

The Social and Historical Impact of Christianity

Probe founder Jimmy Williams examines the charge that Christianity has been detrimental to society, providing evidence for the contrary—that it has been a force for good.

Introduction

W.E.H. Lecky has commented on the Enlightenment that “The greatest religious change in the history of mankind” took place “under the eyes of a brilliant galaxy of philosophers and historians who disregarded as contemptible an Agency (*Christianity*) which all men must now admit to have been . . . the most powerful moral lever that has ever been applied to the affairs of men.”{1}

And yet, the West is in the process of abandoning its Judeo-Christian base which was the very source of this social development (Is this good or bad? Can we even ask such questions of history?).

The Negative Charge: Christianity has been a repressive force against the advancement of civilization.

- A. Karl Marx termed Christianity an opiate of the masses, a tool of exploitation.
- B. Sigmund Freud called Christianity an illusion, a crutch, a source of guilt and pathologies.
- C. Bertrand Russell: “I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of the moral progress in the world.”{2}
- D. Arnold Toynbee: “When the Greco-Roman world was converted to Christianity, the divinity was drained out of nature and concentrated in a single, transcendent God. Man’s greedy impulse to exploit nature used to be held in check by his awe, his pious worship of nature. Now monotheism, as enunciated in Genesis, has removed the age-old restraint.”{3}
- E. Gloria Steinem observed that human potential must replace God by the year 2000.
- F. Lyn White: “Christians, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”{4} “The crisis will not abate until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”{5}

Summary: Christianity. . .

1. Is a crutch
2. Impedes science
3. Is a source of bigotry
4. Causes wars
5. Causes pollution and animal extinction
6. Contributes to the population explosion
7. Causes inflation.

Analysis of the Charges

(Unfortunately, *some* of the charges are true.)

A. The church, as an institution, has not always been a positive influence for social change.

1. Two major errors:

Platonism — The spiritual sphere is the real world. Matter is evil. Thus, the body is the prison of the soul. This sacred/secular distinction has resulted in the “pie in the sky” religion which has at times not been concerned about social reform.

Humanism — Views the physical and social needs of man as the only importance. The institutional church has, at times, failed at preaching regeneration.{6}

2. Jesus was concerned for the *total* man. Should we put a “new suit” on the man, or a “new man” in a suit? Jesus would have done both—put a new suit on a new man! (See the Gospels).

B. When the church is assimilated by the culture in which it finds itself, it loses its cutting edge. Example: Under Constantine in the 4th century, “The church became a little worldly and the world became a little churchy.”

C. The institutional church and true Christianity are not always synonymous. Professing Christians many not live up to the ideals and practices of its Founder (“Faith without works is dead,” James 2:26).

1. Renaissance popes are *not* Christianity; St. Francis of Assisi *is*.

2. Pizarro and Cortez are *not* Christianity, Bartolome de Las Casas *is*.

3. Captain Ball, a Yankee slave captain, is *not* Christianity, Wilburforce *is*.

D. Jesus Himself foretold that “tares” would be won among the “wheat.” (Matt. 13:25-39 ff).

Christianity’s Positive Impact

A. The Rise of Modern Science

1. Science rose in the West, not in the East. Why?

2. Whitehead and Oppenheimer insisted that modern science could not have been born except in a Christian milieu.

3. Many pioneering scientists were not only theists, but Christians: Newton, Pasteur, Kepler, Paschal, Fleming, Edwards.

4. Concepts conducive to scientific inquiry were expressly Christian:

a. Positive attitude toward the world.

b. Awareness of order (i.e. cause/effect, cf. Rom. 1:20).

c. Views of man as a superintendent of nature.

d. Positive attitude toward progress (“Have dominion . . .” [Gen. 1:28ff])

B. The Development of Higher Education

1. The Puritans were 95 per cent literate.
2. The University movement and the quest for knowledge (Berkeley, Descartes, the British Empiricists, Locke & Reid).
3. 100 of the first 110 universities in America were founded for the express purpose of propagating the Christian religion.
4. The American university emerged from American Seminaries (Witherspoon, Princeton; Timothy Dwight, Yale).

C. Christianity and the Arts: the influence has been so broad as to be inestimable.

D. Social Change

1. Means of Social Change

- a. Reform—moderately effective, but slow. Not always good.
- b. Revolution—more rapid, but usually bloody.
- c. Regeneration—Changing persons changes society. Jesus said, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . That which is born of flesh is flesh: that which is born of spirit is spirit” (John 3:3,6). Paul spoke of the Christian rebirth in this way, “Do not be conformed to this world-system, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .” (Romans 12:2).
- d. There is a difference between *professing* Christianity and *possessing* a personal relationship with Christ.

2. Examples in the Early Church

- a. In 252 A.D., the Christians of Corinth saved the city from the plague by responding to the needs of those who were simply dragged into the street.
- b. In 312 A.D., half of the Roman Empire came under the political and social influence of Christianity under the rule of Constantine.
- c. Early Christians stood in opposition to infanticide, degradation of women, gladiatorial combats, slavery, etc.

3. Examples in the Middle Ages (Consider the Monks, not the knights.)

- a. Monasteries served as hospitals, places of refuge.
- b. Monastic schools trained scribes to preserve manuscripts.
- c. Monasteries also developed agricultural skills and knowledge.
- d. The Scholastics remain a pivotal period of intellectual growth.

e. A time of major artistic development: architecture, music, literature.

4. Examples during the Reformation

a. A myriad of forces were at work in the vast social and religious shift known as the Reformation (i.e. Luther, printing, Gutenberg Bible).

b. Calvin and the other reformers must not be ignored. Says Fred Graham in *The Constructive Revolutionary*, "Economic, scientific, and political historians . . . generally know little about Calvin's own secular ideas. They assume that it was simply the rupture with tradition made by Calvinists which produced certain changes of life-styles which, in turn, affected society in Protestant countries in later centuries. But the heart of this study shows clearly that Calvin himself was aware of the epochal character of his own (social and economic) teaching and of the transforming implications of the Genevan pattern which he had a hand in forming" (11).

5. Examples in Colonial America.

a. The First Great Awakening (1725-75) raised up many American universities. 100 of the first 110 American universities were founded expressly for the purpose of training men to propagate the Christian faith.

b. American educational and political systems, Christian influences.

1) Colonial education was classical and Christian, with the Bible and its principles primary to all learning. The New England Primer appeared about 1690 and was almost universally adopted. It was the chief beginning reading book for American schools for over 100 years. The contents clearly show its religious character and purpose which included forty pages containing the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

2) Framers of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The vast majority at the Constitutional Convention (55 delegates) were members of Protestant churches: 28 Episcopalians, eight Presbyterians, seven Congregationalists, two Lutherans, two Dutch Reformed, two Methodists, two Roman Catholics, three Deists, one unknown.

c. The Wesley-Whitefield revivals resulted in millions of Christian conversions. Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was converted after hearing the preface of Luther's commentary on Romans read at Aldersgate: "About a quarter before nine, which they were describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, and Christ alone, for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

d. Wesley preached the social responsibilities of Christian piety:

1772 - Slavery was judicially excluded from England, 14,000 freed

1792 - Conditions aboard slave ships were regulated by law

1808 - The English slave trade was abolished.

1831 - All European slave trade abolished. England spent 15 million pounds for enforcement, even making payments to Spain and Portugal to stop the trade.

1833 - Slavery abolished in British Empire: 45 million pounds paid in compensation to free 780,933 slaves. Wilberforce, along with Buxton, Macaulay, and Clark . . . all evangelicals who were converted under Wesley's ministry, were the top leaders in ending slavery (This British action in the 1830's profoundly affected American attitudes which resulted in the Civil War).

e. Prison reform: John Howard, Elizabeth Fry (England); Fliedner (Germany). Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, was trained in one of Fliedner's schools in Kaiserswerth.

f. Labor reform: Anthony Ashley Cooper (Earl of Shaftesbury, self-described "Evangelical of the Evangelicals" pioneered child-labor laws, prohibited women working in the mines, established mental health sanitarium, built parts and libraries).

g. Harriett Beecher Stowe. Daughter of a preacher, married to a preacher; all her brothers were preachers. Her book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ignited the minds and imaginations of people in both North and South. "So this is the little lady who made this big war," said Abraham Lincoln upon meeting her for the first time. Her book was the first great American bestseller. (Initial print run was 300,000 copies. Sold three million copies in America, then 40 million worldwide in 40 languages).

h. The Third Great Awakening (1858-59) produced a rash of missionary and philanthropic organizations in the U. S. and England:

- Barnardo's Homes (world's largest orphanage system)
- William Booth's Salvation Army
- Henri Dunant, a student evangelist in Geneva, founded the Red Cross in 1865
- YMCA was founded in 1844 and grew greatly
- The missionaries from William Carey on:
 - CMS (Christian Missionary Society) taught 200,000 to read in East Africa in one generation
 - Secured the abolition of widow-burning and child sacrifice
 - Brought medicine to the world
 - Actually founded the educational systems in China, Japan, and Korea.

i. Today: World Vision, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Mission agencies, Parachurch groups, Denominational missionaries, medical personnel, teachers, and volunteers.

Conclusion

"It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the coming of Christianity. It brought with it, for one thing, an altogether new sense of human life. For the Greeks had shown man his mind; but the Christians showed him his soul. They taught that in the sight of God, all souls were equal, that every human life was sacrosanct and inviolate. Where the Greeks had identified the beautiful and the good, had thought ugliness to be bad, had shrunk from disease and imperfection and from everything misshapen, horrible, and repulsive, the Christian sought out the diseased, the crippled, the mutilated, to give them help. Love, for the ancient Greek, was never quite distinguished from Venus. For the Christians held that God was love, it took on deep overtones of sacrifice and compassion." - R. R. Palmer (standard college history text)

"The history of Christianity is inseparable from the history of Western culture and of Western

society. For almost a score of centuries Christian beliefs, principles, and ideals have colored the thoughts and feelings of Western man. The traditions and practices have left an indelible impress not only on developments of purely religious interest, but on virtually the total endeavor of man. This has been manifest in art and literature, science and law, politics and economics, and, as well, in love and war. Indeed, the indirect and unconscious influence Christianity has often exercised in avowedly secular matters—social, intellectual, and institutional—affords striking proof of the dynamic forces that have been generated by the faith over the millenniums. Even those who have contested its claims and rejected its tenets have been affected by what they opposed. Whatever our beliefs, all of us today are inevitable heirs to this abundant legacy; and it is impossible to understand the cultural heritage that sustains and conditions our lives without considering the contributions of Christianity.”

“Since the death of Christ, his followers have known vicissitudes as well as glory and authority. The Christian religion has suffered periods of persecution and critical divisions within its own ranks. It has been the cause and the victim of war and strife. It has assumed forms of astonishing variety. It has been confronted by revolutionary changes in human and social outlooks and subjected to searching criticism. The culture of our own time, indeed, has been termed the most completely secularized form of culture the world has ever known. We live in what some have called the post-Christian age. Yet wherever we turn to enrich our lives, we continue to encounter the lasting historical realities of Christian experience and tradition.” {7}

In contrast to the Christian system, modern materialistic philosophies do not provide a strong basis for reform. Humanism is, in effect, a philosophic smuggler; it has borrowed the “dignity of man” from Christian precepts and has not bothered to say, “Thank you.”

Notes

1. W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, NY: Appleton, 1905, Vol. I, 28-29) (explanatory insert mine).
2. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 21.
3. Arnold Toynbee, *Horizon* magazine, 1973).
4. Lyn White, *Science Magazine*, 1967.
5. *The Environmental Handbook*, p. 25.
6. Alan Menninger: *Whatever Became of Sin?*
7. Roland H. Bainton, Professor Emeritus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Yale University. *Horizon Magazine*, Marshall B. Davidson, et. al., American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc.: New York. Distributed by Harper and Row, 1964.

FOR FURTHER READING

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