

10 Misconceptions of the Christian Faith

#10 Christianity Has Done More Harm than Good in the World

Many deny the validity of Christianity and the teachings of Jesus not on the basis of philosophical or theological reasons, but based on the results that those teachings have produced. Whether witnessed in the annals of history or in personal encounters with Christians, abuse and misuse of Christian teachings and hypocritical adherence to them does at times yield deplorable actions. Events such as the Crusades and the Inquisition are often highlighted as blights on historical Christianity.

Christians have failed. The first response to such claims is to say that they are not without merit. The Christian Church is not an institution without flaws precisely because it is composed of people, every one of them deeply flawed. Christians have committed many unloving and unjust acts, both corporately and individually, and for those we are deeply regretful and sorry.

Who's to blame? A second response, however, is also in order: Christians are humans that don't always live up to what true Christianity is about, but this does not mean that Christianity itself is immoral. In other words, the Christian faith is not the source of injustice and evil, people are. Atheists like Christopher Hitchens fail to make this crucial distinction. In his book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Hitchens argues that religion aggravates racial and cultural differences. He writes, "Religion is not unlike racism... One version of it inspires and provokes the other. Religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred."¹ Hitchens' point may apply to some expressions of world religions, and even to some strands of Christianity; however, the flaw in Hitchens' argument is his assumption that belief in God necessarily leads to injustice. The Christian Scriptures stand resolutely opposed to unjust human killing and oppression. Even if some believers have misunderstood or misapplied the Bible, that fact should not lead us to conclude that the Bible is the problem. As Christians it motivates us to live in greater conformity to God's word, knowing that we need God's grace to overcome the evil in our own hearts and minds. It is unfair to blame Christianity for history's greatest atrocities, for non-Christian causes have produced as much and probably more evil than the Crusades, the Inquisition, and so on. Timothy Keller points out that "The Communist Russian, Chinese, and Cambodian regimes of the twentieth century rejected all organized religion and belief in God. A forerunner of all these was the French Revolution, which rejected traditional religion for human reason. These societies were all rational and secular, yet each produced massive violence against its own people without the influence of religion."²

Christians have accomplished tremendous good for the world. It also ought to be mentioned that many people, *because* they were followers of Christ, have accomplished tremendous good for the world.

For example, the foundation for American freedom that all people are created equal and endowed with certain rights is the product of Christian thought. Furthermore, the abolition of the British Empire's slave trade was the result of the movement spear-headed by William Wilberforce, who was an outspoken Christian statesman. Wilberforce was not an exception. Historian Rodney Stark explains that Christians have consistently fought for human liberty: "Although it has been fashionable to deny it, anti-slavery doctrines began to appear in Christian theology soon after the decline of Rome and were accompanied by the eventual disappearance of slavery in all but the fringes of Christian Europe. When Europeans subsequently instituted slavery in the New World, they did so over strenuous papal opposition, a fact that was conveniently 'lost' from history until recently. Finally, the abolition of New World slavery was initiated and achieved by Christian activists."³

Take advances in knowledge for another example. The value placed on education in the Western world is largely rooted in Christian convictions. For over a millennium and a half, schools and universities have been founded all around the world in the name of Christ. Many of our nation's finest universities, like Princeton, were founded by devout Christians. Princeton University was born out the Log College, a school that was begun by William Tennent. Tennent was a Presbyterian minister in the early 1700's who trained Christian ministers out of his home in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. At his death, it was recognized that a new school needed to be established, so Jonathan Dickinson founded The College of New Jersey in Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1746. The college was later moved to Princeton, and in 1896 was renamed Princeton University.

Nearly all the founders of modern science had a strong faith in God – men such as Boyle, Kepler, Newton, Pascal, and Pasteur. They pursued their research with diligence because they were convinced that a rational God created the universe in such a way so as to reflect, among other things, his own rationality and creativity. In arguing for scientific advancement, Francis Bacon averred that shallow knowledge of the world through natural science could lead people to atheism, whereas increased scientific understanding would naturally lead to adoration of the First Cause, the Creator God of the Bible.⁴ Bacon's syllogism is sadly and ironically turned on its head by many of today's scientists.

Perhaps the greatest invention in educational history – the movable-type printing press – was developed in Germany around 1440 toward the end of more efficient reproduction of the Bible. The Bible's wider circulation due to the printing press in turn provided kindling for the Protestant Reformation and its renewed emphasis on the importance of education.

It can be easy and even popular to fixate on Christians who have made mistakes, and consequently shrug off Christianity itself. To do this is to misunderstand Christianity's emphasis on God's grace, through Jesus, for people who make mistakes. The teachings of Jesus and the core truths of Christianity should not be judged on the basis of failure to adhere perfectly to those teachings on the part of Christians. Ultimately, in consideration of Christianity, it is imperative to distinguish between nominal, hypocritical, or cultural Christianity and genuine devotion to Jesus and his teachings.

(For further reading, see *Christianity on Trial* by Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett and *What's So Great About Christianity?* by Dinesh D'Souza).

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¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, pp. 35-36.

² Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 55. See also Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*; Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason*.

³ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, p. 291.

⁴ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 11.