

Sermon 21: The Problem of Christianity Being Detrimental to Society

OUTLINE

Christianity holds back progress
Christianity denies religious freedom
Christianity denigrates human dignity
Christianity destroys other cultures

INTRODUCTION

Today there are many people who believe that Christianity is not only wrong and backward but actually dangerous and inhibiting. The New Atheists have laid almost all social evil at the foot of religion. The trouble with this critique is that it is historically uninformed. There is a false narrative that tries to make out that science, or progress, or freedom, has been trying to break out of the mould and the church has been the biggest hindrance. This accusation that the church can only do harm can only come when people are historically ignorant to all that the church has accomplished. Jurgen Habermas, who carried no brief for Christianity said: 'Christianity and nothing else is the ultimate foundation of liberty of conscience, human rights and democracy, the benchmarks of western civilization.' This is not the feeling on the streets or in the message of the New Atheists. So today I want to look at four areas of concern. Firstly, we must address the false narrative that Christianity has held back the development of culture/society. Secondly, we want to answer the perception that Christianity denies religious freedom forcing its opinion upon all. Thirdly, we must address the concern that Christianity dehumanise us by denying us freedom and putting us into a straightjacket. Fourthly, that Christianity destroys other cultures. I have grouped all these concerns together under the problem of Christianity being detrimental to society.

Christianity holds back progress

I am a lover of history and in particular surveys of history of all sorts, the history of philosophy, the history of the church, the history of psychology, the history of apologetics, the history of medicine, etc. Over and over again I come up against a fallacy, that Christianity was the great enemy to progress. A typical example is Edward Gibbons famous book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This book pretends that the golden age of history and civilization was the time of the Greeks succeeded and perfected by the Romans, but then came barbarous Christianity. And Rome and its glory falls as Christianity rises to the fore and the 'Dark Ages' begin. This is portrayed as a time of tyranny and intellectual darkness, but the human spirit cannot be bound and a return to the sources of Greek and Roman culture gave birth to the 'Renaissance.' But darkness soon came on its heels with the rise of the Reformation creating a dark fog of religious conflicts. But this darkness was banished with the rise of Rationalism and Empiricism which led finally to the great Enlightenment where a man thinks for himself and does not simply accept what religion or authority says. This narrative painted in broad brush strokes is ubiquitous. However, it is false.

In the first place it was the Barbarians and not the Church which destroyed Rome, it was the Church which converted the heathen and taught them a better way. I have a great book on my shelf called, *The Genesis of Science, How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution*, by James Hannam. His whole thesis is to reverse the false narrative. Just inside the dust jacket it reads, 'People in the Middle Ages did *not* think that the world

was flat—in fact, medieval scholars could prove it wasn't. The Inquisition never executed *anyone* because of their scientific ideas or discoveries (actually the Church was the chief sponsor of scientific research and several popes were celebrated for their knowledge of the subject.) It was medieval scientific discoveries, methods, and principles that made possible western civilization's 'Scientific Revolution.'"

As it relates to the development of science as we know it today, 'Scientist' being a word that only came into existence in 1833, Hannam demonstrates that the church gave rise to the universities for the clergy where most of the scientific advances took place, many of the innovators and inventors being clergy or devout Christians. Notions like the world being like a giant clock or mechanism lent it to being studied for further advances. To know that the world was created by God is what stimulated the scientific enterprise in the first place. Before major discoveries were made the study of nature was an outworking of worship as they studied God's handiwork. 'This made it a legitimate area of study because through nature man could learn about its creator. Medieval scholars thought that nature followed the rules that God has ordained for it. Because was consistent and not capricious, these natural laws were constant and worth scrutinizing.'¹ Modern science and learning is today what it is not despite Christianity but because of it.

Add to that the effect of the monasteries after the Barbarians sacked Rome. Monasteries were places where learning was maintained, where ancient manuscripts were copied, did you know that the majority of the ancient manuscripts we have are because priests copied them? Monasteries became centres around which villages, towns and eventually major cities developed. They were places of medicine, charity, faith and agriculture. They were not closed off sheltered places that were behind the times and a thorn in the side but a stimulus to progress and stability.

Add to that the effect of Christianity on the arts. Think of the world's greatest painters and sculptors and architects, you inevitably have to think of Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, Leonardo Da Vinci's the Last Supper. In music you are met with Handel's Messiah and Mozart's Requiem. In Poetry you meet Milton and Herbert.

In the area of social justice think of Wilberforce and his work against slavery, Thomas Barnado and his work for the homeless children, the Earl of Shaftesbury and his prison reforms. Think of the Second Great awakening and its work in the temperance movement, the woman's suffrage movement and abolitionism.

And there is more the influence of Christianity upon medicine, education, welfare, economics, law, politics and many other fields is immense. To repeat the idea that Christianity has been a hindrance to progress is a bald faced lie.

Christianity denies religious freedom

Today's person looks at Christianity as a dogmatic religion that is seeking to convert people over to their view and who condemn other views as being wrong. There is a history of the Roman Catholic Church taking over countries, and in certain political arenas the Evangelical right has a clear political agenda and is seeking to take over the public sphere. There is then an understandable misapprehension about Christianity as an upholder of religious liberty. It is worthwhile looking at the Christian view on the separation of Church and State and how that in fact created and protects religious freedom today.

1 P348-9.

Jesus is the author of the separation of Church and state. Matt. 22:15-22, 'Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.' It is important to note how Christ distinguishes the two kingdoms of God and Caesar. And highlights two distinct sets of responsibilities. Since we are not in Eden, nor in Israel, nor yet in the New Creation but are abiding in a common grace state where God has granted government as a gift and restraining grace, there is no mixing of church and state, at least there should not be. This was a unique contribution that Christianity brought into the world in the first century. In the early church period Christians were accused of being atheists. This does not mean that they did not believe in God, but rather that they did not believe in the gods of the state. You see in Rome at the time the pantheon of gods was a way to unite the Roman Empire, worshipping Caesar was a way to submit yourself to Rome. They mixed church and state, religion and state. Christians insisted that they must worship God all the while submitting to the state, Rom. 13:1-7.

Although Christianity and Islam are both monotheistic, they should not be confused with each other as many are doing today in grouping them together as dogmatic and destructive forms of fundamentalism. Historian Bernard Lewis has pointed out that, 'in classical Arabic and in the other classical languages of Islam, there are no pairs of terms corresponding to 'lay' and 'ecclesiastical', 'spiritual' and 'temporal', 'secular' and 'religious', because these words express a Christian dichotomy that has no equivalent in the world of Islam.'²

Augustine in his very influential book *The City of God* gives clarity on the two kingdoms idea. He highlights how there is an earthly city and a heavenly city, of which Christians are a part. However, there are varying responsibilities. And until the time of the new creation these kingdoms are not united but separate. The implications of Augustine's views are stated by apologist Dinesh D' Souza, 'It means that the earthly need not concern itself with the question of man's final or ultimate destiny [i.e. it is not the job of the state to evangelize]. It also implies that the claims of the earthly city are limited, that there is a sanctuary of conscience inside every person that is protected from political control, and that kings and emperors, however grand, cannot usurp authority that rightly belongs to God.'³

This is the embryo of limited government and the separation of church and state. Now granted it took many centuries for Christians to fully implement this vital distinction but it should be stressed that the teachings of Jesus taught this despite the failure of Christians to implement it. Further reflection on these ideas led to John Locke a Christian articulating the idea of religious tolerance. This was further expanded by American Christians who had to flee England and Scotland to worship freely into the idea of freedom of conscience. In other words, our modern notion of freedom/liberty of conscience is a Christian answer to a Christian problem and has laid the ground work for all modern definitions of personal

2 Dinesh D' Souza, *What so Great about Christianity*, p50.

3 *Ibid.*, p51.

liberties. Sadly, the hard fought for idea of freedom of religious expression has come to mean freedom from religious expression. The modern idea that seeks to remove religion is a case of biting the hand that feeds. Listen to that quote from Habermas again, 'Christianity and nothing else is the ultimate foundation of liberty of conscience, human rights and democracy, the benchmarks of western civilization.' When people say that Christianity denies one freedom you can respond, Christianity gave you freedom.

Christianity denigrates human dignity

The exclusive claims of Christ have made it appear to many that Christianity is an enemy to equal rights and liberty undermining human dignity. In light of recent thought that all truth claims are power plays, a new attitude towards Christianity as a force of violence that undermines our humanity is now prevalent. The Christian view of the human being is one of God creating all human beings equal. The statement 'All men are created equal' from the American Declaration of Independence is based on Gen. 1:27, 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' The Biblical teaching that God made us in His image means that we are equal and that we have dignity, it is this view that has undergirded all Christian energy in being pro-life, abolitionist, democratic, etc. Nietzsche says this when he said, 'Another Christian concept, no less crazy: the equality of souls before God. This concept furnishes the prototype of all theories of equal rights.'

Listen to this account of how this led Christians to value children and women: 'In ancient Greece and Rome, human life had very little value. The Spartans left weak children to die on the hillside. Infanticide was common, as it is even today in many parts of the world. Fathers who wanted sons had few qualms about drowning their newborn daughters. Human beings were routinely bludgeoned to death or mauled by wild animals in the Roman Gladiatorial arena. The greatest of all classical thinkers, from Seneca to Cicero, saw nothing wrong with these practices. Christianity banned them, and Christianity introduced the moral horror we now feel when we hear about them.

Women had very low status in Ancient Greece and Rome, as they do today in many cultures, notably in the Muslim world. Aristotle expressed the view of many when he wrote that in men reason finds its full expression. In children, according to Aristotle, reason is present but undeveloped. In women, he wrote, reason is present but unused. Such views are common in patriarchal cultures. And, of course, they were prevalent in the Jewish society in which Jesus lived. But Jesus broke the taboos. From society's point of view and even from some of his male disciples' point of view, Jesus scandalously permitted women (even of low social status) to travel with him and be part of his circle of friends and confidantes.⁴

This Christian view of humanity has shaped the politics and social concern of the West. So that when we come forward to the declaration of human rights in 1948, a document that asserts the common rights of all people, namely, that each adult has the right to marry someone of the opposite sex and start a family, that no one should be tortured, that all should be equal in the eyes of the law, that everyone has a right to life, liberty and property, and that people should receive fair pay for their work, this is built on the back of what Christianity has given to the West.

Christianity destroys other cultures

4 Ibid., p71.

The charge has been made that Christianity is a cultural straight jacket that takes all cultures and forces them into one mold. It is true that we have a history of colonialism where 'Christian' nations have sought to annex smaller and weaker nations in an attempt to expand their kingdoms. But once again this was a gloss over sinful motives that attempted to give a religious face to a desire for more power and wealth. The truth is that Christianity is in fact more adaptable to the various cultures of the world than any other religion. If you look at Islam when it grows it imposes a single language, dress code and set of laws to which all must conform. It truly is destructive, it cannot accommodate different types of foods, clothing, music styles, art, etc. The same is true of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc. Christianity was the first true international religion that welcomed people from all tribes, tongues and nations to sit at one table as one family in the Lord.

A modern day example of Christianity not destroying culture is the growing church in Africa. 'Why has Christianity grown so explosively in these places? African scholar Lamin Sanneh gives a most intriguing answer. Africans he said had a long tradition of belief in a supernatural world of good and evil spirits. When Africans began to read the Bible in their own languages many began to see in Christ the final solution to their own historic longings and aspirations as Africans. ...Sanneh argues that secularism with its anti-supernaturalism and individualism is much more destructive to local cultures and 'Africanness' than Christianity is.⁵ In other words, not only is Christianity more accommodating than other religions, but it is also more accommodating than those making the accusation that it is unaccommodating. Gal. 3:27-28, 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'

The Bible teaches us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, that there is no race that is immune from sin. And it is in Christ that God has made a plan for all nations where by faith and not by works, or cultural traditions, or race based qualifications, or particular religions ceremonies is a person saved. All are sinners and all need Christ. When we believe we are all joined into one spiritual family. The Bible gives us certain things that we must do like baptism and the Lord's Supper, but there is no requirement about language, food, music, dress, etc. The Bible paints the picture of a people from every tribe and tongue and nation coming before God in their ethnic uniqueness to give their praise to God. There are admonitions to love one another despite these different cultural difference and call to humbly put one another first. When properly understood the Christianity of the Bible is not an enemy to society but its solution.