

What Has Christianity Ever Done For Me?

Anyone possessing even a rudimentary awareness of world history might be astonished at those who opine that all religions are equally evil, equally fanatical. It leaves a person wondering what has happened to the concept of evil, and where people get their news from. We all process information. But we are not always sure why we respond the way we do. No doubt, our experience and our beliefs add their colour to whatever we see.

How we interpret our world depends greatly on whether we think God is absolutely sovereign, or if we think nobody is home in heaven at all. The Christian worldview historically has promoted the possibility of unprecedented good, of flourishing freedom, and of true (but not perfect) peace. This hope exists because the Christian views the world from the center point of history, the cross, where God dealt redemptively with the crux of the human problem.

It has become increasingly fashionable to fault Christianity for authoritarianism and repression, to paint it as a faith that promotes fanaticism and religious warfare, while impeding science and free inquiry. Little is heard about how many of our dearly held institutions originated and were developed under Christian influence. The very freedom of speech, which ironically allows widespread castigation of Christian values, is largely a byproduct of Christian doctrine spread throughout the culture of the Western world. Witness the regions where Christianity, as a system of thought, has had little influence, and note the remarkable differences.

The great sins perpetrated over the centuries by those who have been called Christian, must not blind us to the rest of history.

What is the impetus behind the faith and action of the Christian worldview? Simply one Man's unique and exemplary life, his teaching, suffering, death, and physical resurrection. He transformed forever those who would follow after Him. They, in turn, changed the world; its morals and ethics, health care, education, science, law, economics, art, music, literature, government, social welfare, families, human rights, and the sanctity of life itself. The awareness of these landmarks is markedly absent from our current social landscape, yet they remain as operative guideposts for so much of what we would pursue as decent and good.

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Addendum to “What Has Christianity Ever Done For Me?”

The sacred evidence of scripture correlates with secular evidence from the ancient world, and a person is on solid ground indeed when they believe what the Bible says. This is a major defense of the Christian faith. The Bible is consistent with reality, and it explains much of what has happened throughout history. However, Christianity can be defended on another front, and that is its record of being the most powerful agent for transforming society for the good, for the past two thousand years. Certainly Christianity has, and will continue to have its shortcomings, but these are heavily outweighed by its benefits to all mankind. In a climate of multiculturalism and the search for truth in all religions, this will

no doubt be scorned as a highly arrogant, politically incorrect thing to say. But the facts are plain enough for all to see, if we would only take a look.

People just don't come to life after they have been dead for a few days. So if it does occur, it will have a tremendous impact on those who are there when the 'impossible' happens. Such was the case in Palestine two thousand years ago. Jesus proclaimed that He was the son of God, and He validated that claim by the ultimate miracle. As a result, Christians who were later asked to denounce Jesus Christ declined to do so, and suffered imprisonment, torture, or death. They lived a noticeably higher moral lifestyle, and their Roman neighbours resented it. The common Roman practices of abortion, infanticide, suicide, homosexuality, and degradation of women were condemned by the Christian community. The early Christians were persecuted for nearly three hundred years with intermittent periods of toleration. Nero liked to cover the Christians with pitch and set them on fire at night to illuminate the circus games. Public mobs were allowed to molest and murder with impunity. In fact, the magistrates often complied. The writings of Eusebius document that Christians had their legs torn off, some had their noses and ears cut off and their eyes gouged out, others had their ankles cauterized and were then sent to the mines, some had their genitals mutilated, still others were thrown to beasts as public entertainment, women were cast into brothels to suffer shame before being executed. They endured all this simply because they acted upon the unbelievable truth about their heavenly Lord and King. He had risen from the dead for sinners like them, and so they followed his commands willingly no matter what the cost.

Ironically, the more that Christians were persecuted, the more their numbers grew. Their faith was unlike anything the Romans had ever witnessed, and the full force of the Roman Empire could not shut it down. None of their gods had risen from the dead. By the time Constantine legalized Christianity in AD 313, the number of Christians had grown from a dejected bunch of maybe 120 souls at Christ's death, to an astounding 5-7 million, or about 10% of the Roman Empire's 60 million people. Amazingly, there is very little evidence that those persecuted ever picked up the sword to defend themselves. They went about speaking of the forgiveness of Christ and demonstrating His love to all, regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, poverty, or wealth. They were true multiculturalists. They knew that it was not their faith that validated Christ's resurrection, as many would teach today, but in fact it was his physical resurrection that validated their faith.

Over the centuries, the Christian faith has been a positive force in effecting so much of what we now take fore-granted as decent and moral. Here is a short list of some of these areas of influence.

The Sanctification of Human Life: Infanticide was common in Greco-Roman culture and many other cultures as well. Early Christian literature repeatedly condemned infanticide. Bishop Basil of Caesarea outlawed it in 374. Early Christians also opposed abortion, another accepted Roman practice. Concerning the gladiatorial spectacles, most people would now recoil at the brutality. Is this because we have absorbed Christianity's view of the sacredness of human life? In time, the games were banned by the emperors. The practices of human sacrifice and the eating of human flesh, once widespread in many pagan cultures, is now also (almost) a thing of the past, largely due to the value placed on human life by the Christian religion. Unfortunately, we seem to be slipping back into the past as partial birth abortion, and the idea that animals are equal to humans in value, are gaining acceptance.

Sexual Morality: Roman literature of the first two centuries AD indicates that adultery and fornication were common, marital unions were short-lived, and sadistic and masochistic sex was widespread among all levels of society. Adultery was defined in terms of a woman's status, not a man's. A wife who committed adultery was guilty of a property offence, because she belonged (literally) to her husband. The adulteress was subject to the death penalty, but no such punishment could be incurred upon the husband. Christianity teaches sex between spouses as the expression of mutual love and respect, not self-serving gratification. Not only did Christians contend that sexual relations had to be confined to marriage, but they also believed that sex made the couple 'one flesh', a very radical idea at the time. By rejecting adultery and fornication, they instituted a new sexual morality. Since Christ did not institute a double standard for men and women, a wife could also divorce on the grounds of adultery.

The ancient Greeks and Romans practiced widespread pedophilia, and they were not ashamed. It is depicted in poetry, literature, and archaeological artifacts. Today, this perverse behaviour is classified as child molestation, and the fact that pedophilia has been outlawed is the result of Christian influence.

Womens' Rights: The New Testament compares the relationship of a man with his wife to that of Christ to the church. Where else does one find the concept of sacrificially loving a wife as being the norm for marriage, and not the exception? In ancient Greece there was no freedom for the average wife. She had the social status of a slave. She was not permitted to speak in public. Baby girls were expendable and were often killed. The actions and teachings of Christ raised the status of women to heights previously unheard of. He spoke with them and befriended them, even in public. And in the early church, women were allowed freedom and dignity unknown in the Roman and Judaic cultures. Unfortunately, the teachings of Christ were forgotten by many in the church over the centuries and this has led to the distortion of the role and status of the sexes. Yet the idea of a woman being a man's equal is clearly a new testament teaching. Monogamy has become the marriage norm in all countries where the Christian church became prominent.

Charity and Compassion: Christian charity means giving to someone to alleviate distress or hardship, without expecting anything in return. It's what Christ taught his disciples to do. As St. Paul taught in his letter to the Philippians (chapter 2, verse 4), Christians are to help and give to everyone in need, Christians and pagans alike. Christian charity is completely voluntary, 'from the heart'. To the Christian, every individual is valuable because firstly he is made in the image of God, and secondly Christ died to redeem lost sinners, and that includes all types of people. This is not, and never has been, the common view of humanity.

Compassion is a Christian innovation. This is not about emotion, it's about a responsibility to fellow man. *We are* our brother's keepers, as the Bible teaches. Unlike the pagans, Christians showed compassion for the weak, the sick, the outcast, the dying, and doing so often at their own risk. In Christian thought, the worth of a human being has never been determined by external and accidental circumstances surrounding a person's stature in society.

When modern people show compassion upon seeing a human tragedy, like a tsunami, do they not demonstrate an internalized concept of Christian compassion? Over the centuries orphanages have been founded and supported by Christian charity. Every human being is precious in the sight of God. The idea of 'godparents' is one founded at the Christian baptismal font. Beginning with the Christian era, homes for the aged spread throughout Europe and North America, and they have become major social institutions. Social welfare in general has sprung out of the Christian view of the less fortunate. Countless volunteer organizations help their communities every day, following the example of the early church, of giving without expecting anything in return. The Salvation Army, the United Way, countless service clubs, rescue missions, YMCA, YWCA, have been touched by the tradition of Christian compassion.

Early Christians, following the example of Christ, set a model for their descendants to follow. People, who want to be 'decent' apart from religion, have forgotten the very origin of the content and context of their decency. Every time we see compassion and charity in action, the credit should go to Jesus Christ.

Health Care: Christians cared for the sick, no matter who they were. Jesus healed many in his ministry. He was concerned about the whole person, body and soul. The stoic attitude of the Greco-Roman culture toward the sick and dying left little room for compassion. Romans saw helping the sick as a sign of weakness, whereas the Christian viewed the act of helping the sick as doing it unto Christ Himself. Whereas Seneca wrote of drowning the weak or abnormal at birth, the Christians saw the potential of saving another soul every time they tried to save a life.

In time, hospitals for the poor and general populace were built. By the middle of the 6th century AD there were hospitals in most of the larger cities of Christendom. These were the first known voluntary charitable institutions. The story of Florence Nightingale is still an inspiration to those aspiring to pursue the nursing profession.

The Red Cross was founded by a Christian named Jean Henri Dunant and four associates in 1864. He chose the Christian cross as the emblem of the fledgling organization. The rest is history.

Education: Christianity, from its beginnings, had instruction for both men and women. Later, schools maintained by bishops taught doctrine as well as grammar, rhetoric, logic, math, geometry, music and astronomy. Christians took their cue from Jesus who taught both sexes in His ministry. In later times, the reformers Luther and Calvin both advocated universal, state sponsored education for the understanding of the world we live in. In fact, Luther told civic authorities that all children should be *compelled* to attend school. Today, this idea is accepted and enshrined in public law throughout the West.

The first universities arose in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the auspices of Benedictine monks. Well into the 19th century, even with the growth of scientific studies, Western universities almost always operated within theological boundaries. As recently as 1932, 168 of the 182 colleges and universities in the USA were founded by Christian denominations. It is ironic that despite the time most of us in the West spend in school, so little is appreciated about the contribution made by the Christian heritage to the highly developed educational systems that we now take for granted.

Labour and Economics: In classical Rome, there was no dignity in labour. Slaves did most of the work, while the non-slave population sought pleasure above everything else. Christians assigned dignity to work because of the role model of Jesus, of the apostles, and the New Testament teaching that if a man will not work, he will not eat. The reformers of the 16th century developed the notion that work is a calling, a vocation, from God. Thus, all honest work was God-pleasing. Although it now may seem to us so basic, the idea of fair wages was not so widespread in those class driven societies, especially where servanthood and slavery were the norm. The Christian work ethic underpinned the expansion of capitalism, as it eventually aided in developing a new middle class of consumers and producers of goods.

There's no sense working if you cannot keep what you earn. If the king, the church, or the state, owns it all, then what's the point? Private property rights and personal freedom go hand in hand. They are closely linked to, and developed along side of, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and freedom of speech. The commandments not to steal and not to covet underscore such rights. Nowhere in Scripture does God deny the right of economic freedom for people, unlike fascism, radical socialism, and communism. Capitalism, i.e. free enterprise, with all its faults and temptations concerning greed and the undue exploitation of the less affluent, is a material byproduct of mosaic law. It is also closely related to the Christian concept of freedom, within the bounds given in Holy writ, to pursue the activity of one own choosing, and reap the consequences. Is it an accident that the greatest economic freedom, and its resulting prosperity, is found in countries where Christian ideals have had the most influence?

Science: There is only one God, one rational supreme Being. Christian philosophers linked rationality with the empirical, inductive method. They reasoned that discovery and predictability were possible only in a universe made to the order of a rational Being, not a universe of chaos. Aristotle, whose thinking was dominant among philosophers and scientists for 1500 years, held that true knowledge was only acquired through the deductive process of the mind. The inductive method, requiring manual work in a lower realm, was not to be trusted, and was not acceptable.

The Christian perspective sees God and His creation as distinct and separate. Pagans adhered to views about the power of controlling spirits living in and through nature. The idea of man, as God's representative, being responsible to care for the world, is also a fundamental tenet which follows directly from the Biblical creation account.

This distinctly Christian approach to reality has allowed many in the scientific community to develop the known scientific 'laws', because of the underlying assumption that the universe is governed rationally and predictably. The idea that the God of the Bible is the One behind all the order, which we discover through our scientific endeavour, has been largely displaced by 'modern' notions which often attempt to explain the 'hows', but not the ultimate 'whys' of our world. Nevertheless, the inductive method continues to be the way true science is done.

Law: The Judeo-Christian view of law is fundamental to Western society as we know it. The requirement of having witnesses to testify finds its basis in the Bible. The idea that all are subject to the law, that no one is exempt, is a Biblical tenet first and last.

The Magna Carta had important Christian ties, despite it having often been contradicted by various popes and kings. In setting forth their beliefs regarding civic liberties, the architects of the Magna Carta followed the precedents of the many creeds set forth by the Christian bishops of the previous centuries.

The notion to worship freely according to ones' conscience before God inevitably led to the notion that one might also live freely in society according to ones' conscience. Natural rights were not given to people by kings or governments, but belonged to people by the very nature of creation. Christian handprints are smeared all over countless declarations of law, government, and freedom, over the past 800 years of western democratic development. Individual freedom and rights are prevalent where Christianity has had the greatest impact.

Conclusion: There are many other areas of western culture where the imprint of Christianity has left its mark. Christians are sinful people, but they are redeemed sinful people, with a sure hope of better things to come. Of course, what we would call 'good' has also been accomplished by many outside of the Christian faith. However, the inspiration, power, and teaching of a risen Saviour have caused Christianity as a whole to have a tremendously beneficial impact where ever it has been introduced and become established. It has undeniably improved the lot of humanity. As we go about our business freely, in relative safety, assuming the normalcy of our daily life, we should pause and reflect on why it is the way it is here in the West. What countries do you think you could live in and adapt to? Is it just a difference in the weather, landscape, customs, or does it go a bit deeper? Wherever there is freedom now, invariably Christianity is embedded in the history of that region.

This truth needs to be told and retold; or we might just lose what we have been given.

The above information was taken almost exclusively from the excellent and very readable book '*How Christianity Changed the World*' by Alvin Schmidt, Zondervan, 2004, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Further Recommended Reading:

The Story of Christianity 2 vol. in one
Justo L. Gonzalez
Prince Press (Hendrickson)
Peabody, Massachusetts
2001 2nd Edition

A History of Christianity Vol. 1
Kenneth Scott Latourette
Prince Press (Hendrickson)
Peabody, Massachusetts
Fifth printing Jan 2003