite damning Biblical quotes which actively support slavery.
2. When you consider these positive quotes in context of what Jesus says, it turns out that he is far more focused on salvation and qualifying for heaven in your afterlife than equality and a universal brotherhood. The quotes are not representative of Jesus’ true message.
3. All tenets of Christianity turn on a fundamental division between God and the devil. One is good (by definition) and the other bad (also by definition). Discrimination is an almost inevitable side-effect of any worldview that is so polarised in its approach.

When everything is considered, I am afraid to say that we cannot turn to the message of Christianity for deliverance from slavery, at least not without twisting the principles of the faith to conform to our Enlightenment-derived values and humanistic ideals.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Discrimination**

Christianity, as with almost all religions, is inherently divisive and elitist. Consider the situation for a moment as Christianity portrays it. On one side we have God, on the other the Devil. Humans have been given free will so that we are able to choose which side we wish to support. If you choose God, you will enjoy an eternity of bliss in heaven after you die. If you fail to choose or disagree with something God says, you have by default, chosen the Devil, in which case an eternity of suffering and torment awaits you in your afterlife. One side (by definition) is goodness, love, kindness, compassion and other good things, the other (also by definition) is evil, depravity, decadence, lust, hatred and other bad things. As far as divisions go, this is the most extreme divide that can be imagined.

There is no gray, there is no amelioration of your sentence, there is no chance to change your mind after you die, there are no half measures. You choose between good and evil, light and dark and your decision is binding *forever*. The devil is the sworn enemy of God and likewise his followers are anathema to good Christians.

Christians tend to try and play this aspect of religion down emphasising the love and universal brotherhood that Christianity supposedly breeds, but this is all a smokescreen. Ultimately, it is *not* all about love because nobody loves the Devil. The fictive ‘universal brotherhood’ is only as universal as Christianity and Christians because all those who adhere to other faiths (or reject faith) are hell bound.

Neo-Christianity surges forth here proclaiming that God loves everybody, including Lucifer,[[36]](#footnote-11) it’s Lucifer who doesn’t love God back. Through freewill, the Devil and all those who end up on his side of the fence, have created the division by not loving God. This almost sounds kind of feasible until you take a moment to think about it like a sensible adult, not like a submissive slave blindly acceding to his master’s whim. For an omnipotent Being pitching a pretty sweet offer (an eternity of happiness) who loves us and just wants us to love Him, God is simply not doing a very good job.

I watched a debate about the very topic we are discussing here, whether Christianity has been a force for good in the world, between Michael Shermer and Dinesh D’Souza a while back. In the course of this debate Shermer wryly observed that not only do Christians point proudly to the fact that, by in large, Christians these days treat women, blacks and Jews with the respect they deserve as human beings, but they assert the claim that they were the first to do so. We have come to this section to verify this claim.

**Sexism**

Women have been given a bit of a raw deal for most of human history. Treated as inferior, ignored, relegated to little more than servants and actively prevented from improving their lot by being denied education and any social standing from which they could make a difference, women have had to work hard to get the respect that they have today. Or have they?

If the typical Christian claim is right, they needn’t have worked hard for their emancipation at all. Christianity should have done much of the work for them. This should be an easy one to test. Let’s have at it…

The Facts

As we did with slavery, we can look at the timing of female liberation to test the Christian claim that they spearheaded this movement.

The notion that women were mere chattels of their husbands was first challenged by freethinkers such as Thomas Paine and Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Mary Wollstonecraft is another prominent figure in the early days who was actively promoting women’s rights.

It is commonly accepted that there were three ‘waves’ to the feminist movement. The first was the women’s suffrage movement of the nineteenth century which was mainly focused on securing the right to vote. This was finally achieved in New Zealand first in 1893. The second was the women’s liberation movement which started in the 1960s and was focused on legal and social equality for women. The third was a continuation of this which sought to address the perceived failures of the second movement and started in the 1990s.

As with slavery, we must ask ourselves what changed around the 18th and 19th centuries to spur this movement? Christianity had been around for centuries (as with slavery) and had had no effect but as I have already pointed out, the 19th century and the accompanying age of enlightenment was a time when previously accepted social mores and customs were coming under attack and being actively revised.

Hart attempts to defend the fact that the early Church did not pursue equality for women because “there was simply no cultural grammar for such ideas.”[[37]](#endnote-26) This is one hundred percent true and really makes my point for me. Christianity failed to supply the ‘cultural grammar’ needed for women’s liberation. That would have to wait for a time when more powerful forces had gripped society.

So what were these Christians, who were supposedly the first to acknowledge that women had the same rights as men, doing all the time they held the reins of power? Christian history once more has a depressing tale to relate…

As always, the facts of Christianity start with St Paul. David Bentley Hart points out that St Paul instructed his followers that “a man’s body belonged to his wife no less than her body belonged to him, and that in Christ a difference in dignity between male and female did not exist.”[[38]](#endnote-27) What a great start! Hart is drawing from Galatians 3 with this reference. That is all Hart has to say about St Paul and women, but unfortunately this is a woefully inadequate and shockingly dishonest representation of St Paul’s opinion of the fairer sex:

* 1 Cor 11:7-10 “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.”
* 1 Cor 14:35 “it is shameful for women to speak in church”
* Eph 5:22-23 “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife.”
* Paul says more of the same in Galatians, 1 Timothy, Titus, Colossians and 1 Peter.

As you can see, St Paul was certainly no respecter of women’s rights. Man is the image and glory of God, women is the glory of man. Where is the equality in this? What happened to, “no difference in dignity between man and woman”?

The Church Fathers were no more forgiving…

Tertullian inveighs “The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world… You are the devil’s gateway, you desecrated the fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you who softened up with your cajoling words the man against whom the devil could not prevail by force…”[[39]](#endnote-28)

Bishop Epiphanius in the fourth century wrote, “God came down from heaven… not, assuredly, that the Virgin should be adored… nor that, now after so many generations, women should once again be appointed priests… (God) gave her no charge to minister baptism or bless disciples, nor did he bid her rule over the earth.”[[40]](#endnote-29)

St Clement was particularly magnanimous in his estimation of women when he wrote: “Every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman.”[[41]](#endnote-30)

St Augustine writes: “…the woman together with her own husband is the image of God, so that that whole substance may be one image; but when she is referred separately to her quality of *help-*meet, which regards the woman herself alone, then she is not the image of God; but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman too is joined with him in one.”[[42]](#endnote-31)

It is worth noting that Augustine was attempting to ameliorate the more blatantly sexist and repressive comments of St Paul regarding women covering their head in churches. This is to Augustine’s credit but from a wider perspective of his opinions, he still refused women the honour of being made in the image of God in their own right and never questioned the prevailing attitude of the time (the ‘cultural grammar’) in which women were inferior to men.

Unfortunately, Augustine did not stop with this. He also supported the belief that woman was to blame for the Fall. “[Satan turned to] the inferior of the human pair… supposing that the man would not be so easily gullible…”[[43]](#endnote-32)

Pope Gregory I exclaimed: “A woman is slow in understanding and her unstable and naïve mind renders her by way of natural weakness to the necessity of a strong hand in her husband. Her ‘use’ is twofold: animal sex and motherhood.”[[44]](#endnote-33)

St Ambrose reminds us that “God took the rib out of Adam’s body, not a part of his soul, to make her. She was not made in the image of god, like man.”[[45]](#endnote-34)

All of the Church Fathers were strongly in favour of virginity and were clearly deeply tormented by the act of sex which in turn blossomed into an obsessive hatred they projected onto the perceived temptresses, women. This guilt-driven neurosis is nowhere more evident than in the fact that women were often described as lustful and the general opinion was that women were carnal, base creatures whose sole purpose was to ensnare men in their webs of deceit and sensual pleasure. Women were something to be guarded against. The notion that women could ever be elevated to the status of sensible members of society, let alone equal with man, was literally unthinkable. As Hart has noted, the cultural grammar for equality just didn’t exist, and as we’ve seen, the Church Fathers did absolutely nothing to remedy this; rather they made the division deeper and stronger.

The much venerated St Aquinas was clear that woman should not be subject to man in a servile capacity but merely because “good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man.”[[46]](#endnote-35)

In general, Aquinas followed the trend set by the Bible and St Paul in which women were inferior to men. As he himself says, “As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten.”[[47]](#endnote-36) He then goes on to detail how in procreation, the male sperm is the active force and so naturally seeks to reproduce itself. Only through an abnormal situation, such as the semen being weak or the material provided by the mother being unsuitable, would a female be produced. To be fair he does later concede that “as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten…”[[48]](#endnote-37)

There is no doubt that Aquinas held that woman was inferior to man. Kudos to Aquinas for recognising that women need not be destined to be men’s servants but in the final analysis he certainly didn’t do much to promote women’s rights.

Martin Luther, contributing on behalf of the Protestants in the 16th century, also presented a less than sterling account of women. Although he recognised that man could not live without woman, he also believed that: “Girls begin to talk and to stand on their feet sooner than boys because weeds always grow up more quickly than good crops.”[[49]](#endnote-38) He felt that “Women ought to stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon.”[[50]](#endnote-39) He also held that “women are foolish for the most part.”[[51]](#endnote-40)

Christians inevitably raise the objection that because the Virgin Mary was a woman, women were accorded more respect and honour than they had ever had in history before. As usual this is a seriously inflated claim seen through the eyes of modernity with no real basis in truth.

Women had far more important roles in pagan rituals and belief than they would ever see in Christianity. Paganism truly embraced the feminine often emphasising the intrinsic juxtaposition and harmony that existed in a male and female representation of divinity. Within the pagan pantheon, both gods and goddesses reigned over their particular areas of specialty and their representatives on earth reflected this gender equality. This is something that could never happen with a single, male Divine figurehead or even the Trinity, composed of a Father, a Son (both male) and a Spirit which was presumably genderless.

Of course, women’s rights outside the pagan temples were still non-existent, but that is exactly my point. We would have to wait until the 20th century for that to change.

Despite the fact that there was ample precedent for feminine worship in paganism, the early Church worked hard to deny Mary a position too near the Trinity. Of course, Mary was the mother of Christ and so she couldn’t be ignored, but there are nevertheless two reasons why the Virgin Mary did not improve things for women here on earth.

First, Mary was a virgin and therefore completely pure. Not only was Mary a virgin before giving birth to Christ, she also purportedly remained a virgin afterwards (you have to wonder if for poor ol’ Joseph knew what he was getting into). She was also immaculately conceived without original sin and was supposedly taken bodily (or ‘assumed’) into heaven. These are impressive qualifications on a Christian resume. I’m not even going to address these beliefs as beliefs because they are obviously nonsense. What is important for us is that these attributes make Mary a woman so far removed from any other Earthly woman that there is no realistic comparison. A Christian who claims that Mary being a woman and being worshipped as one lends support to a softening of attitudes towards the fairer sex has failed to consider that Mary was for all intents and purposes nothing like a woman at all. None of Mary’s virtue is transferrable to mortal women because mortal women are mortal, and sinful, and generally unable to preserve their virginity long into their adult life; in short, they are the opposite of Mary. A more cynical commentator might even suppose that she had been intentionally painted this way to specifically remove her from any comparison to earthly women.

Secondly, despite Mary being a key player in the story of Christianity she was never one of the MVPs. Comparatively, Mary warrants almost no mention in the Bible. Mark, the Gospel considered to be the first and least embellished of the four, only mentions her once and doesn’t even name her. Luke identifies her the most, twelve times in all, but all of these are in the infancy narrative. Once Jesus is born, Mary seems to fade away into relative obscurity.

Mary is not only, never anywhere near as important as the feminine deities worshipped before Christianity but she was relegated to the sidelines after bearing her son in her own religion. As a role model or rallying symbol for women, Mary has been completely impotent throughout Christian history.

The facts are that well into the twentieth century women were not allowed to partake in any meaningful way in society. They were wives and mothers but that was all. They couldn’t vote, couldn’t sit on juries, were permitted only a few select jobs such as teaching or nursing (which they often had to forfeit after pregnancy) and were often excluded even from Church rolls (the one place Christians assure us they had a measure of dignity and freedom!).

Long after secular society had fought for and instigated changes for women, the Church unwillingly began to follow suit. It is highly relevant to note that the Church continued to discriminate against women well into the 20th century. It was only forty years ago, in 1970, that a women was first authorised to teach Catholic theology, and throughout the world many churches are still exempt from sex discrimination laws.

In an age where women are eligible to become CEO’s, scientists, even Presidents and Prime Ministers, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is still hopelessly backwards. Pope John Paul II, in 1994, in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, affirmed “that Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”[[52]](#endnote-41) In 2007, the Holy See issued a decree saying that any attempted ordination of women would result in automatic excommunication for the women and the priests trying to ordain them. This sentiment was again affirmed in 2010 when the Holy See stated that the ordination of women is a “grave delict.”[[53]](#footnote-12)

It is painfully obvious that Christianity has never improved the lot of women in the slightest and has instead been responsible for much of the oppression that women have suffered. People like David Hart make spurious claims that Basil of Caesarea and his brother Gregory of Nyssa looked to their sister as an exemplar of the ideal of Christian life and certain marriage laws early C.E. were changed in favour of women but they fail to address the more important fact that women were virtually totally excluded from society until society itself railed against this.

Christian apologists weakly attempt to find a few instances where women were credited with more ontological status than mere possessions (they often have to twist and obscure facts to accomplish this – as Hart’s blatant, wilful misrepresentation of St Paul’s attitudes towards women demonstrates) and then laud these over us like Christianity single-handedly lifted society out of its wicked, discriminatory ways. This approach is like looking at one or two trees but failing to see the forest. Of course, Christians can find examples of reduced sexism (I think it’s fair to say that there were no genuine instances of true respect for women as a gender before the 17th century) interspaced throughout their history, not all Christians have been all bad, all the time. But there is a bigger picture that the apologists… not fail, they *refuse* to see. Women were discriminated against for centuries and Christianity and the Church were just as guilty as any other party in this.

Claiming that Christianity played any kind of role in overcoming sexism unfairly diminishes the truly revolutionary actions of the enlightened visionaries (primarily in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries) who actually *did* work to secure equality for women. At the risk of sounding like Spock, it’s also highly illogical. If Christianity did so much for women, why did we even need movements like women’s suffrage and feminism?

The Conclusion

Christianity ruled the Western world for fifteen hundred years and it was a fifteen hundred years in which women were consistently and effectively oppressed and treated as second class citizens. The notion of women’s rights only became thinkable (the ‘cultural grammar’ emerged) *after* the Church lost its death grip over society and people became open to new ideas and ways of living. In the face of this, Christians maintain they are at least partly responsible for the freedom women enjoy today. You’ve gotta love them for trying.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

The Theory

So the important Christians in history have failed to provide a shining beacon out of the mire of sexist ignorance that dominated the Middle Ages. What about Christianity itself?

Let’s start with the Old Testament. Unfortunately, this text is one of the more overtly sexist and repressive documents to have ever been put into print. If the Bible were anything other than the Bible, its continued publication would almost certainly have been heavily protested and eventually banned by feminists. However, hiding under the banner of ‘freedom of religion,’ the Bible is allowed to continue to promote its misogynistic tale.

There are many, many individual quotes which show women being treated as chattels and having absolutely no rights within society, but we are not forced to rely only on quotes because as anyone who has read the OT will confirm, the message when taken as a whole reveals a situation where women were systematically ignored, devalued and disempowered.

Right from the beginning, in Genesis, man is created purposely by God. It is only some time later, when He notices that Adam is lonely, that He decides to make a helper for him. He fashioned that helper from Adam’s rib and she became Eve, the first woman.

What a depressing start for Eve. Not only was she never a part of God’s initial plan but merely an afterthought, not only was she not created as a being deserving existence in her own right but as a “helper” for man, and to add insult to injury she was created out of a part of man. We can therefore trace the lineage as follows: God 🡪 man 🡪 woman. But it gets worse, after Adam finishes naming all of the animals he also chooses woman’s name saying, “She shall be called Woman, / Because she was taken out of Man.” (Gen 2:23) WoMAN. The inferior nature of woman is even codified in her name (Adam later gives her the more personal name, Eve, but it is significant that she was not even allowed to decide her own name).

Ah, but the sexist male author behind Genesis (and he was definitely male, so much the worse if you believe he was God) isn’t finished degrading woman just yet. Just a few passages further on, we discover that man wasn’t responsible for tasting the forbidden fruit from the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ but rather woman. It was Eve who succumbed to the temptations of the serpent and as a result is solely responsible for the most tragic and damning event to have ever occurred to the human race; the Fall.

It is because of Eve that we must die, it is because of Eve that we are separate from God, it is because of Eve that we are forced to endure this world of suffering instead of lounging in the fabled Garden of Eden. There can be no doubt of Eve’s guilt because God doled out a harsh punishment to her alone; the pain of childbirth. Thenceforth, whenever a daughter of Eve gives birth in what should be a celebration of life, instead she should be reminded of the irrevocable sin her ancestral mother committed. By the way, God also condemns the woman, saying “he [man] shall rule over you.” (Gen 3:16) So man was actually given Divine authority to rule his wife. Despite all of the times you have heard the Creation story, I bet you haven’t heard that little titbit before.

All of these facts were cited regularly by clergy throughout the ages as a means of discriminating against females.

Unfortunately, it only gets worse from there:

* Gen 29:27 “Fulfil her week, and we will give you this one also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years.” This is Laban talking about his daughters. Esau has requested one of Laban’s daughters for his wife but Laban generously decides to give him both of them. What a nice guy.
* Ex 21:10 “If he takes another *wife*…” This is God advocating polygamy (although only for men you will notice).
* Lev 19:20 “Whoever lies carnally with a woman who is betrothed to a man as a concubine…” God again, this time condoning concubines (only female, of course).

Naturally there are many, many more quotes where these came from but I don’t want to take up that much of your valuable time. If you are curious, I strongly recommend you pick up the Bible and see for yourself whether the tone supports woman’s rights or opposes them.

Not only are women given away like chattels, required to enter polygamous marriages, required to serve as concubines and all round treated like dirt, but they are seldom referred to by their actual name. Rather, the Bible prefers the dignity-robbing phrase, “XX and his wife” because after all, who needs to know the name of the woman, as long as she is producing and looking after good little male offspring.

Less than a generation ago, we were all unwitting heirs to this sexist practice but it had become so deeply ingrained in our lives through the pervasiveness of Christianity that (if you are old enough) I bet you barely gave it a second thought. I am of course referring to the practice of a woman automatically forfeiting her surname and adopting the husband’s after marriage. Not only was this standard practice, but we had all been brainwashed into thinking it somehow represented true love so that even the women giving up a part of their identity were often excited at the prospect of becoming Mrs. so-and-so.

How about Jesus? Well, the man himself completely avoided the subject. In reading the Gospels, there is really nothing which betrays Jesus’ opinion on woman’s rights. Nevertheless, there are two facts which don’t bode well for any young Christian woman seeking enlightenment from Christ.

First, none of Jesus’ twelve Apostles were women. You might think this is a fairly weak objection but Jesus ought to have known that he was creating what would become the building blocks of a religion which would conquer much of the world. Seeing that he was in the midst of a sexist age, surely, he could have thrown in a few (even token) female Apostles just to balance things out a little. This particular fact, that Jesus never authorised any woman to go forth and teach on his behalf, has been cited by the Roman Catholic Church as late as 2010 as a precedent to justify and reinforce its policies regarding women not being eligible for ordination.

Although some have tried to slip Mary Magdalene into the folds of Jesus’ inner circle, these claims seem fairly sophistic to me. We don’t have to infer from or interpret any of Jesus’ actions to place any of his twelve male disciples but as soon as people need a female Apostle they start digging into the details, filling in gaps and leaping to wild conclusions which (surprise, surprise) turn out to support their expectations. One of my favourite examples of sophistry in this direction claims that Mary was called *apostola apostolorum* in the Middle Ages and this can be translated as either “apostle TO the apostles” or “apostle OF the apostles.” The former makes her sound like a messenger of sorts (i.e. being sent TO the apostles to bring word of Christ’s resurrection) while the latter makes her sound like she is elevated above the other apostles (as in a doctor of doctors). Voila! With a single wave of a dictionary, a disciple is transformed from a messenger into an elevated apostle before your very eyes!

Second, it would have been so easy for Jesus, knowing that people would look to him for guidance in the centuries to follow, to have just said, “You have heard it said that man shall rule over woman, but *I* tell you that neither shall rule over the other, for both are children of the Lord and they *are* equal in His eyes. And anyone who has a problem with this can meet me over by the manger for an ass-whipping.” OK. Maybe he wouldn’t have said it quite like that, but you get the point. How far would just a single quote from the son of God have gone in placing women back on an even footing with men? Surely, he knew what was going to happen? Knowing this, why wouldn’t he have taken his one opportunity to set the record straight? Unless, it never occurred to him.

John Paul II holds that “Christ’s *way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds,* is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women.”[[54]](#endnote-42) Didn’t you know that Martha’s sister Mary sat at Jesus’ feet which was a privilege reserved for men in Judaism? Didn’t you know that Jesus spoke to and helped women on his travels? If only Mary Wollstonecraft knew promoting women’s rights was as easy as meeting and greeting. She could have saved herself a whole lot of effort and time writing those books and actively arguing for the equality of women. Comments like this are inane and an insult to anyone who has ever advocated women’s rights.

Finally, God Himself was male and was *always* described as such in the Bible. When He decided to incarnate, He chose to do so as a son, not a daughter. This is a patriarchy right to the top. What if I were to ask you to rattle off a few of the angel’s names, which names come to mind? Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, maybe Uriel. All males.

In the upper echelons of Christianity there are no females. Paganism featured any number of female deities, many of whom had temples built in their honour. There was no need to infer female dignity from the actions of a male elite; females could demonstrate their dignity and value for themselves. All this disappeared when Christianity ascended to the throne.

These days, you might hear Christians proclaiming that God transcends gender. He is the mother/father, not just the father and as such gives Christianity a solid footing for female dignity and value. While modern Christians might claim this, it is significant that this development is only a recent one in the history of Christianity. Before women’s rights movements gripped the male-controlled world, God was never, ever, ever considered anything but male.

This example reveals the Christian strategy for asserting its agenda of love and goodwill to all men and women as having led us into the modern age. We know for a fact that God was never, ever considered female by any self-respecting Christian until within the last generation or two. I defy you to find a prominent Christian who held this view pre-modernity. You won’t be able to because it would have been considered highly heretical.

However, once society (independent of religion) approves a change and moves in a certain direction, as it did with the issue of women’s rights and female dignity in general, Christianity always puts up a fight at first but then eventually rolls over and follows the trend.[[55]](#footnote-13) But it doesn’t just follow the trend, it tries to incorporate the new value into its doctrine so that it seems as if Christianity actually held that value all along. And so we see the unquestioned notion that God was male (the Bible is very clear on this by the way, Jesus himself only ever refers to his ‘Father’) suddenly becoming hazy around the edges until Christians forget this inconvenient truth and all we hear is that God is your father/mother. Neo-Christianity has perfected this strategy into an art, reducing the doctrines of Christianity into a lump of clay they can mould to conform to any desired shape to align with the culture and norms of the day.

The foundation that Christianity has erected itself upon is the Bible. Unfortunately, the Bible is unapologetically and unashamedly sexist, clearly regarding women as the inferior of the two genders. The damage done to the status and dignity of females was complete within the very first chapter when Eve sentenced her sex to guilt for the Fall by eating the apple from the fabled Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Men eventually learnt to see women as equal but the tenets and central book of Christianity not only contributed nothing to the struggle, they erected considerable barriers we had to overcome on our way.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**The Jews / Godkillers**

Right from the beginning, Christianity has had a stormy relationship with its cousin[[56]](#footnote-14) religion, Judaism. Despite the fact that Christianity fully adopted the Old Testament which includes the Jewish Torah (the first five books of the Bible), there were some massive deal-breaking additions to come in the New Testament which would drive a wedge between these two religions.

Following is a table of some of the more important of those differences:

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| --- | --- |
| Christianity | Judaism |
| God exists as a Trinity. | See God as a single entity. Trinitarianism is incomprehensible in the face of God’s unity. |
| Jesus is fully divine and fully human. It is only through him that humans can receive salvation. Most of the Old Testament is more or less a prelude to Jesus. | Jesus is one of a number of false Messiah’s who have appeared through history. The real Messiah has yet to arrive. |
| Emphasis on faith over action. Actions are important but the key feature of Christianity is faith in God and Jesus. | Emphasises rules and rituals. Conduct is the primary vehicle for salvation. Of course, one must believe in God but this isn’t a sufficient condition for salvation. God’s essential aim is for people to act well. |
| Actively proselytises and encourages members to convert non-Christians, a process which is very easy. | Jews do not actively proselytise and converting to Judaism is in fact, very difficult. |

As Christianity garnered more and more power and became more and more obsessed with doctrine, these differences drove the two religions, which share common Abrahamic ancestral roots, further apart.

The word ‘anti-Semitism’ tends to immediately conjure up images of Hitler and Nazi concentration camps, but Hitler was far from the first to persecute the Jews. The refusal of Christianity to share power combined with its intrinsic intolerance towards other religions turned Judaism into an enemy which would at various times throughout history be merely disregarded and at others violently suppressed and its adherents victimised.

Christian apologists almost reflexively tend to try and downplay references to any wrong doings of the Church but the incredibly vivid impression of evil that Hitler left in our collective unconscious has made it vital for Christianity to rid itself of all anti-Semitic allegations in particular. And so, in true Orwellian fashion, Christians have hurriedly scampered to re-write the history books as they ‘remind’ us that Christianity has never committed atrocities against the Jews. “Pogroms? Never,” they exclaim in (sometimes genuine) surprise.

As I mentioned, the word, ‘anti-Semitism’ has become inextricably linked to what has become the epitome of evil, Hitler and the Nazi party, and as such, Christians have been quick to label any ‘disagreements’ their faith may have had with Jews in the past as ‘anti-Judaism’ to try and avoid association with Hitler. Anti-Judaism is supposedly a disagreement with religious tenets of Judaism while anti-Semitism is an emotional bias or hatred not specific to religion. Needless to say, this as another one of those smokescreens Christianity is constantly putting up around itself and I refuse to partake in it. In this essay, I use anti-Semitism the way it was meant to be used, as reference to any kind of discrimination against Jews, religious or otherwise.

The Facts

St Paul, in the first century CE, led the charge away from adherence to Jewish law when he made conversion to Christianity easier by declaring that according to a ‘vision’ he had had, Gentiles did not have to become Jews, get circumcised, follow Jewish dietary restrictions, or otherwise adhere to any Mosaic laws. He was also the first to claim that the mere belief in Jesus Christ was enough to achieve salvation.

Paul also sowed the seeds which would eventually blossom into a damning accusation that would tarnish the whole of Jewry; that of God-killer.

1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 “…the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets… and they do not please God…”

St Paul is anticipating the story of Jesus’ crucifixion as told in the Gospels,[[57]](#footnote-15) in which Jewish authorities in Judea first charged Jesus with blasphemy but lacked the authority to have him put to death. They brought Christ to Pontius Pilate who washed his hands of the whole affair declaring he could find no fault in him. He consented to have Jesus crucified only because the Jews demanded it. The Gospels are very clear about this point. Matthew 27:25 even has the Jews handily incriminate themselves for us, “His blood *be* on us and on our children.”

Jeremy Cohen in *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*, holds that while Paul did not yet condemn all Jews, that condemnation wasn’t far away. Melito of Sardis delivered a sermon the following century, entitled *Peri Pascha (On the Passover)*, in which he charges the Jews with the murder of Christ, the Son of God.

Here are some of the Church Fathers comments towards Jews at the time:

* Justin Martyr (100-165) noted that God had to provide a Law for the Jews “on account of their stubbornness and insubordination.”[[58]](#endnote-43)
* Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (d.258), preached: “We Christians, when we pray, say Our Father; because He has begun to be ours, and has ceased to be the Father of the Jews who have forsaken him.”[[59]](#endnote-44)
* Origen (184/5-253/4) said the Jews suffered because they were ignoble but although they suffered, their suffering did not compare to what they inflicted on Jesus.[[60]](#endnote-45)

Freeman also notes that almost all of the early Church Fathers wrote a work entitled *Against the Jews*.

The rift continued to deepen between the two religions over the following centuries but it wasn’t until Constantine formulated the Edict of Milan which removed the penalties for professing and practicing Christianity early in the fourth century that the attacks on Judaism began to fuel genuine malice.

For the first time in three hundred years, Christians were suddenly no longer being persecuted. Now they actually had the means to defend their intolerant claim to be the one true path to the one and only God. The Church Fathers would not pass up this opportunity. James Everett Seaver notes that throughout this period in history “The phrase “a Jew” or “some Jews” is almost unknown in patristic literature.”[[61]](#endnote-46) By this time, Jews were collectively guilty of the sins of their forefathers.[[62]](#footnote-16)

Contemporary Christians went all out to extol Christianity’s virtues while castigating all other religions. Eusebius of Caesarea even went so far as to distinguish between early “Hebrews” as opposed to “Jews.” The Hebrews weren’t Jewish but they weren’t Gentiles either, instead they were the first Christians. Seaver points out that Eusebius even steals Abraham from the Jews, making him an early Christian. More re-writing of history.

As Christianity’s power grew, adherents of the faith started turning the legal code against their foes. Although not all Emperors sided with Christianity against the Jews, the reign of Constantius, the son of Constantine, was a particularly onerous one for Jews. Among other pronouncements, Constantius strengthened the restrictions of Jewish slave owners specifying that if a Jew is in possession of a slave from another sect or national group other than his own the slave will be confiscated to the State but “if the Jew has purchased slaves known to be of the holy faith, then all the goods found in his possession shall be taken from him at once, and no delay shall be interposed in depriving him of the possession of those men who are Christians.”[[63]](#endnote-47)

Constantius also made the penalties for Christians converting to Judaism outrageous. “…if any one once a Christian has become a Jew… we decree that all his goods be confiscated to the imperial fisc…”[[64]](#endnote-48)

The language used to refer to Jews and their religion deteriorated as well. Constantius uses phrases like, “the baleful sect of Judaism” and the “evil sect”.[[65]](#endnote-49) It became increasingly common for Jews to be likened to other heretics as Canons began expressing phrases like, “It is not proper that Christians accept gifts which are sent by Jews or heretics,”[[66]](#endnote-50) As Augustine put it: “heretics, Jews and pagans they have formed a unity against our Unity.”[[67]](#endnote-51)

The next fifty years saw a reprieve for Jews but with the passing of Valentinian so too did the era of mild repression fade. It was mid fourth century in Rome and the Jews were about to be forced to endure their darkest hour yet.

Seaver notes how Ephraem Syrus calls the Jews “circumcised vagabonds” and considers the wretched state of the Jews a punishment sent from God. This was a common theme that would be used again and again against Jews over the years to come.

St. Basil and his brother Gregory of Nyssa (both of whom you may remember as being cited by David Hart as defenders of female dignity) had little love for Jews. Basil urged Christians to “avoid the blasphemy of the Jews who slaughtered God’s Son, fearing contamination from them.”[[68]](#endnote-52)

Freeman points to the year 388 when Ambrose of Milan challenged Emperor Theodosius over the burning of a synagogue, as a turning point for the Christians in their animosity towards the Jews. What happened was a synagogue was razed to the ground by Christians and Theodosius ordered the local governor to punish those responsible and compensate the victims. Ambrose challenged the Emperor imploring that a Christian should not be responsible for rebuilding a house where “Christ was denied.” Ambrose carried his defence of the act further by taking personal responsibility. “I declare that I burned down the synagogue; at least that I gave the orders that there would be no building in which Christ was denied.”[[69]](#endnote-53)

After this incident, Freeman notes that references to Jews in legislation became more “vituperative” and the laws became more discriminatory. He quotes St. John Chrysostom as referring to synagogues as a “dwelling place for demons… a hideout for thieves… a den of wild animals.”[[70]](#endnote-54) Few people can hold a candle to the anti-Semitic tirades Chrysostom felt compelled to espouse. “The Jews do not worship God but devils”.[[71]](#endnote-55) “God hates them and indeed has always hated them; since their murder of Jesus He allows them no time for repentance.”[[72]](#endnote-56)

Jerome, another paragon of Christian saintliness, had a decidedly low opinion of the Jews holding that the Jews seek God in an evil way, hoping to find him without Christ.[[73]](#endnote-57) He also said, “If it is expedient to hate any men and to loathe any race I have a strange dislike for those of the circumcision. For up to the present day, they persecute our Lord Jesus Christ in the synagogues of Satan.”[[74]](#endnote-58)

St. Augustine was a comparatively mild opponent of the Jews although there is no doubt that he held they were mistaken in their beliefs, or rather *dis*belief in Christ. To his credit, he held that they should not be wiped out (the fact that he had to make such a statement in the first place speaks volumes about the prevailing attitudes towards Jews) although he is not overly magnanimous as he goes on to say they should remain spiritual “beggars” and a living testimony of God’s displeasure.

It’s important to note that Augustine recommends the Jews not be persecuted *not* because they don’t deserve to be persecuted or because of some Christian notion of love and charity… rather because God has let them live lest we forget the example they provided of what *not* to do and so that the truth of Christianity can forever be known and remembered through their suffering.

It is also important to note that he recommends they be allowed to live but only in a servile condition or as spiritual ‘beggars’ in order to validate Christianity. This was no magnanimous gesture of Christian love; Augustine was never preaching the equality of Jews. Rather, he thought they should remain alive *only* because it was supposedly a part of God’s Divine plan to show his displeasure. Augustine would have found it unconscionable for Jews to succeed in life. It was not for that that they were kept alive.

Augustine’s attitude towards the Jews became the official position of the Church right through to modern times.

Jonathan Riley-Smith[[75]](#footnote-17) confirms my feelings when he points out that the message of all the Church Fathers is consistently the same. The Jews are an ‘alien group,’ they ‘live in our midst’ and in many ways are worse than Muslims. They suffer for the sins of their ancestors but must not be allowed reprieve. The emotional invective directed towards them is spiteful and full of hatred but seldom officially sanctions violence, although violence, often and it would seem unsurprisingly to me at least, was perpetrated by ‘good Christian’ citizens.

The fact is that throughout the reign of Christianity in Rome there were periods of more discrimination and periods of less discrimination, but no periods where discrimination was absent. This is evident from the fact that in the periods of more oppressive official attitudes towards Jews, we see harsh laws being enacted against them, and in the periods of less official repression, we see laws attempting to prevent the wilful desecration of synagogues and Jewish ceremonies. The short and long of this is that at *all* times Jews were being persecuted, whether because of the laws or despite them. And as we have seen, most of this animosity came from Church Fathers whose biting rhetoric accomplished its aim of associating the Jews and their customs with the Devil and evil.

Ironically, the Jews found some sanctuary in the seventh and eighth centuries in Spain and Africa under Muslim protection and although anti-Semitic passions faded in the early Middle Ages, with the revival of Western European cities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a new era of much more vicious atrocities was about to begin.

The Crusades – The Facts

The Crusades were a series of religious wars fought between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the primary aim of which was to restore Christian access to holy places around Jerusalem and stem the Muslim tide which had executed a number of successful campaigns around the south of the Mediterranean.

While it is true that the Crusades were not specifically directed against the Jews, there were nevertheless many Jewish casualties during this time. There are two primary reasons for this. First, anti-Semitic roots had run deep during the early reign of Christianity and while they had lain dormant for some time didn’t need much encouragement to flare up once more. Second, and primarily in the first Crusade, Jews fought alongside Muslims to defend Jerusalem and were eventually defeated resulting in their massacre.

Often Christians defend the Crusades as a Holy War which was fought to prevent the Muslims from overrunning Western Europe. In this essay, I am not interested in whether this is true or not. I will only be looking at the Crusades from two perspectives; whether they represented a force for good according to the historical facts and how they affected the Jews.

The first Crusade was set in motion in 1095 by a papal call at Clermont. It is important to note at the outset that it is almost certain that Pope Urban II did not call for any anti-Jewish violence with this papal call, although he didn’t demand any special protection for the Jews. It is also significant that this Crusade was not a series of organised military forces (although the siege of Jerusalem in 1099 which marked an end to the Crusade was an exception), it was more a rag-tag, chaotically and randomly assembled gathering of individual groups, although instigated with a definite goal to be sure, which accumulated into a more ordered force over time.

Jeremy Cohen quotes a Jewish chronicler commenting on the massacres which took place in 1096 as follows: “Why should we concern ourselves with going to war against the Ishmaelites dwelling about Jerusalem when in our midst is a people who disrespect our God – indeed, their ancestors are those who crucified him. Why should we let them lie and tolerate their dwelling among us? Let us use our swords against them first…”[[76]](#endnote-59)

Robert Chazan makes use of an early Jewish text called *Mainz Anonymous* which records the first violent incidents against Jews in 1096 as a direct result of the first Crusade. The *Mainz Anonymous* shows clearly that the call to crusading immediately stimulated anti-Semitic sentiments as well: “They [the crusaders] said to one another… ‘We take our lives in our hands in order to kill and to subjugate all the kingdoms that fail to acknowledge the crucified. How much more [should we be aroused against] the Jews, who killed and crucified him.’”[[77]](#endnote-60)

The *Mainz Anonymous* makes it equally clear that the early violence perpetrated by crusaders was random and spontaneous in nature and not the assault of organised forces. Still, this is neither an excuse for the crusader’s actions nor a refutation of the facts.

One early incident, which would prove to be an auger of things to come, relayed by the author of the *Mainz Anonymous,* tells of the attempted slaughter of a number of Jews in Speyer when crusaders and burghers[[78]](#footnote-18) planned to surprise the Jews at their Sabbatical prayers. The Jews however, were sufficiently alerted and retreated quickly to their homes.

A second incident in Worms (also Germany) found the Jews splitting into two groups. One retreated home while the other sought refuge in the bishop’s castle. The *Mainz Anonymous* records how the crusaders targeted the Jews who had returned to their homes by taking a corpse of theirs which had been buried earlier and carrying it through the city exclaiming that the Jews had killed their fellow Christian by boiling him in water. They also accused the Jews of pouring that water into the wells in order to poison the city. The author writes all crusaders and burghers alike took up arms saying: “Behold the time has come to avenge him who was crucified, whom their ancestors slew. Now let nor a remnant or a residue escape, not even an infant or a suckling in the cradle.”[[79]](#endnote-61)

The second group of Worms Jews hiding in the bishop’s castle were to be subjected to a similar fate. The crusaders and burghers recruited individuals from outlying villages and laid siege to the castle. The small Jewish defenders were no match for the crusaders and when their defences crumbled they were exposed to near-total destruction.

Up to this point the attacks against Jews had been random and lacked pre-meditation, but the *Mainz Anonymous* tells next of a crusading army, belonging to a Count Emicho, which was ideologically committed to the annihilation of Jews, through either conversion or slaughter. The Jews which felt the brunt of this first recorded, anti-Semitic, crusader attack were the inhabitants of a large town called Mainz.

The Mainz Jews were surrounded, besieged, overrun after two days and butchered according to a precise, pre-meditated, military operation. Chazan also notes that it is likely this same crusading force was responsible for the effort to wipe out the Cologne Jews who had been distributed among outlying rural areas for safety by the local bishop in apparent imitation of the Speyer bishop. The result of this Jewish disbursement was not as favourable as in the Speyer case though. The Jews hidden in a number of refuges were systematically rooted out and killed or forced to convert. As Chazan writes quoting another contemporary text *Solomon bar Simson Chronicle*: “the enemies gathered against the saintly of Altenahr, to torture them with great and terrible tortures until they [the Jews] might agree to baptism.”[[80]](#endnote-62)

The *Solomon bar Simson* also mentions the forced conversion of the entire Regensburg Jewish community and the mass conversions of the Trier Jews. In addition to murders and forced conversions there are several recorded instances of suicide in order to avoid forced conversions. This reinforces the seriousness with which people sometimes view their faith but also the fear these Jews must have felt at the approach of the ‘good Christians’ who were sometimes their neighbours. Particularly disturbing accounts relate a father slitting the throats of his entire family before killing himself in order to avoid facing the attackers.

From this, it is clear that the persecution of the Jews throughout 1096, while neither extensive nor widespread[[81]](#footnote-19) was encouraged and implemented by militarily organised crusaders, spontaneous crusaders and burghers alike. What is also clear is that despite the fact that the aim of the Crusade was never persecution of the Jews, the stated goals, re-taking Jerusalem and purging the land of the enemies of Christians, owing to the centuries of hatred which Christianity had instigated and fermented towards Jews, were directly adaptable to anti-Semitic sympathies. As we have seen, accusations the Church Fathers were levelling at Jews almost a thousand years prior, resurfaced during the First Crusade.

The charismatic preachers who made their appeals to warriors were also preaching messages of hatred and violence which were not contained just within crusader ranks but easily spread to civilians accounting for the increased burgher involvement in anti-Semitism despite the absence of such ideas in the papal calls.

By 1099, the crusading forces reached Jerusalem (incidentally none of those responsible for the Rhineland Jew massacres mentioned above) and laid siege to the city for over a month. At this point, the crusading army was tired and numbered little more than 15,000 people, including women and children. Many of them were thin from starvation but hardship had made them strong.

On July 15th the makeshift army overran the beleaguered city and proceeded to massacre the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. There were some residents allowed to leave Jerusalem alive but nevertheless, it is undeniable that there were many savage murders that day. One Ibn-al-Qalanisi states that Jews sought refuge in their synagogue but the “Franks burned it over their heads”[[82]](#endnote-63) killing everyone inside.

After the success of the First Crusade, four Crusader states were created: Jerusalem, Edessa, Antioch and Tripoli. The Muslims rallied again and in 1144 re-took Edessa. This prompted calls for a new Crusade by various preachers, most notably by Bernard of Clairvaux and this was officially sanctioned by Pope Eugene III. This Crusade was the first to be led by European kings, particularly Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany.

As in the first Crusade, the themes of hatred and violence which were preached led to attacks on Jews in all of the same places we have already heard tell of; Cologne, Mainz, Worms and Speyer, although it is generally accepted that these Crusades were far less bloody than the first.

Peter the Venerable epitomises the more moderate[[83]](#footnote-20) Augustinian stance towards the Jews when he wrote in 1146, as quoted from Jonathan Riley-Smith, that “in spite of everything God did not want Jews killed; on the other hand, they should be punished for their wickedness in a suitable manner, by having their profits confiscated.”[[84]](#endnote-64) Seaver also notes in a quote from Peter the Venerable: “They [the Jews] are dependent, miserable, and terror-stricken, and must remain in that state until they are converted to the Saviour.”[[85]](#endnote-65) In yet another quote from Peter, we see him call the Jews “vile blasphemers and far worse than the Saracens”[[86]](#endnote-66) and wonder “How can zeal for God nourish God’s children if the Jews, enemies of the supreme Christ and of the Christians, remain totally unpunished?”[[87]](#endnote-67) Of course he also points out that God doesn’t want the Jews killed, rather they are “to be preserved for greater torment and reproach, like the fratricide Cain, in a life worse than death.”[[88]](#endnote-68)

Later Crusades all spawned random, sporadic, Christian violence towards Jews although they would never again reach the levels witnessed in the First Crusade.

David Hart grants the Crusades about a page of commentary in which he mentions nothing about the anti-Semitic fervour they encouraged. Instead, he attempts to imply that the violence which broke out was because a number of “louts, brigands, and killers came along as well.”[[89]](#endnote-69) He weakly dismisses them as “entirely of their time” and attempts to justify them as “a great ferment of cultural and intellectual interaction between East and West.”[[90]](#endnote-70) This attitude is ridiculous and would be a classic example of Christian apologising except that he doesn’t even bother to apologise for anything. Our reaction to this should be just as severe as towards someone who attempted to write off the Holocaust as being “of its time.”

More cogent Christians will point to their own set of quotes and ‘heroes’ to ‘prove’ that the violence against Jews during the Crusades was un-Christian and largely condemned by the Church as in the case of Pope Calixtus who, as Gavin Langmuir notes, issued a papal bull for the protection of Jews in1120 which would be re-issued by later Popes in later Crusades.[[91]](#endnote-71) Bernard of Clairvaux (who you will remember as a key player in the Second Crusade) also strongly condemned anti-Semitic violence and was responsible for quelling much of what could have erupted into more serious persecutions of the Rhineland Jews.

Unfortunately, these defences miss the mark. The Church during the Crusades, as a whole, was against the murder of Jews… great. But it continued its highly polemical and emotive anti-Semitic position towards the killers of Christ. Although it didn’t approve of murdering Jews, it was 100% in favour of keeping them outcast, poor and servile as a fitting punishment (ordained by God after all) for their ancestor’s deicide and their own continued crimes against the one true faith. It is also clear that the messages of hatred, violence and discrimination preached during the Crusades, although perhaps unforeseeable at the time, were highly influential in turning a number of crusaders and burghers against the Jews.

And let’s not forget that the Church was not acting to prevent the murder of Jews by other Godless heathens. The Church’s papal bulls were issued to prevent *Christians* from attacking Jews; Christians who had been raised in a Christian culture which had fermented hatred against the Jews for centuries prior; hatred instilled by the very same Church which was now issuing papal bulls on one hand while preaching about division and religious hatred on the other. Surely some bishop, somewhere, was having a good old laugh at the irony of the situation.

Back to the Facts (General)

Thomas Aquinas adopted the ‘milder’ position put forward by Augustine in which “the Jews by reason of their fault are sentenced to perpetual servitude and thus the lords of the lands in which they dwell may take things from them as though they were their own” as long as they leave the Jews enough to survive.[[92]](#endnote-72) Aquinas is another ‘hero’ devout Christian apologists regularly turn to in defence of Christianity, “See, St Aquinas didn’t advocate killing the Jews.” But as you can see, anyone who holds an opinion which recommends reducing an entire people to perpetual servitude is making a mockery of the notions of “Christian love” and “universal brotherhood.”

In the 12th century, Peter Alfonsi (a Christian convert from Judaism) wrote his *Dialogue* in which he slams Judaism and the Jews for deliberately and knowingly killing the son of God out of jealousy. As Abulafia notes, the Jews “emerge as (1) irrational, (2) deliberate killers of God and (3) in possession of post-biblical writings which induced them to have irrational beliefs about God.”[[93]](#endnote-73) Abulafia points out that this was important because the *Dialogue* was widely disseminated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

From around the same time period, Peter Abelard tends to get wide recognition as a Christian who acted sympathetically towards the Jews and worked for their fair treatment. He wrote in his *Ethics,* that the Jews did not technically sin when they crucified Jesus because they did not realise they were committing deicide. This is a nice gesture to try and stem the rampant anti-Semitism of the day but, as Abulafia notes, what even modern day commentators fail to appreciate is that Abelard is still 100% certain that the Jews did something very wrong in crucifying Jesus. Although, he tries to reduce the severity of their crime from, say, murder in the first degree to murder in the third degree, he cannot see past the predominating fictions of the day that (1) contemporary Jews are not guilty for the sins of their distant ancestors and it is wrong to hold them in any way accountable and (2) the Jews did not kill God against His will because the notion of a human killing the Christian God is about as believable as an ant killing a human through brute strength. Abelard makes a valiant effort but is ultimately unable to break free of the Christian instigated, anti-Semitic paradigm that dominated his time.

Around the same time, in 1140, a new wave of Jewish-based fantasy and delusion was about to grip Europe. Gavin Langmuir writes of an accusation in Norwich where a priest accused the Jews of killing his young nephew, William, despite the fact that there was never any evidence supporting the claim. Nothing more would happen until a decade later when a monk, Thomas of Monmouth, joined the chapter and started the rumour that the Jews had crucified young William. Eager Thomas didn’t stop there however. It turned out that (somehow Thomas had come into this very specific knowledge) “the Jews in Europe conspired every year to choose a country and a city by lot, and the Jews of that city would then kidnap and crucify a child as a ritual to free Jews from their exile.”[[94]](#endnote-74) It just so happened that in 1140, Norwich was the town chosen. Fortunately, few clerics believed the story and no Jews were killed. But the rumour had been planted and like a seed sown in fertile soil it would eventually bear fruit.

By the middle of the thirteenth century Jews were officially executed in England by Edward I and in France by royal officials for alleged crucifixions. Langmuir records how 24 Jews were killed in the town of the monastery of Fulda after people accused the Jews of murdering four boys to get the blood necessary for a Jewish ritual.

This was bad but much worse was to come in the form of an even harder to swallow fantasy. According to Catholic dogma, the consecrated wafers used during Mass actually become the real body of Christ,[[95]](#footnote-21) and despite the fact that everybody knew the Jews did not believe this fiction, the new fantasy held that Jews were stealing consecrated wafers to torture Christ!! This outrageous myth was born in France but it was in Germany that it became particularly lethal.

Langmuir notes that in Rottingen, in 1298, at least 3,400 and possibly 1,000 more Jews were killed as a direct result of an accusation of ‘wafer torture.’ In 1336, the same accusation led to the Armleder movement which may have slaughtered up to 6,000 Jews. Langmuir points out that many more Jews were killed by these accusations than were killed in the Crusades.

It is also relevant to note that the Church never condemned the ritual murder by crucifixion fantasy nor the fantasy surrounding the torture of Christ in wafer form (the two myths which reinforced certain Christian beliefs) although it did condemn the allegations that Jews needed blood for secret rituals.

At this time (the Middle Ages) the Church still forbade usury (the lending of money for profit) but Jews, not being subject to canon law, were able to lend money and charge interest. This let some Jews acquire large sums of money. This only fuelled the animosity towards Jews and led to greater injustices against the culture.

Taxation on Jews became increasingly severe, in 1218 England earned for itself the dubious privilege of being the first European country to instigate the wearing of the degrading yellow, Jewish badge to mark Jews as separate from Christians and in the late 13th century usury was outlawed.[[96]](#footnote-22) Owing to the existence of guilds and popular prejudice against them, Jews were unable to find ‘honest’ work.

Over the next three to four hundred years Jews were systematically expelled by the thousands from countries all over Europe.

In 1348 the Black Death fell upon Europe and the people needed a scapegoat to reconcile the tragedy and senseless loss of life. It was no random act which saw the Jews collectively become that scapegoat. After centuries of vicious slander and abject discrimination they were the obvious candidates and this is borne out by the fact that Europeans all over the continent subscribed to the ludicrous notion that Jews had poisoned the wells and had thus caused the plague. The result? Tortures and massacres all across Europe. Langmuir suggests this accusation led to the slaughter of thousands of Jews.

Again, the Pope, Clement VI this time, tried to protect them but to little avail. There was poisoning going on but it wasn’t the Jews and it didn’t involve any wells. It was the Church which had already poisoned the minds of the Europeans against the Jews. Their almost laughable effort to fix their own mess in this instance is just another chapter in the historic screw ups Christianity has had a hand in.

In the Papal States, an area in Italy under direct sovereign rule of the papacy, which existed until 1870, Jews continued to be discriminated against in a number of ways. They were only allowed to live in specially designated areas called ‘ghettos,’ they were required to regularly attend sermons exhorting their conversion to Christianity and it was illegal to convert from Christianity to Judaism.

Unfortunately, the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century did little to alleviate the plight of the Jews. Martin Luther in particular was especially vehement in his anti-Semitism, giving St Chrysostom a run for his money. In his book *On the Jews and their Lies*, (doesn’t the name say it all) he exclaims that the Jews are a “base, whoring people, that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth.”[[97]](#endnote-75) Mordecai Paldiel in his book *Churches and the Holocaust*, (2006), quotes Luther castigating the Jews as “venomous beasts, vipers, disgusting scum, cancers, devils incarnate… pig excrement” warning his followers that there was no greater enemy to the Christian, outside the devil himself, than the Jew.

In the same text Luther outlines a more violent seven step plan for eradicating Judaism from the face of the earth including burning down their synagogues and schools and letting whatever escapes the fire be covered with sand and mud, destroying their prayer books, forbidding their rabbis to preach, razing their homes and confiscating their wealth.

Luther even takes his anti-Semitism beyond mere slander (although slander is far too generous a word for the excoriating insults he levels at the Jews) implying that Jews should be murdered. “We are at fault in not slaying them. Rather we allow them to live freely in our midst despite all their murdering, cursing, blaspheming, lying, and defaming”.[[98]](#endnote-76)

Luther is so quotable regarding the Jews, however my favourite all-time quote is this one, Luther’s final warning against the Jews on February 18, 1546: “Yet, we will show them Christian love and pray for them that they may be converted to receive the Lord, whom they should honour properly before us. Whoever will not do this is no doubt a malicious Jew, who will not stop blaspheming Christ, draining you dry, and, if he can, killing you.” That sums up Christian love to me. *We will love you if you believe in Jesus but if you don’t, why, then you must be a malicious Jew who will try and kill us if you can.* Beautiful.

Before I close this section, I want to address a defence that I have heard voiced by Christian apologists. It goes something like this, “Yes, the Jews occasionally had run-ins with Christians but the numbers were never big. Sure, a few hundred here, a few hundred there… compared to ‘atheist’ regimes, Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, etc, these incidents don’t even compare.”

The first thing to note is that Hitler, Pol Pot and all the other dictators of the twentieth century who were guilty of genocide did not have an ‘atheist’ regime, there isn’t even such a thing; but we will look at this in greater detail later and I wish to defer this discussion for a bit.

Second, these people had access to far greater means of destruction than our Middle Age Crusaders did. You can’t meaningfully compare people running around with swords and clubs to people wielding automatic machine guns and bombs.

Third and one of the three main points I want to make here. Who cares what Hitler and Pol Pot did? Christians claim that their religion was beneficial to the world. They claim that Christianity is all about ‘love thy neighbour’ and ‘turn the other cheek.’ Shouldn’t Christianity be able to stand on its own merits rather than earning a favourable review by comparing itself to some of the greatest atrocities humanity has ever seen? I’m not claiming Christianity is worse than Hitler or Pol Pot. Christians who point out that at least Christianity isn’t as bad as them, are really saying, “I know Christianity is pretty rotten, but hey, at least it wasn’t as rotten as Stalin.” Forget the comparisons. They mean nothing.

Fourth (another of the main points here and one I’ve already touched on in a footnote), we must be careful when these apologists downplay murders which took place in long forgotten history. The facts become sterile and the tragedies become academic and cerebral data rather than real events involving real people. Let’s take the 24 Jews killed in revenge for the murder of four boys (supposedly for some kind of Jewish blood ritual). 24. Only 24, right? What’s the big deal? Over the course of Christian history, 24 murders is nothing. At first, it does seem like nothing but this is an illusion. First of all, when we hear of an event which happened that far in the past we tend to automatically apportion the tragedy over a great number of years which misrepresents how serious it really was. Second, that incident took place in a town where the population was probably no more than a few thousand. In a mega-city where population is measured by the millions, 24 is nothing; but in a small town, 24 is a much larger number.

Take both of those facts together and imagine a small rural town, maybe the town you grew up in or the one where someone in your family now lives. Imagine 24 people are killed in this town, for whatever reason. I challenge you to find an apologist who will stand up and say, “Well, 24 murders is 24 too many, but… you know in the grand scheme of things… thousands have died in Syria… a single suicide bomber killed thirty five people…” The further back in history we go, the less severe events seem.

Fifth and finally, the savagery involved in slaughtering someone with a sword or burning down a monastery full of Jews is far more brutal than that involved in pushing a button to fire a bomb or pulling a trigger. To dismiss these savage murders out of hand does not do justice to their cold-blooded nature and the primitive emotions that often accompanied such actions.

The Conclusion

Christianity has a nasty history bursting at the seams with anti-Semitism. Not only has Christianity continually reinforced the negative stigma and incessant cultural hatred towards Jews for centuries, they started it. The hatred of Jews all began with accusations of their deicide. What started out as the malicious rantings of a few very twisted individuals would spiral and grow into a pernicious stigma which would follow the Jews for centuries afterwards.

This stigma would lie dormant underneath social veneer, sometimes for centuries at a time, but then it would erupt in explosive and tragic fashion in events like the Crusades and the insane accusations of wafer torture or well-poisoning. Christianity branded the Jews as devils and the fact is that while Christianity ruled the Western world, the Jews would never find themselves far away from persecution.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

The Theory

Is there anything in what I have been calling the ‘theory’ of Christianity which can save it from the anti-Semitic elements we have seen exemplified so far? There is not much in my hit list of things to believe that relates specifically to anti-Semitism except one; believing in the Bible.

The Old Testament contains very little anti-Semitism, as you would expect considering it chronicles the history of the Jews themselves. However, there is one thing of note which would later come to be used against the Jews by Christians. Throughout the beginning of the Old Testament, when God was still a tangible presence, the Jews repeatedly showed their inability to follow His simplest commandment, the one about not worshipping any other gods. Again and again, despite paying for this sin with their lives, the “stiff-necked” Israelites, as God so eloquently puts it, continued to make and worship other gods at every chance they got.

In Exodus 32, when Moses goes to the top of Mount Sinai to have his pow-wow with God, the foolish Israelites get tired of waiting and fashion a golden calf to start worshipping in place of Moses. Not surprisingly, neither God nor Moses are happy with this state of affairs and in the end the Lord is forced to plague “the people because of what they did with the calf…”

Throughout the Israelites (the Jews) military campaigns in the Middle East, God is constantly having to kill his unfaithful followers: “…the people [Israelites] began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab… So Moses said to the judges of Israel. “Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor [another god]”” (Numbers 25)

Often, the Jews are just portrayed as whingeing fools. In Numbers 11, the ungrateful Jews complain about their incessant wandering and lack of food so God sends his fire down upon them consuming those in the outskirts of the camp.

Everyone knows that Moses was a pretty good guy. He was God’s right hand man for a time but in Numbers 16, those naughty Israelites that he was leading start complaining about the fact that he has taken it upon himself to be their leader. God’s reaction? “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”

The stupid Israelites cannot even get the offerings they are to make to God right. In Leviticus 10, a couple of sons of Aaron step up and offer “profane fire before the LORD”. Needless to say “fire went out from the LORD and devoured them”.

Finally, in the early chapters of Judges, the Israelites again and again fail to honour their covenant with God, almost continually worshipping other gods. Of the three subheadings in Judges 2, two of them are “Israel’s Disobedience” and “Israel’s Unfaithfulness” and sentences expressing the sentiment “the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD” appear with startling frequency. In the end, God gets so fed up with the Israelites that He renounces them and turns His back on them, actively strengthening their enemies to punish them for their unfaithfulness. He delivers them into the hands of Mesopotamia, Moab and Canaan, just to name a few. It is striking to note that a solid case could be made for it being the fault of the “stiff-necked” Jews that God has abandoned us.

The Old Testament definitely does not paint a very flattering picture of the Jews. They come out looking like foolish, disobedient, ungrateful, unfaithful buffoons who are so easily tempted into worshipping other gods that they wear out the patience of God, who then abandons them to their enemies for their insolence.

How about the New Testament? As we have already seen, the Gospels directly attribute Christ’s death to the Jews. All Christian, anti-Semitic sentiment stems from this pernicious accusation. Each of the four Gospels ‘faithfully’ record the Roman governor Pontus Pilate telling the Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem that he could find no fault with Jesus and proposing his release. In response to this, the crowd in all four Gospels shout back, “Crucify him, crucify him!” As I have already pointed out, Matthew has the most damning phrase, one that would prove to be the bane of Jews for centuries after Christianity rose to power: “And all the people answered and said, “His blood *be* on us and on our children.”” (Matthew 27:25) But John is the only one of the four to actually use the word Jews in reference to the crowd gathered in Jerusalem before Pilate: “And he said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” But they cried out, “Away with *Him,* away with *Him!* Crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” “The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar!” (John 19:14-15). All four Gospels thoroughly exonerate Pilate of any responsibility for Christ’s crucifixion and place the blame squarely on the Jewish crowd and Jewish priests.

As you might expect, the crucifixion of Jesus is not the only part of the Gospels where we see Jews being portrayed in a less than positive light. In fact, throughout the whole of the Gospels, the Pharisees, Rabbis, priests and Jewish elders come off looking like legalistic sticks in the mud. In every encounter with Jesus, he contradicts and belittles them and their rules and in each of the Gospels, they are always out to get Christ. Here is just a small sample of the interactions between Jesus and the Jews:

* Mark 11:15-18: Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple and chastises them for turning it into a ““*den of thieves*.” And then the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him”.
* Mark 14:43-46: The Jewish disciple Judas Iscariot betrays Jesus and identifies him for the chief priests, the scribes and the elders.
* Matthew 21:45-46 “Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them. But when they sought to lay hands on Him, they feared the multitudes”.
* Matthew 23: Almost the whole chapter falls under the subtitle, “Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees” and is exclusively devoted to Jesus soundly criticising and chastising them calling them hypocritical, foolish, blind, lawless and culminating in the infamous, “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”
* John 7:1 “After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judaea, because the Jews sought to kill Him.”
* John 10:31 “Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone me?” The Jews answered Him, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.””

Now you may be wondering why and how, if Jesus was a Jew (which he was) and he only came for the lost sheep of Israel (which he admitted), can the Jews be cast as the villains in this fantasy story? Haven’t I made two contradictory claims in saying that Jesus only came for the Jews, was a Jew himself, and yet seemed to be at odds with Jews all throughout the Gospels, the whole saga finally ending with the Jews crucifying one of their own?

The resolution of the apparent paradox lies in the realisation that Jesus was not the first Christian. Jesus never saw himself as separate from the Jews, as such. He thought the Jews had wandered astray like lost sheep, and he saw it as his job to shepherd them back to the fold. Now, those who were leading the flock astray happened to be the Jewish priests, Rabbis and elders. In the first place, they failed to recognise Jesus as the Messiah (a big no no and a fact which meant that Jesus could overturn all the old rules they were clinging to such as no work on the Sabbath (see Mark 2:23-28)) but they had also become hypocritical and corrupt, at least according to Jesus. In a sense, Jesus was fighting with the Jewish establishment for the Jewish people.

I think it is quite clear that Jesus is not condemning *all* Jews in the confrontations he has with the priests and Rabbis but this is how the first Christians (St Paul and the early Church Fathers) would come to interpret it. And this conclusion is reinforced by the fact that in the end, it is the Jews who would call for Jesus’ crucifixion. From this point on (or rather, *because* of this incident but from around the 3rd century on), there would no longer be any such thing as an ‘innocent’ Jew. All of Jewry would become collectively guilty and just as mistaken and misled as the priests, Rabbis and Pharisees who sought to kill Jesus and against whom he rallied all throughout the Gospels.

The Conclusion

Again, the theory of Christianity that belies the facts of Christian history serves up ample evidence to account for the near-constant anti-Semitic attitude and frequent persecutions of Jews that have existed for the last fifteen hundred years.

I have never yet heard any Christian claim that Christianity put an end to anti-Semitism (the way we hear such grandiose claims about slavery and sexism) but I suspect I just haven’t waited long enough. While they haven’t claimed that their faith delivered us from the evils of anti-Semitism yet, they certainly aren’t keen on admitting that those same evils were given birth to by their precious faith, despite the evidence which points a gnarled finger directly at the cross hanging above their front door.

As you may have noticed, I have purposely avoided any commentary on the Holocaust until now. I did this because I believe the facts allow us to pass judgement on Christianity irrespective of whether we find Christianity partially responsible for Hitler’s anti-Semitism or not. I think that Christianity has given us plenty of rope to allow us to hang it before we even ask the Nazi question. And it is with this sentiment that I proceed to judge:

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Homosexuals**

Now here’s a subject you won’t hear any Christian apologists bravely trumpeting in the face of atheists. And there’s a reason for that. In our current social system, homosexuals are gaining ever more rights and freedoms. There is less discrimination against homosexuals than ever before and homosexuals are conducting themselves with more openness and less shame. Same sex marriages are becoming legal and legally recognised in more and more countries every year. In short, homosexuality has become a practice which is gathering widespread public acceptance.

Almost every part of Western society has changed its attitude regarding homosexuality… except Christianity. [[99]](#footnote-23) Various Christian denominations hold differing attitudes towards homosexuality but the consensus is definitely that same sex relationships are sinful. Many Christians believe that homosexuality should be treated like any other sin, that is, the offender should be allowed to join a congregation and work towards overcoming his or her sinful tendencies, but should otherwise not be maltreated or discriminated against. This is the attitude I will be addressing.

This is the first aspect of modernity we have encountered in which Christians aren’t claiming their faith spearheaded the humanistic toleration and acceptance that is currently practiced. As such I will not be following my usual format of reviewing the historical facts and the theory of Christianity; there is no need to when Christians are largely clear that homosexuality is a sin and wouldn’t deny that the Church has been against the practice since its inception fifteen hundred odd years ago. Rather, we will just jump in and see why Christians hold this view and whether we might consider the Church to be helping or hindering the progress of humanity.

As I mentioned, Christianity as a whole, is united in this view on homosexuality but where does it come from? Well, Christians enthusiastically point to their Bible for direct, incontrovertible proof that God despises homosexuality. In particular, there a couple of passages in Leviticus which hold the spotlight regarding this:

* Lev 18:22 “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It *is* an abomination.”
* Lev 20:13 “If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination. They shall surely be put to death.”

The Christians are right about one thing. That is unequivocally clear. As always however, this is not the whole story.

First, Leviticus does not condemn only homosexual relations; it also goes into great detail regarding other laws that must be obeyed including; a woman being considered unclean after childbirth for seven days (if the baby was a boy, two weeks for a girl) after which time she must make a ritual offering as atonement for her sin, meticulous rules and conditions regarding the sacrifices which must be made to God, a prohibition on eating pork and any sea creature that doesn’t have scales or fins (no more calamari), no tattoos, no shaving the sides of your head, and so on. Christians seem remarkably flexible on all of these other points but somehow fail to grant the rule against homosexuals the same flexibility.

I once heard a Christian argue the rules we might call ‘civil’ from the above list were made for a theocracy and since we are not under a theocracy anymore, they are not applicable. The laws regarding ritual offerings and so on are ‘priestly’ laws which Jesus ‘fulfilled’ (whatever that means) so we no longer have to worry about them. The last category are the ‘moral’ laws which are still in effect.

Surely, anyone with even an ounce of commonsense can see that this is sophistry at its finest. The ‘civil’ laws were made for a theocracy and are not applicable anymore!? That’s ludicrous. Jesus somehow mysteriously ‘fulfilled’ the ‘priestly’ laws for all eternity?!? More nonsense. All we are then left with are the ‘moral’ laws which include things like the ten commandments and the prohibition on homosexuality which conveniently carry through to today.

It is God speaking directly in Leviticus and He is explicitly clear about the fact that the contravention of *any* of the above rules constitutes a sin and will be punished accordingly, usually with banishment from the tribe (if He’s feeling generous) or death (if he’s feeling ornery). God never makes any of these sophistic distinctions between civil, priestly and moral laws.

Another problem is that the punishment for homosexuality, as seen in Leviticus 20, is death. Again, our sincere ‘it says so in the Bible’ Christian has simply chosen to ignore this unpleasant directive... but not without a sophistic explanation. Another Christian commentator claimed that St Paul condemned homosexuality in the New Testament as being a sin but shies away from recommending the death penalty.

This invites a whole host of new problems:

First, this assumes that everything in the New Testament trumps everything in the Old Testament. Who couldn’t doubt that St Paul (a human) is bringing a more accurate or up-to-date message than God (who must have changed His mind somewhere along the way)? This is the current Christian attitude but I find it hard to believe. God laid down the law and then we are supposed to believe that it was overturned later by a human, albeit it one with some kind of imagined Divine mandate. Seems suspicious to me.

Second, it’s a little misleading. My friendly Christian commentator helpfully quoted the following passage from Romans 1 for me:

* Rom 1:26-27 “For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful”. I.e. homosexuality is shameful but not fully sinful.

Unfortunately this is only part of the passage. Just a few lines further on, Paul concludes:

* Rom 1:32 “…those who practice such things are deserving of death”.

Now, it’s true that Paul is not quite as bold as God and to say that someone deserves death is not the same as sentencing someone to death, but Paul was not really in a position to be making laws. Paul was a preacher of a religion which did not tolerate other religions in a state where the Emperors were trying to maintain order. He couldn’t have authorised the death penalty or any kind of law even if he had wished to, but it might be argued that he goes as close to it as he possibly can.

It’s also misleading because while Paul doesn’t explicitly recommend the death penalty, neither does he ever mention that he is overturning it. He doesn’t say anything about punishments here on earth for those who sin (he does say they will not inherit the kingdom of God) but it is irresponsible to infer from this that he is against them. As I already mentioned, he was not in a position to be making any such claims even if he had wanted to.

At any rate, Christians are firm in their belief that God condemns homosexuality and they have the Biblical quotes to back it up. I would argue that this attitude is a perfect example of the backwards, restrictive influence Christianity has in our world.

Modern society has progressed to a point where many people accept homosexuality and homosexuals as different but not bad. Of course, this wasn’t always the case and it wasn’t the case for most of our history. Homosexuality has only earned acceptance within the last couple of generations (much like all of our other freedoms) and we can credit, almost entirely, the Enlightenment and perhaps to a lesser degree the Renaissance, for this. It was these movements which forced the notions of equality and universal human rights upon our forefathers, which they in turn bequeathed to us.

A neo-Christian might argue at this point that not all Christian denominations consider homosexuality a sin and this is true, but all of these denominations either formulated such an open-minded tolerance or changed their former bigotry *because* of secular movements and the secular appreciation of human rights and freedoms.

No Christian claims we have our open, tolerant attitude towards homosexuals because of Christian love and universal brotherhood. We founded this attitude all on our secular selves. But is it a good one?

I don’t plan to delve into great depth to answer the question of whether acceptance of homosexuality is a positive facet of society or a negative one, largely because it is almost a rhetorical question. The only people who condemn homosexuality are religious and the only real reasons they have for condemning it are religious in nature (i.e. because a book written 2,000 years ago says so).

Homosexuals are engaging in mutually consenting sexual relationships with other adults and it is very difficult to offer plausible reasons why this should be considered wrong or in some way detrimental to society. What these people do in the privacy of their own homes is really their own business and the fact that we are okay with that is a positive sign and evidence of a genuine sense of respect for an individual’s rights. It used to be unthinkable for a white-skinned person to consider marrying someone with black skin, but we progressed beyond that prejudice too.

I submit that the acceptance of homosexuality in our society is an overwhelmingly positive feature; it is a sign of maturity and the emergence of a true universal brotherhood as opposed to the counterfeit version offered by Christianity. In light of this, we have no choice but to interpret Christianity’s continued resistance to the acceptance of homosexuality as something not sinful or deserving of punishment, as negative and bigoted.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Christianity as the Foundation of Science**

It has often been claimed that religion can co-exist with science because they are in fact separate realms. Due to this fundamental separation, it has been suggested that neither is qualified to comment on the conclusions of the other. Stephen Jay Gould first coined the term ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ in 1997, from an essay with the same title, to define the situation and forever end the conflict that existed between the two disciplines.

I would like to suggest that the NOMA principle is completely false. Presumably Gould was imagining that science takes the physical as its realm while religion occupies itself with the ‘spiritual’ (whatever that is). However, I think that science and religion do in fact overlap in a very important way. Essentially they both make claims about the way the universe is and what happens in it. Religion claims that the universe was created and is headed by a mysterious Creator Being called God. It claims that when you die, you either go to a place called heaven or a very different one called hell. It claims that if you are in trouble and pray to God, He will listen and help you. When various natural disasters or acts of crime take place, Christians often invoke God as the reason. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack, a press release by Pat Robertson, an American Christian evangelist, claimed that “It is happening because God Almighty is lifting His protection from us.”[[100]](#endnote-77)

All of these claims are addressable by science. If God is interfering with and manipulating events on earth according to His own agenda, science should be able to pick up on this. Of course, despite the studies performed on the efficacy of prayer, none have produced any evidence to support the hypothesis (and I do use that word loosely here) that God is listening and answering. Tectonic plate theory is able to explain earthquakes in a way that is both rational and 100% materialistic. Even the more esoteric or ‘spiritual’ claims about God or heaven should be at least indirectly accessible to science. If God really exists and is talking to (or has talked to) some of us, there should be some kind of tangible evidence to back this up.

On the other hand, if you want to restrict your religion to a Creator God who has no involvement in day-to-day, earthly affairs, does not communicate with humans, and who resides in a dimension (heaven) so separate from ours that we have no way of accessing or even learning about it through ordinary physical means, fine, go for it. But what a bleak religion and what a disappointing God. Such a metaphysical description seems almost entirely predicated on expressly separating the Divine and the physical, solely in order to protect itself from a scientific attack which is necessarily restricted to the physical. Even the mere supposition of a ‘spiritual’ realm, usually explicitly defined as ‘opposite to matter’ seems to be more of a cover than a genuine expression of the way things are.

I have said that religion and science both make claims about how the universe is and how it works. A Christian might argue that God and heaven are ‘beyond’ our universe so religion is by default, beyond the scope of science which is necessarily limited to our universe. This is nonsense. So that you can see the facetious nature of the claim, allow me to illustrate what they have done. They first define God as being ‘beyond’ the physical without appeal to any reliable reasoning and then they turn to us atheists and say, “God is beyond the physical so your science can’t affect us” as if the dimensional gap between us and God was a verifiable fact rather than something they just made up.

Of course, there is a fundamental problem with this strategy as well. They fail to address exactly *how* it’s possible for them to know God is of a different ‘spiritual’ substance when, by their own definition and according to their own terms, it should be completely impossible for there to be any contact between God (non-physical) and us (physical). The same problem exists for the claim that the ‘soul’ is non-physical. If that’s true, how and where does it interact with the body? This is one of the biggest problems with the idea of Cartesian dualism (the notion that the human is a dual entity comprised of a spiritual soul and a physical body) and for many philosophers has sounded the death knell for this theory.

Not only this, but religion has not restricted itself to comments about God and descriptions of heaven and hell; it has frequently intruded into the realm of the physical and attempted to make claims about how the world is (more so in the past than now – they have since learned the folly of making claims that can be verified scientifically). Of course, everyone remembers the Christian claim that the earth is the centre of the universe, but Christianity has also claimed that the earth and everything on it was created in six days and that it is much, much younger than the current scientific estimate of around four billion years (of course there are many Christians who still believe both of these myths). They have claimed that humans used to live for centuries, that the entire planet was consumed by a flood and that a ship was built by a single guy which housed every species of animal we see on the planet today for the duration of the deluge. They claimed that humans and dinosaurs used to co-exist and that God made man out of clay, not according to evolution. They claim that Adam and Eve used to live on earth in a paradise but because they ate an apple from a certain tree they were banished and now all of us bear the mark of original sin on our eternal souls (which are conveniently non-material; whatever that means).

All of these things should be, at least in some way, verifiable by science but science has ruthlessly ignored Biblical and Christian mythology to arrive at its own explanations and this is because there is one sense in which science and religion can be considered NOMA; evidence. Science requires evidence built on a chain of logic and reason to support its claims; religion demands no such exacting proof; the words of a book compiled over an uncertain period of time from writings composed by unknown authors or even the random ideas of a priest are enough to substantiate religion’s claims for its adherents. Such a flimsy base as religion is built upon stretches the claim that religion even qualifies as a ‘magisteria’ in the first place.

We see science and religion both making claims about life and our universe and in many cases these claims are polar opposites. Problems arise because the two ‘magisteria’ allow different standards of proof. Science only permits theories that proceed according to the rigorous scientific method and meet equally rigorous standards; religion allows any story or interpretation that falls within the bounds of doctrine and presumes to explain something. As such, the conflict between the two is real and intractable.

If I say the word ‘science’, what names spring to mind? If you’re like most people, you probably think of Galileo, Newton, Einstein, probably Copernicus, and maybe Kepler. It is interesting to note that all of those scientists were active post-1500s. If I pushed you for a scientist before this time you would probably not be able to come up with any names although you might hesitatingly offer Archimedes and Ptolemy (Archimedes dies 212 BC and Ptolemy in 168 CE).

It is useful to note your intuitions on this subject at this point because I am almost certain that you cannot name any person you might be tempted to call a scientist stemming from the Middle Ages (sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages in this context - around the time period 200 to 1500 CE). This is an important clue to much of what will be the focus of the rest of this section, so it will be useful to bear it in mind as we proceed.

Christianity has been frequently targeted as having retarded scientific advances all throughout its history. There are a couple of very good reasons for this but before we look at exactly what did happen when Christianity came to power, I want to mention a curious development that has arisen only recently. Christians have traditionally been on the defensive in this particular debate but they have recently changed tact under people like James Hanaam, Rodney Stark and David Bentley Hart. Christians are no longer satisfied with the passive claim that Christianity has *not* hindered scientific progress, rather they now declare that it has actively pursued science and even helped build the foundations for the scientific age. They claim that science did not actually falter and stagnate during the Middle Ages but rather thrived under the attempt to understand the mind of God.

Bold claims. This chapter will see what the facts have to say about this.

The Facts

The titles first philosopher and first scientist (at least in Western tradition) are usually bestowed upon a single man, a Greek fellow from Miletus, called Thales. Thales was born in the seventh century BCE and was the first person we know of to formulate reasons and use argumentation in support of his ideas. It is reported how he bought all of the olive presses in Miletus one year after accurately predicting the weather and the subsequent good harvest, at which time he sold the olive presses back to the hapless farmers making a handsome profit. He is also usually given credit for correctly predicting a solar eclipse that occurred in 585 BCE.

Another example of some early scientific thinking can be found in Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. In his book, *The Closing of the Western Mind*, Charles Freeman documents how this early thinker was among the first to reject the notion that the gods disturb our lives or interfere with our planet (the weather, crops, etc) according to their whims, and search for reasonable explanations. This may seem so obvious to us as to verge on the moronic, but over two thousand years ago, this was a radical idea. The idea that the weather is not directly controlled by the gods and therefore cannot be influenced by praying to them or making sacrifices was a vital and huge leap in understanding.

The example Freeman cites involves speculation on the cause of the annual flooding of the Nile River. Herodotus considers and rejects three possible causes before adopting a fourth, giving reasons to support his thesis. Freeman notes that Herodotus “uses observation and reason to discard some explanations and formulate others. Here is the process of “scientific” thinking at work.”[[101]](#endnote-78)

Freeman also discusses an early example of a ‘scientific’ text, this time from the early fourth century attributed to Hippocrates. The text is about epilepsy, at the time known as the “Sacred Disease” because due to its sudden and violent nature, it seemed that it must be of divine origin, and in it Hippocrates dismisses the supernatural ‘explanation’ and offers a rational hypothesis for its onset.

While being far from exhaustive; these examples are also indicative of the intellectual and rational approach to problems being developed by the ancient Greeks, in which various hypotheses and theories were being investigated, argued for and argued against in an atmosphere not unlike the one that currently prevails in modern scientific circles.

In the third century BCE Eratosthenes attempted to measure the circumference of the earth and Archimedes made giant leaps in mathematical understanding. Epicureanism was active from the third century, making, while not strictly scientific investigations, rational inquiries backed up with reasons beyond “the priest said so” or “this ancient religious text says so.” The relatively long-lived Stoicism was practiced and taught well into the second century CE, when some of the last real scientists, Galen (in medicine) and Ptolemy (in astronomy) flourished. Freeman correctly observes that scientific inquiry completely ceased from this time on, citing the final recorded astronomical observation as having been made by the Athenian philosopher, Proclus, in 475 CE.

After this point in time, certain scientifically based assumptions or ideas were warped to fit within a Christian framework and ossified almost instantly. Plato’s model of the creation of the universe by God, as recorded in the *Timaeus*, became Gospel. Ptolemy’s work, particularly in cosmology, froze the earth at the centre of the universe where it would stay for the next fourteen hundred years. And Galen’s work in the field of medicine, while admirable despite being primitive and not particularly effective, attacked disease with a reasoning and scientific mind but was left without an heir and was to be adopted and twisted by a Christian guardian. Freeman records how leprosy became a punishment sent by God for lust, saints became associated with specific diseases and “the relics of martyrs, sacred texts and icons became mechanisms through which miracles [were] effected.”[[102]](#endnote-79) Magic, miracles, God, and the devil all dislodged sensible, rational thought towards medicine until well into the Middle Ages and beyond.

As a representative example of the prevailing attitude during the Middle Ages, Freeman cites the following as a cure for epilepsy (which you will recall Hippocrates identified as a natural, that is non-supernatural, disease), “The English physician John of Gaddesden (1280-1349) recommended a composite cure – the reading of the Gospel over the epileptic while simultaneously placing on him the hair of a white dog.”[[103]](#endnote-80)

The history of Western scientific thought was forced into a period of stagnation for over a thousand years until Copernicus published his landmark text, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, in 1543. Copernicus almost single-handedly started the scientific revolution, the reins of which would be left to a string of scientists truly deserving of the title whose names are so famous they barely even need introducing. Of course, I am talking about people like, but not restricted to, Galileo Galilei, Johannes Kepler and arguably the greatest of them all, Sir Isaac Newton. The ideas and insights that swept from the minds of these individuals and their contemporaries shook the Christian society to its roots and left it forever changed. But science had one more trump card up its sleeve.

In 1859 an English naturalist, Charles Darwin, published his compelling theory of evolution by natural selection in *On the Origin of Species*, outlining a detailed scientific investigation which included the extremely uncomfortable conclusion that humanity had in fact, evolved from primates not unlike monkeys. This was the final straw for an already weakened Church, but by this time science had built up too many successes and was virtually unstoppable. Pandora’s Box had been well and truly opened and Christianity is still recovering from the impact.

Earlier chapters in this essay have involved a deeper analysis of historical figures (usually working up through St Paul, the Church Fathers and other prominent Christians such as Aquinas) and their attitudes to the topic in question, but there is no real need in this case because science as we know it simply didn’t exist until the modern period. Of course, I have glossed over a few important points which I will now revisit in more detail with the aid of Rodney Stark and David Bentley Hart to act as my foils.

Reflections on the Facts

Both Stark (2011) in *The Triumph of Christianity*,and Hart (2009) in *Atheist Delusions*, claim that there was in fact no scientific revolution. They claim that it is ridiculous to assert that science “burst forth in full bloom” from nothing as it were. As with all half-truths there is an element of truth to this but just how much and exactly how distorted this truth actually is may not be clear after a first read.

It is certainly true that Copernicus didn’t just wake up one morning and think to himself “Of course! The earth rotates *around* the sun!” It is also probably a fair claim to make that most people tend to think the story does go something like that. Stark points to people like William of Ockham (1295-1349), Nicole d’Oresme (1325-1382) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) as being the primary precursors to Copernicus’ ground-breaking heliocentric model of the universe. This is a part of the half-true aspect of the Hart-Stark story. These thinkers were all extremely gifted and talented individuals who were capable of thinking outside the box and were not afraid to push the boundaries of current thought. Kepler himself even calls Nicholas of Cusa “divinely inspired” in one of his works.

Hart tries to narrow the gap further with some name-dropping from the High to Late Middle Ages including Thomas Bradwardine (1290-1349), Robert Grosseteste (1168-1253) and Richard Swineshead (mid 1300s). Again, I have no wish to diminish the theories of these thinkers; they were intellects of the highest calibre and all the more astounding for having had their ideas in the midst of an intellectual desert, as it were.

The half untrue part of the Stark-Hart claim is the way they deliberately fail to mention that these thinkers made their contributions almost a thousand years after the last authoritative word on the subject. They completely ignore the fact that under the Christian Church, progressive thought had stagnated for more than eight centuries prior and was enjoying a resurgence as a direct result of the Renaissance; not the Christian Church.

Stark obscures the situation further by claiming that Copernicus’ involvement in the process was “not a leap, but the implicit next step in a long line of discovery and innovation stretching back for centuries.”[[104]](#endnote-81) While this is not a bold-faced lie, he has stretched the truth. When he says “centuries”, implying many hundreds of years, what he really means is a little over two hundred years, which, when considered in light of Christianity’s well over a thousand years dominance, looks far less impressive.

Hart attempts to foist the reason for the stagnation (without actually admitting that there was any stagnation) by claiming that Galileo, Kepler and Newton were emerging from the “enormous burden of the millennial authority of Aristotelian science. The scientific revolution… was not a revival of Hellenistic science but its final defeat.”[[105]](#endnote-82) There are two problems with this sentiment. First, while Copernicus may have led a movement which resulted in the complete abandonment of Aristotelian science, this in no way undermines the value that such science had as a step (albeit a misplaced one) on the path to scientific truth. As both Hart and Stark are overly fond of saying, no theory emerges fully formed from nothing. The preceding ideas to any theory in any discipline are bound to be at least partially wrong, but it is unfair to condemn them in this way looking back from our elevated position which we only came to by “standing on the shoulders of giants”.

Second, Hart fails to account for why Aristotelian science had assumed such an authoritative position in a Christian society. He attempts to blame its “Hellenistic” (what Hart wants to say here is “pre-Christian”) roots, as if that should have given it some kind of authenticity in a Christian world. The truth is that most of Aristotle’s works were lost to the West until the twelfth century and as we have already seen most of Plato’s works were also ignored. The only parts of both philosophers which were retained were those that Christianity could fit into its theological worldview. Hence, it is not due to Aristotle or Plato that their almost entirely erroneous natural physics and cosmologies dominated for a thousand years; rather it is because the Church, after appropriating the ideas which supported their doctrines,[[106]](#footnote-24) stifled all further thought in these areas. The Christian Church dominated society (including education and medicine) all throughout the Middle Ages. It is disappointing that Hart attempts to ignore this fact whenever it is inconvenient for him.

This is more classic Christian logic. Christian apologists tell us that throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity dominated in all areas of education and medicine and this is why Christianity is responsible for the beginnings of modernity; including science, ethics and even medicine. But when something happened that was not progressive, such as the dominance of Aristotelianism, all of a sudden Christianity has no responsibility. When something positive happened; abolitionism, democracy, equality, etc., Christianity was the driving force in society; but when something negative happened, sexism, persecution of the Jews, dominance of Aristotelianism, etc., Christianity was a helpless spectator… but I digress…

Hart also tries to narrow the yawning divide between pre/early Christian science and pre/early ‘scientific revolution’ science, by devoting a couple of pages to the Christian[[107]](#footnote-25) philosopher and scientist John Philoponus (490-570 CE) who was another intellectual luminary of his times. It is worthwhile noting (although Hart fails to do so) that even considering this last effort, there is still a gap of six hundred years between him and Grosseteste (the next ‘scientist’ Hart calls on). This is a very important point because it goes right to the heart of the Stark/Hart claim. They claim that scientific thought not only didn’t stagnate and that the Dark Ages never existed, but also that Christianity was responsible for the scientific endeavour. This chasm, of at least six hundred years, where they are unable to find even one notable thinker needs to be addressed because this is in the heart of the Western theocracy, the time when Christianity ruled the Western world. If Christianity spurred science along, why did we have to wait for the (‘alleged’ according to Stark) scientific revolution which quickly separated itself from religion and why was there this centuries-long dearth of intellectual progress?[[108]](#footnote-26)

Now after all of that, if Hart or Stark were satisfied with merely asserting that there were a string of thinkers before Copernicus who contributed to his thinking regarding his heliocentric model of the ‘universe’, then I wouldn’t have any problems with them. But they are not content to leave it there and that is not the main thrust of their argument. What they are doing is trying to show that science progressed all throughout the Christian Middle Ages and that the ‘scientific revolution’ and the notion of the ‘Dark Ages’ as a period in which scientific and societal development stagnated, are both false. These are tough claims to back up.

I have already shown that there is a gaping black hole between the last of Hart’s earlier thinkers and the first of his later thinkers but there are at least four other problems with the Hart/Stark thesis.

One; Stark mentions that Copernicus studied or was at least aware of the theories of people like Nicole d’Oresme and Nicholas of Cusa but this is only half the story. Copernicus also studied Aristotle’s natural science and Ptolemy’s cosmology. Now, if you are anything like me, you might be asking yourself why Copernicus had to study Ptolemy’s theory which was conceived more than fourteen hundred years prior. The answer is because it was the largely unquestioned and more importantly the *only* precisely formulated schema which explained the movement of the stars and planets in the sky (albeit it with a cumbersome system of epicycles) to any degree of exactness approaching science.

Hart and Stark attempt to convince us that Christianity was a driving force of science all throughout the Middle Ages but this single fact, that the only cosmological theory around was fourteen hundred years old, cries out against inferring any such thesis. The unavoidable conclusion is that Christianity either suppressed any ideas which attempted to seriously call into question the Ptolemaic (which was enthusiastically adopted by Christianity especially as it coincided with Biblical verse) system or failed to provide enough motivation to really seek a better scientific understanding of the universe.

Two; despite the fact that there were intelligent Christians who had radical ideas prior to Copernicus, none of them presented or formulated their ideas in such a way as to really challenge the status quo. How do I know that? Simple. Nothing changed. As Hart freely admits, Ptolemy and Aristotle ruled until Copernicus came along.

Copernicus provided the first geometric, mathematical based reasoning to offer any kind of serious challenge to the Ptolemaic system. Other thinkers had thought interesting thoughts but these were almost nothing more than idle speculations compared to Copernicus. Copernicus, in addition to putting the sun at the centre of his model, gave compelling reasons supporting his theory (the first of its kind to emerge for centuries) by expressing “it all in mathematics and work[ing] out the geometry of his system so as to permit the calculation of future positions of the bodies involved”.[[109]](#endnote-83)

A comparable situation can be seen with Empedocles (a Pre-Socratic philosopher born towards the end of the fifth century BCE) who claimed that creatures were initially many and varied, but the deformed ones failed to survive to leave offspring, so only the most well-suited creatures reproduced their kind to populate the earth (Gottlieb, 2000). This sounds uncannily like evolution according to natural selection, but you don’t see Hart or Stark racing to undermine Darwin by claiming that Empedocles anticipated natural selection by over two thousand years. And with good reason. Empedocles was right on the money (although he did imagine a more fanciful bestiary from which evolution pruned the creatures alive today) but it was nothing more than an idea; there was no real scientific reasoning behind his outrageous claim.

Three; the fact that there were intelligent people before Copernicus does not preclude the fact that Copernicus still deserves credit for starting the scientific revolution and was therefore more influential and important in the history of science. Hart and Stark seem to think that just because there were people able to ask and suggest answers to questions outside of, how many angels can fit on the head of a pin? – the scientific value of Copernicus is automatically lessened and must therefore have been inflated by overzealous atheists. As every high school student knows, it was the Copernican model which provided the spark that ignited the scientific revolution. Whether Hart agrees is irrelevant. The *fact* is that *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* was the text which caused the commotion that led to what we call the scientific revolution.

We might imagine Stark complaining that too much fuss is made over Newton as well, because after all, he relied so much on the work begun by Galileo; even Newton himself famously claimed that, “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”[[110]](#endnote-84) You might (justifiably) argue that Newton contributed significantly more to what preceded him than Copernicus did, but this would be to miss the point. The point is that this is the way all progress is made in any discipline. The fact that Newton built on and contributed to Galileo’s work, in no way diminishes his insights or his genius any more than the fact that Copernicus built on and contributed to the ideas of d’Oresme or Nicholas of Cusa.

Four; while Hart and Stark are both able to point to a number of intellectual luminaries of the times they fail to realise that a lone thinker crying out in the wilderness does not a scientifically progressive society make. If Hart/Stark want to make the claim that science and more importantly, the scientific spirit, was alive in the Middle Ages, they need to do more than isolate a couple of thinkers who failed to generate the momentum to turn any of their (genuinely interesting and important) ideas into real science.

They need to show real improvements in science and scientific thought which in turn had real effects on society. They will be unable to do this because as I have already mentioned there is a gaping, centuries-long chasm through the darkest parts of the Dark Ages where even they fail to find any reputable names to drop and nothing changed through this period. Ptolemy’s incorrect cosmological model was still in use and little progress, if any, had been made on Aristotle’s natural science.

By the way, Copernicus made a fundamental error (a point both Stark and Hart take great pleasure in relating) in assuming that the orbits of the heavenly bodies were circular and because of this, almost all of his calculations were incorrect. Of course, this does not diminish the scientific importance of his work one iota. He was the first to mount a solid challenge to the earth-centred Ptolemaic model of the solar system and all the Nicole d’Oresmes and Nicholas of Cusas in the Middle Ages cannot change that.

The bottom line on Copernicus is that while Hart and Stark are right to point out that Copernicus was not an isolated thinker starting from scratch as it were, they attempt to diminish his achievements (although Hart denies this, he only does so in a couple of lines after devoting a couple of pages to giving reasons why Copernicus shouldn’t be considered as revolutionary) as part of their overall goal of linking science to Christianity.

The fact is that *something* changed around the time of Copernicus. This *something* was an attitude and it was bigger than a handful of intellectuals. Like all human achievements, it did not spring fully-formed from nothing, but, as Hart and Stark rightly assert,[[111]](#footnote-27) rather evolved over time and through a number of people. Despite this however, when we look back on history, we find that there is often a tipping point (we might even create one through that hindsight) and this tipping point is often associated with a single man or woman and a theory. In this case, we have located our tipping point in Copernicus. The basic thrust of Hart and Stark’s claim is that Copernicus is undeserving of the credit of starting the scientific revolution and I feel they have failed to substantiate this claim.

Hart reluctantly admits, “It is true that Copernicus was perhaps the first theorist since Aristarchus of Samos (c. 110-c. 130 B.C.) who had dared so openly to place the sun at the center of the “universe”[[112]](#endnote-85) and despite all of Hart and Stark’s objections, this single fact on its own, is enough to guarantee Copernicus a box seat for life in the stadium of great scientists. It was this insight more than any other, which delineated the change from Ptolemy and Aristotle’s universe to Newton’s. This change we have called the scientific revolution and, despite Hart and Stark, I see no reason to change this.

*The Inquisition of Galileo*

Both Hart and Stark are united in claiming that Galileo’s Inquisition was less about his scientific claim that the earth moves around the sun and more about his “arrogant duplicity” as Stark cheerfully puts it. They both admit that Galileo was unfairly put on trial and sentenced to house arrest but they both deny that it was because of Galileo’s support for the Copernican heliocentric theory.

Here is the story without any frills; Copernicus’ heliocentric theory steadily became more and more controversial after its publication in 1543, and in the early 1600s was causing quite a stir. The old-school defenders of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic systems were involved but the Church, having realised that Scriptural authority, Church authority and a central belief about man’s overweening importance to God and therefore to the universe were all being challenged, also decided that it needed to weigh in.

Contrary to popular opinion, Galileo had some early Christian supporters including a Carmelite friar named Paolo Antonio Foscarini and the Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who would later become Pope Urban VIII. Of course, he also had his Christian detractors arguing against him primarily on religious grounds. In 1614, Tommaso Caccini, an Italian Dominican friar and preacher, delivered a sermon against Galileo and in March a year later he made a personal deposition with the Roman Inquisition. In February 1615, another Dominician friar named Niccolo Lorini also filed a written complaint with the Inquisition in Rome. Lines were being drawn in the sand.

Galileo was not to be called by the Inquisition just yet however, instead, in 1615 he went to Rome of his own accord to defend his views. He succeeded in preventing Copernicanism from being officially condemned as heresy but it was still deemed “false and completely contrary to the Divine Scriptures.”[[113]](#endnote-86) In 1616, Cardinal Bellarmine (by order of Pope Paul V in the name of the Inquisition) warned Galileo, under threat of imprisonment if he refused to accept, that he could not hold or defend Copernicanism.[[114]](#footnote-28) (This was later noted in Church records as a special injunction forbidding Galileo from “hold[ing], teach[ing], or defend[ing] it [Copernicanism] in any way whatever, verbally or in writing.”[[115]](#endnote-87)) A decree was also issued declaring that the hypothesis of the earth’s motion was false and contradicted the Bible, and Copernicus’ book, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, was banned until offending sections could be amended (which happened in 1620).

After Galileo’s friend, Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, became Pope Urban VIII in 1623, he was encouraged to keep working on his *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems* in which he hoped to clarify his thoughts on the Copernican model through a Platonic style dialogue. The dialogue was to take place between three characters; Salviati, Galileo’s mouthpiece; Sagredo, an open-minded inquirer and Simplicio, the staunch defender of tradition.

Maurice A. Finocchiaro notes that as soon as Galileo’s controversial text was published, his enemies launched a number of attacks against it. One was that it did not regard the Copernican idea of the movement of the earth as a mere hypothesis but treated it as a genuine possibility which was capable of being proven; another was that the book, although written as a dialogue, clearly favoured the notion that Copernicanism was true (i.e. Salviati won); a third and much more deadly charge was also levelled at Galileo, saying that he had violated the special injunction handed to him forbidding him to “hold, teach or defend [Copernicanism] in any way” and it was this that led to Galileo being summoned to Rome to stand trial.

As it happened, there were some technical problems with the enforcement of the special injunction (Galileo denied receiving it and produced a certificate from Bellarmine that did not mention anything about being forbidden to discuss the topic “in any way whatever”) and the inquisitors came to an agreement with Galileo that they would not press the more serious violation of the injunction if he agreed to recant and plead guilty to the lesser charge of transgressing the warning not to defend Copernicanism. The authorities accepted Galileo’s admission of guilt but were unconvinced that he had not deliberately and knowingly propounded heliocentrism, so he was then interrogated under verbal threat of torture.

The conclusion of the trial came on June 22, 1933 with his sentencing. He was found guilty of “vehement suspicion of heresy” (a category between the most and least severe forms of heresy), was forced to recite a humiliating “abjuration,” his book was banned, and he was to be held in prison indefinitely. This last penalty was immediately commuted to house arrest, which stayed in effect until his death.

The Galileo affair was a horrendous debacle in which the Church thoroughly disgraced itself and a travesty of so many human rights that it almost defies the imagination. One of the greatest scientists in all of human history was found guilty of a crime which amounts to no more than holding a belief that differs from one advanced in a book, forced to apologise, recant his views, subjected to an interrogation under threat of torture, and then sentenced to live out the remainder of his days under house arrest. No matter which way you look at it, a terrible injustice was committed by the Church and there is really no defence… until Hart and Stark come along.

They attempt to diminish the blame of the Church in a number of ways:

* They malign Galileo’s character and his work.
* They claim that the whole incident was little more than a “conflict between men of titanic egoism”[[116]](#endnote-88) that Galileo could and should have avoided.
* They attempt to blame the historical context for the Church’s reaction to Galileo.
* They maintain that Christianity should not be judged harshly in light of the trial of Galileo because it was only “one episode of asinine conflict among proud and intemperate men”.[[117]](#endnote-89)
* They hold that Christianity still started the scientific revolution (which they *also* deny took place) because Galileo was a Christian.

Let’s investigate each of these defences one by one.

Stark places the blame for Galileo’s trouble with the Church, not with his scientific beliefs but with his “arrogant duplicity”[[118]](#endnote-90) and Hart is even less forgiving describing Galileo as “selfish, irascible, supercilious, and mildly vindictive.”[[119]](#endnote-91) Hart in particular, takes every possible opportunity to malign Galileo’s character. Now, these ad hominem attacks may be largely based in fact (Galileo may have been selfish and irascible) but they completely fail to remit the Church’s actions in any way. If it were appropriate to sentence rude and irascible people to house arrest for life, our society would crumble overnight. It’s a weak attempt to distract you from the real cause which was Galileo’s heretical views.

In line with this, Hart and Stark attack Galileo’s book itself and the ideas contained within. Stark says, “Ironically, much that Galileo presented in the book as correct science was not; his theory of tides, for example, was nonsense”.[[120]](#endnote-92) Of course Galileo made some mistakes, he was a pioneer and all pioneers will take some missteps, but the people who follow will do a better job because of it. Not just that, it is also completely outrageous to attack the scientific theories of a man who would probably fall within the top three in a listing by most people of the greatest scientists of all time. The single negative example that Stark provides could be offset by hundreds of successful and productive ideas from Galileo’s book.

And don’t forget, if everyone who wanted to publish an as yet unaccepted theory, were prevented from doing so, we would have a much more stilted science than we currently see. Ultimately, that’s what we’re talking about; the right of a man to publish a work which contradicts the teaching of the establishment. Whether those views turn out to be correct (something that can only be assessed from hindsight, which Hart and Stark have no qualms about exploiting in order to undermine Galileo) has *absolutely no bearing* on the issue at hand. We are discussing the Church’s treatment of Galileo, not the virtue of his theories (which have proven to be outstandingly correct and useful anyway), unless that is, like Hart and Stark, we want to deflect attention from a wayward Church interested in protecting its authority.

On this issue, Hart also claims that Urban was entirely right in holding that the Copernican hypothesis was still just a hypothesis; and Galileo with his book had failed to prove it. Hart notes, with the appropriate amount of irony, that the Church was demanding proof (like a scientist) while Galileo was stubbornly holding to an unproven thesis (like a theist).

Once again, Hart is laying a smokescreen before his reader’s eyes to obscure and confuse. Of course Galileo’s book was full of hypotheses (which he obviously thought correct). If it wasn’t, there wouldn’t have been any point in writing it, because it would have just contained ‘truths’ that everyone already knew. Hart is attempting to paint the Pope as an impartial seeker after truth who would only agree to be convinced if the evidence was rock solid. That may or may not have been true of Urban personally, but does that give the Pope the right to ban a book that falls short of 100% proof? Does that give the Church the right to sentence the holder of any unproven beliefs to home arrest? These are the issues that are at the heart of the Galilean Inquisition, and the answer is no, no, never!

They both acknowledge that Galileo and Barberini were good friends who had a falling out sometime after Barberini became Pope. This may have been true but Hart and Stark attempt to a) blame Galileo for this and b) make out that this was the ‘true’ cause for the conflict between the Church and Galileo, despite the official documents which clearly specify the cause as being Galileo breaching the injunction against holding and defending Copernicanism.

Stark tells us that Pope Urban VIII (Barberini) and others like him were trying to avoid a conflict between science (which was really only newly emerging) and religion by separating their domains. To this end, the Pope asked Galileo to acknowledge in his publications that “definitive conclusions could not be reached in the natural sciences. God in his omnipotence could produce a natural phenomenon in any number of ways and it therefore was presumptuous for any philosopher to claim that he had determined a unique solution.”[[121]](#endnote-93) Stark and Hart talk about this request as if it was the most mild and reasonable request in the world, Stark describes it as an “easy evasion”, when in fact, the exact opposite is true. Imagine if, in the course of writing a book in which you are attempting to expound your beliefs, someone (whose organisation had previously tried to force you into denying that which you believed) ‘requested’[[122]](#footnote-29) that you note in your publication that everything you were proposing was totally unknowable and you actually had no right to claim to know it at all. I can imagine the outrage that would follow if a Christian author was required to include an ‘easy evasion’ disclaimer to the effect that “there is no way anyone can *actually* know whether God exists and it would be presumptuous for any Christian to speak as if they knew otherwise.”

Galileo did put the mandated disclaimer in his work but put it in the mouth of Simplicius, thereby disowning it and promoting the Copernican hypothesis. Naturally, the wholly innocent and surprised Pope (“a cultured and generous friend” and “an Italian gentleman of his age” as Hart describes him) “took umbrage” and thus went after his former friend.

Now, this is a delightful story and quite possibly true (or at least, as with most things from Stark/Hart, partly true), but Hart and Stark have failed to adequately demonstrate that this clash between Galileo and the Church was really nothing more than a clash of “volatile personalities.” It is obvious from what Hart and Stark tell us that Galileo was annoyed and offended by the Pope’s ‘request’ and chose to express his annoyance through his writing. But to suggest that the Pope invoked the Inquisition to satisfy a personal grudge is more than far-fetched. Hart and Stark imagine that the Pope led the charge against Galileo solely (or at least primarily) because Galileo had offended him when it is a recorded fact that many other Church officials were angry about the book, and they were explicitly angry because they thought it promoted a theory which threatened their absolute power and authority, which it did.

Did Pope Urban VIII take personal offence at what he perceived as a slight? Maybe. Did he act alone in putting Galileo on trial? Of course not. Was Galileo’s Inquisition *really* only about two men and their egos? Absolutely not.

By the way, there are two additional points worth noting here. First, the Hart/Stark claim that the accepted reasons for the clash between Galileo and the Church are actually false is not unlike a conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are characterised by the belief that there are hidden facts which explain the true motives behind or reasons for something and that these facts have usually been covered up by a person or group with a vested interest in keeping the truth hidden. All conspiracy theorists disbelieve the suggested and less interesting explanations in favour of a more exciting alternative.

Now in Galileo’s case, we have written evidence, any number of documents and plenty more explicit statements which make it clear that Galileo’s trial was about heresy, that is, the holding and teaching of a belief which the Church did not accept. One single example of which is an announcement from the theological consultants during the 1616 affair that the Copernican claim was “formally heretical, since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture according to the literal meaning of the words and according to the common interpretation and understanding of the Holy Fathers and the doctors of theology.”[[123]](#endnote-94)

The logical conclusion, because there is hardly any reason to doubt it, is to accept it all at face value. After all, the stories as told by both the supporters of Galileo and the supporters of the Church are in complete agreement as to what happened and why it happened. Yet despite this congruence of facts, Hart and Stark continue to believe and advocate an alternative story, one which is conveniently less damning to the Church. Like all good conspiracy theorists, they point to circumstantial evidence, blow it all out of proportion and ignore any well-known and perfectly reliable evidence if it stands to weaken their claim.

One more point about conspiracy theories is that apart from the truth that they make for compelling TV, there is usually no other element of truth to be found in them.

The second point is that there is a glaring contradiction in Hart and Stark’s account of Galileo’s trial. Hart goes as much out of his way to paint Pope Urban VIII as a man of “enormous culture”, and a “prince of the Church” as he does to slander Galileo in true Church Father style as a man who “squandered good will with remarkable abandon”, “could not abide rivals, resented the discoveries of others… and belittled those whose theories differed from his own.” Yet about one page after extolling the Pope’s virtues, he calls him “proud and intemperate” and attempts to sell to us on the idea that this generous and cultured prince of a man was prepared to use his position to wrongfully call a man to trial and have him placed under house arrest, all to settle a personal vendetta. Just another unlikely element in the Hart/Stark story.

Third, Hart and Stark try to ameliorate the apparent bigotry and autocratic nature of the Church by claiming that Galileo was unlucky to have been born into a time when the Church was undergoing a crisis. The Reformation and Counter-Reformation were both in full-swing and because of these the Catholic Church was clamping down more strictly on dogma and acceptable Biblical interpretations than it had at any time in the past. It’s like trying to enter a plea of temporary insanity, yes the Church did it but it wasn’t acting like itself at the time. Like, all of Hart and Stark’s claims this is true... but only partially.

While it is certainly true that the Catholic Church was in crisis mode in Galileo’s time, I hardly think that it can be claimed they were acting out of character. It goes without saying that the Church has been literally obsessed with doctrine and forcing people to adhere to that doctrine since its inception and authorisation by Constantine around 313 C.E. They have been so obsessed with it in fact that not only was heresy punishable by death at various times in history but the Church would even go after its own priests and bishops with just as much fervour as they denounced non-Christians with. The Church set this trend when it was still in its infancy by persecuting its own presbyter Arius and Archbishop Nestorius and continued it right into the modern era until society had unshackled itself from this form of Christian tyranny.

Even if Hart and Stark are partially right and the Church was *more* oppressive and bigoted than usual, this fact again fails to excuse the Church from its short-sighted and autocratic suppression of Galileo. This fact in no way redeems the Church or makes its impact less damaging.

Fourth, Hart and Stark attempt to convince the reader that even if we allow that the Galileo trial was a tragic wrongdoing by the Church we should be careful not to blow it out of proportion and claim that it is representative of a long-standing feud between science and religion. It was merely a single wave amidst an ocean of Church-supported science and progressive thinking.

Now, in one sense this is true. There was no long-standing feud between the two disciplines (although it seems a little generous to call a myth a ‘discipline’) but this was definitely not because Christianity had supported science. It was rather because there was no science to speak of until Copernicus and in particular, Galileo came along.

Hart notes that at the time of Galileo’s trial, Copernicus’ text, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies*, had been around for decades and had not caused any scandal. This is again true but it was hardly because the Church was open-minded. Copernicus wasn’t seen as a big threat because his book and the ideas therein still hadn’t gained full steam. Andreas Osiander, a Lutheran theologian, also helped to keep heliocentrism from attracting too much attention by, probably without the approval of Copernicus, substituting Copernicus’ introduction with his own stating that the heliocentric theory was not an account of the actual physical organisation of the heavens; it was merely a convenient device for simplifying astronomical calculations. He asserted that “these hypotheses need not be true nor even probable.” As a result many people believed that Copernicus himself did not truly believe in the truth of his own hypothesis. Now, would anybody have to insert a disclaimer effectively saying that an entire theory was not real but only a convenient way of making calculations, if the governing authority was ‘open-minded’ and ‘progressive’?

But when a man as far ahead of his time and as brash as Galileo was, lent his full-fledged support to the Copernican theory, it became a wholly new thing and acquired a veracity that gave it a dangerous belief-challenging nature. It was at this time that the Church reacted.

The question my fourth point raises is, is the Galileo trial representative of Christianity’s attitude towards science? Hart says no; I say yes. We have seen Hart try to play the whole thing down by maligning Galileo and exaggerating a personal falling out between the two central figures (Galileo and Urban VIII) but we have also seen how all of this can be viewed as a valiant but vain attempt at creating a smokescreen to bemuse any impressionable readers.

Christianity as a religion is built on the Bible and can only exist when people believe in the myth of the son of God coming to earth to save them. This is basic and above question. In the first place, this is a tall tale to swallow and the Church authorities were (rightfully) worried about keeping the masses (and maybe even themselves) believing. We have seen how jealously and ruthlessly the Church has fought to keep its doctrine whole and free from heresy, willingly excommunicating its own members, which is presumably the harshest act imaginable to someone who believes in the myths and believes that the Church is their ticket to heaven, solely to protect this belief system.

As I have already mentioned, not one single Christian of the time ever maintained even the vaguest hint of a pretence that the Galilean Inquisition was ever about anything other than heresy, which is to say a belief that contradicts Church doctrine. It is so clear what was happening that it almost seems as if I’m stating the obvious but I will do so because sometimes people just don’t want to accept a truth even if it is obvious; the Church felt threatened and reacted with an iron hand to cut off any belief which undermined its precious doctrine. We have seen Christianity willing, even eager, to persecute and even kill in defence of its doctrine all throughout history from the day it had the power to do so right up until the day it lost that power, and the Galilean Inquisition was just another example of this (although one of the more highly publicised ones). Was it an anomaly in Church history? Of course not. Early Christianity crushed the Manicheans and the Pelagians for exactly the same reason although in a slightly different way.

And let’s not forget the next big clash between religion and science. Evolution. Was religion open-minded and prepared to listen to the facts when Charles Darwin outlined his theory? Did they give evolution a fair hearing as Hart would have us believe this supposedly ‘progressive’ institution would have? Despite the overwhelming evidence accumulated for it, many modern Christians *still* refuse to accept evolution as a scientific fact over a century and a half after its formulation.

In short, Hart and Stark are wrong for two reasons. First, although it was the first incident to specifically involve the Church attacking science, there simply was no science before Galileo. And second, and more importantly, the Church had a long, long history of labelling any threatening ideas as ‘heresy’ and crushing them. The Inquisition of Galileo was not a one-off event, but rather the most highly publicised one amidst a string of identical reactions to ‘dangerous’ ideas.

Fifth, Hart and Stark almost gleefully delight in reminding us that even if Christianity was the bad guy and all of their arguments come to nothing, the Church was still the birthplace of science because Copernicus and Galileo were both Christians. This is such a flawed notion that it seems almost trivial to denounce, but many people actually believe this nonsense and so I am forced to spill some more ink to dispel this myth.

Perhaps the best way to attack this problem is through analogy. What if Einstein had been a devout Buddhist? (Let’s call him B Einstein) Would it be right for Buddhists to demand recognition for the fact that Buddhism provided us with the theories of general and special relativity? Of course not. B Einstein’s religious beliefs have absolutely no bearing on his discoveries as a scientist. What if it wasn’t just Einstein? What if the whole line from Copernicus through Galileo, Kepler, Newton *and* B Einstein were all Buddhists? What if they were all Buddhists because there was never any real choice for them? What if it was virtually illegal for them to be anything else? They were raised by Buddhist families, with Buddhist ancestors as far back as anyone could remember, in Buddhist societies, all ruled by a Buddhist theocracy. Would that give Buddhists any special right to claim that Buddhism founded science?

The mistake that Hart and Stark make here is thinking that Copernicus and Galileo made their scientific discoveries, by virtue of their Christian beliefs. This is false. For Christianity to have been somehow responsible for the scientific discoveries of some of its adherents, Christians must show us that science is somehow crucial to Christianity as a religion. The truth is the exact opposite; Christianity the religion, has absolutely no interest in science. Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius? Mercury is the innermost planet in our solar system? Who cares? Christianity (and religion in general) has zero interest in these scientific facts beyond the belief that everything happens as God intended it to.

Christianity has *never* been about understanding the world and seeking to understand or control parts of it, which it might be argued science is about. If you had to reduce Christianity to a sentence or two, what principles would best represent it? I don’t want to do this in detail here because I have done it elsewhere but the concepts of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the devil, heaven, hell, sin and salvation would all dominate the top ten. Understanding the universe because it’s there (as Sir Edmund Hillary once famously remarked about his scaling of Everest) would fall well down the line.

If Christianity *really* encouraged and motivated scientific learning in its adherents, then if we wanted to know something about science we would be able to go to a Church because surely, the heads of such a scientifically-minded organisation would all be well-versed in the subject. But this isn’t the case, is it. If we desire to know a scientific fact, the very last place we would go would be a Church because we know their *sole* concern is far removed from this world of matter, temporality and suffering. In a very real way, their heads are up in the clouds above them, while the heads of scientist’s are directed in the complete opposite direction.

You also have to wonder, why was it that as soon as it became possible or even feasible to be atheistic did science attract so many from the fold of Christianity? These days the science halls in universities are among the least religious places in any country. Why is that, if Christianity started science and is so compatible with it?

You might also argue that Copernicus or Galileo’s belief in God motivated them to learn more about His universe; and that might even be true, but it still doesn’t help a Christian apologist. I feel another analogy coming on… Imagine that Immanuel Kant (the highly influential 18th century philosopher) was a dedicated although amateur table tennis player. If he himself had said that he was inspired to write his greatest work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a result of the way his playing table tennis made him think about the world, would we be comfortable in saying that table tennis was responsible for the thoughts of this great man? Would he go down in history as a famous table tennis player who happened to write one of the most influential philosophical texts of all time? Hardly. Rather, we would correctly identify him as a philosopher who also enjoyed table tennis and anyone who wanted to learn more about him or emulate his thinking would be encouraged to study philosophy, not play table tennis. The exact same thing can be said of any famous scientist who also happened to be a Christian, or Buddhist, or Muslim, or Jehovah’s Witness, or Scientologist.

People make scientific discoveries as scientists, philosophical insights as philosophers, and play table tennis well as table tennis players. They pray to God as Christians, Allah as Muslims and meditate on a candle flame as Buddhists. Attempting to appropriate scientific discoveries as Christian because they were made by a Christian, who by the way never had a choice in his faith, could barely have even imagined an alternative (atheism hadn’t even been ‘invented’ at that time, the notion of God was so deeply ingrained in society), and would have been excommunicated, shunned or even burned at the stake had he dared to deny the truth of Christianity (i.e. it was illegal not to believe); is an absolute joke and barely deserves to be treated as more than such.

One final point on this issue. Christian apologists love to claim that since Christians made certain scientific discoveries, Christianity in fact made them or they can be attributed to Christianity, but how convenient it is that the deeds of any ‘bad’ Christians are not also directly imputable to the faith.

Mention the Inquisition (something I will do a little later on) and a Christian will solemnly shake his head and mumble something meaningless like, “Yes, that was a terribly unfortunate occurrence.” Typically, they won’t try to excuse it or (heaven forbid!) defend it, but they totally divorce the acts of these devout Christians from *their* Christianity; as if it was a completely separate thing.

This is very easy to show (no more analogies, I promise), the logic goes like this:

1. Galileo was a Christian
2. Galileo made some remarkable and insightful scientific discoveries

Therefore Christianity also made some remarkable and insightful scientific discoveries.

But Christians refuse to accept the exact same logic applied to another person:

1. The head Inquisitor was a Christian
2. The head Inquisitor tortured and murdered many innocent people

Therefore Christianity also tortured and murdered many innocent people.

This is a point I have made before but I think it deserves to be made again here because it is so relevant. Of course, a good Christian would argue that the Inquisitor wasn’t actually a Christian, it is someone’s acts which make them a Christian, not whether they call themselves a Christian or not. A ‘real’ Christian would never torture an innocent. And then a good atheist would argue against the ‘real’ Christian defence by turning to my “true faith blinders” section under *Some Important Preliminaries* way back at the beginning of this essay. But since we have already done all of that, we won’t do it again here.

And let’s not forget (this is *real* final point) that if Copernicus and Galileo were just fulfilling their role as good Christians with their scientific discoveries then they wouldn’t have been penalised by their own religion for their claims in the first place. The minute the Church banned the books of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler, they lost all right to claim their discoveries for their own. In which other discipline would we allow such blatant nonsense to carry on? Christianity bans the works of the first scientists, effectively divorcing themselves from their theories, and then a couple of centuries later attempts to claim, not just that their faith isn’t opposed to those theories, but that it was in fact responsible for them! This is madness of the highest degree.

The Conclusion

The bottom line is that science has been an unstoppable force on our planet and we know that it is unstoppable because religion *did* try to stop it but failed. We also know that it has been immensely successful. Of course, you need look no further than the netbook (mini-laptop) I am writing this essay on (and the fact that by the time you read this, netbooks will probably be hopelessly outdated) to see that, but its success is also attested to by William James’ famous pronouncement regarding the stages of all great theories.[[124]](#footnote-30) He said that any new theory first “is attacked as absurd; then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant; finally it is seen to be so important that its adversaries claim that they themselves discovered it.”[[125]](#endnote-95) It is almost as if Christianity acted the way it did towards science, specifically to prove James’ idea. First, they tried to suppress the ‘heresy’ that was Copernicanism; then they tried to adapt to it, attempting to show that even though everything orbited the sun and man was descended from apes, there was still a place for God; finally, they now claim that Christianity was the foundation for science and it was their best exponents who kept it alive. Classic.

We have seen that science did in fact stagnate during the Middle Ages when Ancient Greek theories retained their appeal for over fifteen hundred years. We also saw that the Galileo case was nothing like Hart and Stark argue. While their facts may be correct, the conclusions they derive from them are wildly inappropriate and ill-considered. Science triumphed in the end and although it was unable to purge religion from our system completely, it created the space for reason and common sense to dominate, totally independent of myths and fairytales, for the first time in human history.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Christianity as the Foundation of Morality**

Morality, as a system of ideas about right and wrong conduct, can be a large and involved subject but I want to keep this chapter focused on our primary question. Has Christianity been a force for good in the sphere of morality; both as a real, tangible institution and through its doctrine and teachings?

This is probably Christianity’s strongest claim of all the points we have thus far investigated. Everyone is familiar with the Christian, deontological moral code as given in the Ten Commandments and there are some moral gems to be gleaned from the Gospels as well. But as we have seen, Christianity is becoming greedier and greedier. They are no longer just content to claim that Christianity has a strong moral message; they now want us to believe that Christianity founded our current moral instincts, going so far as to say that we wouldn’t even have them if it hadn’t been for Christianity. This is a much stronger claim and requires much stronger evidence.

If Christians wish us to believe that their religion is the foundation of Western morality, they must demonstrate or explain three things:

1. They must show that their religion has a strong moral foundation. (This is the ‘theory’ aspect)
2. They must show that the Christian worldview created a moral and enlightened society. (This is the real-world aspect)
3. They must explain why it is unlikely that we developed our modern sense of morality independent of Christianity.

To the first point, I will repeat something that I have already said. *Christianity was never, ever a system of morals. It was and is primarily a system of salvation.* Christianity is not about doing good for the sake of being good or because it is the right thing to do. It is about doing what God demands and reaping the benefits (everlasting life in heaven) and escaping the punishments (everlasting life in hell). Dan Barker observes that “The loftiest Biblical principles are obedience, submission and faith”[[126]](#endnote-96)

The most important tenet in the whole of Christianity, and the key feature that separates it from other religions, is that Jesus died for your sins (this is what Jesus allegedly came to earth for, not to give us a standardised moral code) and because of this you can get into heaven. Jesus is much, much, more important in Christianity than God as evidenced by the fact that modern Christians tend to virtually ignore the Old Testament with its retributive and jealous God in favour of the New Testament, that is, Jesus and Paul. They realised this dissonance early on and to overcome this, despite the fact that Jesus clearly and repeatedly calls God his Father, they concluded that Jesus was somehow God as well, and the myth of the complete and equal divinity and humanity of Christ was born.

The point is that Christianity is one hundred percent focused on receiving salvation and thereby getting into heaven. Any morals that might come from this are to be considered a bonus. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily make those morals defective or poor, but it considerably undermines the Christian claim about a strong moral base when we discover that morals are merely a by-product of Christian faith because it is *not* actually about being good, unless of course, that being good also coincides with receiving salvation. This is immediately *un*helpful to the claim that our modern morality was built on a Christian foundation, because if Christianity itself was not founded on so-called ‘Christian morals’ then it makes it much less likely that our modern ethical sensibilities were founded on them.

So, what are the so-called Christian morals? Most people would unhesitatingly refer us to the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ simplified version, “’*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind*’ and ‘*your neighbour as yourself*’”.[[127]](#endnote-97) Let’s look at these a little closer.

Now, the Ten Commandments:

1. You shall have no other Gods before Me.
2. You shall not make yourself a carved image and bow down to or serve them.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath.
5. Honour your father and mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet anything that is your neighbour’s.

The first four are solely about worshipping God (considering the source, doesn’t that involve the sin of pride?) and as such, fall outside our discussion on morality. That leaves us with the final six; the familiar and useful ones like don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t lie. Now these are a fine set of morals to have and to live by… but they are hardly revolutionary.

Christians tend to make a disproportionate amount of noise over their cherished Commandments as if these six precepts set the world on the path to righteousness and if God hadn’t bestowed them upon us we would still be floundering around in small, disorganised packs lying, stealing, murdering each other will-nilly and having random sex with each other’s husbands and wives.

This is ridiculous.

As far as moral guidelines go, the Ten Commandments are nothing more than the absolute minimum for any functioning society. Large civilisations existed for thousands of years before both Christianity and Judaism which means that they obviously had already ‘discovered’ and at least implicitly codified the Ten Commandments. Note that I said ‘codified’. They hadn’t just thought of them, they weren’t just aware of them, but they had put them into practice in a useful, meaningful way.

Christopher Hitchens has already observed that without a system of morality, the Jews couldn’t have formed a functioning society before the ‘revelation’ of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. When Moses imparted God’s Commandments, surely his followers must have looked at each other and said, “Well, we already knew that.” The alternative, which Christians seem to feel is more valid, is the Jews all hitting their foreheads with their palms and exclaiming, “Ohhh, so I should *not* kill or steal from my neighbours! That’s why we can’t get our act together…”

Any moron with half a brain can work these commandments out for him or herself without being told by God. The typical Christian argument here is that it does in fact seem as if any moron can figure these precepts out for him or herself but that is only because Christianity has embedded them so deeply in our society. These values have become so deeply ingrained that we can’t imagine anyone not knowing them. That would be a very fine argument if Christianity or Judaism could also show that no society prior to theirs had already figured them out. Unfortunately, the Bible itself refutes this claim by clearly telling us that not only did the Jews have a working society before the Mt. Sinai incident, but there were many other working societies surrounding them and who actually ruled them for a time.

As for Jesus’ moral code, it is worth noting how his primary emphasis is on loving God. This is of course, what we would expect if Christianity is a salvation system and not a moral one. We are commanded first and foremost to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind… oh, and also love our neighbour as ourselves. We give our heart, soul, strength and mind to God but we should just be nice to our neighbour.

Of course, the command to love our neighbour as ourselves is an excellent command and is not as blatantly obvious as the prior Ten Commandments were. This gives it much more value as a moral imperative. In fact, now that we can compare God’s Commandments to Jesus’ Golden Rule, it is obvious that the former are little more than rules designed to keep order in a society, not unlike the laws we all live by today. They provide little actual moral guidance; they merely state what must be in order for a society to operate. Jesus’ Golden Rule however, offers real tangible moral advice which we can use in all our social interactions. It transcends individual, specific circumstances, not unlike a meta-principle and this gives it real value.

On its own, the Golden Rule seems like a solid base for a morality thereby fulfilling my first requirement; however, we are not going to be content with cherry-picking what Jesus says in order to put him in the best light possible. We are after the truth, not attempting to justify a pre-ordained conclusion. To this end, I have already highlighted other, less highly-publicised, pronouncements Jesus made in my “Some Important Preliminaries” section, which show that Jesus’ morality was not as wholesome and simple as Christians would have us believe. I won’t go into detail here again, but I believe that if you take the time to recall that earlier discussion you will agree that the evidence shows Jesus not so ‘loving’ and not all about ‘turning the other cheek’ when it comes to those who don’t follow him, considerably narrowing his ‘love thy neighbour’ imperative. As far as I’m concerned, the things Jesus says about those who deny him in turn being denied in heaven and cast into hell (with much wailing and gnashing of teeth) completely negate any morality points Jesus may have earned along the way.

Ultimately, we are forced to conclude that the Bible is highly ambiguous regarding morality and if it was being read by someone who truly had no pre-conceived moral intuitions, they would emerge afterwards none the wiser. Not only do you have the New Testament contradicting much of the Old Testament, but God and Jesus both contradict Themselves on many separate occasions. This, combined with the fact that Christianity is manifestly *not* a system of morals is reason enough for me to consider the first pre-requisite unfulfilled.

However that is not all. There is another problem with the notion that Christianity has a strong moral base and that is the reliance on authority, even if it’s a Divine authority that is the lynchpin of Christian morality. It might surprise you to hear me cite this aspect of Christianity as a problem, because most Christians see it as a strength. In fact, most Christians argue that without a governing Deity, morality is strictly impossible. If there is no lawmaker and enforcer then there is no reason to be good which leads to the “everything is permitted” of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

If Christianity’s morality comes from God (which Christians tell us it does) then it’s not good because it’s Good, it’s good because God commands it. As with any argument from authority, the information is only as good as the source and if the person relying on that source is blindly devotional to it, then they are also vulnerable to being misled. Without a rational check on the instructions being received, any true believer can all too easily be diverted from any truly moral path. Consider the pinnacle of human devotion, Abraham. Genesis 22 relates an event where Abraham’s faith is tested by God. God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son, Isaac, to Him. Abraham complies without hesitation, just as any good Christian ought to. (If you aren’t familiar with the story, an angel stops him just before he finalises this terrible act). The problem is that while murdering your son (who has done absolutely nothing wrong) is clearly an unethical act, Abraham was willing to go through with it because he believed God told him to. What’s worse is that to this day, in any Church you might go to, Abraham is still revered as an exemplar of the Christian faith and praised for demonstrating his unshakeable belief by his willingness to sacrifice his son.

This reveals two dangerous aspects of relying on authority. The first is that even if the source is corrupt, the follower will blindly (even eagerly) carry out the immoral actions because they have forfeited any independent, rational assessment of the instructions. The mandate becomes right, not because it adheres to any universal, verifiable standard of right and wrong (sometimes it will even contradict it), but because the source (in this case, God) says so. Abraham is a classic example of this. He blindly agrees to do something that he knows is wrong, but he lets his blind belief and trust in God overwhelm his moral instincts. There is nothing commendable about this. This attitude is foolhardy at best.

I heard a debate between Dinesh D’Souza and Dan Barker in which Barker asked D’Souza what he would do if God asked him (D’Souza, that is) to kill him (Barker). D’Souza scoffed at the question and answered along these lines. If God asked him to kill Dan Barker, he would take everything he knows of God from his Bible and from his experience and compare that with the nature of the command. Having done this, he would find that the command contradicted his understanding of God as love and goodness and so on. He would therefore conclude that the directive did not in fact come from God, and he would refrain from murdering Barker.

This is a concise and neat refutation of what is actually a tricky situation. Of course D’Souza, in a move worthy of a politician, changes the question subtly but importantly to make it answerable. The scenario wasn’t that D’Souza hears a disembodied voice telling him to commit a crime; it was he hears *God* telling him to commit a crime. D’Souza therefore failed to answer the question genuinely and honestly. At any rate, let’s grant Dinesh D’Souza his evasion and see how he fares.

In my opinion, after all is said and done, D’Souza would end up going to hell. If he actually received such a directive from God and rather than immediately obeying, he took time to analyse the order before then bluntly rejecting it, he would have completely failed to follow the sterling example, the precedent for the correct behaviour in a test of faith, which Abraham had already clearly laid out.

Not only that, D’Souza’s ‘analysis’ itself is seriously flawed. He claims that the God he knows from his Bible and personal experience would never demand that a follower kill in His name. This is one hundred percent false. The Old Testament God demanded the total destruction of entire societies of his Israelites and as we have seen, He even ordered Abraham to murder an innocent (in what is a very close parallel to Dan Barker’s imaginary scenario) just a few thousand years prior. How does D’Souza know that God wasn’t testing his faith, like he was testing Abraham’s? Perhaps God, in being able to see the complete picture, knew that if Dan Barker lived (for reasons we cannot comprehend) hundreds of innocent people would die and now that D’Souza and failed to act, those deaths were guaranteed.

D’Souza’s answer shows that his faith is counterfeit as measured against the Abrahamic benchmark. Of course, he had to answer in this way in order to avoid the second danger of relying blindly on an authority which you believe is above reproach; that is, it is all too easy to be deceived.

The most obvious kind of deception here occurs when, in the event that your source is unavailable, you are willing to accept a proxy in his or her place (such as a priest or Pope or cult leader). This proxy then becomes invested with the same trustworthiness that you originally gave to the true source even if in reality the proxy does not warrant such respect and trust.

Another kind of deception can also occur, particularly when the source is something that may not even exist (such as God), and this is that people who believe in God will often delude themselves into thinking that He is actually talking to them, maybe not directly but maybe through dreams or life situations or some other equally unreliable means. This is dangerous because the ‘above reproach’ seal of authority is then subtly transferred from a fictional God to a very real individual, who interprets her ‘messages’ however she sees fit. We have already seen the extreme consequences of this in serial killers who kill prostitutes or people who murder abortion doctors because ‘God’ told them to.

These dangers are manifest in any belief system that rests on authority alone but they are doubly so for religion because the authoritarian source is *always* absent. I am certain that God has never directly spoken to anyone reading this essay (or anyone else for that matter) and yet people are still claiming that God gives them guidance in their lives; that their entire system of morals comes from Him directly.

If I am right and God doesn’t exist, all of these people are deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. This, in itself, is not a problem and is totally natural… *if* these decisions are being made with the backing of reason and with an awareness that they are in fact, being actively made, not passively received from above. If people have this kind of healthy attitude to their morality then they will be making fully-informed, rational decisions and more importantly they will be open to differing viewpoints which will make these decisions, to a certain degree, malleable.

You might think malleability might not be such a healthy trait in morality but you would be quite mistaken. If our morals were never open to change, then many of the evils that were collectively taken for granted at various times in our history would never have changed, some of which have been discussed in this very essay; sexism, racism, slavery, etc.

There is also the familiar ethical dilemma in philosophy where you are hiding Jews in your attic and the Nazis come a-knocking asking you if there are any Jews in your house. The Biblical injunction is not to lie, but clearly there is something wrong with telling the truth in this case. I am not suggesting that any Christian would be unable to make the ‘right’ choice in this situation, I am merely demonstrating that without a rational understanding and awareness of how your morality came to be, you cannot properly enact it. A set of dos and don’ts, such as those handed out from an authority figure, are just not sufficient to make a moral system.

As I said, the problem comes when people are deciding on their morality for themselves but don’t realise it. This means that they pick and choose what to accept as right (like everyone else) but they think that this decision has God-sanctioned approval and as such is beyond reproach, even from themselves. John Stuart Mill summed up this sentiment when he said, “there is a very real evil consequent on ascribing a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality. That origin consecrates the whole of them, and protects them from being discussed or criticised.”[[128]](#endnote-98) Of course, we don’t want to change our morals at the slightest provocation but we don’t want to have morals that are completely closed to change or even to discussion. It is when morality is placed above criticism that problems tend to surface and poor decisions wind up being made because of inflexibility and a refusal to accept new or different perspectives. If you refuse to allow your ideas to be discussed then you refuse to allow those ideas to progress and develop, and this ultimately leads to intellectual stagnation.

We have come quite a long way from my initial starting point but, if I could tie it all together again, Christianity had to show that their faith has a strong moral foundation. We have seen that Christianity was never intended to be a moral system, its central moral code (the much lauded Ten Commandments) is decidedly unimpressive, Jesus revealed himself as being contradictory and reinforcing our thesis that Christianity is a system of salvation, and Christianity’s reliance on the argument from authority for its morals was shown to be a weak and dangerous trait. All in all, we are forced to consider this first pre-requisite unmet.

Secondly, Christians have to prove that a society founded on their morals would truly make for a better, more equitable world. It is hard to see how Christians can defend this claim considering that Christianity had a good fifteen hundred years to mould the Western world the way they wanted and the culmination of this effort was the Inquisition and the Index of Forbidden Books.

Again we see that, like the claim that Christianity abolished slavery and created equality for all, the timing just doesn’t support the notion that Christian morality created our modern moral sensibilities. Our modern morals rest on humanistic conceptions which came to light during the Renaissance and which were supported by the push for reason the Enlightenment provided. Christianity had fifteen hundred years to build a foundation for modern moral notions of equality and fairness, but it failed to do so. Not only did it fail to provide this moral foundation but it perpetrated some of the worst crimes against morality and human rights that we have had to overcome in the modern age. The Crusades, the persistent discrimination against Jews, the support of slavery, the Inquisition, the burning of witches (both of which took place after an official ‘trial’), the constant suppression of ‘heresy’ (which is actually no more a crime than a difference of opinion), the Index of Forbidden Books; all of these things happened during Christianity’s reign and none of them represent the moral values we tend to endorse today. So how could Christianity have supplied the framework for these morals? Christianity’s own timber is rotten through to the core.

Christianity gave us the Middle Ages, a time in which all progressive thought stagnated, at least partially because all the great thinkers of the age were so focused on God that they didn’t bother with anything else; we have even seen how it was deemed heresy to rely on reason and we bore witness to the massive injustice (which the Pope finally admitted and apologised for in 2000, although this obviously didn’t help Galileo at all, coming almost four hundred years after the fact). *This* is the institution which founded the morality and freedoms we enjoy today?

Christianity acted with a distinct *lack* of morals during its theocratic reign and the many individual injustices which the Church took part in and perpetuated, as well as the general repression of ‘free-thinking’ (largely through the invention of the ubiquitous notion of heresy) that the Church implemented, provide us with more than enough reason to not just doubt, but totally discard the claim that the Christian state provided (or is even capable of providing) any kind of moral society.

Third, Christians have to offer us a reason why it is unlikely we developed our secular morals independent of Christianity. All of the above evidence points to the emergence of a humanistic ethics which formed *after* the Church lost its power and control. This makes it highly doubtful that we have the Church to thank for our modern morals.

The best argument that Christianity can mount in this direction is to claim that secularism cannot support any form of morality on its own. Perhaps David Hart puts it best when he says, “every ethical theory developed apart from… transcendent truth is a fragile fiction” – “a simple “I disagree” or “I refuse” is enough to exhaust the persuasive resources of any purely worldly ethics.”[[129]](#endnote-99) This is a common opinion and seems sound enough but there are a couple of reasons why this attitude, upon reflection, reveals itself to be complete nonsense.

Is it really Hart’s opinion that without the constant threat of hell and everlasting torture (or just the denial of heaven and the bliss of being with God as neo-Christians might choose to rephrase it) no one would choose to do the ‘right’ thing? If it was conclusively shown that God did not exist, would Hart himself suddenly throw off his artificial moral exterior and succumb to the debauched desires that were held at bay only by the existence of God?

People like Hart imagine that without the existence of God there is no reason for acting in a morally conscious way. This is false. Very few people who act decently do so because of a belief that God will judge them after they die. The central thesis of this position is that without an enforcer, people will not choose to act morally on their own. I would actually agree with this statement. Bertrand Russell has already observed that “In lawless conditions, such as in a gold rush, all sorts of people will commit crimes although in ordinary circumstances they would have been law-abiding.”[[130]](#endnote-100) Humans do possess a selfish core which can easily rise to the fore without an explicitly formulated code of conduct backed by punishments or penalties for failing to obey. The problem with the Christian understanding of the situation is that they imagine the punishment which will eventually be inflicted by God is the only form of punishment powerful enough to keep human behaviour in check.

Here is what would change if it was suddenly announced and proven beyond a doubt that God doesn’t exist… nothing. No Christians[[131]](#footnote-31) would suddenly start murdering and lying and stealing. Why? Because those things would still be against the law. There would still be punishments in place for breaching those maxims, ranging from social rejection to fines to community service to jail time. The Christian typically thinks that these punishments are nothing compared to an eternity in hell, and that is true, but they don’t have to rank close to that extreme in order to effectively deter people from committing crime. Sure, if you compare ten years in jail to forever in hell, the jail time is nothing, but the jail time also has meaning in its own right. Forget hell, think about spending even just ten years of your life in jail. That is not a punishment many people would knowingly risk incurring.

A Christian might then argue that there is a chance you won’t get caught by earthly law enforcers and this encourages many criminals to pursue their nefarious business interests, but God sees and knows everything so you have no hope of escaping your dues. This is also true but now we come face to face with the fact that the Christian punishment is so far away and, in truth, so uncertain that, as a real, practical deterrent, I doubt it has much efficacy. The truth of this statement is evident or else we would never see any Christians breaking the law or lying or cheating on their spouses or having sex before marriage or getting divorced or engaging in homosexuality… and yet study after study has consistently failed to show that Christians perform better in any of these areas than atheists or agnostics. This is a surprising fact. Even those Christians who truly believe in heaven and hell, find neither eternal bliss in the former nor eternal suffering in the latter, motivation enough to curb their wicked tendencies. What is happening here?

I think there are two reasons for this peculiar fact. First, as I already mentioned, the promised rewards and punishments are so, so far away (in another life in fact) that they are able to exert almost no influence over our present behaviours. Many of us even have trouble saving money, which is a real, tangible good, useable in this lifetime, for a future time and instead squander almost every penny we make as soon as we make it. It is a well-known fact that if our salaries go up, our spending habits also follow suit. Whether you make two hundred dollars or two thousand dollars a week, you will probably still be living from pay cheque to pay cheque.

Second, one of the most amazing features of the human brain is its capacity for self-deception. Almost no one who has ever lived, who lives now or who will live in the future, considers themselves a bad person. We justify *everything* that we do, and curiously, (I have watched other people in my life do this) even if we are aware of what we are doing and can vocalise this knowledge, it doesn’t seem to affect our inflated opinion of ourselves. We might laugh about it with our friends, “I guess it’s probably my fault [the acknowledgement] but… you know… [the nebulous, open-ended implication that it isn’t *really* my fault]”.

Just as the Grand Inquisitor presumably believed he was doing God’s work and would be rewarded with heaven on his death, a criminal who believes in Christianity (they are definitely out there, make no mistake about that) commits his crimes with the same tacit belief. After all, it’s not his fault; it’s because his father used to drink too much and beat him as a boy and the government only looks after the rich and his mate is lying anyway and…

Many Christians try to back out of this situation by claiming that these people, the ‘criminal Christians’ (we need look no further than the Church itself, to the many priests guilty of paedophilia) actually don’t *really* believe in heaven and hell and probably don’t believe in God either. “If they really, truly believed, they wouldn’t commit crimes.”

I hope you spotted the ‘true faith blinders’ being donned in that last sentence. Such an excuse fails to account for the complexities of the human mind. There are good and bad atheists, good and bad Buddhists, even good and bad Christians, but there is one thing they all share in common; they all *think* they are good.

Before we return to the main thread of the discussion I just want to include one more real-world punishment which helps keep us on the straight and narrow and which I purposely omitted above; that is our conscience. Even if we were to evade the law and the punishments it brings, and no one knew of our activities so there were no social repercussions, we would still have to face our conscience, which, like an ever-present mental shadow we simply cannot avoid.

People like C.S. Lewis might jump in here and claim that we get our conscience from God. This is an unwarranted conclusion to jump to which I have discussed at length and dismissed in a previous essay. Here, I just wish to mention that our conscience is an effective disincentive from certain immoral and illegal acts and it is certainly feasible that it is informed by and derived from a basic sense of empathy which we all possess, although we may do so to varying degrees.

Another reason for rejecting the ‘Hart thesis’ regarding morality is that although an “I disagree” is sufficient to reject an ethics lacking a supernatural authority, that very same “I disagree” is also more than sufficient to reject an ethics based on a fictional, or supposed, supernatural authority. I don’t even have to go the atheist route to answer Hart; I might instead opt for a Buddhist take, which doesn’t so much demand good behaviour as it recommends it if one wishes to escape samsara, the cycle of birth and death. Or I might take a new age direction which offers real-life benefits (i.e. I don’t have to wait for a promised future life, promised I might add, by priests and pastors who don’t know for certain) for doing right in the sense that if I exude positivity then I will attract positivity into my life, without any of the baggage that Christianity brings. What Hart has failed to realise is that each of these groups have rejected the entire “transcendent truth” of Christian morality with a simple “I disagree”, and in turn, Christianity has rejected all other moral systems via the same statement.

“But *if* people believe in Christianity, then the Christian moral system takes on an indisputable quality.” Of course, but this is nothing more than a truism. *If* people believe in Buddhism then the Buddhist moral system takes on an indisputable quality and *if* people believe that all men and women are equal and equally deserving then this basic concept of humanism is indisputable. Because God is suspiciously silent on the issue (on every issue in fact) the fact is that it is *us*, not God, in *every* case, who are deeming these ‘values’ unquestionable.

This focus on a supernatural authority and the associated future reward and punishment is also highly suspicious when discussing morality. We have already seen that if law enforcement agencies become ineffective, it doesn’t take long for lawlessness to break out but would we call someone who only does the right thing because they are afraid of the punishment or trying to get a reward, moral? As a practical measure, the police and the legal system are effective means of controlling people and enforcing right conduct, but are people moral as a result of this? For society, this issue is irrelevant. Society isn’t interested in fostering morality; it is only interested in creating order and, in some cases, equity and fair treatment. Christianity however, is claiming the moral high ground. Its claim is that its moral system is rock solid, so rock solid in fact, that it laid the foundation for modernity. But is this true?

I suggest that true morality requires an understanding of what is right and wrong and a free decision to pursue the former. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) felt so strongly that morality required a feeling of duty and obligation that he even declared an act to be morally void if an agent actually *wanted* to do the right thing. If someone wants to do the right thing, he felt that we can’t then adjudge them morally decent because their morals haven’t been tested. It is only when someone desires to do otherwise but feels compelled to and undertakes the morally righteousness action that we can attribute a moral dimension to their act.

We need not go quite this far, but I would definitely maintain that any conception of morality which rests on a system of reward and punishment has failed to meet the basic requirement of a moral system. At best, this is morality for children. Perhaps you remember when you were a child and your parents told you that if you cleaned your room you would get a little extra pocket money. And I am almost certain that at some point in your life, you have heard the threat that if you didn’t eat your dinner, you wouldn’t get any dessert.

This is the technique we use to motivate our children to do what we know they should, because they are unable to understand and appreciate the deeper reasons involved. We don’t consider children moral agents for that exact reason. We know that an appeal to adult commonsense will not find much traction with a child and so we resort to the trusty old carrot and stick. This is exactly what Jesus, and the religion that his teaching spawned, does.

Would you consider someone moral who did the right thing because there was a gun pointed at his head? Would you say that person’s action had moral worth? What about someone who did the right thing after being offered a million dollars? How about the person holding the gun or offering the money? Hopefully, you answer in the negative to all of these questions.

So, Jesus never addresses what we would call a true humanitarian approach to right action. You might think that was the best he could have hoped to do with the people of the time. Perhaps they were like children and maybe Jesus phrased his commands in the only language they could understand; gain and loss.

Maybe.

But probably not.

That doesn’t explain why Jesus explicitly states that he is only interested in Israelites and why he continually affirms that on Judgement Day he will happily deny before his Father, all those who have denied him. It’s also an interpretation that Jesus nowhere gives evidence for. The strong theme throughout the Gospels is reward and punishment based on loving God and following him (Jesus/God) and his rules.

Not only are there problems with the Christian conception of morality, but the claim that secularism or atheism cannot maintain a meaningful ethic is also entirely false. This Christian argument points out that without a basis in ‘ultimate truth’ as decreed by an ‘ultimate deity’ there is just no foundation for any kind of morality, in short, there is no reason for doing good. Note that this attitude reveals a fundamental Christian belief which just cannot conceive of someone doing good for the sake of goodness itself or for the benefit of another person.

This attitude can’t imagine any possible reason for being good except in obedience to some higher power,[[132]](#footnote-32) but is it true that there is absolutely no reason for being good unless someone in authority commands it of you? Perhaps it’s time we looked a little closer at the world view called humanism.

Humanism is simply an approach to affairs with a focus on human values and concerns as opposed to divine or supernatural ones. Its first proponents emerged in the 14th century amidst the Renaissance, a cultural movement which sparked a break from the restricting Scholasticism of the Middle Ages and is typically seen as a bridging period between the Middle and Modern Ages. The Renaissance saw an explosive burst of genius manifest through polymaths such as Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and as we have seen, Copernicus and Galileo. It influenced several areas of intellectual life including art and science in addition to the already mentioned humanism.

Now it is true that humanism developed against a backdrop of religion and was definitely not a true atheist movement (although we might permit it to be called ‘secular’) but it was a necessary stepping stone to the complete freedom of thought we enjoy today. Humanism not only shifted the focus from God back to man, but also opened the door to the possibility that the Church, its doctrine and its hierarchy may not all be infallible and beyond question after all.

So the million dollar question is can humanism, that is, a worldview focused solely on human and worldly affairs, provide us with suitable motivation to act right? Dan Barker points out that “Humanists think we should do good for goodnesses’ sake, not for the selfish prospect of reaping individual rewards or avoiding punishment”[[133]](#endnote-101), but are they justified in making that claim?

Perhaps not surprisingly, I think so.

I have made this point elsewhere so I won’t delve too much into it again but how can anyone doubt that a species with the cognitive and reasoning faculties we have, could not derive a morality for its own based on a simple understanding of its shared humanity? As Sam Harris, a well-known atheist, notes “Our common humanity is reason enough to protect our fellow human beings from coming to harm.”[[134]](#endnote-102)

It is not just our common humanity which gives us adequate reason for doing the ‘right’ thing but it is, perhaps more importantly, our ability to perceive and acknowledge that common humanity and then extend it to other species which engenders moral responsibility. Through our innate sense of empathy, our ability to imagine what it would be like in ‘another person’s shoes,’ we can appreciate the basic human insight that ‘I wouldn’t like it if someone did that to me.’ How many times did you hear that as a child growing up? How many times have you said that as a parent or adult? Did you need Christianity or did you appeal to a ‘higher power’ in order to make that claim? Of course, this insight is nothing other than Jesus’ Golden Rule, although I am being a bit facetious in calling it Jesus’, because as you already know, every culture across the planet figured this one out for themselves.

Of course, that insight alone does not guarantee that someone will therefore act on that knowledge. A person might conceivably know that they wouldn’t like to be treated a particular way but not have a problem with it as long as they aren’t on the receiving end. And to this end, we have laws and police to enforce them. And what are these laws based on? The Bible? The Koran? Buddha’s sayings? Of course not. They’re based on a basic understanding of fairness, that is, how we would like to be treated in a similar situation.

A Christian might point out that if it was this awareness of our common humanity which prompts moral excellence, why did it take so long to come into effect? Why were we discriminating against our fellow (darker-skinned) humans or those with different religious beliefs less than a hundred years ago if this empathy was as innate as I claim?

Well, why wouldn’t we?

This idea is completely compatible with the evolution of a secular morality, which is what I am arguing for here. At first, as a group, we chose to ignore those empathic promptings (or perhaps we didn’t even have them at all) but slowly, as societies and cultures evolved, those who were being maltreated pointed out the fact which began to raise the question in those more sensitive to such issues among us. Spearheaded by such people (on both sides, oppressed and oppressor) movements sprang up, gathered momentum and eventually forced widespread social change.

A bigger problem for Christians and one which we have seen repeatedly crop up in this essay is why did morality languish throughout the period when its representative institution ruled the Western world? Why did we have to wait for largely secular movements, such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to bring about change? How could Christianity have ushered in the changes if it was only with the decline of Christianity that those changes came into effect?

Ultimately, the best reason I have heard for doing the right thing was expressed by an atheist and based solely on humanistic grounds so it finds resonance with everyone open to the idea (Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, even those dirty atheists); “every person you have ever met, every person you will pass in the street today, is going to die… Why would one want to be anything but kind to them in the meantime?”[[135]](#endnote-103)

Christianity had to demonstrate three things in order to back up its claim to have founded our modern moral sensibilities. It had to show that it had a strong moral foundation, that it left behind a strong moral legacy, and that secularism could not build a morality on its own. In my opinion, it has failed on each of these counts and this is reason enough to reject this arrogant Christian claim. Before closing this section there are a few more issues I would like to raise regarding Christianity and morality which I hope won’t overlap too much with the preceding.

*Cherry Picking*

There is another reason I think that people’s sense of morality (even Christians themselves!) does not come from the Bible and Christianity. This is that despite the fact that the Bible contradicts itself almost every way imaginable, Christians are able to distinguish the ideas that are ‘moral’ from the ones that are ‘immoral.’ How can they do this? How does a Christian know to ignore the passages where Jesus makes a non-Jewish woman beg and disgrace herself in front of him before he heals her daughter (Matt 15:21-28) and where Paul reminds us that women are to be silent in church and must obey their husbands (1 Cor 14:35 and Eph 5:22-23) but proudly point to passages where Jesus tells us that we should love our neighbours as ourselves (Luke 10:27) despite being in direct contradiction with that old mandate, an eye for an eye, from the Old Testament (Matt 5:38)?

Since the Bible is clearly ambiguous in its ‘moral’ teachings then Christians *must* be cherry picking their sacred book for examples of moral worthiness. (This should be a completely *un*controversial statement). But if this is the case, then how do Christians know which passages in the Bible to cherry pick? Clearly, they are getting their morals from somewhere else.

There are few Christians I know who would enthusiastically recommend stoning someone to death for working on the Sabbath and yet this is the practice carried out in the Bible. “But” a Christian might argue, “As with anything written, we must read the Bible with commonsense and interpret the messages conveyed within.” Of course we must! That is exactly what Christians are doing and precisely what I am arguing they *should* be doing. This ‘commonsense’ which our imaginary Christian mentions is nothing less than a basic understanding of the difference between right and wrong, and is being applied to the Bible in order to sift out the chaff from the wheat. One of the first and most well-known cherry-pickers was St Augustine who said in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, “Anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related to good morals or the true faith should be taken as allegorical”[[136]](#endnote-104) Clearly Augustine is referring to an *extra*-Biblical source regarding the use of his “good morals” when it comes to understanding the Bible.

It is as I have said to a Christian-sympathetic friend of mine, Christians mine the Bible for nuggets of wisdom and always hit pay dirt; but they only do so because they put these gems there in the first place. They find the diamonds they went looking for and leave all of the coal buried; and then are surprised at the haul they take away.

The bottom line is that if people are cherry picking (and it is pretty hard to claim Christians aren’t as even a cursory look through the Bible will show) then they must be basing this cherry picking on something external to the source being cherry picked (the Bible). This ‘something’ I would identify as the values which have evolved to dominance in our current society built on the foundation of a humanistic and enlightened worldview.

*Modern people’s morality is ‘enlightened’ but this is only because they have already been influenced by Christianity.*

This defence can be seen as a direct response to Thomas Jefferson when he said, “If we did a good act merely from love of God and a belief that it is pleasing to Him, whence arises the morality of the Atheist?”[[137]](#endnote-105) The Christian replies that, of course atheists are moral now, but that is only because Christian teachings have already been embedded into the very essence of our society; you can’t escape the fact that Christianity was a powerful force which deeply influenced the world and left it forever changed in its wake.

This is basically an attempt to claim that we can no longer separate our moral instincts from Christianity because Christianity has affected us all. While it is true that Christianity affected the Western world in a deep and profound way, there is still nothing in that truism which forces us to concede that Christianity had a *positive* impact. This argument begs the question that Christianity was in fact a positive force in history; it starts by assuming this notion and proceeds from there.

This entire essay is an argument against this assumption and I consider it a dishonest ploy to argue that since Christianity has already affected society and us, we can no longer imagine what either would be like without it. A friend of mine once claimed that we live in a post-Christian world but that is not the same as one in which Christianity never existed. That is true but it is also completely mute on whether our world is the way it is *because* of Christianity or *despite* it.

It is also worth noting that on the back of this essay, it would be very easy to turn this argument around and persuasively argue that modern Christian sentiments are only what they are because of secular influences. The Church now condemns events which it led, such as the Inquisition and witch burnings and the trial of Galileo and denies many others including its role in sexism, slavery, the persecution of the Jews, the suppression of free speech, free thought and almost any other freedom you care to imagine. These days you can find Christians not only accepting the truth of the heliocentric hypothesis and evolution but they have also wisely ceased making any claims about science which it is likely science will one day be able to prove or disprove. Christianity may have influenced us but secular society also had a kick in its tail which Christianity felt and is still reeling from today.

*Absolute Good*

This is a concept which is often raised in any discussion about morality. The central issue at stake is whether or not there is an objective, absolute good beyond our own human, earthly determinations upon which we can rest our morality. The typical Christian argument is that there is such a standard and it rests in God; or to be more precise, what God decrees is what that objective, absolute good consists of.

The problem which arises for Christianity in light of this is one called the Divine Command Theory. I want to put the spotlight on this idea a bit here because even though it is a little philosophical and even scholastic in nature, I think it points to a real problem with the notion of morals coming from God. The Divine Command Theory says that whatever God mandates is right and good. But we then have a problem called the Éuthyphro dilemma (so called because it first appears in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*): is an action morally good because God commands it or does God command it because it is morally good?

If a Christian wants to hold that the good is truly absolute and exists beyond God’s whim, (i.e. God commands the things He does because they are good) then there is something God is subject to, i.e. He is subject to this absolute notion of the good. Loving your neighbour becomes good not because God says it is good but because it is good in itself and would still be good even if God didn’t exist. This notion of the good is beyond God and He can’t change it even if He wants to and more importantly, He is forced to follow and uphold this moral standard. This is not what Christians typically want to believe of their omnipotent Deity.

If a Christian holds that nothing can exist independent of, and especially beyond or above God, then their notion of the good becomes good not because there is anything inherently good about it but simply because it is what God decrees. This gives morality a suspicious ad hoc feel and means that the morality we tend to think of as absolute and unchangeable becomes nothing more than a single Deity’s will and deteriorates into an arbitrary and most certainly *not* absolute truth. It means that torturing babies is bad, not because it violates some absolute, essential moral code, but merely because God says it’s bad.

Now a Christian’s first response to this might be to say that it doesn’t matter. The good is both absolute *and* true because God decrees it, i.e. God’s will *is* the absolute. Unfortunately, this doesn’t solve the problem; it just tweaks the meaning of ‘absolute’. The problem is that it tweaks the ‘absolute’ so much that it loses all meaning. The situation is still that the good is good only because God says so. The only reason one can give for not torturing babies is that God says we shouldn’t, it isn’t actually wrong in and of itself, i.e. *if* God said that torturing babies was good, then torturing babies would *become* the absolute good. This seems too arbitrary for most people’s understanding of morality.

Still, a Christian might then claim that the whole thing is nonsense because God would never say such a thing because being omnibenevolent, He would never command evil. Again, this hasn’t solved the problem (I told you it was scholastic) because the question is then *why* would God never say such a thing? How does God know that torturing babies is evil? The only explanation could be that a standard for the good (and the evil) exists beyond God, independent of Him, and even He, with all of His omnipotence, is subject to this principle, i.e. there is something greater than God.

The other possibility open to Christians is to say that God *is* good and so the two are inseparable. Of course, there is also a serious problem with this. If God *is* good then it makes no sense to call Him good. If ‘God’ and ‘good’ are literally the same thing then to say God is good is as meaningless as to say that God is God, or equivalently good is good. This is basic logic; the subject and predicate of a statement must be different in order for the statement to have any meaning.

Unfortunately, making ‘God’ and ‘good’ equivalent also runs the risk of defining God so broadly and nebulously that He ceases to be the personal Creator God most Christians believe in. It is like saying God is love. ‘Love’ and ‘good’ are concepts. Christians (and new age proponents) love bandying these kinds of meaningless expressions around without taking the time to actually think about them. What does it mean to say that ‘God is love’ or ‘God is good?’ Is God just a concept?

This is not the place to discuss this idea further. I just wanted to draw your attention to it and hopefully make you think about something that you maybe hadn’t thought of before regarding Christianity.

The Conclusion

Ultimately, the claims Christianity makes in the arena of ethics turn out to be no different, that is, no less inflated without justification than its claims in any other area. Christianity claims to be the foundation of our modern morals and yet cannot even justify a self-consistent set of morals itself. The Church, as Christianity’s ambassador here on earth, has conducted itself in an entirely morally circumspect fashion throughout history which has led David Bentley Hart to comment regarding the harsh measures towards heretics and pagans Theodosius I took during his reign from 379 to 395CE that his steps “were a great boon for the institutional church, perhaps, but was obviously an almost irreparable catastrophe for Christianity.”[[138]](#endnote-106) Of course, Hart is not shy about attributing all of the positive actions of the Church, or even individual Christians to Christianity. If you are going to be biased, there is no sense in doing it half-cocked, I guess.

I would like to leave you with one final classic D’Souza allegory which he often proudly, but mistakenly, makes use of to illustrate the Christian moral code. He tells the story of Mother Theresa in some poor, third-world country hugging a leper on the side of the road when a well-off man upon seeing this can’t help but comment, “I wouldn’t do that for all the money in the world.” Mother Theresa looks up at him and says, “Neither would I, I do it for Jesus.” At the conclusion of this everybody in the audience goes, “Oh, how lovely” and it does seem lovely until you remember what I had to say about the true moral worth of an action.

Mother Theresa was hugging that leper for Jesus; because Jesus told her to (at least, she thought he did), but isn’t such a motivation missing the point. Shouldn’t she have been hugging the leper for the leper? Wouldn’t that have been a truly morally praiseworthy act? This brings us back to what has been one of the key points of this section. Christianity says, “Be good for Jesus” but atheists say, “Be good for the person you’re being good to.”

Christian morality isn’t really morality at all, it’s just obedience; obedience because if you do there’s a reward and if you don’t there’s a hefty punishment. Is this the lofty morality that Christianity supposedly bequeathed us in our modern age? Sadly Christianity has fallen well short of the mark again and we find ourselves once more in a position to make a ruling.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Christianity Preserved and Maintained Free Education and Open Inquiry**

It is almost a joke to have to address this issue in a serious fashion but it is what many Christians are sincerely claiming these days. Traditionally the Middle Ages have been seen as a period of stagnation in progressive thought but now Christians are attempting to rewrite the pages of history books with fanciful notions which completely contradict the facts.

We have already seen how scientific thought effectively ceased throughout the (aptly named) Dark Ages and we will now turn our attention towards the more general topics of education and free inquiry and particularly the Church’s attitude towards both.

The Facts

As F. B. Wright notes, Ancient Roman society was very tolerant of religious belief; “the Romans allowed to every citizen the free exercise of his own reason and judgment in regard to matters of a divine nature”[[139]](#endnote-107) and even David Hart (after a couple of pages of attempting to argue against this fact) eventually admits that “the critics are right: in many notable respects, pagan religious culture was immeasurably more “tolerant” than Christianity ever was”.[[140]](#endnote-108)

This was one of the better attitudes the Romans inherited from their Greek predecessors. Charles Freeman notes that they (like the Greeks) had and respected their myths (Greek *muthos*) but they weren’t dogmatic about them. They understood the place of myth in society as fulfilling emotional needs but not necessarily as a reflection of any absolute truth. Freeman points to Cicero as a perfect example of this who, while being a priest in civic cults, was openly sceptical about the existence of the gods in his *On the Natures of the Gods*.

In addition, Freeman notes that “The Romans assumed that other people’s gods were as important a part of the fabric of their society as their gods were of theirs, and this provides one reason why they were so easily prepared to tolerate other deities and beliefs.”[[141]](#endnote-109) This tolerance fostered a period in which “fruitful speculations” on the nature of the gods were permitted and encouraged, from Aristotle’s Prime Mover to the Epicurean gods to the pantheistic conceptions of the Stoics.

Wright notes that while it was true that the Romans “extended their toleration to every kind of religion, from whence no danger to the public safety was apprehended… they would not endure any one to deride or attempt to explode the religion of the state, or that which had the support of the laws.”[[142]](#endnote-110) Unfortunately, from its very inception, Christianity showed that it was entirely unable to accommodate or tolerate other beliefs and thus came into direct conflict with the powerful Roman state. Christianity has always been plagued with the arrogant belief that there is only one God, that He only looks after Christians, and that anyone else is at best deluded, at worst, in league with the devil.

Interestingly enough, many Christians point to this arrogant intolerance as being a praiseworthy trait. Hart talks about Celsus (a second century Greek philosopher) as a person who “continually speaks of Christianity as a form of sedition or rebellion”.[[143]](#endnote-111) He goes on to say that Celsus talks about how the Christians refuse to honour the Roman gods and goddesses but rather see themselves as being *above* all these false deities. Hart then proudly states that “of course, he was entirely correct… Christians were indeed a separate people, or at least aspired to be: another nation within each nation”.[[144]](#endnote-112) This is a classic example of the arrogant elitism inherent in Christianity which cannot fail to breed division and animosity in any society unlucky enough to find itself with a Christian minority.

Because the Christians refused to treat their *muthos* as myth, but insisted, not only that it was real, objective truth, but also that everyone else’s *muthos* was flat out wrong, the attitude of the state towards this new cult was not particularly welcoming. The Roman emperors, even the generous and most respected of them, are well-known for their brutal treatment of the Christians. Such persecutions were carried out somewhat erratically until the third century when Decius began the first systematic and concerted strike against the Christians. I am not attempting to justify the treatment of Christians during this period but as Freeman notes, “They [Christians] posed the classic political dilemma: how far can one show tolerance to a group that itself condemns the tolerance of the state in allowing pagan worship to continue?”[[145]](#endnote-113)

Despite these teething problems, Christianity eventually secured for itself the official seal of approval from Constantine. Naturally, the first order of business was the banning of pagan worship, i.e. there was to be no freedom of religion, which Theodosius ordered in 390.[[146]](#endnote-114) What happened then? Did this usher in an era of free Christian inquiry and unbridled philosophical speculation? If you believed the writings of Hart, Stark and other Christian apologists, you could be forgiven for thinking so. Instead, we will see the Christians attack each other with the fervency that they had previously reserved for their pagan enemies and all because they take their own *muthos* too seriously, turning it from harmless and useful myth into inflexible, destructive doctrine which people become so obsessed over they will die (and kill) for.

The first incident was over something which came to be called the Arian controversy. The Church Father, Arius, believed that Jesus came into being at some point (i.e. there was a time in which Jesus didn’t exist) while another Church Father, Athanasius, held that Jesus was perfectly equivalent with the Father and the Holy Spirit, therefore, there was never a time in which Jesus didn’t exist.[[147]](#footnote-33)

Despite the innocent nature of the debate in which both sides quoted Scripture in support of their opinions, the result was that the Arian belief was condemned as heretical, Arius was banished and his followers were ordered to be called ‘Porphyrians’, from Porphyrius, a heathen who wrote against Christianity. Wright records how Constantine subsequently “wrote letters to different churches branding Arius with every abominable name, and threatening to put everyone to death, who should find any of the books of Arius, and not immediately burn them.”[[148]](#endnote-115)

Once Arius had reformulated his notions so that they were more in line with ‘official’ doctrine, he was permitted to return to his home. However, one day before he was due to be re-admitted to communion he died in a highly suspicious fashion, about which, Edward Gibbon concludes “Those who receive the literal account of this story, may take their choice betwixt miracle and poison.”[[149]](#endnote-116)

Another infraction between Christians was over Novatianism. The Novatianists were an entirely Christian sect of the third century whose main source of antagonism with Catholicism was over those baptised Christians who had denied their faith in the face of persecution sanctioned by Decius. The Novatianists refused re-admission to communion for those Christians who had turned their backs on their faith so easily. This sect was declared heretical.

The Donatists were another Christian sect who, a century later, refused to accept sacraments administered by Christian priests who had handed over their Scriptures under the persecutions of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. In 405, Honorius branded the Donatists as heretics, confiscated their property, forbade their services and exiled their clergy. St Augustine then argued that Donatism intimidated and misled innocent Christians and it was the duty of the ‘true’ Church to suppress and, if necessary, enforce conversion. Even the conversion of Paul by God has an element of non-consent about it, taking place as it does after him being thrown to the ground. Augustine found similar examples to support his thesis from the Old Testament. In this way, St. Augustine, although a peaceful, kind-natured man, provided a rationale for persecution and forced conversions.[[150]](#endnote-117) “What then does brotherly love do? Does it, because it fears the short-lived fires of the furnace for the few, abandon all to the eternal fires of hell?”[[151]](#endnote-118)

In the late fourth century, at a time when the Church Fathers were elevating virginity and propagating vehemently against sexuality in favour of a more ascetic approach to life, a monk from Rome called Jovinian, brought a surprisingly frank and reasonable viewpoint to the whole discussion. He argued against the notion of a virgin being given prominence in the eyes of God over a married person, and in favour of eating and drinking freely, as long as one gave thanks to God. He argued his case using examples from the Bible and his view was a “down-to-earth, balanced and realistic approach”.[[152]](#endnote-119) Freeman notes the reaction of the Church Father Jerome to Jovinian was a vicious counter-attack in which he described Jovinian’s book as “vomit which he has thrown up”. The result for Jovinian? He “was declared a heretic, ordered to be flogged with leaden whips and forced to leave Rome for Milan”[[153]](#endnote-120) where he came under attack from Ambrose. What was Jovinian’s crime? Expressing an opinion that differed from that of the Church.  
 Bishop Cyril of Alexandria condemned the teachings of a Bishop Nestorius, who like Arius before him, didn’t argue against the ‘truth’ of Jesus having a Divine *and* human nature; he merely suggested that they were more separate within the human Christ than the Catholics thought. Bishop Nestorius was accused of heresy, deposed and anathematised in 431 and in 435 Theodosius II ordered the burning of all of his writings.[[154]](#endnote-121)

Another prominent early Church Father, Origen, who was active in the late second and early third centuries, was declared anathema to the Church in the sixth century over, among other things, his belief in the pre-existence of souls and the sub ordinance of God the Son to God the Father. Ironically enough, Origen also recommended teaching “those who cannot abandon everything and pursue a study of rational argument to believe without thinking out their reasons”[[155]](#endnote-122)

Around this time a monk named Rufinus, set about translating Origen’s *On the First Principles,* and this, despite the fact that he proclaimed he was following in St. Jerome’s footsteps, was enough to earn from his childhood friend (the same St. Jerome) a vituperative response which saw him and his work branded as heresy.

Early Christianity was so full of bickering that it even led to their greatest benefactor, Constantine exclaiming, “Even the barbarians now through me, the true servant of God, know God and have learned to reverence him while you [the bishops] do nothing but that which encourages discord and hatred and, to speak frankly, which leads to the destruction of the human race.”[[156]](#endnote-123)

Through the medium of the ubiquitous ‘heresy’ all those who failed to abide by the accepted, orthodox position, were treated the same, including not only Christians holding non-orthodox beliefs, but also Jews and pagans. But the Church was not content to eliminate heresy; it also attacked what it correctly saw as the key to unlocking such ‘evil’ notions, that is, free inquiry and rational, reasoned thinking, in short, philosophy and in quick order the two (rational thinking and heresy) became identical.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans had flourishing philosophical and scientific (although obviously crude compared to modern standards) disciplines full of spirited, and sometimes bitter, discussions, debates and arguments but these things would disappear with the emergence of Christianity. Instead the focus, not shifted to, was *forced* to religion and God. Faith triumphed reason, natural investigation became heretical, and even in talking about God we have seen one had to be very careful not to say anything which might conflict with ‘official doctrine’. How can learning and knowledge flourish under such conditions? It can’t.

A Church Father from the second century, Bishop Irenaeus, wrote that “If… we cannot discover explanations of all those things in Scripture… we should leave things of that nature to God who created us”.[[157]](#endnote-124)

Another Church Father in the third century, Tertullian, had few charitable things to say about philosophers and heretics (they amounted to the same thing to him), “Wretched Aristotle who taught them dialectic, that art of building up and demolishing…self-stultifying since it is ever handling questions but never settling them… what is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem?”[[158]](#endnote-125) He also happily rejected commonsense and reason leading to what Freeman calls his most famous statement, “The Son of God died; it must needs be believed because it is absurd. He was buried and rose again; it is certain because it is impossible”.[[159]](#endnote-126) He also had the following to say regarding free thought, “We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel!”[[160]](#endnote-127)

Symmachus, a fourth century Roman statesman, sought to preserve paganism and in the face of the Christian wave sweeping through the aristocracy, he proclaimed in a letter “What does it matter by which wisdom each of us arrives at the truth? It is not possible that only one road leads to so sublime a mystery.” Ambrose’s typically arrogant and intolerant reply was “What you are ignorant of, we know from the word of God. And what you try to infer, we have established as truth from the very wisdom of God.”[[161]](#endnote-128)

John Chrysostom in the late fourth century, had this to say regarding reason and secular learning, “Restrain our own reasoning, and empty our mind of secular learning, in order to provide a mind swept clear for the reception of divine words.”[[162]](#endnote-129)

The following are a few more examples, all quoted from Freeman, which sum up early Christianity’s attitude to reason:

* Basil: “Let us Christians prefer the simplicity of our faith to the demonstrations of human reason… For to spend much time on research about the essence of things would not serve the edification of the church.”
* Lactantius: “What purpose does knowledge serve-for as to knowledge of natural causes, what blessing is there for me if I should know where the Nile rises, or whatever else under the heaven the ‘scientists’ rave about?”
* Philastrius of Brescia: “There is a certain heresy concerning earthquakes that they come not from God’s command, but, it is thought, from the very nature of the elements… Paying no attention to God’s power, they [the heretics] presume to attribute the motions of force to the elements of nature… like certain foolish philosophers who, ascribing this to nature, know not the power of God.”

Moving to the fourth and fifth centuries, the notable St Augustine said “There is another form of temptation, even more fraught with danger. This is the disease of curiosity… It is this which drives us to try and discover the secrets of nature, those secrets which are beyond our understanding, which can avail us to nothing and which man should not wish to learn.”[[163]](#endnote-130)

Freeman also notes how Augustine, despite being a great thinker, came to the conclusion that some things need to be taken on trust which necessarily involves accepting the authority of others and from this attitude Augustine cast a disparaging eye towards the ‘philosophers’ who thought they could find truth for themselves. Hence, Augustine accepted the authority of the Church on all matters. It is true that we need to accept the authority of others, we can’t all be experts in everything and society would never progress if each generation had to reinvent the wheel to know it for themselves, but the problem comes when we accept other’s authority at the expense of our own commonsense and reason. Then we become blind followers incapable of distinguishing truth from fantasy. Reason became less and less important to Augustine as the years passed until as Adrian Hastings notes, “The main use of reason by the mature Augustine is unquestionably to understand what is already believed.”[[164]](#endnote-131)

Freeman notes that when a bishop was asked by Leo 1 whether they wished to reopen the declaration of Chalcedon, decided in the fifth century, he replied, “We uphold the Nicene creed but avoid difficult questions beyond human grasp. Clever theologians soon become heretics.”[[165]](#endnote-132)

Under the rule of Justinian, emperor 527-65, the gloves came off with the following pronouncement:

“All those who have not yet been baptised must come forward, whether they reside in the capital or in the provinces, and go to the very holy churches with their wives, their children, and their households, to be instructed in the true faith of Christianity. And once thus instructed and having sincerely renounced their former error, let them be judged worthy of redemptive baptism. Should they disobey, let them know that they will be excluded from the state and will no longer have any rights of possession, neither goods nor property; stripped of everything, they will be reduced to penury, without prejudice to the appropriate punishments that will be imposed on them.”[[166]](#endnote-133)

Justinian also mandated that those practicing pagan cults were subject to the death penalty, pagan teachers (including philosophers) were banned and had their licences to teach withdrawn and Plato’s Academy, after 900 years of teaching, was closed.[[167]](#endnote-134)

In the sixth century, Freeman writes of Pope Gregory the Great, that he “warned those with a rational turn of mind that, by looking for cause and effect in the natural world, they were ignoring the cause of all things, the will of God.”[[168]](#endnote-135) Opinions on Gregory the Great vary, but it is clear that he favoured faith over learning and as Freeman notes, this was a complete shift of perspective which amounted to a denial of the intellectual advances made by the Greeks especially but also the Romans. “The wise,” Gregory said, “should be advised to cease from their knowledge,” to be “wise in ignorance, wisely untaught.”[[169]](#endnote-136)

Aristotle was another casualty of Christianity completely disappearing from the Western world by the seventh century (with the exception of two works of logic), only reappearing in the 13th century through Albert the Great and St. Aquinas, thanks to his preservation by Arab interpreters.[[170]](#endnote-137) Mind that Aristotle didn’t just fade away into obscurity, but was actively forced there thanks to attitudes like those of an abbot of the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai who argued that the ten horns of the dragon in the Book of Revelation were none other than the ten categories (“heresies”) of Aristotle’s famous work, *Categories*.

Freeman contends that the only philosopher of note between Boethius (early 6th century) and Anselm (late 11th century) was a 9th century Irishman Erigena and all of his works were declared heretical by the Church in the 13th century.[[171]](#endnote-138) It was with the arrival of Anselm that secular learning became possible once more and the first universities began appearing. These universities were permitted to teach secular learning but only if they were careful not to contradict Christian doctrine or the authority of the Church. Freeman notes how the Faculty of Arts of the University of Paris forbade the use of Aristotle as a basis for discussion as late as 1215. It was only with the aforementioned Albert the Great and St. Aquinas that this prejudice was thrown off. Despite this, even as venerated a saint as Aquinas could not escape censorship and several of his theses were condemned in both Paris and Oxford.

Pope Innocent III, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was a vigorous opponent of heresy and actively fought to suppress it. He declared that “anyone who attempted to construe a personal view of God which conflicted with Church dogma must be burned without pity.”[[172]](#endnote-139)

Charles Goodrich in his *A History of the Church* details three distinguished heretics who all met the same fate at the hands of an intolerant and jealous Church during the 14 and 15th centuries. John Wickliffe (1328-1384), most famous for translating the Bible into vernacular English, a crime punishable by charges of heresy (a *very* serious charge in those times), in 1415, almost a century after his death, had his writings banned (any found were to be burnt), was declared a heretic and had his bones dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into a river.

Wickliffe inspired a number of followers, called Lollards, and Goodrich reports how many of these were imprisoned, suspended by chains from a gallows and burnt alive. One notable name among these belonged to Jan Hus, a Czech priest, who in 1410 was excommunicated and declared a heretic. His writings were burnt, and he was put on trial and condemned to be burned at the stake in 1415 for his crimes against the Catholic Church.

The third member of our trinity was Jerome of Prague who suffered the same fate as his predecessors, that is, burning at the stake. Jerome was a determined supporter of Jan Hus and even went to Constance to try and aid Hus at his trial. He was unable to be of any help here and was arrested en route to Bohemia. He was forced to recant his admiration and support of both Wycliffe and Hus but he later recanted his recantation. In 1416, he was burned at the stake for these crimes.[[173]](#endnote-140)

Commenting on these three individuals, Pope Martin V issued a papal bull in which he declared that anyone who approved of the doctrines of Wickliffe, Hus or Jerome of Prague should be delivered to the secular court to be punished as heretics.[[174]](#endnote-141)

In the beginning of the reign of Henry V (the late 14th century) an act was passed expressing that whoever should read the Scriptures in their mother tongue (called Wickliffe’s language) would find their lands, life and good forfeited to the King.[[175]](#endnote-142) Joseph Priestly recounts the case of six women being burned alive in the sixteenth century in Coventry for the heinous crime of teaching their children the creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English.[[176]](#endnote-143)

In the century following the murders of Hus and Jerome, another enterprising Christian, William Tyndale, sought to translate the Bible into English so that everyone could read for themselves the word of God. John Foxe describes an encounter with a “learned” clergyman who asserted to Tyndale, “We had better be without God’s laws than the Pope’s”. Tyndale replied, “I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!”[[177]](#endnote-144) Naturally, this constituted a direct threat to the authority of the Catholic Church who reacted accordingly. Tyndale was denied the permission he sought (to publish the Bible into the vernacular was a crime punishable by death at the time) and fled to Germany where he completed his translation anyway and set about smuggling copies into England and Scotland. In 1526 Bishop Tunstall condemned the translations and issued warnings to booksellers and had books burned in public.[[178]](#endnote-145) Tyndale was condemned as a heretic in 1529 and finally caught in Antwerp six years later. Tyndale was “strangled to death while tied at the stake, and then his dead body was burned.”[[179]](#endnote-146)

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, spearheaded by the likes of Martin Luther and John Calvin, effectively split Western Christianity in two. A number of factors led to the Reformation, including the Black Death and the Western Schism (a split within the Catholic Church the highlight of which was when two men simultaneously claimed to be the true Pope), both of which eroded people’s faith in the Catholic Church, the emerging humanist ideals of the Renaissance, and the general feeling that the Church was becoming more and more corrupt outlined clearly in Luther’s *The Ninety-Five Theses*.

How did the Catholic Church respond to these people who had different notions about things than the Church did? Did it allow the public to choose by becoming more transparent in its work? Did it offer reasons or explanations to the people? Did it leave the choice up to the people or did it attempt to coerce them by demonising and outlawing its critics? Let us briefly see what happened to Martin Luther.

Luther was excommunicated in 1521 by Pope Leo X for not recanting his heretical opinions and the year before that Pope Leo issued a papal bull which “utterly condemned, reprobated, and rejected” all of the books, writings and sermons of Luther. He “forbid each and every one of the faithful of either sex, in virtue of holy obedience… to read, assert, preach, praise, print, publish, or defend them.” And regarding Luther’s works themselves, “wherever they may be, shall be sought out carefully by the ordinaries and other [ecclesiastics and regulars], and under each and every one of the above penalties shall be burned publicly and solemnly in the presence of the clerics and people.”[[180]](#endnote-147)

Luther was summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms in 1521, a general assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire, to account for his heretical writings. The outcome, the Edict of Worms, reinforced everything Pope Leo had stated in his papal bull a year earlier, calling Luther “a demon in the appearance of a man” and a “notorious heretic” and the Church forbade “anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther.” Anyone helping Luther would be dealt with harshly, “we will also proceed against them and will take all of their goods and belongings”.[[181]](#endnote-148)

Ironically enough, Luther, a Catholic heretic himself, also recommended severely punishing heretics[[182]](#footnote-34) (those who disbelieved or taught principles which contradicted Lutheranism) saying that “there should be one kind of preaching only at one place”.[[183]](#endnote-149) ‘Blasphemy’ became the new tool for persecuting heretics who were to be “punished straightway and without compunction.”[[184]](#endnote-150) It seems he was somewhat more lenient than the Catholic Church he was rebelling against however, when he stated that “heretics are not indeed to be put to death, but may however be confined, and shut up in some certain place, and put under restraint as madmen.”[[185]](#endnote-151) Are we at freedom of inquiry for all yet?

John Calvin also became less and less tolerant towards those who held different opinions from him, as illustrated by the burning at the stake of Michel Servetus in 1553, in which Calvin played a crucial role.[[186]](#footnote-35) Calvin was so in favour of punishing heretics that he wrote a treatise endorsing the death penalty for them (heretics different from him that is).

Naturally, all branches of the newly formed Protestantism (heretic according to the Catholic Church) pronounced each other heretical as well, to just add to this outpouring of Christian love and charity.

*The Index*

In a final assault on our freedom to believe what we choose the Catholic Church kept an official “index of prohibited books”, started in 1559, which listed some five hundred and fifty authors in addition to individual proscribed titles.[[187]](#endnote-152) As the name suggests the *index* was a list of publications prohibited by the Church and marked a “turning-point in the freedom of enquiry”.[[188]](#endnote-153) The *index* went through its final edition in 1948, by which time there were more than four thousand works censored, and was only abolished in 1966; not a very long time ago at all.

The *index* was a direct reaction to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century which suddenly made it possible for information to be mass produced and widely disseminated. For an organisation like the Catholic Church, which survived in great part by keeping the public relatively illiterate and uninformed, this clearly represented an enormous threat to its authority.

One of the shocking things about the *index* is the list of authors whose works are included. Naturally, many of the authors will be unknown to all but the most dedicated of historians but the highlights of the *index* include men and women we consider to be some of the greatest thinkers who ever lived, a veritable “Who’s Who of Western thought.”[[189]](#endnote-154) A brief listing of these people includes Kepler, Galileo, Descartes, Voltaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, Kant, Spinoza, Hobbes, John Locke, and Bentham. These are names of people who most consider the foundations of our current age, and the Catholic Church attempted to suppress their writings.

I can already imagine the Hart / Stark defence. They would dig into the events surrounding the creation of the *index* and infer any number of extraneous motivations to absolve the Church of its crime of repressing our rights to not only free speech but also free thought which we have today thanks in great part to the thinkers they tried to suppress.

If I may for a few moments play devil’s advocate and put words in their mouths… “Sure,” they would say, “the Church was responsible for the *index* but they weren’t the only ones. The secular authorities also wanted control and in many cases… blah, blah, blah.” The way these authors work is through the tried and tested, “Yes, *but*…” strategy. They admit the truth and then try to overwhelm the reader with a barrage of true but miscellaneous and diversionary facts. In the end, the reader can no longer see the forest for the trees.

If you step back and look at the situation, there is no mistaking what the *index* was and what it meant. It was an attempt to curtail the freedom which we so often take for granted in our modern society.

Hart / Stark would also point out that every society has carried out some form of censorship in order to preserve moral and social order. This is another diversionary tactic. First, it wasn’t just censorship but full prohibition that the Church enforced and second, just because other people in other times censored material in no way absolves the Church for the creation of the *index* which we all recognise as a blatant infraction on basic human rights.

You might also wonder what’s the big deal about the *index*? After all, every institution has the right to publish a list of what it considers untrue or immoral literature and recommend that their followers not indulge in such material. That’s true, but the *index* was far more than a mere guideline for its own private members who had joined of their own free will. It was a mandate forced on a general public who had no choice in the matter and the effects for ignoring it ranged from excommunication to execution, a few instances of which we have already seen.

Any opinion on the index of forbidden books which concludes that it was anything other than a tool for the suppression of natural, “God-given” freedoms is fallacious and flawed. It was a blatant attempt to control what people thought, and backed up by words such as ‘heresy’ and ‘blasphemy’ it demanded the highest penalties for failure to comply.

One of the principle means for discovering and punishing those who failed to comply with the rules of the Catholic Church was the Inquisition, a subject we turn to next.

*The Inquisition*

You would have to look hard to find a more morally repugnant, shameless violation of basic human rights than the Inquisition. There were actually a number of separate Inquisitions that came into effect in Europe spanning seven hundred years from the 12th century to the 19th. The following is a broad summary of the different Inquisitions and the periods they were in effect:

* Medieval Inquisition – 12th to 16th centuries.
* Spanish Inquisition – 15th to 19th centuries.
* Portuguese Inquisition – 16th to 19th centuries.
* Roman Inquisition – 16th to 19th centuries.

Although there are minor differences among the different Inquisitions, they were all established under Roman Catholicism with the ostensible goal of combating heresy (which is remember, nothing more than holding a conflicting view with that of the church) and by in large the procedures and punishments were generally the same in all (although present in varying degrees) and so for our purposes I will usually treat them collectively.

It is worth emphasising that the Inquisition was never about promoting Christianity, or spreading love and happiness, or even promulgating the Good News. Its sole aim was to crush all views that differed from those held by the Church. In the Medieval Inquisition, the heretics primarily targeted were the Cathars in France and the Waldensians in Italy. The Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions were instigated to ensure the orthodoxy of those who had converted to Christianity from Judaism or Islam but the latter expanded to Portugal’s colonies including Goa in India, where the focus was on those converts from Hinduism or Islam who were slipping back into their old religious practices. The Roman Inquisition was a continuation of its predecessors and earned notoriety with the prosecution of Galileo and the execution of Giordano Bruno.

The primary weapon of the Inquisition was fear and intimidation which they used to bully and coerce people into the ‘fold’. In the Middle Ages the general public was largely ignorant and uneducated and the Church used this to its advantage, instilling a deep fear of anything that contradicted its teachings by withdrawing the love and protection of the Church (therefore God) from heretics. Pope Innocent III sought to do just this when he said, “…if one is faithful to a heretic, he is unfaithful to God”[[190]](#endnote-155) and “The civil law punishes traitors with confiscation of their property and death… All the more then should we excommunicate and confiscate the property of those who are traitors to the faith of Jesus Christ; for it is an infinitely greater sin to offend the divine majesty than to attack the majesty of the sovereign.”[[191]](#endnote-156)

So, after the Church convinced people that God was real and their very souls hung in the balance, they then threatened them with excommunication, i.e. the removal of that which preserved their very humanity, in the harshest language possible, “Let him be excommunicated and accurst by the authority of the omnipotent God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and of St. Peter, and all the saints, and separated from the society of Christians, and from the doors of our Holy Mother Church, where there is remission of sins, and let him be *anathema maranalha*, to the end of the world, with the devils in hell. So let it be; once, twice, thrice, Amen”[[192]](#endnote-157) Imagine how terrifying such a prospect could be to the uneducated people who had put their faith in their Christian leaders.

Demonising and *de*humanising the enemy is a tactic that has been used in countless wars throughout history to rally the citizens of one country against another. In this case, Christianity used it with great effect within countries to turn people not just against those who posed a threat to their rule but also to draw people to their cause by making the alternative (rejected by God) all the more terrible.

Once you were under suspicion in an Inquisitorial trial, you were as good as guilty and in a perverse reversal of our current legal system, it was often considered expedient to consider the accused guilty until proven innocent. Of course, it is impossible to *prove* that someone is *not* guilty; at best you can only fail to find any evidence of guilt. As a result of this, Gorham observes that no one was ever acquitted in an Inquisitorial trial. The rare verdict “Not proven” was the extent of the mercy of the Church.[[193]](#endnote-158) Not only were the trials a mockery of justice compared to even a half-decent standard but those accused were also encouraged to identify other heretics who would in turn come under suspicion. These alleged heretics would then furnish more names so the Inquisitors never wanted for work.

Prior to the 12th century, the Church was active in suppressing heresy but mainly via ecclesiastical proscriptions and imprisonment. It had so far not resorted to torture and only occasionally to executions. With the first Medieval Inquisition, that was all about to change. Burning alive became legally sanctioned in 1197 and torture was made legal by Pope Innocent IV in 1252. Of course, as presumably any sensible person should be aware (especially in the enlightened age when the Church ruled Europe) confessions extracted under torture are almost useless and in particular, names of other heretics even more so.

Upon surviving the trial one was then handed a sentence. There were a number of different sentences handed out to those found guilty of heresy. The lighter penances included prayers, fasting, discipline, pilgrimage and fines. Some of these weren’t terribly onerous but given the untrammelled power the Church had regarding the scope of these penances, they could make a life uncomfortable in the least and a burden at worst. A long pilgrimage could be forced on a convicted heretic during which time his family might be left without any means of procuring income or food.

The second grade of penance was the compulsory wearing of yellow crosses which were sewn onto the clothing of the heretic and the third grade was imprisonment for life. The conditions of this imprisonment were often abysmal including things like solitary confinement, meagre diets of bread and water and even having feet (and sometimes hands as well) chained to a wall.

The confiscation of property was an automatic and necessary penalty which was sometimes enforced even before confessions were extracted. A third was supposed to go to the State, a third to the Papacy and a third to the Inquisition; but as you can imagine, corruption was rife amongst the servants of God.

Burning at the stake was the most extreme punishment and often took place at the conclusion of an auto-da-fe which was a public ritual that was supposed to serve as a form of public penance including things like Catholic Mass and prayer in addition to a procession of the guilty and the reading of their sentences.

Of course, the Inquisition had the support of the higher echelons of the Church but even the good Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, failed to live up to what we would today consider a fairly rudimentary sense of humanity. “On their [heretics] own side there is the sin, whereby they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be severed from the world by death.”[[194]](#endnote-159) Vacandard adds that Aquinas then assures us that Christians only advocate the death penalty in the name of Christian charity; charity for one’s neighbour; i.e. for all the good Christians that the evil heretics would confuse and corrupt with their sinful ways. Needless to say, this makes a mockery of true charity, although as we have seen this is quite typical for the institution which claims charity as its own, even arrogantly prefixing “Christian” before the word as if they have some special claim over it.

An example of one of the many unbelievable stories Gorham relates the Edicts of Emperor Charles V of the Netherlands in 1520 which saw “great numbers of persons [were] put to death for such enormous offences as reading the Bible, ridiculing the sacred wafer, or even casting a disapproving glance on a graven image.”[[195]](#endnote-160)

Gorham also relates a recorded case where the testimony of a ten year old boy was accepted as evidence against his own family and sixty six other people. What was their heinous crime? They listened to a heretical sermon a year earlier. One final case Gorham mentions concerns pilgrimages imposed on three men for the terrible crime of seeing some Waldenses in their father’s house without knowing they were heretics, nearly twenty years earlier!

Wright also tells of how the 16th century Pope, Pius V., recommended via a bull that all those who read, imported or were even in possession of banned books were liable to be excommunicated, whipped, banished or even tortured in order to suppress heresy.

Despite the seemingly indefensible nature of the Inquisition, some diehard apologists make a valiant attempt. One of the more inane of these comes from one E. Vacandard who claims that the Cathari beliefs[[196]](#footnote-36) amounted to nothing more than an “imitation and a caricature of Christianity” and “that in itself would justify the Church in treating its followers as heretics.” This is an absolutely ridiculous attempt to justify the brutalities and curtailing of basic human freedoms that so characterised the Inquisition. That Vacandard even thinks that ‘imitating’ another’s doctrine warrants vilifying, outlawing and actively seeking to eradicate all those who support the ‘heretical’ doctrine shows just how deluded he is.

Vacandard betrays his true colours when he justifies the Church saying it acted in self-defence and characterises Catharism as being nothing more than “false teachings” which disturbed the minds of the people and would have brought about the downfall of the Church if allowed to continue. Many beliefs and actions of Christians are (and as this essay has shown, have been) extremely detrimental to individuals and on top of this, in the minds of many these teachings are also false. Are we justified in the twenty-first century acting on this situation by hunting those who promote these false beliefs? Is it then defensible to make Christianity a crime punishable by the forfeit of property, the wearing of specifically marked clothing, extended imprisonment, torture and in the extreme execution? Of course not and only a Christian steeped in the divisive dogma and intolerances that so characterise Christianity could ever think otherwise.

Vacandard also downplays the use of torture as the Inquisitor’s “sincere desire for the salvation of the heretic”, the beginning of which was heralded by a full confession. In some or even many cases that may have been true, but rather than ameliorating the shocking nature of the act, torturing someone over their beliefs, it only serves to show the dangers of blind faith in authority unchecked by reason. Every Christian values faith above reason, often the more an event (of course, one which coincides with the Christian doctrine) is rationally impossible the more credibility it acquires with the believer (talking snakes, raising the dead, talking in tongues, etc.) and this is just one reason why faith, the way Christians mean it, is such a dangerous thing. Unchecked faith makes people gullible and stupid, but there is no way to only ‘half’ submit your beliefs to reason; it is either all or nothing. Once you allow common sense and reason a handhold, you will have no choice but to discard all myth and fantasy; and that is precisely the danger that the Roman Inquisition rallied against in its struggle against the Scientific Revolution.

Another typical ploy of modern day Christian apologists involves attempts to reduce the number of executions actually ordered by the Inquisition. Rewriting history as much as they are able (if they could, they would have us believe that those found guilty of heresy received no more than a slap on the wrists) they tell us things like seven out of eighteen *auto da fe* yielded nothing severer than imprisonment.[[197]](#endnote-161) Of course, we aren’t supposed to ask about the other eleven sentences handed out, nor are we supposed to take note of the still wildly oppressive system that robs a person of their freedom simply for holding a different opinion, because remember, Christianity supposedly provided the ‘cultural grammar’ that our modern freedoms and morals are founded upon.

One final defence I will consider is one Christians usually tack on near the end of any discussion of the Inquisition as a final kick in the crotch; that is, the Church was never *actually* responsible for any of the Inquisitorial executions. What happened was the Church handed convicted heretics over to the secular arm for sentencing, but the sentencing was then carried out in accordance with strict Church rulings. It was in other words exactly what it looks like; a system devised by the Church so everything would go the way it determined while they could still hold their heads up high and say, “But *we*, as followers of God and paragons of Christian love, don’t kill anyone”.

Naturally, this defence is a complete joke and amounts to pointing a gun at one person, ordering them to kill a second person and then acting surprised when people blame you for the murder. There’s really no need to attack this defence because every sensible person reading this should immediately, and almost intuitively, realise how devious and dishonest this system was. Only a true Christian could find solace in such a flimsy excuse.

Reflections on the Facts

In typical fashion, modern Christian apologists assert that rather than being to blame for the loss of classic Greek learning we actually owe a debt to Christian scholars for their preserving these ancient texts. This is again in part true, but not half as much as Christian scholars would have us believe.

It is true that some Christian monks copied ancient Greek texts but as we have seen, they did nothing with them; it was only the Arab world which used them in any meaningful way.[[198]](#endnote-162) It is a classic case of modern Christian bias which sees them ignore the Christians, a few of whom we have seen above, who denounced secular learning and philosophy and instead focus on those Christians who sought to preserve the old texts. “See,” they cry, “It was Christians and Christianity which encouraged free thought after all.”

At a time when the Western world languished behind the Arab in all areas (except in ‘knowledge’ of God, of course) some monks may have been working on preserving ancient learning but many others were attempting to stifle all thought which differed from the ‘truth’ as handed down by the Church. For centuries, not just actions, but words, thoughts and in time, even suspicions of thoughts would prove sufficient for the harshest punishments, including death.

Another trumped up modern Christian claim is that Christians built the first universities; therefore they stimulated secular learning and provided the means for it to be facilitated. There are a couple of responses to this. First, of course Christians built the first universities; there was no one else to build them! The Church was the most powerful institution in the Western world and all of the people in power were Christian. A part of any functioning society is education and it falls to the people in power to provide the means for that education. But that doesn’t necessarily reflect back on the ruling ideology. If Hitler had been successful, don’t you think he would also have built universities once the rubble cleared? Does that mean that Nazism was dedicated to free and open learning? Of course not. It means the Nazis were seeking to build a solid society on which to base their principles. Christians built universities at a time when Christianity was dominant, but they didn’t do it out of any genuine interest in promoting free thought. Why do I say that? This brings us to the second point; these universities were focused primarily on theology. Philosophy, grammar and dialectic were useful as preliminaries only.[[199]](#endnote-163) We have already seen how the teachings of Aristotle met with disapproval in the first ‘free learning’ and ‘secular’ universities. Why? Because they contradicted Church doctrine. There is nothing and could never be anything free or open about an education system founded on religion because religion is, almost by definition and certainly in practice, too narrow-minded and intolerant to permit true independence of thought.

I will leave the last word in this section to the fourth session of the Council of Trent in 1546, where in order to "control petulant spirits it had been decreed that:

“in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, no one relying on his own judgment and distorting the Sacred Scriptures according to his own conception shall dare to interpret them contrary to that sense which Holy Mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and meaning, has held or does hold, or even [to interpret them] contrary to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers…”[[200]](#endnote-164)

The Conclusion

The above quotes and incidents are only the tip of the iceberg regarding the active war against free and independent thought that the Church fought as it sought to acquire and maintain control throughout the Middle Ages. It was truly a time when a person’s thoughts could get one killed. Many of us cannot even imagine such a time and it is too easy to let this modern perspective colour our understanding of the past and blind us to the facts.

Charles Gorham said that the teachings of the Church and the suppressive environment of the Middle Ages made “life in general very unpleasant for any one who had a taste for independent thought.”[[201]](#endnote-165) This is so utterly obvious and undeniable that only religion, which survives only by distorting facts and appealing to ‘faith’ and ‘paradox’ as opposed to common sense and reason, could hope to successfully mount a campaign against it.

At regular intervals in Christian history, philosophical institutes were closed, non-Christian, non-official philosophy and philosophers were banned, books were burned and all independent thought was squashed. Of course, it isn’t only the Christian Church which has been responsible for such travesties of learning and education, but a defence which argues for example, that Plato also advocated the burning of all the writings of Democritus (a Pre-Socratic philosopher) misses the point. No one is claiming that Plato built the foundation for our modern sensibilities regarding open inquiry the personal freedoms we enjoy today. If you want to convince us that Christianity founded the freedoms we enjoy in being able to think, say, write and read what we want, you need to do a whole lot more than distract us by pointing an accusing finger at other figures.

The Church had close to fifteen centuries at the helm of Western civilisation yet almost nothing of value happened during that time. The thinkers we revere were all pre or post Christianity. The punishments for independent thought under Christian rule are all too obvious and well-known; people were murdered (for we can’t in good faith call it anything else) for things as innocuous and forward thinking as translating the Bible into English, or teaching the Lord’s Prayer in English, or being in possession of (let alone reading) a banned book. Books were banned! The Catholic Church actually created and maintained a list of prohibited books and in the face of this, modern Christians turn around and claim that Christianity spearheaded open learning! This is truly nonsense of the highest magnitude. It is akin to standing outside on a bright, sunny day and declaring that it is raining. Such a steadfast denial of the facts is so perverse that it causes one to marvel once more at the seemingly boundless capacity of the human mind for self-deception.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

The Theory

There isn’t much in the theory of Christianity either for or against open education and free inquiry. This is hardly surprising because, as I have been repeatedly emphasising throughout this essay, Christianity is a system of salvation, nothing more, nothing less. It has nothing to say on learning and education because it was never concerned with these things, at least as they applied outside a religious perspective. Still there are a couple of things that make the Good Word not so good when it comes to learning and therefore undermine the arrogant claim that Christianity paved the way to our relatively liberal modern education principles and sensibilities.

The Facts

Christianity has always been first and foremost a belief system that has placed a lot of emphasis on faith and obedience to authority. In fact, central to the whole Christian enterprise is the notion that you must believe in a supernatural God (that is, a God outside the laws of physics and therefore in a certain way forever unknowable to us) who created us and gave us specific rules or guidelines which we MUST follow. It is forbidden to break these rules and the punishment for doing so is an eternity in hell (if we are going old school) or separation from the bliss that is closeness to God (if we put a Neo-Christian spin on things).

Unpacking this sentiment gives us three ideals which do not lend themselves to freedoms in inquiry or thought. First, belief in God is faith-based, not evidence-based. As St. Augustine summed up nicely, “Therefore, seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe that you may understand; for unless you believe, you will not understand”[[202]](#endnote-166) and again, “Faith goes before; understanding follows after.”[[203]](#endnote-167) Here, education and honest inquiry (understanding) are discounted in favour of belief. This hardly fosters an attitude where the spirit of learning and the progress (in all areas; technological, social, moral, intellectual, etc.) that inevitably follows on wherever such a spirit is nurtured, can flourish.

Of course, this flows on into the second ideal which is the concept of God Himself. God is so far removed from anything we know and are familiar with that we must deliberately and wilfully ignore everything our reason tells us can be true in order to swallow this tale of an entity couched in superlatives and clothed in paradox. God knows everything and yet has granted us freewill (i.e. God knows what we are going to do before we do it and yet our choice is still free), He is beyond time and yet still manages to do things, such as create the world, that supposedly require time in which to do them, God loves us and yet demanded the blood sacrifice of His only son(/Himself) before forgiving us for our sins (which he presumably knew we were going to commit anyway), etc. There are so many paradoxes and irrational elements in Christianity that they can never be understood through any systematic intellectual endeavour. This is why whenever Christians encounter a doctrine that doesn’t make sense, they turn off the thinking part of their brain and engage the ‘spiritual’ part, whose primary directive is to smother that little voice inside that says, “Hold on, surely this is total bull#@\*.” No respect for freethinking and reason there.

Third, it is mandatory to follow God’s rules. God is the lawmaker, we are the law followers. In Christianity, the universe has been set up in such a way that we are reduced to obedient subordinates whose primary purpose in life is to fulfil what has been preordained by God for us. Gorham expresses this sentiment when he says that Christianity’s “claim to Divine inspiration and support led naturally to a demand for obedience so complete that no room was left for liberty of opinion and mental expansion.”[[204]](#endnote-168) In the Bible, God vividly demonstrates his intolerance with those who show themselves to be poor followers of His decrees and this precedent coupled with the arrogant belief that everything Christians believed came with a Divine seal of approval and therefore stood beyond question, created the corresponding intolerance for opinion contrary to orthodox position.

The Middle Ages are famous for their spirited (and often dangerous to the person who falls on the wrong side of orthodoxy) disputations over subtle details of doctrine and metaphysics including the infamous how many angels can dance on the point of a needle, but these are clearly not much help to anyone attempting to establish a foundation for sensible, free inquiry. Of course there were some more relevant and interesting disputations (we have seen one regarding the nature of Jesus, which saw Arius excommunicated and exiled) but these don’t get us to free inquiry either because the Church ruthlessly enforced its orthodox position and didn’t brook any dissent or competition. My question here is could this oppressive attitude have been founded on Christian principles.

I think yes.

As I have already mentioned, Christians believed they got their orthodox beliefs from God and so they *had* to be right. The idea that these doctrines came straight from God made the Church as intolerant as its Leader. But, perhaps even more importantly, the belief that they *had* to follow the word of God obediently (and therefore get it right in the first place) was so crucial because their eternal happiness depended on it. If they got it right, their reward was heaven, if not, their punishment was hell. This was strong motivation to make sure the word of God was being interpreted correctly and obeyed faithfully.

You could almost be forgiven for thinking that this situation should have led to spirited and lively debates where the parties interested were all dedicated to finding the truth. And it *could* have, but this desperate need to be right, rooted in the fear of being wrong, (in order to gain salvation) was accompanied by an overweening arrogance that they already were (because God exists and has made His wishes known) which could only lead, not to open passionate inquiry, but stifling, rigorous suppression of inquiry to preserve God’s mandates.

During the ‘glory days’ of the Middle Ages, freedom of inquiry was not merely discouraged, it was made into a sin. Again, we will find there is ample precedent for such an attitude deep in the core of Christianity; this time from the Bible.

Cast your mind back to Genesis 2 and 3 where the whole apple eating incident takes place. We all know the story; the snake slips into the Garden right under God’s nose and tempts the gullible Eve into eating that apple from the tree… wait, what kind of tree was it again? Everyone knows the story of Eve and the apple but does everyone know some of the important details? Do you remember the name of the tree? Were you ever even taught it? Of course it was an apple tree, but God specifically gives it another name in Genesis, one that is suspicious if God is the good guy we all imagine Him to be. It was the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Now, neo-Christians will obviously be unfazed by this little fact (the ability to remain unfazed by any belief-threatening fact is part of the definition of a neo-Christian) as they will tell us something like the tree symbolises the human tendency to ‘play God’ and make his own morals to live by. God’s mandate not to eat from that tree is a metaphor urging us to guard against the arrogant tendencies within each of us. Great, but ultimately unhelpful beyond a new age or motivational truism.

The lesson implicit in such a parable, when unfiltered by the modern mind conditioned by humanism, equality and democracy (this is important because we have all had our sensibilities and opinions deeply influenced by modern values), is that we shouldn’t pursue knowledge. Rather, we should be satisfied with what God tells us and not strive for more.

God would ram this message home only a few chapters later in Genesis 11 in the Tower of Babel incident. I am sure you are familiar with the gist of this story as well. God notices that the humans have all gotten together, they all speak the same language and are working together to build a massive city and a tower that stretches to the heavens. How does God react to this unity and sense of purpose among His creation? Does He praise us? Marvel at our ingenuity? Help us? Sadly not. Instead He scatters us and confuses our language so we can’t work together to achieve so much. What is the take home message from this? A neo-Christian would tell you it’s that we need to temper our hubris and learn modesty; not necessarily a bad lesson, but a very secular one. Within the doctrine and mythology of Christianity (which is what we are talking about) it says God doesn’t like people trying to learn too much because if they are successful “then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them” (Genesis 11:6). Take home message? Achieving too much is bad and incurs God’s wrath.

The Conclusion

We have already seen how Christianity as an institution actively created a stifling attitude which effectively suppressed free thought and open inquiry for centuries but what we have now discovered is that this was not an aberrant trend stemming from ignorance of the doctrines underlying Christian faith but rather a reasonable and in some sense even a natural extension of those doctrines.

Christianity is founded on a supernatural God who stands alone above the mortal world we inhabit. The word of God is the final word on any subject and if human enterprise discovers something else, so much the worse for puny human attempts at knowledge. Faith trumps knowledge every time, to the point where Christians revel in paradox like contented pigs wallowing in mud believing their impossibilities point the way to a ‘higher Truth’. Sometimes impossibilities are just that… impossible, period.

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| Force for Good? | **X** |

**Miscellaneous Thoughts**

We are nearing the end of what has turned out to be a much longer ‘rant’ than I initially intended but hopefully it is not the worse for it. In this final section I will briefly address a few additional points that don’t warrant an entire section on their own but deserve a hearing and are related to the central question I have tried to keep in my crosshairs at all times, has Christianity been a force for good?

*Christianity built the first hospitals and took care of the sick, poor, etc.*

Yes, it did, and this is much to its credit. This is one area I am prepared to allow much more credit to Christianity than I have at any other point in this essay. Although the charity and goodwill that *some* Christians displayed (of course, we must remember that not all Christians were kind and generous) was ultimately based on a fiction (and a negative, disempowering one at that) this need not completely detract from their actions.

Christians were responsible for some early version of what we might these days term ‘social welfare’ and as far as they went in this direction they deserve credit. The problem comes when Christians start stretching this fact to make bold, sweeping statements like “Christianity was a force for good because it built the first hospitals” as if it singlehandedly seeded modern medicine and healthcare. Christianity *was* a force for good inasmuch as it did attempt to heal the sick but to leap from this to anything else, particularly to where we today owe some kind of debt to Christianity, is just ludicrous.

We have seen how Middle Age priests attempted to heal the sick through things as inane as reading the Gospel and the placing on the patient the hair of a white dog. This is a far cry from anything remotely resembling a modern hospital. Naturally, in any hospital-type institution set up by pre-Modern era Christians, prayer would have featured heavily as a cure. Unfortunately the *in*efficacy of prayer has been witnessed time and time again in carefully controlled scientific experiments. You don’t need to take someone else’s word for it. Try it out for yourself. Pray for something. I dare you. The next time you get sick, pray for God to heal you, and I don’t mean in two or three days (enough time for the virus to work its way through your system naturally), I mean right there and then. If it works, please call me because I usually need a good healing once or twice a year, particularly in winter.

‘Christian’ hospitals relied largely on God and faith and it wasn’t until science and medicine came into their own in the Modern age that ‘real’ hospitals and ‘real’ medical care came into existence. More relevant to the point under discussion is the fact that *to the extent that a hospital relied on faith*, it can be thought of as a Christian institution and *to the extent that it relied on science and medicine* it can be considered a secular one.

Don’t get me wrong here. I’m not trying to take anything away from those early hospitals built by Christians who worked hard to cure their patients; I am just trying to keep their utility in perspective. The issue boils down to one question, was it Christianity the religion, which started modern medicine, or was it science? I think it’s obvious that to claim the secular benefits of modern medicine somehow came from a religion (any religion) that has an omnipotent deity at its head, is completely backwards. Modern healthcare didn’t start with religion except in the crudest sense imaginable, it started with modern science. To claim otherwise is as inane as claiming our smartphones have their origins in two kids talking to each other using two paper cups connected by a long piece of string. In a crude manner of speaking it is true, but only someone hell-bent on promoting those kids would ever think of it like that.

From a slightly different perspective, even the notion of the earliest hospitals being ‘built by Christianity’ is misleading at best and at worst, false. Hospitals, loosely defined as places for treating the sick, were in existence from ancient times right through every era up to the present one. No group of people could survive without some form of healthcare, however primitive (the healthcare, not the people). Of course, prior to the present, where hospitals are largely secular, earlier ‘hospitals’ were virtually always associated with religion. Every pantheistic religion had a God of health or healing while the God of the monotheistic religions was very concerned with his follower’s physical well-being and able to effect cures. In the superstitious days when everybody believed in God(s) it would have been unthinkable to divorce healing from religion. But of course, this fact doesn’t mean that modern medicine and healthcare owes its inception to religion either.

Nevertheless, neo-Christians still want to point out that modern hospitals were directly preceded by Christian hospitals and therefore we must owe *some*thing to Christianity. This is again false. At least in this instance, Christians have gotten the time frame right. We have seen how the Christian claim that their religion ended racism and sexism didn’t make sense by about 1,500 years; at least here, the appearance of the first modern hospitals coincides with the hospitals built by Christianity. The problem of course, is that building hospitals is simply the *job* of the ruling power at the time, assuming you want your citizens to survive.

North Korea is a totalitarian, Communist country ruled by one man supposedly invested with God-like qualities and abilities. That man is currently Kim Jong-Un and he was preceded by his father, Kim Jung-Il, who was in turn preceded by his father, Kim Il-Sung. Now, suppose that the Kim dynasty were to be broken tomorrow and the country became a democracy. Jump ahead another fifty years to a time when North Korea has a well-developed public health-care system. Now imagine that some group of Kim dynasty supporters jumps up and claims that their modern health-care system is founded on the three Kim dictators because they built the first hospitals. Now, obviously the Kims did build hospitals but would you agree with the Kim dynasty supporters? I doubt it. Why not? Because it was their *job* as rulers (whether they were benevolent leaders or tyrants makes no difference here) of the country. They built hospitals as leaders of a country, not as leaders of the ‘Kim religion’ (which, in a very real way, they are as well), so we can’t impute their actions in this back to their ‘religion’.

This goes back to that distinction we made earlier in separating the beliefs of a person from their actions. Sometimes there is a correlation but more often than not there isn’t. Immanuel Kant was a revolutionary and extremely influential philosopher who basically ushered in the modern age of philosophy; he was also a Christian. But it makes no sense to then go ahead and attribute his philosophical works to Christianity by saying something as inane as “Christianity founded modern philosophy” because one its key texts was written by a Christian.

It is the duty of the leader of a country to provide hospitals and schools and laws and so on, to and for its citizens. To the extent that it does this well, it is a good leader and to the extent that it fails to do this, it is a bad leader. Christianity, as an institution, had immense power during the Middle Ages and as such it was its responsibility to provide hospitals and healthcare, not as a religion, but as the ruling body. Trying to use this fact to enhance the reputation of Christianity is just as flawed as it would be in the case of the North Korean Kims.

Throughout this whole essay I have focused on two distinctions; on one hand, the real world institution of Christianity and on the other, the principles or doctrine behind it. As a real world institution, Christianity deserves credit for providing places of healing for the sick, but to then intimate that it provided the foundation for modern healthcare by building hospitals goes way too far.

Regarding the claim that Christianity the religion (fundamentally a faith based system of salvation) somehow earns credit from the building of hospitals is simply an error. Christianity as a religion must be judged on its doctrines and beliefs, not the actions of its best members. Just because Christianity (as a powerful real-world institution) built hospitals in no way recommends Christianity itself as a good (or bad) belief system. The successes of Christianity as a healthcare provider (minimal as they are, healthcare really only took off once people *stopped* turning to the church for relief and faith in medicine took over) are irrelevant when we are considering the merits of Christianity, as a system of beliefs, because Christianity is not a healthcare provider! It’s a religion. Christianity stands or falls on its merits as a religion; everything else is just a smokescreen. Members of a satanic cult can also build hospitals if they have to (satanic cult members also get sick), but this doesn’t in any way alter our opinions regarding the *beliefs* of the cult. We can admit they did something useful while still thinking their beliefs are backwards, wrong and harmful to humanity.

*Without Christianity we would lose much of our aesthetic history - music, art, architecture, etc.*

Of course, Christianity has provided the inspiration for countless masterpieces in every domain of aesthetics. We have magnificent cathedrals built in God’s name, moving hymns and concertos composed around religious themes and exquisite paintings of religious imagery; all of which we owe to Christianity. Surely Christianity has been a force for good in this respect. What would we have lost in terms of art if Christianity had not flourished?

This argument can be addressed in exactly the same way as we handled the hospital claim of neo-Christians. There can be no doubting that we have some extremely impressive aesthetics to reflect upon over the course of human history and many of these were inspired by Christianity.

The first thing to note is that nothing can provide inspiration and uplift the human spirit quite like religion. A belief in something greater, something that protects and nurtures us, something that brings meaning to what often seems to be a meaningless existence is always going to be a powerful source of inspiration and capable of arousing intense emotions. This has always been one of religion’s primary attractors; it transcends our everyday lives and can give us something to believe in… and something to paint, compose or build for.

I don’t want to deny that Christianity has provided the inspiration for a number of truly exquisite creative projects that we wouldn’t have in the form we do if Christianity hadn’t been as successful as it was and as far as Christianity went in providing that inspiration, it was a good thing… at least for aesthetics.

We can pay tribute to Christianity for the inspiration it has given various artists and architects over the years but there is one important point we need to make before we declare Christianity to have been indispensable to our age. Even if we hadn’t had religion and Gods and angels to paint, we would have painted other things; perhaps landscapes, sunsets and oceans. We might even still have painted fictional realms that tempted and tantalised the senses and the mind even if we didn’t believe they reflected real places. If we hadn’t built cathedrals we would have erected massive monuments for our own glory rather than that of God, tall buildings, beautiful buildings with lines that replicate with stone what an artist does with paint. Instead of composing symphonies that uplift our eternal souls to bring us closer to God we would compose music that carries us away on wings of rhythm and updrafts of harmony. Oh wait, we have done all of that. We have already produced non-religious masterpieces in every aesthetic category you can imagine. If we didn’t have Christian inspired artworks we might be worse off for it, but this is a false perspective because who knows what we are the worse off for right now having missed out on a purely secular Renaissance. Imagine what Michelangelo would have done had he not worked on his religious pieces? In other words, we owe Christianity for the Christian-inspired art/music/architecture but we don’t owe it for art/music/architecture themselves.

To sum up this brief section, we can conclude that Christianity did give our more talented artists some solid inspiration for some truly spectacular works of art but if we didn’t have that particular source, we would have almost certainly found others to tap into (as we have in actual fact).

But, more importantly for our discussion here is the observation that Christianity is *not* just a source of inspiration for art. If it was in fact nothing more than that, then I would happily withdraw all my other comments, unfortunately this is not the case. Christianity, at its heart, has no more to do with art or architecture or music than it has to do with building hospitals and finding cures. Beware of neo-Christians who claim the benefits of Christianity while ignoring all of the essential things that make Christianity what it is.

*Christianity makes people feel good*

I touched on this a little in the last section. Christianity (like all religions) does have the power to make people feel good. Humans are insecure creatures and life here on planet Earth is not always as smooth as we might wish it was. The idea that there is a protector, parent God who is taking a personal interest in us provides much needed comfort and solace in the face of difficult times. Surely, Christianity is a force for good in this respect.

In general, something that makes people feel good and doesn’t harm anyone else is good. To the extent that Christianity gives people something greater than themselves to believe in, it is good. It provides peace of mind and it could be reasonably argued that that is the number one goal in life. But the situation is not as straight forward as this. Yes, it makes people feel good and safe, and yes, it doesn’t harm anyone else (usually, let’s ignore the myriad wars fought over religion, the Inquisition, the Crusades, etc.), but *is* it good?

I contend that there is one negative that outweighs the positive. To believe in God or Christianity or *any* religion for that matter, requires that one turn a blind eye to reality. Instead of accepting life as it is, Christians turn to a fantasy for comfort. Now, the coincidence of hearing a particular song with certain lyrics just when I was having a particular thought becomes not just a coincidence, but a message from God. A particular difficulty I am having at work becomes a trial sent by Jesus to build my character.

So what, you might think. Interpreting events like this doesn’t harm anyone and may in fact enable me to act in more courageous ways than I would have otherwise or give me the strength to overcome obstacles more easily. What’s wrong with that? Just one thing. It’s not true.

Now we get down to it. It’s time to face facts. The bottom line, after everything we’ve talked about, we haven’t once asked whether God actually exists, whether Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins. Well, now I am declaring that He doesn’t and He didn’t. It’s all a myth that has gotten out of control. This is not the place to go into the arguments for and against the existence of God. I am going to limit myself to one deceptively simple observation and leave it at that; for a God who is so important and who loves each and every one of us… He is suspiciously absent. And so belief in Christianity is just that… *belief*. It requires *faith* because there is no *reason* to think that God or the entire Christian myth is true. If God’s existence was evident, we wouldn’t have to believe it. We wouldn’t gather in churches every Sunday to reinforce and strengthen this belief to ourselves. *Faith* wouldn’t need to be at the heart of Christianity, as it currently is, because we would *know*. And I’m not talking about the fervent, “I don’t *believe* in God, I *know* He is real” exclamation of the ardent Christian. I’m talking about the calm, crystal certainty with which we know that gravity is real, that the sun is real, that if I roll this table tennis ball into that bowling ball, it will rebound back. These are things we don’t have to assert with ‘all of our heart’ because we really know them to be true. Anything else is little more than a wish.

So then, is this belief in something that doesn’t hurt anyone else still good even though it is not real? I would argue no for two main reasons:

1. We intrinsically value the truth over falsehood even if the results of believing in the falsehood are positive. Consider a man who believes in UFOs and aliens and is convinced that they are here to take some lucky people (including him) back to their home planet to avoid an inevitable nuclear winter that is immanent. This man doesn’t try and convince other people of his beliefs; he isn’t mentally unbalanced, he just truly believes in the destruction of the planet and his salvation at the hands of aliens. This feeling that the aliens are coming to save him and will ferry him away to a better life makes him feel happy and safe; he *knows* the aliens want him and won’t let any harm come to him here on Earth. He even believes that they sometimes intervene to protect him from non-believers and to create opportunities for him in his every day, pre day-of-departure life. Now, would you encourage this man with his hopes and faith (after all it could be true) or would you hope that he realises the truth one day. Is he, with all of his happiness and transcendent faith, to be envied or pitied? Is it not true that even though his life would be harder without this alien crutch to support him, he would be better off facing the world as it is and learning to find happiness peace of mind in a real, authentic relationship with reality rather than hiding behind a fiction?
2. It requires effort to maintain an illusion. When you believe in something that is as insubstantial and lacking in evidence as God is, you must continually make an effort to bolster and renew your faith. There is little to no external evidence in support of your beliefs and so the strength of your convictions must come entirely from inside. This requires effort and can be wearying as self-doubt inevitably creeps in. I speak here from personal experience. While I never really believed in any form of religion I strongly believed in some metaphysical reality behind the physical world we see and interact with every day. I was a prime new ager, believing in anything mystical or paranormal. I meditated regularly for over ten years and had an awful lot invested in the spiritual. Several times in my life I can remember assessing my priorities and the spiritual was always number one. Despite this, I can remember being tormented by doubt at various times; I believed in the mystical, and yet despite the effort I was putting in, I had no mystical experiences to bolster my belief with. I kept reading and meditating and lapping up what these new age authors (Deepak Chopra, Stuart Wilde, etc.) spouted but never really experienced anything, no ‘inner voice’, no ‘spirits’, no ‘ultimate force’. After over a decade of this, I finally gave up. I resigned myself to the fact that maybe there isn’t anything over and above the physical world and moved on. Now, the point of relating this story is that one of the things I immediately felt afterwards was *relief*. I definitely had a big hole in my life which I knew would need to be filled, so there was a sense of loss and emptiness, but to my surprise I also felt relief. I realised that I was relieved because I no longer had to struggle to believe in something that I had absolutely no external or internal evidence for. There were no more nagging doubts that I was making it all up, because I knew I wasn’t anymore. It was only then that I realised maintaining a belief that contradicts manifest reality requires a lot of effort, but now that I think about it, it seems obvious. To continue to deny what is right in front of your face requires continual effort, a wilful refusal to acknowledge the facts.

One more point closely associated with this one is that the effort we are talking about goes into not only denying reality but also actively affirming the alternate reality. In my case I was trying to experience something, hear the voice of my Higher Self or whatever; in the case of Christianity, feel the Holy Spirit or hear God’s voice or whatever. Now we learn how easy it is to well and truly deceive the human mind because all too many people who try to experience these things often end up deceiving themselves so completely that they actually think they have experienced them. This is in many respects a kind of mental illness and is very much something to guard against. Of course, the extreme cases, where people go on to start cults or kill prostitutes because they finally heard the voice of God, provide ample cautionary tales of why this is a highly undesirable situation.

Ultimately, although Christianity does make people feel safe and secure and provides a grand meaning to their lives, the fact that it has its foundations built well and truly on the sand means the benefits accrued are easily outweighed by the costs incurred. There are better, more authentic ways to navigate the tricky waters of life. We are all on this ship and far from land but you have two choices. You can either cower in the cabin pretending that you are safe on dry land or stand on the deck, getting salt spray in your face and feeling the wind through your hair. The latter may get you wet but when you reach the end of the voyage you will have the satisfaction of knowing you faced what came, honestly and without fear, or even better, you were scared witless but stood up anyway and did what had to be done.

*Christianity bred successful countries*

Some Christian apologists have claimed that the difference that resulted in Western countries being so successful is that they embrace/embraced Christianity as their national religion. This seems to me to be a simple error in thinking.

The error comes from trying to force some kind of causal link between Christianity (a Western religion) and the success of Western countries, primarily Britain and the United States whose cultures and norms (particularly the latter’s) have and are spreading throughout most of the world. Both of these facts are true, the error comes in trying to connect them and is known as inferring causation from correlation.

We can easily unravel the confusion by remembering that Christianity, while it did have and still does have a solid foothold in both Britain and the U.S., is neither unique to those countries nor does it have its origins in either of them. In fact the centre of Catholicism is the Vatican City in Italy and all through the Middle Ages, Europe was the home of Christianity. At the time of writing, Italy is having serious financial problems and the strongest country in the region is Germany, a country Christians want to steer clear of having any association with. Not only that, Christianity didn’t make it to the U.S. until the 16th and 17th centuries, more than a thousand years after Christianity had been flourishing in Europe and Britain.

Stepping a little back from the details of which countries are Christian and when Christianity started to dominate them and so on, we can ask a broader question which goes right to the heart of the claim. Why should Christianity (or any religion) make a difference in how successful a country becomes? Now, I don’t know much about economics or politics or how to run a country but I don’t think we need to be experts in these fields to sort this out. So, what things make a country successful? Things like having a well constituted ruling government, having a large number of resources (or access to them through colonies), having a sizeable population and having sufficiently developed infrastructure and technology to optimise the use of those resources.

How could religion possibly affect any of these areas? Now, it could in theory affect the government because governments are made of people and people are ruled by ideals and passions. Possibly a religion could serve to unite the people who run a country and even bring the entire population together under one banner, so to speak. Unfortunately, Christianity failed to do any of these things in the U.S. In the first place, despite Christianity, America was gripped by civil war during the 60s primarily over slavery, which the South even appealed to Christianity to justify. And arguably, one of the key ideals which propelled the U.S. forward was that of separation of Church and State. The founding fathers explicitly set up the system so that religion and government could not interfere with each other. This meant that not only were people free to adopt any religion without coercion from the ruling powers but also the ruling powers were free to run the country without input from religious advocates.

Resources and population size have nothing to do with religion, which brings us to infrastructure and technology. These last two features are absolutely vital to the success of a country and are almost at the complete opposite end of the spectrum from religion. We have already seen the conflict that erupted between the Church and science in the early days of the scientific revolution. At best, religion has absolutely nothing to contribute to the forward march of technology and at worst, it acts to retard it.

All in all, the notion that Christianity was the ‘secret something’ that put the West over the top is laughable. All of the ingredients that go into making a country successful have absolutely nothing to do with religion and moreover, history has shown that every time religion interferes with the running of a country, it ends up acting as an impediment either by elevating irrelevant concerns such as what God thinks or the Second Coming, or by actively campaigning against progress.

*The shrillness of atheism*

This is a claim which has popped up recently in reaction to what has been called the “new atheism” which is supposedly a more aggressive form of atheism spearheaded by the so-called four horsemen, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

The basic form such a criticism takes is to point to someone like Richard Dawkins who basically says I think religion is nonsense and here’s why, and exclaim, “But why does he have to be so aggressive about it? What has religion ever done to him to deserve such a scathing attack?” Am I suggesting that the books written by Dawkins and co. aren’t scathing at times? No. They are, and they’re intended to be. But what’s wrong with that? For the first time in history, religion is being attacked the way they have (much more viciously, by the way) attacked each other for centuries and attacked non-believers for the past century or two.

Religious groups have gone to war with other religious groups over religion. At the extreme, those who didn’t promptly convert were executed. But we never heard about the ‘shrillness of religion’. Popes burned books, banned books, and banned independent thought, even going so far as to place one of the greatest scientists to have ever lived under house arrest for his ideas, but this doesn’t qualify as ‘shrill’. Religious believers happily accost innocent citizens in a park or even come knocking at our doors promoting their religion, but they aren’t being ‘shrill’ here. Overzealous Christians fight to get their myths taught alongside scientific fact in schools, ruining honest schoolteacher’s lives in the process; how decidedly ‘*un*shrill’ this is. The Pope stands up and advocates against making condoms available in Africa, prominent politicians in the U.S. tell us that a woman who has been raped can prevent herself getting pregnant if she really wants to, outspoken Christians continue to bleat on and on about homosexual marriages… but none of this is ‘shrill’. A man writes a book against religion expressing his ideas, exercising his right to free speech… and he is accused of being virulent, aggressive, shrill.

I hope you are beginning to see the double standard at play here. Since the 14th and 15th centuries, religion has been steadily losing influence until now in a very much secular twenty-first century (and that is definitely what it is despite the fact that many people are still religious) religion is something private, something that has no place in the marketplace and something that doesn’t make any of the major decisions facing a country, economically, politically or industrially anymore.

Although religion has fallen from its perch, it fought to preserve its niche. Religious groups worked to ensure that among the freedoms newly being doled out (speech, thought, etc.) the freedom to choose and practice any religion was included (ironically something Christianity never afforded to any other religious group when it had the chance to do so). But somehow along with these basic rights, Christianity managed to secure for itself a privileged position where there was something holy or sacred about the church and the priests/nuns who worked there.

Richard Dawkins said it best when he said that there is still this idea that “religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to any other.”[[205]](#endnote-169) We accord undeserved respect bordering on sanctity to anything religious as if there was something… well… holy about it; all the while their priests are molesting our young boys left, right and centre.

For too long it was almost taboo to dare to question any religious doctrine too enthusiastically, too seriously. Sure, people could lampoon religions, there wasn’t much they could do about that in an ever increasingly free society, but should anyone really put it to them they put their hands up, and without realising the irony, plead, “Freedom of religion. You can’t say that.” And now, respected scientists and philosophers and scholars are really hitting home, asking the tough questions and showing unabashed and total support for atheism. And they don’t like it. So they put their hands up again, as if they are purely innocent, and ask us, “Why are you attacking us, why are you being so shrill?”

The answer, of course, is that atheists aren’t being ‘shrill’, they’re merely expressing honest, *un*sugar-coated opinions that Christians take offence at because they believe they are above such questioning. They mistakenly believe that freedom of religion means freedom from criticism. If a politician stands up and says the U.S. should borrow a trillion dollars from China, he will be called out on it and his ideas will be harshly attacked. If a scientist stands up and claims cold fusion is just around the corner (a position it has held for the past thirty years), his statements will be attacked and his reasons critically analysed by all and sundry. And, if a priest stands up after an earthquake and says it is God’s punishment for our sins, he should also be freely criticised because *no one is beyond reproach and no idea is above question*.

For too long Christianity has held itself above other fields, as if it and it alone had some privileged access to truth and because of this was therefore above the rules. We are not being shrill, we are just finally subjecting Christianity to the cross-examination that any other idea in any other field gets. And we wouldn’t have it any other way.

*Overvaluing religion and its representatives*

We have seen some atheists taking the fight right to Christianity’s doorstep and subjecting some of their beliefs and doctrines to a thorough critique but there is another aspect of this privileging of religion that I want to point out here; that where religious leaders command respect in fields outside of their ‘specialty’.

And what exactly is a priest’s ‘specialty’? What can a priest do that no other person can? This question is easily answerable in any other discipline, an accountant can prepare a set of financial accounts and advise on tax issues, a scientist can think up and conduct experiments to prove a hypothesis and further research in his or her field, but what can a priest do that other people can’t? What expertise does a priest’s study give him?

Answer. It gives him unparalleled knowledge about a myth that he thinks really happened. He then tries to interpret modern day events and experiences in light of this myth based on a book well and truly out-dated and obsolete. There is no value in this, and yet people will seek a priest out for advice on things as important as careers, finances and relationships. This is madness!

A priest deliberately chooses a lifestyle quite removed from any normal human life and yet people visit them precisely for help in these areas. If there was one thing I learned after getting married, it was that everything I thought I knew about love and marriage before taking the plunge was totally wrong. And yet when some people have problems in their marriage who do they turn to for advice and counselling? An unmarried priest who may also be celibate in the bargain. What meaningful advice could such a person give to a couple in a sexual relationship? None.

If there is a panel called together to discuss a social issue, you will invariably find people like a political advisor, an economist, a professor in a relevant field… and the local priest, why? To give a ‘religious perspective’. This is a joke. How would Christians feel if the organisers also invited a local Hindu and Buddhist to give their opinions on the matter, just to check on what Vishnu or the Buddha think about the whole thing? It’s ridiculous, but it *seems* reasonable because Christianity has enmeshed itself so deeply in our culture that we don’t even recognise it for what it is anymore, just another outmoded, fantastical cult on steroids. While we are at it, let’s invite an Ancient Greece scholar along too and see what Zeus’ opinion would be, oh wait, Zeus isn’t real… hmmm.

Richard Dawkins reminds us that “the notion that religion is a proper *field*, in which one might claim *expertise*, is one that should not go unquestioned.”[[206]](#endnote-170) Let us question it here and stop letting them pretend they have some authority or wisdom direct ‘from God’. Of course, they are entitled to their opinions but in a panel of experts, let’s insist on each member being an *actual* expert. Is that too much to ask?

*Science is based on faith*

The universe is rational, it obeys laws, it is understandable to our minds. These are the tenets of faith that science espouses, some Christians like Dinesh D’Souza, tell us. They would have us accept the notion that to believe in these ‘facts’ requires just as much faith, if not more, than to believe in their God. Is this a fair pronouncement?

Let’s just quickly review what ‘faith’ is. No matter how much you might like to cloud the issue with etymological details like ‘faith’ originally meant ‘trust’ or ‘confidence’, the fact is that ‘faith’ is only possible in the absence of evidence. If you have evidence for something, you don’t need faith. This is why (to borrow a humorous image from Dan Barker[[207]](#endnote-171)) you don’t see scientists gathering on Sunday mornings, holding hands and chanting, “I believe in gravity, I know gravity exists.” They don’t need to have faith because if they just drop an apple, the root of their theory is demonstrably evident.

So, to have ‘faith’ means to believe in something that you have no good reason for believing in. It means to hold an unjustified belief. If it was really, truly justified (i.e. there was solid evidence), you wouldn’t need faith.

Now, the opening line of this section includes some issues which have the potential to explode in a Pandora’s Box style deluge of philosophy, but I think we can come to a satisfactory answer without too much fuss.

The claim that the universe is rational is probably a misnomer. The universe isn’t rational or irrational. The only things that can be classified as such are things that possess a degree of consciousness and are therefore capable of acting in ways we would perceive as rational. Humans are rational or irrational depending on their actions and thoughts. We use that rationality to investigate the universe but it is a mistake to try to apply rationality to the universe itself.

We can say exactly the same thing for the claim that the universe obeys laws. The universe doesn’t ‘obey’ laws like we do, when we follow the speed limit for example. The laws are merely descriptions of processes that we observe in the universe. The universe doesn’t ‘obey’ gravity when a planet forms and acquires a sizeable gravitational field; we ‘invent’ the law when we observe what happens when we drop an apple and then try to express it mathematically.

So far, we have absolutely no need of faith, because the first two scientific ‘faith claims’ about the universe have actually been about ourselves. But what about the third claim, the universe is understandable to our minds? Scientists go off determinedly searching for answers to their questions, implicitly assuming that the universe is understandable to our puny, human minds. Doesn’t this require faith of the highest order?

Of course not.

“But why should the universe be understandable to our minds?” Christians continue to plug. Well, the answer is simple, it doesn’t have to be, but it sure looks as if it might be. We have already come to understand so much; actually we have a fairly robust scientific understanding of the universe. Have we answered every question? Of course not, but from the many, many questions we have satisfactorily answered, it is quite clear that the universe, or at least, some part of it, *is* understandable to us. If it wasn’t, your cell phone wouldn’t be working and satellites wouldn’t be bouncing your favourite TV show around the world in the blink of an eye.

Christians who claim that there is no reason the universe should be understandable to us are completely ignoring the actual facts on the ground. If I roll a die and it lands on a six. A Christian might quite rightly claim that there is no ‘reason’ it should have landed on six… but that doesn’t change the fact that it did. Likewise, there is no ‘reason’ the universe should be constructed in such a way that it is understandable to us and our reasoning powers… but that doesn’t change the fact that it seems it is. Why does it seem that way? Because we have been so amazingly successful[[208]](#footnote-37) in decoding and describing the way the universe does work that to claim the opposite is, quite simply, preposterous.

As I have said, we don’t know everything yet, and we can’t be sure that everything is even knowable to us, but from what we have seen so far, there is certainly no reason to suppose that we *can’t* know everything. And the current situation seems to suggest the opposite case quite strongly; that the universe is actually eminently understandable by us. If it didn’t look that way, science would have come to an abrupt end a long time ago instead of growing exponentially since Copernicus and Galileo started the revolution which didn’t happen according to Hart and Stark.

**Conclusion**

This essay has been one long, negative tirade against Christianity and I make no apologies for that. A detractor might argue that I am only looking at one half of the story and cherry picking for the ‘bad’ Christians… and you’d be right. I am. Because if I can show that there were bad Christians then I have shown that any good we have did not come from *Christian*ity, it came from *human*ity.

The idea that Christianity is all about love, hope and charity is one that has been painted in broad strokes over our Western culture and often lets Christianity slip under the radar precisely when we should be vigilant about what we choose to accept.

Was Christianity all bad? No. Were all Christians bad? Of course not. But on balance I do think, and have tried to show in this essay, that Christianity has been far more destructive and harmful than it has helpful and positive.

Right from the beginning, Christianity showed its true character when it brought its jealous, arrogant, intolerant attitude to bear on religion, which prior to that time had seen days of relative openness and tolerance in Greek and Roman societies. The Christians were unwilling to accept any other God but theirs, but more harmful than this, they were unwilling to accept *anyone else* believing in any other God, but theirs. This arrogance would be a herald of things to come. Aligning itself with power, Christianity was not content with merely offering a spiritual solution to the world; it demanded complete obedience and ruthlessly pursued this aim. Neo-Christians like to say the Church provided a balancing check on the powers of rulers but this is just a weak effort to conceal what was in fact a continuous power struggle between Church and State.

This arrogance and desire for control (even if sincerely being enacted in the name of God) coupled with an unyielding doctrine built on the flimsiest of myths and backed up by authority and superstition instead of evidence and reason would give the world a tyrant blind to its own shortcomings that refused to consider any other viewpoint and would end up effectively retarding all technological, medical, societal and any other ‘al’ you can think of, progress for centuries. Charles Gorham summed it up nicely when he said Christianity was a “system which was incompatible not only with the rights of individuals, but with the progress of humanity in civilisation and happiness.”[[209]](#endnote-172)

Thankfully, this tyrant’s grip on our necks has been broken and with our very first unobstructed breaths we gave ourselves the freedom to think and say what we please, we realised that every man, woman and race was equal (not just because God says so and only if we join His team, but because *we* say so), and we celebrated our humanity instead of cursing it or looking beyond it to a promised afterlife.

Of course, the Church is still holding us back even in the twenty-first century, but it is slowly relenting with increased public pressure. In 2010, Pope Benedict finally cited the use of condoms by male prostitutes to protect clients from HIV as "a first step toward moralization". Of course, this is still a very cautious recommendation but considering his comment the previous year that condoms could worsen the spread of AIDS in Africa, this is a welcome, albeit small change.

Christianity has embarrassed itself in its sordid fifteen hundred odd year history but could it do better from here on out? Could it redeem itself and become a force for good in the hands of the neo-Christians who are trying to keep it alive and relevant in an increasingly secular, modern world?

I don’t think so.

At bottom, Christianity is nothing more than a myth for people too afraid to confront reality. Even if you could divest it of its negative dogma (an impossible task because what you would be left with would no longer even *be* Christianity), it will always be false. No matter all the love and good deeds that this neo-Christianity could inspire, it will always be preferable to achieve the same results through appeal to non-religious motivations, i.e. helping someone solely because you want to help *them*, not because Jesus wants you to or God told you to or we are all children under God; just because she’s a human being and so are you.

All of the things that are good about Christianity (love, charity, goodwill towards all mankind, etc. (to the extent that these things are present in it which, as we have already seen, is certainly not 100%)) are things that are not exclusive to Christianity, nor even to religion. We can find better reasons for being nice to each other and loving our families in appeal to secular, and dare I say, common sense thinking. These reasons are immeasurably better than their religious counterparts because they come to us free from nonsense doctrines and superstitious myths that pollute and cloud any positive message that may be buried underneath. How much easier, more genuine and more *humane* is it to help a person in need because I recognise that that person could just as easily have been me, than to help them because I believe an omnipotent, jealous God will reward me if I do; or punish me if I don’t? On the surface, the results may be the same, i.e. a person gets helped; but one way leads to an enlightened, authentic culture; the other to a repressive, fearful, superstitious culture; one we have already had the misfortune to have lived through.

It’s time to move beyond superstitions and fictions which always have the potential for harm within them precisely because they encourage things like faith, appeal to authority, belief in things which aren’t there and irrational thinking. Any system founded on such a Pandora’s Box of virtues can never lead us to any place we might want to go. And maybe the simple acceptance of where we happen to find ourselves and who we find ourselves with will end up being all we need.

A Case Study: The Death of God Leading to Hitler

Much ink has been spilled over the question of whether Christianity had a hand in leading to the events in Germany which culminated in World War II. There are many books out there, such as some of those written by Christopher Hitchens, which claim that the Church and certain Popes actively supported Hitler and other Nazis. There are also many claiming the opposite; that the Church actively fought against Nazi anti-Semitism.

I actually don’t care much either way. What first drew me to the issue of Nazism as it relates to Christianity was the Neo-Christian claim that the horrors Nazism instigated were only able to occur because of the fall of Christianity. The first issue, whether the Church had a hand in supporting Nazism or not, is a very difficult one to ascertain because you have so many people on totally different sides of the fence pointing out different but seemingly equally reliable facts in support of their claims. This issue calls for a thorough research assignment into the events in and around the time of the Nazi party rule and is beyond the scope of this essay. The second issue however, whether the fall of Christianity allowed such a pernicious evil to manifest in a particular part of the world, can be considered much more ‘cleanly’ (we don’t need to read dozens of experts and historians all seemingly contradicting each other) and has a direct bearing on the topic of this essay, which is largely a defence against the outrageous claims of a Christian fan base who have become somewhat overzealous in their pronouncements that Christianity has been a blessing for us all, Christian and non-Christian alike.

There are a two related but separate issues that I plan to discuss regarding Hitler:

1. The Neo-Christian claim that Nazism was only possible with the fall of Christianity.
2. The Christian defence, “Secularist/atheist regimes have produced far greater evils than Christianity ever did. Look at Hitler.”
3. *Nazism was only possible with the fall of Christianity.*

The main point, as the subheading for this case study reveals, is that the fall of Christianity somehow created a power vacuum into which Hitler was able to step. Proceeding in the same way we did when we tackled the claim that Christianity led the fight against slavery and sexism, let’s first consider the timing of these two events.

Somewhat surprisingly, Christianity is bang on the money this time. Christianity was in a serious state of decline prior to the rise of Hitler. Score one for Jesus! Of course, the temporal coincidence of two events doesn’t *necessarily* yield a cause-effect relationship, in the same way that if just as I happen to yawn a power cut hits doesn’t imply that my yawning caused the power cut… but it’s a consistent start for Christianity, something we haven’t seen much of before.

I have been a little ambiguous in my phrasing so far and I should perhaps clarify myself somewhat. The title “The death of God leading to Hitler” is actually a subtly different statement from the one I favoured in the section proper, “Nazism was only possible with the fall of Christianity.”

The former is a much stronger claim suggesting that the loss of those wonderful Christian values and the loss of a belief in a loving Deity who established a high moral framework for us to make sense of our lives within, opened the door to the evil of Nazism. The latter merely points out the fact that only one ideology can be in dominance at any one time.

Christianity was an ideology which held sway for around fifteen hundred years. In many respects, it was also a totalitarian regime.[[210]](#footnote-38) Whether you belief that Christianity was fully totalitarian or not is irrelevant; the point is that it was the dominant ideology and it brokered no other belief system which made anything or anyone more important that God and Jesus. Nazism was an equally jealous ideology which would not give any ground over its central beliefs, primarily the importance of a pure, Aryan bloodline and its hatred of anything and anyone Jewish. Clearly these two power structures cannot both exist at the same time. With that understanding it is obvious that one must fall before the other can gain ascendance. Of course, this is not the extent of the Neo-Christian belief which brings me to the stronger claim.

Neo-Christians are arguing that it was not just a case of one regime replacing another; they are saying that the pure evil of Nazism could not have found its voice or resonance with the people without a complete abandonment of the pure love and goodness that was Christianity. Of course, this being a stronger claim also requires stronger evidence before we can accept it. I think Christianity cannot easily supply such proofs for the following reasons:

* Christianity has historically failed to show itself as the epitome of love and freedom on multiple occasions.
* One of the prime features of Nazism had already found vocal and vituperative expression in Christianity.
* Germany wasn’t non-Christian or atheist at the time of Hitler’s rise to power.

First of all, this essay has already shown that Christianity has much to answer for when it comes to slavery, sexism, anti-Semitism and the Crusades. Later, we will also look at several more instances where Christianity has failed in its supposed duty to supply love and charity to the world including, Christian attitude to homosexuals, the repression of learning, the stifling of science, the Inquisition and the witch burnings.

Now, of course there have been times where Christians have acted in loving, charitable ways but to hold these up as counter-examples to my list of failures is a misguided defence. The fact that a Christian performed a good deed, even if it was directly attributable to her Christian belief, is completely irrelevant. The claim Neo-Christians are making here is not that Christianity has *sometimes* or *could have* been a beacon of love (if it wasn’t for some misguided humans for example), but rather that Christianity itself (the faith/tenets as well as the acts of its human ambassadors) *is* and *has been* such a beacon.

If Christianity wants to claim that its fall made possible the evil of Nazism, they must show that such an evil was *im*possible under Christianity. Of course, this is a ludicrous notion. We have seen numerous instances throughout history in countries under Christian rule (sometimes where that Christian rule was directly responsible) where people have been slandered, discriminated against, persecuted, tortured and even burned alive sometimes for no more than harbouring a belief that ran counter to Christian doctrine.[[211]](#footnote-39)

The typical Christian defence is that the people who committed these acts were misguided or ‘strayed from the path’ and Christianity should not be maligned for their acts, but I will repeat myself once more for those hard of hearing; this is *completely irrelevant*. Neo-Christianity is claiming that Hitler was able to bring his specific brand of evil into the world *because* that world had either lost or willingly given up its Christian heritage. If this is true then what Neo-Christians are essentially claiming is that under Christian rule it is not possible for evil to manifest. As the (modern day) Popes’ (plural) apologising attests to, much evil was not just possible but actually did occur under Christian reign. I have already outlined a few instances of such evil (and we have a few more to come) but one which specifically relates to Nazism brings me to my second point.

When people think of Hitler there is one word which immediately comes to mind, ‘anti-Semitism.’ It is true that Hitler re-wrote the book when it came to anti-Semitism with his systematic, ruthless, cold-blooded executions of all those of Jewish blood in an attempt to completely eradicate the Jews from the face of the Earth. No one would deny that Hitler was an unprecedented force of evil on the planet but, and this is something people tend to overlook, his particular brand of evil, anti-Semitism, was not unique to him and did not start with him. We have seen anti-Semitism before in history (despite the efforts of more Orwellian-inclined Christians to obfuscate the matter by re-naming it ‘anti-Judaism’) and it sprang from the mouths and minds of Christians.

We have already seen that anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, persecution of those of the Jewish faith (whatever you want to call it) *originated* with the Christian Church. No one persecuted the Jews with such vigour and malice as the Christians, and not just any old Christians mind you, it was the revered and respected Church Fathers who bequeathed us the template for the anti-Semitism which was to last well into the modern age.

The fact that they didn’t actually call for the murder of Jews and certainly didn’t go about systematically attempting to wipe them from the face of the Earth is an empty defence. First, since when is it acceptable to call a group of people “venomous beasts” or their place of worship a “dwelling place for demons”, as long as you don’t attempt to kill them? We wouldn’t accept that kind of behaviour from the least loving and most depraved of us, so why do Christians accept it from those whom they extol as paragons of virtue and goodness?

Second, and as I have already mentioned, although the Christian Church never officially advocated the murder of Jews, it succeeded in creating an atmosphere of hatred and animosity toward Jews which at times erupted in massacres and ethnic purges right across Europe.

No sensible commentator can seriously claim that any modern day persecution of Jews is completely unrelated to the fifteen hundred years of condemnation and discrimination that Christianity initiated, fostered and mandated. Remember that at various times in history it was illegal to believe in anything other than Christianity, hence the word “heresy”. A part of Christian teaching included the ‘fact’ that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, or in more inflammatory terms, guilty of deicide.

It is true that Hitler’s persecution of the Jews was not over religion or in any way religious, but that defence again misses the point. I am not claiming that Hitler went after the Jews for the same reasons as the Church Fathers. What I am saying is that it is more than a little coincidental that a group of people who had been treated as inferiors, subject to occasional massacres and forced to wear a special ‘badge’ to identify them as Jews, should also happen to find themselves the victims of *another* massacre in the 20th century.

Another defence which also fails to address the problem is when Christians claim that Hitler’s crimes were so terrible that any Christian wrongdoings pale in comparison. Again, this is completely true; who can compare with Hitler in the scope and ruthless efficiency with which he executed his grand plan? But, how does a comparison with one of the world’s most terrible mass murderers endorse Christianity? A serial killer is also relatively harmless and completely inconsequential when compared to Hitler but does this somehow redeem the killer? Of course not, and neither does it redeem Christianity. In fact, the very notion that these people seek to reduce the perceived wrongdoings of their faith by using comparisons to Hitler itself implicates Christianity as guilty. If Christianity had done nothing wrong, we wouldn’t have to look to one-sided comparisons in order to make Christianity seem positive; it would look positive and loving all on its own.

My third point focuses on the situation in Germany at the time of Hitler’s rise to power. Specifically, in line with the Christian claim that the evil of Hitler found expression in the country because it had lost its Christian roots, the status of Christianity in post World War 1 Germany.

I can readily accept that Christianity was in decline at that time, not just in Germany, but all over the world. The Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment – all of these powerful movements dramatically affected every person they touched and every country they swept through.

Although the Renaissance was not specifically anti-religious and indeed included a powerful religious element, it was essentially a celebration of humanity. It wrested the focus of people from heaven to earth and from consideration of the power and glory of God down to the power and glory of humans. The Reformation, an overtly specific religious event, taught people that the Catholic Church is neither infallible in its doctrine nor free from corruption. It was another expression of people taking back control and responsibility, this time, over what and who they would believe in. Of course, the Enlightenment dealt perhaps the heaviest blow to religion in its call for the supremacy of reason and rationality over religion and belief.

Germany was almost certainly less religious at the time of Hitler than it had been prior, but even if Germany had been completely atheistic, that fact would merely be circumstantial evidence which wouldn’t necessarily support any thesis. America, England, France and every other European country also turned away from Christianity but we didn’t see evil rush to fill the power vacuum in these places. Instead, in many cases, democracy flourished, citizens enjoyed unprecedented freedoms of speech, technology improved in leaps and bounds, standards of living and quality of life both rose sharply. Where does the Christian thesis stand on these countries? It doesn’t. Countries that fail to fit the theory are simply ignored. No English Christian turns around and says, “With the fall of Christianity, life got better for all of us” but that is in fact what did happen.[[212]](#footnote-40) We have a situation where the same event (the fall of Christianity) is blamed for a disaster in one country (Hitler) but ignored in a number of other countries that went on to flourish afterwards.

Not just that, presumably the Allies who gathered to defeat Hitler were all plagued by the same loss of Christian faith. How come, in their fallen states, they didn’t rush to support Hitler? Every country was losing its Christian faith but we see one persecuting the Jews and the others uniting to defeat that one. Any sensible analysis could only conclude that the weakening of Christianity had nothing to do with the situation at the time. Alas, disputes where religion is concerned seldom fall to a sensible analysis.

At any rate, we know that Germany was less Christian but how much less? Here our investigation comes to an interesting juncture. Invariably the typical argument goes something like this; Christians claim Germany lost its Christian roots and then atheists start quoting *Mein Kampf*, a book written by Hitler and published in two volumes in 1925 and 1926. It contains autobiographical elements and an outline of Hitler’s political ideology. In it, Hitler makes frequent references to heaven and God: “Their [the Jews] very existence is an incarnate denial of the beauty of God’s image in His creation”[[213]](#endnote-173) and “I sank down upon my knees and thanked Heaven out of the fullness of my heart for the favour of having been permitted to live in such a time”[[214]](#endnote-174) as well as the frequent use of Biblical analogies and parables: “There is a better chance of seeing a camel pass through the eye of a needle eye than of seeing a really great man ‘discovered’ through an election”[[215]](#endnote-175) and “And these higher authorities govelled before the ‘Ally’, as the people of old bowed down before the Golden Calf.”[[216]](#endnote-176) Atheists also call on many of Hitler’s speeches where he asserted his Catholic beliefs and ties to the Church:

My feelings as a Christian points me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded only by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter. In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders. How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison. To-day, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before in the fact that it was for this that He had to shed His blood upon the Cross. As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice.... And if there is anything which could demonstrate that we are acting rightly it is the distress that daily grows. For as a Christian I have also a duty to my own people.... When I go out in the morning and see these men standing in their queues and look into their pinched faces, then I believe I would be no Christian, but a very devil if I felt no pity for them, if I did not, as did our Lord two thousand years ago, turn against those by whom to-day this poor people is plundered and exploited.[[217]](#endnote-177)

Another interesting fact which lends support to the “Hitler was a Christian” thesis is the fact that the German Army belt buckle read “Gott Mit Uns” which translates to “God With Us”.

Richard Dawkins also points out in his *The God Delusion* that Hitler was born and raised a Catholic and was making Christianity-affirming statements his entire career, anticipating the argument that Hitler started out Christian but turned rejected the faith at some point in his life. In 1941 Hitler told his General, “I shall remain a Catholic forever.”[[218]](#endnote-178) Not only did he continue to make positive comments like the one above but he also never officially renounced his faith; a very strange scenario for a man as prominent and ideological as Hitler.

Typically, the Christian then replies with quotes from a book called *Table Talk* which is full of anti-Christian rhetoric such as: "I shall never come to terms with the Christian lie. . ." and "Our epoch will certainly see the end of the disease of Christianity".

We end in an apparent stalemate but although we may not be able to resolve the matter with complete certainty, I believe that we can outline all possible scenarios and this will be enough to shed light on whether the fall of Christianity really contributed to the rise of Hitler:

1. *Mein Kampf* and speeches where Hitler affirms his Christianity faith are false and books like *Table Talk* report the truth. In this case, because we are 100% certain that Hitler actually said or wrote the things from his speeches and *Mein Kampf,* we must assume that he was lying. This is the exact tactic that people like Dinesh D’Souza have used in debates to ‘prove’ Hitler’s position on Christianity. He claims that Hitler was dissembling in order to appeal to and gain the support of the masses. He was in effect, pretending to be Christian so that the Germans would follow him. Unfortunately, and you may have already spotted this, there is an unexpected but undeniable contradiction in D’Souza’s position. What started this whole section was the notion that Germany was becoming less Christian (that’s what created the ‘power vacuum’ for evil, remember), but if Hitler was lying about being a Christian in order to appeal to German citizens then those citizens must have been Christian in the first place. This means that, a) the German faith in Christianity was not as weak as we have been led to believe, and b) good Christians believing in Christianity, which is supposedly the antidote or vaccine against evil, were easily motivated to support arguably the greatest evil the world has ever seen.

Either way, the fall of Christianity (which turns out to have not been much of a fall after all) certainly did not lead to the rise of Hitler.

1. Books like *Table Talk* are false while *Mein Kampf* and every speech in which Hitler affirms his Christian faith are true. In this case, Hitler was a self-confessed Christian and the claim that Hitler rose to power because of a lack of faith crumbles.
2. Finally, we can consider how both sides of the argument could be true. The only way for this scenario to make sense would be if Hitler hated Christianity as an institution (remember, two powerful institutions cannot both dominate at once) but believed in God and Jesus. This turns out to be quite a feasible scenario. The Church had come under a lot of fire in the Reformation for corruption and drifting from the path Jesus had intended. One of the strongest advocates of this was Martin Luther (a man whom we have already seen shared Hitler’s hatred of Jews) and it’s difficult to see how Hitler could not have been influenced by Luther. Hector Alvarez, in a debate on Premier Christian Radio, notes that Hitler actually specifically mentions Luther as a hero of his.[[219]](#footnote-41) Alvarez also makes reference to Martin Bertram, the 20th century Lutheran scholar and translator, who notes in his translation of *On the Jews and Their Lies*, that "it is impossible to publish Luther's treatise today ... without noting how similar to his proposals were the actions of the National Socialist regime in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.”

If this is true, Christianity again cannot claim that its fall led to the rise of Hitler.

The facts show that while Christianity and the belief in God may have been under attack, it was certainly not so much of a problem that Christians can be justified in claiming the fall away from their faith led to Hitler.

The final defence for the devout believer is to claim that even though Hitler called himself a Christian and even if he was telling the truth, this does not make him a Christian if his acts were un-Christian. If you still find yourself tempted to believe this I invite you to re-read my “Some Important Preliminaries” where you will hopefully realise the error of your ways.

Remember, pre-defining Christianity as ‘everything good’ and then sifting through history and discarding everything bad as ‘un-Christian’ is pointless if you are genuinely trying to discover whether Christianity was a force for good or not. The Christian claim is that had Christianity remained in power an evil like Hitler could never have taken hold. It turned out that Christianity wasn’t on the run as much as we tended to think it might have been but despite this Hitler assumed control with the support of his entire country. To claim that it wasn’t ‘real’ Christianity or it had become ‘twisted’ is making excuses which betray an unwillingness to shoulder the legacy which Christianity has bequeathed.

This essay sets out to answer the question whether Christianity was a force for good and it analyses that question from two angles, the first is Christianity as a real-world institution run by real (sometimes corruptible) people, and the second is Christianity as a faith. This case study has entirely operated from the former perspective while the last objection is an appeal to the ‘true faith.’ Unfortunately the ‘true faith’ of Christianity (what I have called the “theory”) also fails to provide a sterling template of love and charity and goodwill to all men as I have repeatedly attempted to show throughout this essay so far and will continue to show in the coming pages.

So finally, we come to the end of my (somewhat long-winded) answer to the first (and main) issue in this case study. I hope I have left you in no doubt as to why I deny that the fall of Christianity (if it even happened to the extent that Christians claim) as the paradigm of love and perfection, opened the gates to Nazism as the paradigm of evil.

As a result of this, is Hitler less guilty for his atrocious actions? Of course not. Am I trying to place the blame for the Holocaust at the doorstep of the Christian Church? Also, no. But Christianity, although it may not have partaken in or sanctioned what happened in Nazi Germany, had spent its entire time in power maligning the Jews in every conceivable way *except* authorising their slaughter. When someone appeared who finally had the wherewithal to take that notion to heart and actually do something about it, can we really pretend to be so surprised?

Remember also that the Christian claim is not just a neutral one. They are not claiming that Christianity had neither a positive or negative effect regarding Hitler, they are claiming that an evil like Hitler was only possible *in the absence* of Christianity. It seems to me that in the absence of Christianity, the hatred towards the Jews we saw exemplified in Hitler, would never have been established and entrenched in the minds of the people in the first place. Of course, this doesn’t mean that Hitler wouldn’t have tried to wipe out the Jews, but it certainly doesn’t support the Christian thesis as analysed here.

Ultimately, the evidence does not support the Christian claim and we must therefore reject it as more wishful thinking.

1. *Secularist/atheist regimes have produced far greater evils than Christianity ever did.*

If you will recall there was a second question I wished to address in this case study which I would like to turn my attention to now. Christian apologists often attempt to deflect unwanted attention from the evils Christianity has been responsible for by asserting that ‘atheist regimes’ have been far *more* evil.

Now, as an immediate reaction you can probably see that this has absolutely no bearing on the merits or demerits of Christianity. These Christians are operating with the motto the best defence is a strong offence. Unfortunately, the best offence in the world can’t wipe Christian wrongdoings from history. Ultimately, this ploy is nothing more than an attempted distraction; by drawing the comparison to ‘atheistic regimes’ what they are in effect doing is abandoning any defence of their faith and arguing that Christianity is the lesser of two evils. This is not what they want to be doing and so undermines their own position. Still, let’s grant them their defence and see if it’s justified.

First, we must look at what it means to call something an ‘atheist’ or ‘secular’ regime. I propose that this is a nonsensical term. A regime is basically a form of government and as such implies something positive, that is, something that can be expressed as a set of rules or principles. So what is atheism or secularism? Essentially, it is the *absence* of a belief. At its core it is a negative response to religion and all of the doctrines that come with it. So we have a problem. How can you define a supposedly atheist regime? What principles do you attack? All belief is a belief-in-something, that’s the only way we can understand belief. Atheism, by definition, on the other hand is the *absence* of a belief in a higher power or life after death. How can a regime be founded on the *absence* of a belief? You might point out that atheism has positive beliefs too, such as a belief that we only have one life and that life is physical. That’s true, but is really just rephrasing what is essentially a negative position into a positive. This argument is cunning because it is trying to force the burden of proof onto the atheist. “You don’t know that there’s no heaven so your opinion is nothing more than a belief just like mine and subject to the same weaknesses and uncertainties of all beliefs.” That is not right. Like it or not, atheism is the default position. We live in a physical world, we see things and people die and not come back, we know consciousness is inextricably tied to our physical selves in some way, particularly our brains (I am more than happy to arrange for someone who disbelieves this fact to have their brain removed to try and see if they retain consciousness and therein disprove me); this is the baseline because this is the extent of our experience. It may be incomplete, it may even be totally wrong but it’s not up to the atheist to prove that it isn’t, it’s up to the believer to prove their radical claim that there is a whole realm we can’t experience with our senses headed by a Being we also can’t experience through our senses. This is the reason police don’t lock up the first suspect they find and demand him to prove that he didn’t commit the crime. It’s ludicrous.

It’s also pushing the limits of credulity to call the fact that life is physical a belief. If we can see something, touch it and understand it (at least fairly well) then there’s no need to *believe* it because it’s self-evident. Sure, some of those self-evident suppositions turn out to be false but that’s not the way we typically think of or mean the word ‘belief’ when we use it. The only people who disbelieve things the rest of us take for granted are philosophers, and even then they only do so in their philosophical musings; they still hold to the beliefs the rest of us do when they have to go and buy eggs from the shop.

So there is no such thing as an ‘atheist regime’ but still it is an unavoidable fact that some atheists done some terrible things. In fact, it is probably fair to say the greatest crimes the world has seen have been committed by atheists. There are three problems with this assertion as a defence for Christianity:

1. Atheists have been responsible for some of the most atrocious acts in history but most of these have been committed within the last century. Why is this?
2. Atheists are not acting in the name of atheism (we have already seen that there is no atheist doctrine) so this is not an attack on atheism, rather it’s an attack on the atheist in particular.
3. All the ‘atheist regimes’ that Christians point to were totalitarian in nature and as such not quite as far removed from religions as you might think.

Let’s take each of these points one by one.

We must be careful when we say things like atheists have been responsible for more bloodshed than Christians. I watched a debate once where Dinesh D’Souza tallied up the deaths caused by Christian events such as the Inquisition and the witch burnings and compared them to the deaths caused by atheists including Pol Pot, Stalin and Hitler. But this is a ludicrous claim to make.

First, the population of the world was considerably less when Christianity was in power. There were literally fewer people to kill during the Middle Ages than there were in the 20th century. Second, the means of enacting genocide only really came into being in the last century when technology and science had reached a certain level of effectiveness. We never got the chance to see the full extent of the damage Christianity could have wreaked on the world with the technology and infrastructure that the infamous 20th century dictators had at their disposal. Yet despite this handicap, Christianity made very real and terrible use of the methods (albeit primitive) it did have access to, to guard (suppress) its flock and teach (enforce) its doctrine. We have already seen some examples of this and there are more horrific ones still to come.

Third, is the total dead body count the best measure of relative evilness? Christianity may not have murdered as many people as Pol Pot or Hitler but it has other sins to atone for. Can we put a number on the people who were forced to believe in Christianity over the centuries or stifled from expressing themselves for fear of being labelled a devil worshipper and burned at the stake? Can we put a figure on the backward effect that the rejection of science had on intellectual progress and the degradation of the Jews that the Church intentionally carried out?

Atheists who commit terrible acts are guilty, but they are guilty as individuals, not as ambassadors of atheism. Stalin didn’t murder millions of people in the name of atheism? What would that even mean? No atheist in the history of humanity has ever gone out and murdered even a single believer because of their belief. No atheist cares enough to do so; she doesn’t have a faith to defend. The only people who murder because of religion are those who have a religion which can be threatened. God’s people are the Chosen People and all others are evil sinners and we must rid the world of their pernicious influence like God did with the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This is a point I have made before. Religion is inherently divisive. At the most basic level, people fall into one of two categories, with God or not with God. From that distinction, it’s a short step to a tense relationship and then another short step to full-blown enemy. The Crusades was a perfect example of how such a transition can take place and very quickly escalate beyond anyone’s expectations.

So Stalin killed millions of people. Christians are shocked and disgusted by this but so are atheists. No atheist would defend Stalin. What’s more, atheists can be shocked by someone like Stalin without feeling embarrassment or a sense of shame over theirs and Stalin’s shared atheism. He didn’t do what he did because he was or wasn’t an atheist. He, and every other dictator who ever committed any atrocities, did what he did for money or power or land or politics or any one of a hundred other reasons why people go to war. Pol Pot was an atheist so he didn’t act because of religion but he certainly didn’t act because of atheism. Christians call their battles Holy Wars, Muslims call theirs Jihad, but there is no equivalent term in the atheist lexicon for war because there is no need for one.

Finally, all of the ‘atheists’ Christians like to point to as being such prominent bad people were dictators who sought to govern their people according to the totalitarian playbook or expand their empire (again with tactics from the totalitarian playbook). Now, Christians take great pleasure in pointing out that these people were all atheists, and in many cases this is true, but if we look at their ideology we find that it more closely resembles that of a religion than anything else.

Am I joking? I’m afraid not.

All of the dictators whose names invariably crop up; Hitler (probably not atheist[[220]](#footnote-42)), Stalin, Pol Pot, Chairman Mao, created a communist type regime which they were at the very top of. They each sought to have unlimited power, unlimited access to information, unlimited control and the adoration of their people. If you disagree or challenge their rule, you can almost guarantee your death. Does this sound like anyone else you know? Cough, cough… God… cough.

All totalitarian dictators essentially seek to create their own religion with them in the Godhead position. Many of them are deluded and egomaniacal and actually see themselves as only a step or two down from true divinity. Totalitarian regimes are atheistic in the sense that they don’t believe in any of the world’s established religions but none of them are truly atheistic because they merely replace God or Allah or Shiva with themselves.

It seems clear to me that any appeal to ‘atheist regimes’ as a defence for Christianity is a misplaced and poorly informed one. At bottom, atheism doesn’t give people another reason to go to war, it removes one. Unfortunately, there are still many other reasons why people start wars and these have nothing to do with a belief in God.

1. In all fairness to my friend, I didn’t push the issue any further, so didn’t give him a chance to elaborate on what may have been a more defensible and well-thought out notion than the overly simplistic one I have presented here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Russell, B. (1953). What Is an Agnostic? In Al Seckel (Ed.), *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion.* 1986 (pp. 73-82) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. The world is full of completely unnecessary suffering, both for sinners and Christians. God’s word in the form of the Bible is extremely suspect and I completely reject personal ‘proofs’. I have examined both of these subjects in more detail in my earlier essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Russell, 1986 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. How this decision eventually came about offers a fascinating insight into how Christians can turn against each other over something as insignificant as a doctrinal technicality. The prime opponent, who ended up being excommunicated and vilified, Arius, never even contended that Jesus was not God. He merely suggested that Jesus had not existed forever, like God had. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
7. A real Biblical quote by the way. See Ex 32:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
8. Jasnow, Richard. 1992. *A Late Period Hieratic Wisdom Text*, p 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
9. Confucius, *Analects* XV.24 (*tr. David Hinton*) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
10. Epictetus, *Encheiridion* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
11. *Tao De Jing,* 63 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
12. Confucius, *Analects* IV.4 (*tr. David Hinton*) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
13. *Ramayana, Yuddha Kanda 115* [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
14. *Dhammapada 223* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
15. Hebrews 10:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
16. This is a point I intend to re-iterate many times in this essay, religion *always* follows society, simply because if it doesn’t, it will be left behind. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
17. Freeman, 2002, p. 205 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
18. Freeman, 2002, p. 78 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
19. Freeman, 2002, p. 205 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
20. Freeman, 2002, pp. 205-6 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
21. Augustine, Boox XIX, Chap 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
22. Ellerbe, 1995, p. 91 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
23. Hayes, Diana. 1998. “Reflections on Slavery.” In Curran, Charles E. *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching* [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
24. “Third Lateran Council” viewable at www.dailycatholic.org [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
25. Hayes, Diana. 1998. “Reflections on Slavery.” In Curran, Charles E. *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching* [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
26. Maxwell, 1975 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
27. Hayes, Diana. 1998. “Reflections on Slavery.” In Curran, Charles E. *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching* [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
28. It’s funny that Christians only commit this fallacy with people who support the thesis they are trying to prove, and it’s hilarious that the people they choose to be representative of Christianity are almost always the overwhelming minority. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
29. Hart, 2009, p. 181 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
30. This is something that will come up again and again in this essay. Jesus was just a man and that is the only background in which some of the things he says make sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
31. Of course, He repeatedly *does* say this in the Old Testament, but as we all know, it’s particularly unfashionable these days to put much stock in *that* God. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
32. Ellerbe, p. 98 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
33. Quoted in Ellerbe, p. 104 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
34. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
35. At least, if you believe Augustine regarding the transmission of original sin through the semen. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
36. I would be remiss here if I did not mention that like all neo-Christianity claims, it goes without saying that this notion would have been utterly impossible and outrageously heretical if uttered by anybody pre-Renaissance and pre-Enlightenment. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
37. Hart, 2009, p. 159 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
38. Hart, 2009, p. 160-161 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
39. Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex,* p. 58 (Quoted in Freeman, *The Closing of the Western Mind*, (2002) p. 243 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
40. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xix-xx (Quoted in Ellerbe, *The Dark Side of Christian History*, (1995) p. 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
41. *The “Natural Inferiority” of Women* compiled by Tama Starr (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991) p. 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
42. Saint Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 12, 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
43. Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, p 185 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
44. Cf Uchem, 2002, p. 39 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
45. Phelips, *The Churches and Modern Thought*, p. 203 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
46. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947) Question 92 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
47. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
48. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
49. Theodore G. Taooert, ed/trans., *Table Talk V* 54 of ‘Luther’s Works’ (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1967) [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
50. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
51. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
52. Apostolic Letter ORDINATIO SACERDOTALIS, Vatican.va [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
53. It’s worth noting, just so you can see the severity of this position, that the clerical sexual abuse of minors is also considered a ‘delict.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
54. John Paul II, “Thoughts on Women-Address to Italian Maids,” April 1979 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
55. In a secular society where the Church no longer has the absolute control that it used to, they are essentially forced to conform to the demands of society. A supplier will go out of business if it doesn’t listen to the needs of its consumers. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
56. I say ‘cousin’ but Judaism was more like a parent religion than a relative occupying the same level in a family tree. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
57. See John 18 and 19. It is quite probable that the Gospel of John was written *after* much of the rest of the New Testament, which largely comprises letters written by St. Paul. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
58. Freeman, 2002, p. 132 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
59. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
60. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
61. Seaver, James Everett, 1952, *The Persecution of Jews in the Roman Empire (300-428)* [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
62. This is not the first time we’ve seen this theme of inherited guilt developed in Christianity. See also the doctrine of original sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
63. *Constantius to Evagrius*, *CTIL*, 16, 9, 2; 13/8/339 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
64. *Constantius to Thalassius*, *pp.* *CTh.*, 16, 8, 7; 3/7/353 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
65. *Constantius to Evagrius*, *CTh.*, 16, 8, 1; 13/8/339 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
66. *Council of Laodicaea,* Canon XXXVII; Mansi, II, p. 590. (Quoted iin Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
67. Quoted in Freeman, 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
68. Basil, *Homilia XXIV*, I; *PC*, XXXI, 600 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
69. Ambrose, *Letters* (Quoted in Freeman, 2002) [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
70. Freeman, 2002, pp. 223-224 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
71. Chrysostom, *VIII Sermons against the Jews, PC*, XLVIII, *Sermo I*, 3 and 6 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
72. *Ibid,; PC,* XLVIII, *Sermo VI,* 1 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
73. Seaver, James Everett, 1952, *The Persecution of Jews in the Roman Empire (300-428)* p. 50 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
74. Jerome, *Ep. LXXXIV,* 3; *CSEL*, 55, p. 123 (Quoted in Seaver, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
75. As written in his chapter *Christian Violence and the Crusades* (2002) which appears in the book, *Religious Violence Between Christians and Jews* edited by A. S. Abulafia. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
76. Cohen, J. (2002). Christian Theology and Anti-Jewish Violence. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 44-60) [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
77. Chazan, R. (2002). The Anti-Jewish Violence of 1096: Perpetrators and Dynamics. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 21-43) [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
78. Inhabitants of a town, especially those of the Middle Class. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
79. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
80. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
81. Chazan specifies in his notes figures of around 1,100 Jewish deaths for Mainz and Cologne and 800 for Worms. But we must remember that these figures only sound paltry to us now as the world population reaches 7 billion and after two World Wars and countless other genocides, where automatic weapons, bombs and missiles have made death much easier to come by. In the eleventh century where the world population was only 300 million and death was inflicted much more savagely and intimately in close combat, smaller figures are far less significant than the brutal, frenzied character involved in the actual killing. It is also important to note that these figures do not include the significant number of Jews who averted death by converting. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
82. Gibb, H. A. R. *The Damascus Chronicle of the Crusades: Extracted and Translated from the Chronicle of Ibn-Al-Qalanisi*. (2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
83. Moderate for the times, that is. Today, he would be crucified for such derogatory, anti-Semitic comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
84. Riley-Smith, J. (2002). Christian Violence and the Crusades. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 3-20) [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
85. Seaver, James Everett, 1952, *The Persecution of Jews in the Roman Empire (300-428)* p. 85 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
86. Cohen, J. (2002). Christian Theology and Anti-Jewish Violence. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 44-60) [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
87. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
88. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
89. Hart, 2009, p. 89 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
90. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
91. Langmuir, G. (2002). At the Frontiers of Faith. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 138-156) [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
92. Thomas Aquinas’ letter to Margaret of Flanders [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
93. Abulafia, A. S. (2002). Intellectual and Spiritual Quest for Christ. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 61-85) [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
94. Langmuir, G. (2002). At the Frontiers of Faith. In A. S. Abulafa (Ed.), *Religious Violence between Christians and Jews* (pp. 138-156) [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
95. As insane as this seems, it’s true and makes all Catholics literally cannibals. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
96. This was given the politically *in*correct name of “Statute of Jewry”. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
97. Luther, M. *On the Jews and Their Lies*, 154, 167, 229, cited in Michael, Robert. *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
98. Luther, M. *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Part X. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
99. As in the case of sexism, slavery and human rights in general, this change was engendered with absolutely no assistance from Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
100. www.patrobertson.com/PressReleases/TerroristAttack.asp [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
101. Freeman, 2002, pp. 16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
102. Freeman, 2002, pp. 320-321. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
103. Freeman, 2002, p. 321. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
104. Stark, Rodney, 2011, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
105. Hart, 2009, p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
106. Such as Aristotle’s notion of a Prime Mover or Plato’s cosmology from the *Timaeus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
107. I love the way both Hart and Stark emphasise that these people were all Christians, as if this fact somehow validates Christianity as a religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
108. Hart includes in his chapter called The Death and Rebirth of Science (pp 72-73), seemingly attempting to be serious although I can’t understand how he can be, the outrageous notion that the invention and improvement of various things like waterwheels, ironworking, mining processes and a whole host of other achievements he terms “practical science”, adds to his case for Christianity having kept the spirit of scientific discovery and invention alive during the Middle Ages. Clearly this is ridiculous. Comparing the “heavy saddle with stirrups” or “drive hammers on camshafts” to the theories of Copernicus or Galileo is absolutely ludicrous and attempting to claim them as examples of scientific achievement is a manifestation of just how weak Hart’s position is. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
109. Stark, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
110. Isaac Newton, Letter to Robert Hooke, February 5, 1675. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
111. Although Hart will later deny that this ‘nothing springs from nothing’ rule applies to Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
112. Hart, 2009, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
113. Blackwell, R. J. (2000). Galileo Galilei. In G. B. Ferngren (Ed.), *The History of Science and Religion in the Western Tradition* (pp. 98-103) [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
114. Blackwell (2000) offers that Bellarmine would have accepted the Copernican thesis and interpreted the Bible figuratively, if it had been proven. At Galileo’s time, it still wasn’t proven and in Bellarmine’s mind, the default was the traditional view. Even if this is true, it doesn’t help the Christian case because what the Church *did* do was ban Copernicus’ book and attempt to prevent Copernicanism from being taught, in which case it would never be proven. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
115. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
116. Hart, 2009, p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
117. Hart, 2009, p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
118. Stark, Rodney, 2011, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
119. Hart, 2009, p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
120. Stark, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
121. Stark, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
122. Remember the Pope had the full force of the Inquisition’s first ‘request’ in 1616 behind him. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
123. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, ed. and transl., The Galileo Affair, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 146; Sergio Pagano, I Documenti del Processo di Galileo Galilei, Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 1984, p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
124. I am hijacking his idea a little here in applying it to an entire discipline like science but I think it is easily transferrable. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
125. James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1949. P. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
126. Barker, Dan, *godless*, p. 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
127. The Bible, Luke 10:27 [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
128. Mill, John Stuart, *Three Essays on Religion* [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
129. Hart, 2009, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
130. Russell, B. (1953). What Is an Agnostic? In Al Seckel (Ed.), *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion.* 1986 (pp. 73-82) [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
131. This only applies to Christians because all of the law-abiding atheists are (somehow) already law-abiding even though they don’t believe in God. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
132. This is ironically a strain of the ‘might makes right’ concept which Christians would rebel against in any other setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
133. Barker, Dan, *godless*, p. 220. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
134. Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith*. p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
135. Harris, Sam, *The End of Faith*. p. 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
136. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 3:33. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
137. Jefferson, Thomas. Letter to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
138. Hart, 2009, p. 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
139. Wright, F. B. (1816) *History of Religious Persecutions*. p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
140. Hart, 2009, p. 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
141. Freeman, 2002, p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
142. Wright, F. B. (1816) p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
143. Hart, 2009, p. 115-116. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
144. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
145. Freeman, 2002, p. 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
146. Ibid, p. 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
147. It is important to note that Arius was not arguing against the Divinity of Christ or the notion of the Trinity, he merely felt that, according to Scripture, Jesus was ‘begotten’ and for this to be true, there must have been a time when he hadn’t yet been ‘begotten.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
148. Wright, F. B. (1816) p. 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
149. Gibbon, E. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
150. Freeman, 2002, p. 295-296. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
151. Rist, *Augustine*, p. 215. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
152. Freeman, 2002, p. 244. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
153. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
154. Brown, P. (1992) *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*. p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
155. MacMullen, *Christianising the Roman Empire*, p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
156. Cameron and Hall, eds. *Life of Constantine* 3:4. The quotation is from Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops,* p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
157. *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, 2.27.1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
158. Freeman, 2002, p. 273. [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
159. Ibid, p. 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
160. Tertullian, “On Prescription Against Heretics” Chapter VII, p. 246. [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
161. Croke, B and Harries, J, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome* (Sydney, 1982), chap. 2, “The Debate on the Altar od Victory, A.D. 384.” [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
162. Lim, *Public Disputation,* p, 233. [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
163. Augustine, *Confessions*. [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
164. From the article “Reason” in A. Hastings, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford and New York, 2000), p. 596. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
165. Quoted in Freeman, 2006, p. 317 [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
166. Quoted in P, Chuvin, *A Chronicle of the Last Pagans* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1990), p. 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
167. Freeman, 2002, p. 268-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
168. Quoted in Freeman, 2002, p. xviii-xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
169. Ibid. p. 303. [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
170. Freeman, 2002, p. 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
171. Freeman, 2002, p. 326. [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
172. Tompkins, Peter, “Symbols of Heresy” in *The Magic of Obelisks* (New York; Harper, 1981), p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
173. Goodrich, Charles, A., *A History of the Church*, (Brattleboro’ Typographic Company, 1839), pp. 120-124. [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
174. Wright, F. B. (1816) p. 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
175. Neal, D., *Neal’s History of the Puritans* (Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811). [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
176. Priestly, J., *A General History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3 (1803), p. 398. [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
177. Foxe, J., *The Book of Martyrs*, Chapt XII. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
178. Ackroyd, P., *The Life of Thomas More*, (Vintage, London 1999) p. 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
179. Farris, M., “From Tyndale to Madison”, 2007, p. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
180. Pope Leo X, papal bull Exsurge Domine issued June 15, 1520. Viewable at papalencyclicals.net [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
181. Bratcher, Dennis. “The Diet of Worms (1521)”, in *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*. [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
182. It does seem to be true that at first he was entirely lenient towards ‘heretics’ but around his fortieth year, he dramatically changed his opinion on this subject. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
183. Quoted from Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
184. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
185. Wright, F. B. (1816) p. 338-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
186. Calvin, like Luther, did not appear to start out this way (obviously since he was a heretic himself) but over time as his influence grew and his beliefs became ‘orthodox’ his tolerance for other opinions seemed to diminish. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
187. Brown, H. R. F., *Studies in the History of Venice*, Volume 2, (BiblioBazaar, 2009), p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-152)
188. Schmitt, C. B. *et al*, *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), “Printing and Censorship after 1550”, p. 45ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-153)
189. Bald, M., *Banned Books*, (Facts On File, Inc., 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-154)
190. Quoted in Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-155)
191. Quoted in Vacandard, E., *The Inquisition*, (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
192. Wright, F. B. (1816) p. 250-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
193. Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
194. Aquinas, T., *Summa*, II-II, Q.11, art.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
195. Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-160)
196. Catharism was a Christian movement that originated in the 11th century in France and some other parts of Europe and posed a threat to the Roman Catholic Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
197. Vacandard, E., *The Inquisition*, (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), p. 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-161)
198. Freeman, 2002, p. xix. [↑](#endnote-ref-162)
199. Ibid, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-163)
200. Quoted Appendix I to Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible,* p. 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-164)
201. Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-165)
202. St. Augustine. St. Augustine:Tractates on the Gospel of John, vol. 88 of The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-166)
203. St. Augustine. *Sermon 68 On the New Testament* [↑](#endnote-ref-167)
204. Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-168)
205. Dawkins, R., *The God Delusion*, (Transworld Publishers, 2006), p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-169)
206. Dawkins, 2006, p. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-170)
207. Barker, Dan, *godless*, p. 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-171)
208. The achievements of science are nothing short of incredible. So much has been accomplished in such a little time that it is difficult to even fathom. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
209. Gorham, C., *The Medieval Inquisition*, (London; Watts & Co., 1918), p. 2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-172)
210. We will discuss this in more detail later but for now it will suffice to note that the Church heavily involved itself in politics and attempted to control every aspect of an individual’s public actions and private beliefs essentially outlawing any non-Christian beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
211. If you disbelieve this, consider the fact that modern day Popes have been doing a lot of apologising over the past century; for everything from acts committed during the Crusades to the trial of Galileo to priest’s sex abuse. It has been estimated that Pope John Paul II has made over a hundred confessions of and apologies for Christian failure during its reign. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
212. Hilariously, Christians instead claim that Christianity was responsible for the freedoms they began to enjoy in countries like England while claiming that the fall of Christianity was responsible for the evil of Hitler, despite the fact that Christianity’s influence, in fact waned in all countries to the same extent. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
213. Hitler, A. *Mein Kampf*, (1924) Translated by J. Murphy, 1939. Chapter 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-173)
214. Ibid. Chapter 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-174)
215. Ibid. Chapter 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-175)
216. Ibid. Chapter 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-176)
217. Adolf Hitler, speech of 12 April 1922. Quoted in Dawkins (2006: 311-312) [↑](#endnote-ref-177)
218. Dawkins, R., *The God Delusion*, (Transworld Publishers, 2006), p. 311. [↑](#endnote-ref-178)
219. The exact phrase used in *Mein Kampf* in reference to Luther is a “great reformer”. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
220. I think there is enough evidence to justify *not* including Hitler in the ranks of atheists. Here is another link in the chain which leads me to this conclusion. In a speech given in October 1933, Hitler says, “We were convinced that the people need and require this faith. We have therefore undertaken the fight against the atheistic movement, and that not merely with a few declarations: we have stamped it out.” [↑](#footnote-ref-42)