

# Not a Threat: The Contributions of Christianity to Western Society

*Rick Wade provides a solid argument for the beneficial contributions of Christianity to Western culture in the areas of science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare.*

## What If You'd Never Been Born?

Do you remember this scene in the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*?

GEORGE (cont'd): Look, who are you?

CLARENCE (patiently): I told you, George. I'm your guardian angel. [George, still looking at him, goes up to him and pokes his arm. It's flesh.]

GEORGE: Yeah, yeah, I know. You told me that. What else are you? What . . . are you a hypnotist?

CLARENCE: No, of course not.

GEORGE: Well then, why am I seeing all these strange things?

CLARENCE: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were not born.

GEORGE: Then if I wasn't born, who am I?

CLARENCE: You're nobody. You have no identity. [George rapidly searches his pockets for identification, but without success.]

GEORGE: What do you mean, no identity? My name's George Bailey.

CLARENCE: There is no George Bailey. You have no papers, no cards, no driver's license, no 4-F card, no insurance policy . . . (he says these things as George searches for them) [George looks in his watch pocket.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): They're not there, either.

GEORGE: What?

CLARENCE: Zuzu's petals. [George feverishly continues to turn his pockets inside out.]

CLARENCE (cont'd): You've been given a great gift, George. A chance to see what the world would be like without you. {1}

Do you remember George Bailey's encounter with Clarence the angel? George didn't think life was worth living, and it was Clarence's job to show him he was wrong. To do so, he showed George what Bedford Falls would have been like if George had never been born.

In desperation, George races through town looking for something familiar. After observing him for a little while, Clarence utters this bit of wisdom: "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives, and when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?" {2} Inspired by the plot of

*It's a Wonderful Life*, in 1994 D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe wrote a book titled *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?*{3} The authors determined to show what the world would be like if, like George Bailey, Jesus had never been born.

Christianity has come under attack from many different directions. It is often derided as the great boogeyman of human civilization. It is presented as an oppressive force with no regard for the higher aspirations of humankind. To throw off its shackles is the way of wisdom.

Kennedy quotes Friederich Nietzsche, a nineteenth century philosopher whose ideas continue to have a profound effect on our society. Said Nietzsche: "I condemn Christianity; I bring against the Christian Church the most terrible of all the accusations that an accuser has ever had in his mouth. It is, to me, the greatest of all imaginable corruptions; it seeks to work the ultimate corruption, the worst possible corruption. The Christian Church has left nothing untouched by its depravity; it has turned every value into worthlessness, and every truth into a lie, and every integrity into baseness of soul." {4}

This article will—we hope¾show just how beneficial Christianity has been, even for its critics. Drawing from Kennedy and Newcombe's book in addition to other literature, we will examine the impact of Christian beliefs on society. The four areas we'll consider are science, human freedom, morality, and healthcare. A theme which will run throughout this discussion is the high value Christianity places on human beings. Far from being a source of oppression, the message of Christ serves to heal, set free, and provide protective boundaries.

## **Contributions to Science**

Perhaps the area in which Christianity has been the most vociferously attacked in this century has been the area of science. Religion and science are thought by many to be like oil and water; the two simply don't mix. Religion is thought to offer superstition while science offers facts.

It would seem, however, that those who make such a charge haven't given much attention to the history of science. In their book, *The Soul of Science*, {5} authors Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton make a case for the essential role Christianity played in the development of science. The authors point out four general ways Christianity has positively influenced its development. {6}

First, Christianity provided important presuppositions of science. The Bible teaches that nature is real, not an illusion. It teaches that it has value and that it is good to work with nature. Historically this was an advance over pagan superstitions because the latter saw nature as something to be worshipped or as something filled with spirits which weren't to be angered. As one theologian wrote, "Nature was thus abruptly desacralized, stripped of many of its arbitrary, unpredictable, and doubtless terrifying aspects." {7}

Also, because it was created by God in an orderly fashion, nature is lawful and can be understood. That is, it follows discernible patterns which can be trusted not to change. "As the creation of a trustworthy God, nature exhibited regularity, dependability, and orderliness. It was intelligible and could be studied. It displayed a knowable order." {8}

Second, Christianity sanctioned science. Science "was justified as a means of alleviating toil and suffering." {9} With animistic and pantheistic cultures, God and nature were so closely related that man, being a part of nature, was incapable of transcending it, that is, of gaining any real control over it. A Christian worldview, however, gave man the freedom to subject nature to his needs—with limitations, of course—because man relates primarily to God who is over nature. Technology—or science applied—was developed to meet human needs as an expression of our God-given duty to one

another. As one historian put it, “the Christian concept of moral obligation played an important role in attracting people to the study of nature.”{10}

Third, Christianity provided motives for pursuing scientific knowledge. As scientists learned more about the wonders of the universe, they saw God’s glory being displayed.

Fourth, Christianity “played a role in regulating scientific methodology.”{11} Previously, the world was thought to work in perfectly rational ways which could be known primarily through logical deduction. But this approach to science didn’t work. Planets don’t have to orbit in circular patterns as some people concluded using deductive logic; of course, it was discovered by investigation that they didn’t. A newer way of understanding God’s creation put the emphasis on God’s will. Since God’s will couldn’t be simply deduced through logical reasoning, experimentation and investigation were necessary. This provided a particular theological grounding for empirical science.

The fact is that it was distinctly Christian beliefs which provided the intellectual and moral foundations for the study of nature and for its application through technology. Thus, although Christianity and some scientists or scientific theories might be in opposition, Christianity and science are not.

## **Contributions to Human Freedom**

One of the favorite criticisms of Christianity is that it inhibits freedom. When Christians oppose funding pornography masquerading as art, for example, we’re said to be unfairly restricting freedom of expression. When Christians oppose the radical, gender feminism which exalts personal fulfillment over all other social obligations, and which calls for the tearing down of God-given moral structures in favor of “choice” as a moral guide, we’re accused of oppression.

The problem is that people now see freedom not as self-determination, but as self-determination unhindered by any outside standard of morality. Some go so far in their zeal for self-expression that they expect others to assist them in the process, such as pornographic artists who expect government funding.

There are at least two general factors which limit or define freedom. One we might call the “rules of the game.” The other is our nature.

The concert violinist is able to play a concerto because she knows the “rules of the game.” In other words, she knows what the musical notation means. She knows how to produce the right sounds from the violin and when to produce them. She might want the “freedom” to make whatever sounds she wishes in whatever key and whatever beat, but who would want to listen? Similarly, as part of God’s universe, we need to operate according to the rules of the game. He knows how life on earth is best lived, so we need to live according to His will and design.

Our nature also structures our freedom. A fish can try to express its freedom by living on dry land, but it won’t be free long; it won’t be alive long! We, too, are truly free only in so far as we live according to our nature-not our fallen nature, but our nature as created by God. This is really another way of looking at the “rules of the game” idea. But it’s necessary to give it special focus because some of the “freedoms” we desire go against our nature, such as the freedom some want to engage in homosexual activity.

Some people see Christianity as a force which tries to inhibit proper expression of who we are. But it is the idea of helping people attain the freedom to be and do as God intended that has fueled much Christian activity over the years. For example, Christians were actively engaged in the battle against

slavery because of their high view of man as made in God's image.{12}

Another example is feminism. Radical feminists complain that Christianity has been an oppressive force over women. But it seems to have escaped their notice that Christianity made significant steps in elevating women above the place they held before Christ came.{13}

While it is true that women have often been truly oppressed throughout history, even by Christian men, it is false that Christianity itself is oppressive toward them. In fact, in an article titled "Women of Renewal: A Statement" published in *First Things*,{14} such noted female scholars as Elizabeth Achtemeier, Roberta Hestenes, Frederica Mathewes-Green, and May Stewart Van Leeuwen stated unequivocally their acceptance of historic Christianity. And it's a sure thing that any of the signatories of this statement would be quite vocal in her opposition to real oppression!

The problem isn't that Christianity is opposed to freedom, but that it acknowledges the laws of our Creator who knows better than we do what is good for us. The doctrines of creation and redemption define for us our nature and our responsibilities to God. His "rules of the game" will always be oppressive to those who seek absolute self-determination. But as we'll see, it is by submitting to God that we make life worth living.

## **Contributions to Morality**

Let's turn our attention to the issue of morality. Christians are often accused of trying to ram their morality down people's throats. In some instances this might accurately describe what some Christians have done. But for the most part, I believe, the criticism follows our simple declaration of what we believe is right and wrong and our participation in the political and social arenas to see such standards codified and enforced.

The question that needs to be answered is whether the high standards of morality taught in Scripture have served society well. Has Christianity served to make individuals and societies better and to provide a better way of life?

In a previous article I wrote briefly about the brutality that characterized Greco-Roman society in Jesus' day.{15} We often hear about the wondrous advances of that society; but do you know about the cruelty? The Roman games, in which "beasts fought men, men fought men; and the vast audience waited hopefully for the sight of death,"{16} reveal the lust for blood. The practice of child exposure shows the low regard for human life the Romans had. Unwanted babies were left to die on trash heaps. Some of these were taken to be slaves or prostitutes.{17} It was distinctly Christian beliefs that brought these practices to an end.

In the era following "the disruption of Charlemagne's great empire", it was the Latin Christian Church which "patiently and persistently labored to combat the forces of disintegration and decay," and "succeeded little by little in restraining violence and in restoring order, justice, and decency."{18}

The Vikings provide an example of how the gospel can positively affect a people group. Vikings were fierce plunderers who terrorized the coastlands of Europe. James Kennedy says that our word *berserk* comes from their fighting men who were called "berserkers."{19} Gradually the teachings of Christ contributed to major changes in these people. In 1020 A.D., Christianity became law under King Olav. Practices "such as blood sacrifice, black magic, the 'setting out' of infants, slavery and polygamy" became illegal.{20}

In modern times, it was Christians who led the fight in England against slavery.{21} Also, it was the

teaching of the Wesleys that was largely responsible for the social changes which prevented the social unrest which might have been expected in the Industrial Revolution. {22}

In an editorial published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1986 titled "Religious Right Deserves Respect," {23} Reo Christenson argues that conservative Christians have been vindicated with respect to their concerns about such things as drinking, the sexual revolution, and discipline in schools. He says that "if anybody's values have been vindicated over the last 20 years, it is theirs." He concludes with this comment: "The Religious Right is not always wrong."

To go against God's moral standards is destructive to individuals and societies. In a column which ran in the *Dallas Morning News* following the shootings at Columbine High School, {24} a junior at Texas A&M University asks hard questions of her parents' generation including these: "Why have you neglected to teach us values and morals? Why haven't you lived moral lives that we could model our own after?" {25}

Why indeed! In time, our society will see the folly of its ways by the destruction it is bringing on itself. Let's pray that it happens sooner rather than later.

## **Contributions to Healthcare**

Healthcare is another area where Christianity has made a positive impact on society. Christians have not only been involved in healthcare; they've often been at the forefront in serving the physical health of people.

Although some early Christians believed that disease came from God, so that trying to cure the sick would be going against God's will, the opposite impulse was also seen in those who saw the practice of medicine as an exercise of Christian charity. {26}

God had already shown His concern for the health of His people through the laws given through Moses. In his book, *The Story of Medicine*, Roberto Margotta says that the Hebrews made an important contribution to medicine by their knowledge of personal hygiene given in the book of Leviticus. In fact, he says, "the steps taken in mediaeval Europe to counteract the spread of 'leprosy' were straight out of the Bible." {27}

Of course, it was Jesus' concern for suffering that provided the primary motivation for Christians to engage in healthcare. In the Middle Ages, for examples, monks provided physical relief to the people around them. Some monasteries became infirmaries. "The best-known of these," says Margotta, "belonged to the Swiss monastery of St Gall which had been founded in 720 by an Irish monk; . . . medicines were made up by the monks themselves from plants grown in the herb garden. Help was always readily available for the sick who came to the doors of the monastery. In time, the monks who devoted themselves to medicine emerged from their retreats and started visiting the sick in their own homes." Monks were often better doctors than their lay counterparts and were in great demand. {28}

Christians played a significant role in the establishment of hospitals. In 325 A.D., the Council of Nicea "decreed that hospitals were to be duly established wherever the Church was established," says James Kennedy. {29} He notes that the hospital built by St. Basil of Caesarea in 370 even treated lepers who previously had been isolated. {30}

In the United States, the early hospitals were "framed and motivated by the responsibilities of Christian stewardship." {31} They were originally established to help the poor sick, but weren't intended to provide long-term care lest they become like the germ-infested almshouses.

A key factor in making long-term medical care possible was the “professionalization of nursing” because of higher standards of sanitation.{32} Before the 16th century, religious motivations were key in providing nursing for the sick. Anne Summers says that the willingness to fracture family ties to serve others, a disciplined lifestyle, and “a sense of heavenly justification,” all of which came from Christian beliefs, undergirded ministry to the sick.{33} Even if the early nursing orders didn’t achieve their own sanitation goals, “they were, nevertheless, often reaching higher sanitary standards than those previously known to the sick poor.”{34}

There is much more that could be told about the contributions of Christianity to society, including the stories of Florence Nightingale, whose nursing school in London began modern nursing, and who saw herself as being in the service of God; or of the establishment of the Red Cross through the zeal of an evangelical Christian; or of the modern missions movement which continues to see Christian medical professionals devote their lives to the needs of the suffering in some of the darkest parts of the world.{35} It is obvious that in the area of medicine, as in a number of others, Christians have made a major contribution. Thus, those who deride Christianity as being detrimental are either tremendously biased in their thinking or are ignorant of history.

## Notes

1. Downloaded from the Internet at [http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script\\_19.html](http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_19.html) on May 11, 1999.
2. Downloaded from the Internet at [http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script\\_20.html](http://www.clarence.com/iawl/script/script_20.html) on May 11, 1999.
3. D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994).
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).
6. Pearcey and Thaxton, 36-37. Taken from John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19-33.
7. Pearcey and Thaxton, 25.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 36.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 36-37.
12. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Christianity.”
13. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 376.
14. “Women of Renewal: A Statement,” *First Things* No. 80 (February 1998): 36-40.
15. Rick Wade, “The World of the Apostle Paul.”
16. Will Durant, *The History of Civilization: Part III, Caesar and Christ: A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1944), 133-34.
17. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 72.
18. Joseph Reither, *World History at a Glance* (New York: The New Home Library, 1942), 144; quoted in Kennedy, 165.
19. Kennedy and Newcombe, 164.
20. Sverre Steen, *Langsomt ble Landet vaart Eget* (Oslo, Norway: J.W. Cappelens Forlag, 1967), 52-53, quoted in Kennedy, 164-65. See also *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Scandinavia, History of.”
21. Earl Cairns, *The Christian in Society: Biblical and Historical Precepts for Involvement Today* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1973), 78-91.

22. Ibid., 67.
23. Reo M. Christenson, "Religious Right Deserves Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, September 1986.
24. Littleton, Colorado. Two young men killed 12 students and a teacher, and then killed themselves.
25. Marcy Musgrave, "Generation has some questions," *Dallas Morning News*, 2 May 1999.
26. Irvine Loudon, ed., *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 55.
27. Roberto Margotta, *The Story of Medicine*, ed. Paul Lewis (New York: Golden Press, 1968), 36. Referenced in Kennedy, 142.
28. Margotta, 117-18.
29. Kennedy, 145.
30. Ibid., 146. From Margotta, 102.
31. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 8. From Kennedy, 147.
32. Kennedy, 148. Quote is from Rosenberg, 8.
33. Anne Summers, "Nurses and Ancillaries in the Christian Era," chap. 12 in *Western Medicine: An Illustrated History*, 134.
34. Ibid.
35. See Kennedy, 149-154.