

# Charity and Compassion: Christianity Is Good for Culture

*Byron Barlowe looks at the impact of Christianity on the world. He concludes that applying a Christian, biblical worldview to the issues that we face in our world has resulted in a great amount of good. Apart from the eternal aspect of Christianity, people applying Christian principles to worldly issues have benefited all mankind.*

## Christian Religion: Good or Bad for Mankind?

Standing on the jetway boarding a flight out of Cuzco, Peru, I overheard an American college student say to his companion, "See that older guy up there? He's a professor. Came here to give lectures on Christianity. Can you believe that?" In an apparent reference to abuses perpetrated on local Indians by the *conquistadors* centuries earlier, he added, "Haven't Christians done enough to these people?"

He didn't know that I was the professor's companion. Turning around, I said, "Excuse me, I couldn't help but overhear. I'm with the professor and, yes, we were giving lectures at the university from a Christian worldview. But did you know that all these people in between us were helping with humanitarian aid in the poorest villages around here all week?"

He sheepishly mumbled something about every story having two sides. But his meaning was clear: what good could possibly come from Christians imposing their beliefs on these indigenous people? Their culture was ruined by their kind and should be left alone. Popular sentiments, but are they fair and accurate?

The church—and those acting in its name—has had its moments of injustice, intrigue, even murder. Unbiblical excesses during the Inquisitions, the Crusades, and other episodes are undeniable. Yet these deviations from the teachings of Christ and the Bible are overwhelmingly countered by the church's good works and novel institutions of care, compassion, and justice.

Carlton Hayes wrote, "From the wellspring of Christian compassion, our Western civilization has drawn its inspiration, and its sense of duty, for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, looking after the homeless, clothing the naked, tending the sick and visiting the prisoner." As one writer put it, missionaries and other Christians lived as if people mattered.[{1}](#) Revolutionary!

Christianity exploded onto a brutal, heartless Greco-Roman culture. Believers in this radical new religion set a new standard for caring for the ill, downtrodden, and abused, even at risk of death. Through their transformed Christlike outlooks, they established countercultural ways that lead to later innovations: orphanages, hospitals, transcendent art and architecture, and systems of law and order based on fairness, to name a few. In the early church, every congregation had a list of needy recipients called a *matriculum*. Enormous amounts of charity were given.[{2}](#) "Pagan society, through its excesses, teetered on the brink of extinction. Christianity, however, represented . . . a new way."[{3}](#)

Compassion and charity are biblical ideals. "Early Christians set a model for their descendents to follow, a model that today's modern secular societies try to imitate, but without Christian motivation."[{4}](#) We take for granted the notion that it's good to help the needy and oppressed, but wherever it's found, whether in religious or secular circles, it can be traced right back to Jesus Christ and His followers.

# Answering Atheists: Is Religion Evil?

“Religion poisons everything,” carps militant atheist Christopher Hitchens. Fellow atheist Richard Dawkins claims that “there’s not the slightest evidence that religious people . . . are any more moral than non-religious people.” True? Not according to social scientists from Princeton and other top universities.

As citizens, religious people generally shine. According to Logan Paul Gage, “for every 100 altruistic acts—like giving blood—performed by non-religious people, the religious perform 144.” Also, those active in religion in the U.S. volunteer in their communities more.[\[5\]](#) A Barna study reports that “more than four out of five (83%) gave at least \$1000 to churches and non-profit entities during 2007, far surpassing . . . any other population segment studied....”[\[6\]](#) This echoes studies from the past few decades.

Furthermore, studies show that religious youth have more self-control against cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana. “Religion also correlates with fewer violent crimes, school suspensions and a host of other negative behaviors.”[\[7\]](#)

It appears that Dawkins is very wrong. He lamented that “faith is . . . comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.” People who care about our culture will hope he’s right about how hard religion is to eliminate, especially Christianity.[\[8\]](#)

So, what about the evil perpetrated by the church? Early Christians were admirable in their display of compassion and charity. But haven’t the centuries since witnessed a parade of continual religious wars (including “Christian wars”), persecutions, and mayhem? Among Christianity’s sins: forced conversions, expansion by so-called “Christian states” mingled with genocide, execution of accused heretics and witches, and the ever infamous Crusades. Regrettable, inexcusable, but

largely overblown.

Dinesh D'Souza writes that this popular refrain also “greatly exaggerates [crimes of] religious fanatics while neglecting or rationalizing the vastly greater crimes committed by secular and atheist fanatics.”[{9}](#) Historian Jonathan Riley-Smith disputes that the Crusaders were rapists and murderers. He and other historians document that they were pilgrims using their own funds to liberate long-held Christian lands and defend Europe against Muslim invaders.[{10}](#)

What about heretics who were burned at the stake? Author Henry Kamen claims that “much of the modern stereotype of the Inquisition is essentially made up. . . . Inquisition trials . . . were fairer and more lenient than their secular counterparts.”[{11}](#)

Atheism is associated with far more death and destruction than religion is, particularly Christianity. In *Death by Government*, R.J. Rummel writes “Almost 170 million men, women and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed or worked to death; buried alive, drowned, hung, bombed or killed in any other of a myriad of ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed, helpless citizens and foreigners.”[{12}](#) Rummel directly attributes eighty-four percent of these to atheistic “megamurderers” like Stalin, Hitler, and Mao.

For perspective, consider that “the Crusades, Inquisition and the witch burnings killed approximately 200,000 people” over five hundred years. These deaths, tragic and unjust as many were, only comprise one percent of the deaths caused by atheist regimes during a few decades. That’s a ninety-nine to one ratio of death tied directly to the atheist worldview.[{13}](#)

History shows that atheism, not Christianity, is the view that is bad—even murderous—for society.

# Compassion: Christian Innovation in a Cruel World

Christianity is unique. No other religion or philosophy values *and practices wholesale* taking care of the young, sick, orphaned, oppressed, and widowed, hands-on and sacrificially.

To ancient Greeks and Romans, life was cheap. Infanticide—baby killing— was “condoned and practiced for centuries without guilt or remorse [and] extolled by Greco-Roman mythologies.” This ungodly practice was opposed by Christians, whose compassionate example eventually caused Roman emperors to outlaw it.[\[14\]](#) First-century art shows believers rescuing unwanted Roman babies from the Tiber River. They raised them as their own.

Emperors pronounced death sentences on a whim, even beyond gladiatorial games. This was the ultimate extension of *paterfamilias*: a father had the right to kill his own child if she displeased him. Life was expendable, even among families![\[15\]](#)

Abortion, human sacrifice, and suicide were also part of societies unaffected by God’s love. How different from the scriptural doctrine that all are made in God’s image and deserve life and dignity.

Slaves and the poor were on their own. One exhaustive survey of historical documents “found that antiquity has left no trace of organized charitable effort.”[\[16\]](#)

The ancient code was: “leave the ill to die.” Roman colonists in Alexandria even left their friends and next of kin behind during a plague.[\[17\]](#) Japanese holy men kept the wealthy from relieving the poor because they believed them to be “odious to the gods.”[\[18\]](#)

By contrast, Jesus expanded the Jewish obligation of

compassion well beyond family and tribe even to enemies. His parable of the Good Samaritan exploded racial and social boundaries.[{19}](#) Scripture says that Jesus “had compassion on them and healed their sick.” Christ’s disciples went around healing and teaching as their master had. Believers were instructed to care for widows, the sick, the disabled and the poor, and also for orphans. “Justin Martyr, an early defender of Christianity, reveals that collections were taken during church services to help the orphans,” writes Alvin Schmidt. By the time of Justinian, churches were operating old folks’ homes called *gerontocomia*. Before Christianity, homes for the aged didn’t exist. Now, such nursing homes are taken for granted.[{20}](#)

Schmidt notes that “Christianity filled the pagan void that largely ignored the sick and dying, especially during pestilences.” Greeks had diagnostic centers, but no nursing care. Roman hospitals were only for slaves, gladiators, and occasionally for soldiers. Christians provided shelters for the poor and pilgrims, along with medical care. Christian hospitals were the first voluntary charitable institutions.[{21}](#)

A pagan Roman soldier in Constantine’s army was intrigued by Christians who “brought food to his fellow soldiers who were afflicted with famine and disease.” He studied this inspiring group who displayed such humanity and was converted to the faith. He represents much of why the early church grew despite bouts of severe persecution.[{22}](#)

Basic beliefs—or worldviews—lead to basic responses. The Christian response to life and suffering changed the world for good.

## **Early Church Charity vs. Self-Serving**

## Greco-Roman Giving

In ancient Greece and Rome, charity was unknown, except for gaining favors and fame. This stood in stark contrast to Jesus' thinking. He rebuked the Pharisees, whose good deeds were done for public acclaim. Christ's ethic of sharing with any and all and helping the underprivileged brought a revolution that eventually converted the entire Roman Empire.

*Caritas*, root word of *charity*, "meant giving to relieve economic or physical distress without expecting anything in return," writes Schmidt, "whereas *liberalitas* meant giving to please the recipient, who later would bestow a favor on the giver." [\[23\]](#) Pagans almost never gave out of what we today would ironically call true *liberality*.

In contrast, for Christ-followers part of worship was hands-on charity. They celebrated God's redemption this way, giving and serving both individually and corporately. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem in the fifth century, sold church ornaments to feed the poor. (Another contrast: the Hindu worldview assumes that neediness results from bad deeds in a past life.)

Ancient culture was centered on elitism. The well-off and privileged gave not out of any sense of caring, but out of what Aristotle termed "liberality, in order to demonstrate [their] magnanimity and even superiority." They funded parks, statues, and public baths with their names emblazoned on them. Even the little philanthropy the ancients did was seldom received by the needy. Those who could pay back in some way received it. [\[24\]](#)

Historian Kenneth Scott Latourette noted that early Christians *innovated* five ways in their use of their own funds for the general welfare:

First, those who joined were *expected to give* to their ability level, both rich and poor. Christ even called some to give all

they had to the poor. St. Francis of Assissi, Pope Gregory the Great, and missionary C.T. Studd all did as well.

Second, they had a *new motivation*: the love for and example of Christ, who being rich became poor for others' sakes (2 Corinthians 8:9).[{25}](#)

Third, Christianity like Judaism, created *new objects of giving*: widows, orphans, slaves, the persecuted.

The fourth Christian innovation was *personalized giving*, although large groups were served. Also, *individuals* did the giving, not the government. "For the most part, the few Roman acts of relief and assistance were isolated state activities, 'dictated much more by policy than by benevolence'."[{26}](#)

Last, Christian generosity was not solely for insiders.[{27}](#) This was truly radical. The emperor known as Julian the Apostate complained that since Jews never had to beg and Christians supported both their own poor and those outside the church, "those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render to them."[{28}](#)

Believers sometimes fasted for charity. The vision was big: ten thousand Christians skipping one hundred days' meals could provide a million meals, it was figured. Transformed hearts and minds imitated the God who left the throne of heaven to serve and die for others.[{29}](#)

Even W.E. Lecky, no friend to Christianity, wrote, "The active, habitual, and detailed charity of private persons, which is such a conspicuous feature in all Christian societies, was scarcely known in antiquity."[{30}](#) That is, until Christians showed up.

## Medieval and Modern Manifestations

This way of thinking and living continued in Medieval times.



Third century deacon St. Laurence was ordered by a Roman official to bring some of the treasures of the church. He showed up with poor and lame church members. For this affront to Roman sensibilities, he was roasted to death on a gridiron. Today, a Florida homeless shelter named after St. Laurence provides job help and basic assistance to the downtrodden.

## **The Generous Middle Ages**

The Middle Ages saw Christian compassion grow. In the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, Italian clergy “zealously defended widows and orphans.”[\[31\]](#) Ethelwold, bishop of Winchester in the tenth century “sold all of the gold and silver vessels of his cathedral to relieve the poor who were starving during a famine.”[\[32\]](#)

Furthermore, according to Will Durant,

*The administration of charity reached new heights in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. . . . The Church shared in relieving the unfortunate. Almsgiving was universal. Men hopeful of paradise left charitable bequests. . . . Doles of food were distributed [three times a week] to all who asked. . . . In one aspect the Church was a continent-wide organization for charitable aid.*[\[33\]](#)

## **From Hospitals to the Red Cross**

Christian hospitals spread to Europe by the eighth century. By the mid-1500s, thirty-seven thousand Benedictine monasteries cared for the ill. Arab Muslims even followed suit. Christianity was changing the world, even beyond the West.

The much-maligned Crusaders founded healthcare orders, helping Muslims *and* Christians. This led to the establishment of insane asylums. By the 1400s, hospitals across Europe were under the direction of Christian bishops who often gave their own money. They cared for the poor and orphans and

occasionally fed prisoners—an all-purpose institution of care.

“Christian aid to the poor did not end with the early church or the Middle Ages,” says Schmidt.[{34}](#) By the latter years of the nineteenth century, local Christian churches and denominations built many hospitals.

Medical nursing, a Christian innovation in ancient times, took leaps forward through the influence of Christ-follower Florence Nightingale. In 1864, Red Cross founder Jean Henri Dunant confessed on his deathbed, “I am a disciple of Christ as in the first century, and nothing more.”[{35}](#)

## **Child Labor Laws**

The Industrial Revolution in England ushered in a shameful exploitation of children, even among those naming the Christian faith. Kids as young as seven worked in horrible conditions in coal mines and chimneys.

Compassionate believers like William Wilberforce and Charles Dickens rallied their callous countrymen to pass Parliamentary laws against the worst child labor. The real superman of this cause was Lord Shaftesbury, whose years of tireless “pleadings, countless speeches, personal sacrifices and dogged persistence” resulted in “a number of bills that vastly improved child labor conditions.” His firm faith in Christ spurred him and a nation on to true compassion.[{36}](#) This had a ripple effect across Western nations. Child labor has been outlawed in the West but continues strongly in nations less affected by Christian culture.

## **And Still Today . . .**

This attitude of charity and compassion continues today in Christian societies like the Salvation Army and Christian groups who aided Hurricane Katrina victims so much better than the government.[{37}](#) Many more can be named. As someone said, “‘Christian ideals have permeated society until non-

Christians, who claim to live a “decent life” without religion, have forgotten the origin of the very content and context of their “decency”.”[\[38\]](#)

## Notes

1. Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004) 147-148.
2. Ibid, 127.
3. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Word/Thomas Nelson, 1995) 40.
4. Schmidt, pg. 148.
5. Logan Paul Gage, *Touchstone*, January/February 2008.
6. “New Study Shows Trends in Tithing and Donating,” Barna Research Group, April 14, 2008, [www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=296](http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrowPreview&BarnaUpdateID=296).
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great About Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2007), 204.
10. Ibid, 205.
11. Ibid, 207.
12. R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (Transaction Publishers, 1994), quoted in *The Truth Project* DVD-based curriculum, Focus on the Family, 2006.
13. D’Souza, 215.
14. Schmidt, 71.
15. Schmidt, 100.
16. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994) 29.
17. Schmidt, 129.
18. Schmidt, 131.
19. Christopher Price, “Pagans, Christianity, and Charity,” CADRE (Christian Colligation of Apologetics Debate Research & Evangelism), [www.christiancadre.org/member\\_contrib/cp\\_charity.html](http://www.christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_charity.html).

- 20 Schmidt, 136.
21. Schmidt, 155-157.
22. Schmidt, 130.
23. Schmidt, 126.
24. D'Souza, 64.
25. 2 Corinthians 8:9.
26. Lecky, quoted in Schmidt, 128.
27. Kennedy and Newcombe, 30.
28. Shelley, 36.
29. Schmidt, 126.
30. Quoted in Kennedy and Newcombe, 32.
31. Schmidt, 131-134.
32. Schmidt, 126.
33. Will Durant, *The Age of Faith*, 31, quoted by Christopher Price: [www.christiancadre.org/member\\_contrib/cp\\_charity.html](http://www.christiancadre.org/member_contrib/cp_charity.html).
34. Schmidt. 137.
35. Schmidt, 155-166.
36. Schmidt, 143.
37. Schmidt, 142-144.
38. Schmidt, 131.