

Introduction

Many people today would agree that Christianity *has* transformed the world – but for the worse. The ‘new atheists’ don’t just see Christianity as wrong, but evil. They believe that we need to be liberated from outdated ideas of moral absolutes. Science (not religion) can solve our problems.

The way history is sometimes presented is that Enlightened Rome (pagan) collapsed; then came the Dark Ages (religious superstition); but during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, human reason triumphed over religion. Humanity then entered the uplands of scientific progress unhindered by faith. Human virtue (without God) could achieve human rights, freedom and prosperity.

That simple narrative has been discredited.¹ Tom Holland,

1 David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale University Press, 2010); V. Mangalwadi, *The Book that Made your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilisation* (Thomas Nelson, 2011); R. Stark, *The Victory of Reason* (Random House, 2006).

author of *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*,² testifies that in his youth:

I was more than ready to accept their interpretation of history: that the triumph of Christianity had ushered in an ‘age of superstition and credulity’, and that modernity was founded on the dusting down of long-forgotten classical values.

But reflection on the evidence changed his mind:

The longer I spent immersed in the study of classical antiquity, the more alien and unsettling I came to find it. The values of Leonidas, whose people had practised a peculiarly murderous form of eugenics ... were nothing that I recognised as my own; nor were those of Caesar, who was reported to have killed a million Gauls and enslaved a million more. It was not just the extremes of callousness that I came to find shocking, but the lack of a sense that the poor or the weak might have any intrinsic value.³

Tom Holland set out to trace the impact of Christianity on Western civilisation, and discovered that the self-giving example of Christ, and the ethic of respect for all human life as made in God’s image, are the *real* foundation of all those values we cherish.

2 Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (Little, Brown, 2019). The American release, is entitled: *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*.

3 Tom Holland, ‘Why I was Wrong about Christianity’, *The New Statesman*, 14 September 2016, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/religion/2016/09/tom-holland-why-i-was-wrong-about-christianity> (accessed 26 March 2020).

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Sociologist Rodney Stark has had a long and distinguished academic career, and written many books on the history of Christianity. For most of his career he made no particular religious profession. He argues:

The success of the West, including the rise of science, rested entirely on religious foundations, and the people who brought it about were devout Christians.⁴

This is because Christianity teaches that God, the supremely rational being, has created mankind in His image. He has placed humans in an ordered and coherent world, with the task of stewarding and managing its resources, using their God-given gifts of reason and logic.

Another historian claims that Christianity has been:

... *the* most powerful agent in transforming society for the better across two thousand years ... No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement – whatever – has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done.⁵

The purpose of this book is to pull together and summarise some of the findings of some of the longer works that have appeared recently. I give suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, and there is also a list of resources at the end. This book is not comprehensive, it's an introduction.

4 Rodney Stark, *Victory of Reason* (Random House, 2006), p. xi.

5 Paul L. Maier, *Foreword to Alvin J. Schmidt, How Christianity changed the World*, (Zondervan, 2004), p. 9. Paul L. Maier was former Russell H. Seibert Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, and is now Professor Emeritus.

HOW CHRISTIANITY TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

I want to provide a short and simple primer to help you to answer these common accusations:

- *Christianity is violent and intolerant*
- *Christians are on the wrong side of history*
- *Christianity is terrible for human rights*

Of course, this is a vast topic. Christianity today is the first truly global religion. A third of the world's people are nominally Christian. There is no way that the full impact of Christianity can be measured. And we need to remember that:

- *In the past, in the name of Christ, injustices have been wrongly perpetrated*
- *Institutional religion has to be distinguished from real living Christianity*
- *Christians don't have a monopoly on virtue and compassion*

But from the inception of the Christian Church at Pentecost, the followers of Jesus have sought to love their neighbour and to reflect God's moral character. We can trace at least some of the beneficial and widespread impact this has had. In chapters one and two we will consider the theme of freedom. Chapter three will look at the question of justice. We'll turn in chapters four and five to the protection of life and the dignity of women. In chapters six and seven we'll consider philanthropy and healthcare. Chapters eight and nine will deal with educational provision and the work ethic. In the final chapter we will contrast two views of history.

This overview gives a broad view of those through the centuries who have professed to be Christian. Mention of the

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positive achievements of a person or group does not imply validation or endorsement of their theology.⁶

You don't have to read the whole book consecutively. The chapters are self-contained, so you can dip in and out looking at the topics you find most interesting. To enable each chapter to be read alone, there is a small amount of overlap between some of them.

The consensus today in the media and the educational establishment is deeply hostile to biblical Christianity. Christians may respond by feeling defensive and afraid. But we don't have to be ashamed. Throughout history, Christ's true followers have done much good. This short, necessarily selective account is designed to present a positive response to the overly-negative story we often hear. I want readers to be confident that:

A world from which the gospel had been banished would surely be one in which millions more of our fellows would go unfed, unnursed, unsheltered and uneducated.⁷

Let's begin to see how!

6 My 2017 Word Alive talks on the Reformation include material on the importance of truths such as the final authority of the Word of God, <https://reformation-today.org/articles-of-interest/the-reformation-rediscovering-the-power-of-the-gospel-a-series-of-papers-by-dr-sharon-james-presented-at-the-word-alive-conference-2017-part-i/> (accessed 15 June, 2020).

7 Bentley Hart, p. 15.