The Development of Modern Culture – Critical Role of Christianity Downplayed

Steve Cable explodes 5 myths about history, showing Christianity's true critical role in the progress and development of culture.



Is our history really what you have been taught in school? For at least the last five decades in schools across this nation, most of us have digested a similar litany of facts about the development of the Western world. Among these commonly accepted facts are these five:

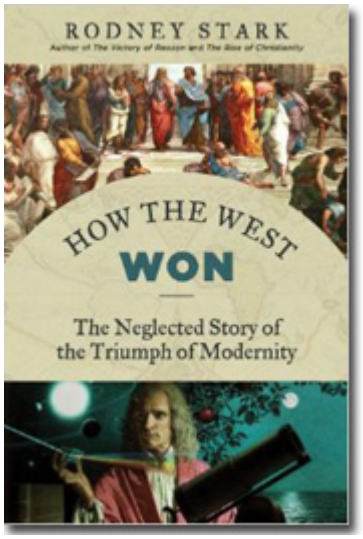
1. The Roman Empire introduced and maintained a period of relative peace in which innovation and free thought could flourish.

2. The Dark Ages, coming after the fall of the Roman Empire, was a period of over 500 years during which the European world languished in feudalism and ignorance.

3. The Protestant Reformation, fueled by the invention of the printing press, introduced a new era of religious freedom.

4. The Scientific Revolution was the result of Europe casting aside religious "superstitions" during the so-called Enlightenment.

5. Protestant missionaries were a negative, colonizing influence on the non-Western world.



In his recent book, entitled *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, Rodney Stark, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, questions these "historical facts" from our childhood along with many others. His premise, based on the current state of historical data and analysis, is that the conventional wisdom about the history of the western world was tainted by the prejudices and lack of knowledge of the early historical writers. His view is backed up by the research and writings of many contemporary scholars. He clearly points out that what is taught in our schools lags far behind the common knowledge held by top researchers in the field. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon is very similar to the difference between high school textbooks on the evolution of man and the current state of research into the origins of life.

Stark concludes that contrary to the conventional wisdom of high school textbooks, the worldview that developed as a result of following after the God revealed in Christian scripture was critical to the advent of our modern age. Only a society steeped in the message of an all-powerful, loving, creator of this universe was postured to take on the scientific and societal endeavors which are crucial to our society today. According to Stark, our modern world is not the result of key people freeing themselves from the chains of religious intolerance to pursue knowledge and truth, but rather the result of people seeking to better understand this universe created out of nothing into an orderly something by our Lord and God.

In the remainder of this article, we will look at these five key concepts of our history still taught to our students today and see how contemporary research has significantly modified

or completely discredited them.

The Impact of Greece, Judaism, and Rome

Apart from periods of Jewish history, most of the world before 600 B.C. was controlled by systems of government that awarded the elite few at the expense of the rest of society. In China, India and Egypt societies had this common theme: "Wealth is subject to devastating taxes and the constant threat of usurpation; the challenge is to keep one's wealth, not to make it productive."{1} Their rulers strived to make it so. Stark pointed this out: "As Ricardo Caminos put it about the ancient Egyptians, 'Peasant families always wavered between abject poverty and utter destitution.' If the elite seizes all production above the minimum needed for survival, people have no motivation to produce more."{2}

Beginning around 600 B.C., the Greek city-states prior to the reigns of Phillip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, were the first to offer a different economic model on a large scale. "The major benefit of Greek democracy was sufficient freedom so that individuals could benefit from innovations making them more productive, with the collective result of economic progress."{3} This unprecedented freedom was partly the result of Greece having an unfavorable geography with an abundance of mountains, no abundance of natural resources, and no large navigable river. This geography helped to promote the large number of small, independent city states. "Thus, having an unfavorable geography contributed to the greatness of Greece, for disunity and competition were fundamental to everything else."{4} Once Greece was under the rule of the Macedonians and later the Romans, the scale of innovation in the areas of democracy, economic progress, the arts, and technology slowed dramatically.

Unlike other peoples near the cities of Greece, the Jews were greatly impacted by the Greek philosophers. Why? The God the

Jews worshipped was “conscious, concerned and rational”{5} and as such the Jewish theologians were committed to reasoning about God from the things God revealed through Scripture. At this time the vast majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora outside of Palestine. And so, like the Apostle Paul, these Jews were exposed to Greek thought filtered through their understanding of Scripture.

Of course, the early Christians accepted this view of God but also added the idea that our knowledge of God and of his creation is progressive.{6} Understand that our early Christian fathers did not wholeheartedly embrace Greek ideas, choosing to show how Christian doctrines were much more rational. But they did embrace the ideas of reason and logic which were behind Greek philosophy. This train of thought by our Christian fathers set the stage for the development and advances of science. As Stark notes, “The truth is that science arose only because the doctrine of the rational creator of a rational universe made scientific inquiry plausible.”{7}

The rule of the Roman Empire provided centuries of relative peace and free travel throughout the Mediterranean area. This *pax Romana* facilitated the spread of Christianity across the Mediterranean world and thus played an important role in the growth of Christianity. However, Stark suggests that “the Roman Empire as at best a pause in the rise of the West, and more plausibly a setback.”{8}

Most of us probably view the Roman Empire as an expanded version of the great age of Greece where advancements were common in philosophy, commerce and technology. Stark points out that as a large, centrally controlled empire, Rome had plenty of labor and a large distance between the privileged few and the laboring masses. Consequently, the art and literature of the Roman period was fundamentally Greek. There were very few technological innovations developed during this period. In fact, “the Romans made little of no use of some

known technologies, e.g. water power."{9} They preferred to use manual labor rather than employ labor saving devices.

Stark suggests that two events during the period of Roman control were important to the development of our modern culture: the Christianization of the empire and the fall of Rome. "It was Rome that fell, not civilization. . . the millions of residents of the former empire did not suddenly forget everything they knew. To the contrary, with the stultifying effects of Roman repression now ended, the glorious journey toward modernity resumed."{10}

The Not-So-Dark Ages

My understanding of the Dark Ages as a student from the 1970's is probably similar to yours. It was pictured as a time in which European culture took a step backward from the advances of the Roman Empire and made little or no progress in advancing culture, economics, philosophy, or technology. It was a time characterized by wars and the stultifying oppression of the Catholic Church. Many historians of the past wrote that the fall of Rome cast Europe into this dismal age, aided by Christianity which celebrated poverty and urged contentment.

Stark, along with most modern historians, take a far different view of this period of Western history. Stark puts it this way: "The fall of Rome was, in fact, the most beneficial event in the rise of Western civilization, precisely because it unleashed creative competition among the hundreds of independent political units, which, in turn resulted in rapid and profound progress."{11}

In this culture of independent political units, trade developed and expanded rapidly, the average person ate better and grew larger than in the past because the people could now put to personal use the wealth Rome had previously squeezed from them. "Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark

Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually 'one of the great innovative eras of mankind.'"{12} During this period technology was developed and put into use "on a scale no civilization had previously known."{13}

One of the strongest influences during this period came from the Scandinavians, the Vikings. "The Viking merchants traveled a complex network of trade routes extending as far as Persia. . . (The) Vikings had excellent arms, remarkable ships, and superb navigational skills . . . Their boats were far superior to anything found elsewhere on earth at that time."{14} Our history lessons, however, placed an emphasis on great empires rather than movements impacting our way of life. "Not only have they continued to regret the fall of Rome, but they remember Charlemagne as the man who almost 'saved' Europe. In fact, the Scandinavians were as civilized as the Franks, while William the Conqueror was certainly as able as Charlemagne, and considerably more tolerant."{15}

One of the major events during this period was the rise of capitalism as an economic driver. Capitalism can only exist in societies with free markets, secure property rights and the right of individuals to work where they wish. The Christian West, out from under the yoke of the Roman Empire, was the only society where this move was possible. As Stark explains, "Of the major world faiths, only Judaism and Christianity have devoted serious and sustained attention to human rights, as opposed to human duties. Put another way, the other great faiths minimize individualism and stress collective obligations. They are . . . cultures of shame rather than cultures of guilt. There is not even a word for freedom in the languages in which their scriptures are written."{16} Counter to the position of earlier historians who put the advent of capitalism much later in history, capitalism not only thrived during this period but had been fully debated by theologians who on the whole gave it general approval.

You may remember being taught that during these Dark Ages that

Islamic scholarship and technological innovation kept society moving forward in the areas of science and technology. In fact, Stark points out, "The 'Golden Era' of Islamic science and learning is a myth. Some Muslim-occupied societies gave the appearance of sophistication only because of the culture sustained by their subject peoples – Jews and various brands of Christianity."{17} In fact when they later cleansed their society of these other people, they soon fell back into a state where any technology was bought from the West and in many cases had to be operated by Westerners. One area where this was revealed on multiple occasions was in the area of military strategy and technology. In numerous battles between A.D. 1200 and 1600, Western forces on land and on the oceans typically inflicted casualties upon their Muslim foes at a rate ranging from 10 to 1,000 Muslim casualties for every casualty among the Western forces.

"Despite the record of Muslim failure against Western military forces, far too many recent Western historians promulgate politically correct illusions about Islamic might, as well as spurious claims that once upon a time Islamic science and technology were far superior to that of a backward and intolerant Europe."{18}

"In 1148 all Christians and Jews were ordered to convert to Islam or leave Moorish Spain immediately, on pain of death. . . . And as (they) disappeared, they took the "advanced" Muslim culture with them. What they left behind was a culture so backward that it couldn't even copy Western technology but had to buy it and often even had to hire Westerners to use it."{19}

What we had been taught were Dark Ages of no progress were actually a period of great progress in the development of individual freedom and the concept of capitalism.

The Reformation and Religious Freedom

Martin Luther, the catalytic figure of the Reformation, asserted that salvation is God's gift, freely given, and gained entirely by faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Each person must establish his or her own personal relationship with God. This new emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility was certainly consistent with the key aspects of Western modernity. But the way these ideas played out in society were a different matter.

The popular view promulgated by English and German historians was that the Protestant Reformation, which roughly occurred between A.D. 1515 and 1685, was facilitated by the printing press and the spread of literacy, resulting in a "remarkable revival of popular piety and the spread of religious liberty." You were probably taught that this new view of piety, placing the responsibility of a relationship with God squarely on the shoulders of the individual rather than on the intervening work of the Church, created a new environment of religious tolerance and personal piety. This environment was invigorating to the concepts of scientific and economic progress. However, the real situation was far different from this idealistic view promulgated by English and German historians. Far from introducing religious liberty to the masses, the Protestant Reformation was more about switching one monopoly religion for another.

Stark points out three ways in which earlier historians and sociologists have misrepresented what went on in the spread of the Protestant Reformation. These historians and probably your high school history textbook, taught the following about the Reformation:

1. The Reformation introduced an era of religious freedom in Europe

2. The Reformation was able to spread rapidly because of the

newly invented printing press

3. The Reformation's spread was partially a result of its attractiveness to the common man.

On the first point, rather than introducing an era of religious freedom, the Reformation produced competing monopoly religions. Depending upon the area in which one lived, the pressure to conform to the religion adopted by that region was immense. So what determined whether your region would be Catholic or Protestant? If the area's current Catholic hierarchy was not operating under the rule of local rulers or councils, the rulers were very likely to convert to a Protestant view, thereby removing the influence of the Catholic Church in their domain. Importantly, it allowed them to loot church property in the name of religion. As Stark point out, "It is all well and good to note the widespread appeal of the doctrine that we are saved by faith alone, but it also must be recognized that Protestantism prevailed only where the local rulers or councils had not already imposed their rule over the Church. Pocketbook issues prevailed."{20}

Was it the printing press that allowed the Reformation to spread rapidly? If so, one would expect that cities with printing presses producing Luther's pamphlets and his Bible, would be most likely to align with Protestantism. Yet what we find is a negative correlation between towns with printers who had published Luther's Bible and those towns which had converted to Protestantism. The printing press was certainly a factor in spreading Luther's theology, but if it was the dominant factor we should see a strongly positive correlation, not a negative one. "Indeed, assessments of the impact of printed materials on the success of the Lutheran Reformation too often overlook a critical factor: no more than five percent of Germans in this era could read."{21}

Finally, a widely held belief is that the Lutheran Reformation touched the hearts of the masses, resulting in a huge revival

in personal faith and piety. However, most people were not personally impacted by the theological arguments between Catholicism and Protestantism. The common man in Germany at that time was, at best, semi-Christian. As Stark points out, “Eventually even Martin Luther admitted that neither the tidal wave of publications nor all the Lutheran preachers in Germany had made the slightest dent in the ignorance, irreverence, and alienation of the masses. Luther complained in 1529, “Dear God, help us! . . . The common man, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about Christian doctrine; and indeed many pastors are in effect unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet they all are called Christians, are baptized, and enjoy the holy sacraments – even though they cannot recite either the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed or the Commandments. They live just like animals.”

The Scientific Revolution and Christianity

The term “Scientific Revolution” was coined, referring to the period in the sixteenth and seventeenth century beginning with Copernicus and ending with Newton, when the rate of scientific advancement was thought to have increased dramatically. However, modern historians say that no such revolution occurred, although the role of science definitely matured during that period of time. Many of us remember being taught three aspects of this so-called revolution that we want to consider:

1. Most key scientific contributors had freed themselves from the rigid dogmas of faith.

2. The Protestant Reformation had freed society from “the dead hand of the Catholic Church,” thereby making real scientific thinking possible.

3. Real science could not occur in universities controlled by the churches.

However, Rodney Stark points out that current evidence indicates that all of these claims are false, stating, “Indeed, Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon.”{22}

Of the 52 most prominent contributors to scientific advancement during this period, we find that 60% of them were devout believers in Christianity. Only one of them was a skeptic toward the message of Christianity. And the rest were classified as conventionally religious. So, the idea promoted by contemporary philosophers that scientific advancement was the result of freeing themselves from belief in the dogmas of the faith could not be further from the truth.

Of these 52 leaders of the scientific community, 26 were Protestant and 26 were Catholic. This equal distribution belies the common wisdom that the Protestant revolution allowed real scientific thinking to begin to take root. It appears that prior advances in scientific thought had prepared the minds of these individuals to advance the frontiers even further, regardless of whether they were Protestant or Catholic. Both faiths believed in God as the Intelligent Designer of a rational universe, and a rational universe was one that could be understood through the application of the scientific method.

As noted earlier, most modern historians sided with the statement, “Not only were the universities of Europe not the foci of scientific activity . . . but the universities were the principal centers of opposition for the new conceptions of nature which modern science constructed.”{23} Actually, 92% of these leaders in scientific research spent an extended period of time of ten years or more in the universities. Nearly half of them served as university professors during their careers. In fact, the distinguished historian of science Edward Grant stated, “The medieval university laid far greater emphasis on science than does its modern counterpart.”{24}

Stark wrote, “Science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation.”{25} As the distinguished mathematician and scientist, Johannes Kepler stated, “The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony imposed on it by God and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics.”{26} Thus, the so-called scientific revolution occurred not in spite of Christianity but rather directly because a Christian worldview beckoned them to study the nature of our world more closely.

Protestant Missionaries and the Rise of Western Democracies

Protestant missionaries are often portrayed as the villains of imperialistic expansion. They have often been portrayed as having a greater interest in converting their charges to Western culture than introducing them to eternal life through Jesus Christ. However, their personal and public publications do not support this negative view. On the contrary, “Missionaries undertook many aggressive actions to defend local peoples against undue exploitation by colonial officials.”{27}

Beyond correcting this distorted view of missionary purpose, modern historians have discovered an interesting impact. A recent study has shown that the rise and spread of stable democracies in the non-Western world can be attributed primarily to the impact of Protestant missionaries. According to a study by sociologist Robert Woodberry,{28} the impact of these missionaries far exceeds that of fifty other control variables such as gross domestic product and whether or not a nation was a British colony. One would think that having a healthy amount of production per individual would be one of the biggest factors leading to a stable democratic government. But the data shows that it has been much more important to

have the teaching and leadership development provided by Protestant missionaries.

In addition, the greater number of Protestant missionaries per capita in a nation in 1923, the lower that nation's infant-mortality rate in 2000. In this case, the effect of having Protestant missionaries was more than nine times as large as the effect of current GDP per capita. In other words, having a history of Protestant missionaries is much more important than having a large amount of money in determining a low infant-mortality rate.

Conclusion

Many of us have been given the impression by educators that the scientific, governmental, and societal advances we enjoy are the result of enlightened people taking off their religious blinders and thinking more clearly about these topics. Sociologist Rodney Stark presents compelling data, arguing that in fact it was the unique worldview of Christianity that created societies in which new ideas could foment and flourish. This Christian worldview was fundamental to the advances in economics, science and government common in our current world. Understanding the worldview that fueled the advances making up our modern world is important if we are to continue to move ahead responsibly.

Notes

1. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity.* Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2014. 12.
2. Stark, 11.
3. Stark, 19.
4. Stark, 15.
5. Stark, 33.
6. Stark, 33.
7. Stark, 40.
8. Stark, 47.

9. Stark, 53.
10. Stark, 66.
11. Stark, 69.
12. Gimpel,Jean, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976.
13. Stark, 76.
14. Stark, 95.
15. Stark, 118.
16. Stark, 125.
17. Stark, 43.
18. Stark, 283.
19. Stark, 302.
20. Start, 272.
21. Stark, 270.
22. Stark, 304.
23. Westfall, Richard S. *The Construction of Modern Science* New York: Wiley, 1971. 105.
24. Grant, Edward. "Science and the Medieval University" in James M. Kittelson and Pamela J. Transue, eds., *Rebirth, Reform, and Resilience: Universities in Transition, 1300-1700* . Ohio State University Press, 1984. 68.
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26. Bradley, Walter, "The 'Just So' Universe: The Fine-Tuning of Constants and Conditions in the Cosmos" in William Dembski and James M. Kushiner, eds., *Signs of Intelligence: Understanding Intelligent Design*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001. 160.
27. Stark, 366.
28. Woodberry, Robert D. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, 2012. 106:1-30.

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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 is 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 on May 11, 1999.
2. Downloaded from the Internet at 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, Ceasar 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.

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