

Question #3 - How come church history is full of such evil Christians?

Jesus may have been a good teacher but Christians are terrible people. In fact, Christians have committed some of the worst crimes in the history of the world. They do these things because the Bible is filled with examples of God commanding violence, so this evil is a result of being zealous for the religion. The Christians who do not do these things are good in spite of the Bible. If we had no Christians, or religion in general, the world would be a better place.

“The problem, however, is that the teachings of the Bible are so muddled and self-contradictory that it was possible for Christians to happily burn heretics alive for five long centuries. It was even possible for the most venerated patriarchs of the Church, like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, to conclude that heretics should be tortured (Augustine) or killed outright (Aquinas). Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated the wholesale murder of heretics, apostates, Jews, and witches. You are, of course, free to interpret the Bible differently – though isn’t it amazing that you have succeeded in discerning the true teachings of Christianity, while the most influential thinkers in the history of your faith have failed” (Sam Harris, Letter to a Christian Nation, 11-12).

Outline of the Study:

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I. The Bible's Promotion of Violence

1. *Christianity and the State*

- a. For the first 300 years of Christianity it was a nonviolent religion; it was also illegal and many Christians were killed by the Roman governors
- b. No early church leaders ever argued for Christians to take up arms and fight for freedom against the Romans – they saw Jesus as nonviolent and themselves as emulating him
- c. How did they interpret the OT violence at God's command?
 - i. Old Testament time was past – God was working in a new (nonviolent) way
 - ii. Violence and judgment were God's right and not humans – God would use any nation to exert his judgment, the pagan Babylonians in OT times and Rome in their time
 - iii. Military imagery was used as a metaphor for spiritual war – even spiritualized the OT
- d. Tertullian (c. 160-220), and others, argued that a Christian could not join the army because (1) it would require sacrificing to pagan gods and (2) killing was not allowed for a Christian
 - i. The real question was whether soldiers who converted could stay in the army
 - ii. Over time we do read of Christian soldiers – after 174 AD
 1. We also read stories of Christian soldiers quitting the army, seeing it as not an allowed occupation for a Christian, and being killed for it
- e. The pagan Celsus said if everyone lived as a Christian then no one would be willing to fight against the barbarians and Rome would fall – this shows the nonviolence of the Christians
- f. 313 AD – Constantine made Christianity legal and soon it was the religion of the empire
 - i. The cross became a sign on shields in battle
 - ii. Eventually, pagans were not allowed in the army
 - iii. For over the next 1000 years Church and State were married
 - iv. New issues for theologians to deal with: mainly, part of being a state requires having an army to defend...but Jesus promoted nonviolence
 1. Church and State became so intertwined that the nonviolent message of Jesus was lost to the seduction of power by the state
- g. The Reformation – the state and church remained linked – if a city was “Lutheran” or “Catholic” or “Reformed” than everyone in it had to follow that form of the religion
 - i. The nonviolent Anabaptists were an exception and they were for the most part persecuted
- h. Modern Times: Countries in the West are secular
 1. Christianity is not illegal (as in the early church prior to 313 AD)
 2. Christianity is not one with the state (as it was up to modern times)

2. *Culture does influence how the Bible is interpreted – goal is to learn the past*

- a. Christians are persecuted (early church, Anabaptists) they follow Jesus' nonviolent teaching
- b. Christians control state (post-Constantine, etc.) they naturally must go to war at times
 - i. Sadly, the Bible became a justification for even worse war
 - ii. Once a nation existed that saw itself as “Christian” the parallels to Israel took over – no longer did they see the church as a spiritual body only, it was now seen as a kingdom
- c. What Christians must do: Confess the evils done in the name of God and justified by the OT

3. *How to Understand the OT (refer to outline on God and OT)*

- a. Bible as an unfolding story: God allows, perhaps commands, things that are evil in order to achieve a greater good – this greater good is God himself dying on a cross for all humanity
- b. Bible portrays God as a Divine Warrior and as a Crucified God
- c. Old Testament is first part of the story that climaxes in Jesus
 - i. Kingdom of God in the OT was Israel, a physical nation (thus they go to war)
 - ii. Kingdom of God now is Church, a spiritual community (must not go to war)
- d. Many of the commands in the OT had their time but do not apply today
 - i. Challenge is to figure out what principles about who God is are behind the commands, what the real point of the commands is, and which commands carry over

II. “Christian” Violence and “Atheist” Violence

A. *Common Dialogue of Debate*

1. Christians argue those who committed these evils were not “real” Christians
 - a. Atheists reply that they justified it by the OT
 - b. Christians say they interpreted the OT wrong
2. Christians argue that atheists have done horrid crimes too (Stalin for example)
 - a. Atheists reply that those people did not commit these crimes by being reasonable, but by encouraging a “religious” type fanaticism in their followers (i.e. they are not ‘real’ atheists)
 - b. Christians reply that atheism gives no reason to condemn such actions

B. *Such argument gets us nowhere*

1. *Both Christians and Atheists say those guilty are not “real” Christians or Atheists*
 - a. I think both are wrong and right in this instance
 - b. For Christians – even Christians are capable of horrific evil which may be motivated by a bad interpretation of the Bible...but this does not mean they are not real Christians
 - c. For Atheists – Some atheists truly believe there is no right or wrong since we are just highly evolved animals, so they see nothing wrong with horrific evil (atheism can lead to extreme evil)
 - d. Both Christians and Atheists are capable of great evil and great good
2. *Honesty – Most Christians and Most Atheists are not committing horrific crimes so this sort of finger-pointing gets us nowhere*

C. *Why mention the good and the bad of Christianity than?*

1. *It is valuable for all to know the good and the bad of Christianity simply for balance: skeptics must realize Christianity has caused much good; Christians must realize it has caused much evil*

III. The Bad Legacy of Christianity

A. The Crusades

1. *Growth of Islam* - Islam was founded by Muhammad in the 600s – by time of his death Muslims controlled Medina, Mecca and other parts of Arabia
 - a. The Caliphs ruled Islam after M.'s death – they conquered Syria, Egypt, Armenia and Persia by 652 AD and north Africa, Spain and the Mediterranean islands by 750 AD
 - i. These victories included the conquering of Jerusalem and much of the Christian East
 - b. While Europe languished in the Dark Ages, Islamic civilization was at a zenith
2. *The Crusades*
 - a. Reasons: Islam was divided politically between Baghdad (Middle East), Cairo (Egypt) and Cordova (Spain); as the tolerant Arab Muslims lost power to the less tolerant Turks the access of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land was threatened; Islamic armies were threatening Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine (Eastern Christian) empire; Europe already had animosity to Muslims based on the long wars in Spain (Deanesly, 106)
 - i. Crusades motivated by religion (fight God's enemies!) and simple greed and person gain (a young son who would not inherit land could go carve out a kingdom)
 - b. First Crusade – conquered Nicea in 1097, Antioch in 1098 and Jerusalem in 1099
 - i. Some armies slaughtered Jews while passing through Germany
 - c. Second Crusade – Christian kingdom of Jerusalem was threatened by Muslims so European armies were sent; in 1147 they were destroyed
 - d. Third Crusade – Jerusalem was retaken by Muslims in 1187; Christians went to take it back and failed; all Christians held now were small sea towns such as Acre
 - e. Fourth Crusade – army never made it to holy land, sacked Constantinople in 1204 (Western Christians fighting Eastern Christians)
 - f. Numerous other later crusades sent against Muslims and expanded to include wars against heretics and others in the west
3. *Verdict*: The Crusades were ugly: Jews and other innocents were slaughtered, while Muslims and Christians fought for religious reasons
 - a. Muslims not innocent – they had violently conquered much Christian land – but Christians as followers of Jesus are not to be people of revenge
 - b. Christians should admit the evil of the Crusades
 - c. *At the time, many Christians did see the Crusades as evil

B. The Inquisition

1. Begun in 1184 by Pope Lucius III in opposition to the Cathari located in south France, a heretical Christian group – the goal was to eradicate heresy and promote orthodoxy
 - a. Motivated by fear – the faithful were to inform on heretics
 - b. Pope Gregory IX (1227-1241) used the Inquisition so much that many attribute its beginning to him – during his reign it grew to a huge size
 - c. Early Christians (John Chrysostom and Ambrose in the 400s) said that to put a heretic to death would be awful, but the idea of punishment of heretics grew over the centuries
 - d. Those who denied being heretics were tortured until confession and those who confessed were burned at the stake
2. Used against those who were orthodox from John Hus in the 1400s to the Reformers in the 1500s,
3. *Verdict*: The most awful event in church history – Christians should always admit evil of this

C. Missionaries Exploitation of Culture

1. *Mixing of Mission and Politics* – instead of bringing the Gospel the Missionaries often transported all of western culture; saw the native peoples as savages and perhaps not even human
2. *Important myth*: Many have the idea that the natives were living in near utopia until Christians came along and ruined it; research shows the natives had wars and were just as violent as all other humans
3. *Important point*: the missionaries did do good as they introduced people to the love of God

- a. “Sometimes there can be a transformation of culture, but often that transformation brought about some good. When native people became Christians, they experienced the love and joy of Christ. That’s a wonderful thing. It’s when other motivations creep into the minds of those seeking to change a culture, like a quest for economic gain or a twisted sense of racial superiority, that very bad things result” (CfF 213)
- b. Movie to see: *The Mission*
- 4. *Verdict* – confess the wrongs but celebrate the good done by missionaries
 - a. Constant Challenge – when we share the gospel what parts do we pass on and what do we leave behind (i.e. what is the gospel and what is added on by OUR culture?)

D. Anti-Semitism

- 1. Early Church - Christians debated with Jews on who Jesus was and proper interpretation of the OT
- 2. Medieval period – Jews increasingly seen as evil and the enemies of God; many slaughtered by Crusaders and during the Inquisition
- 3. Reformation – Martin Luther thought Jews would welcome his reforms and convert; when they did not he fiercely denounced them (though Luther had strong words for everyone, even those who agreed with him on everything except on theology of the Last Supper he called horrid names)
- 4. Hitler claimed to be following people like Luther in murdering Jews
 - a. To be fair, it appears Hitler used (manipulated) religious language to get people on his side (just as he used/misused science?) – no foundation for anti-Semitism in Bible
- 5. *Verdict* – Christians are guilty of this and must admit it
 - a. Bible – Jews are our closest relatives in faith, we share a lot with them and must love them as we are to love all people

Mark Noll – “*Over the long course of Christian history, the most depressing thing – because repeated so often-has been how tragically far short of Christian ideals we ordinary Christians so regularly fall. Over the long course of Christian history, the most remarkable thing-because it is such a miracle of grace-is how often believers have acted against the pride of life to honor Christ. Of all such ‘signs of contradiction,’ the most completely Christlike have been those occasions when believers who are strong-because of wealth, education, political power, superior culture, or favored location-have reached out to the despised, the forsaken, the abandoned, the lost, the insignificant, or the powerless*” (220)

IV. The Good Legacy of Christianity (Main source: Alvin Schmidt's *Under the Influence*)

A. Increased Value of Human Life (*Under the Influence* 48-65)

1. Frederick Farrar – “infanticide was infamously universal” among the Greeks and Romans (UtI, 49)
 - a. Infanticide was also common in India, China, Japan, Brazilian jungles, and among Eskimos
 - b. Plutarch (AD 46-120), Cicero (106-43 BC), Seneca (4 BC – AD 65) and Polybius (205-118 BC) all mention the commonness and acceptance of infanticide
 - c. Often it was those born physically frail or deformed; infant girls were most vulnerable as most families would only raise one girl
 - d. Early Christian Literature repeatedly condemned infanticide (Didache, Epistle of Barnabas) – Christians believed infants were created in the image of God and that Christ had high regard for children (Matt. 19:14)
 - e. Valentinian, a Christian Emperor, outlawed infanticide in 374 AD
 - f. Greeks and Romans also commonly abandoned unwanted infants
 - i. The Columna Lactaria in Rome was there undesirable infants were placed, so named because it was where the state allowed wet nurses to feed abandoned children
 - ii. Christians condemned child abandonment and even often took human castaways into their homes (examples in Callistus of Rome and Benignus of Dijon)
 - iii. Emperor Valentinian outlawed abandonment in 374 AD
2. *Christians opposed abortion*
 - a. Marriage was deprived of all moral character – Roman historian Juvenal said a chaste wife was almost non-existent (Satire 6.161) and Seneca called unchastity the greatest evil of the time
 - b. When married women engaged in adulterous sexual intercourse and became pregnant they would simply destroy the evidence
 - c. Also, many women desired to be childless – they would gain many friends hoping to get rewarded in the wills when they died
 - d. Plato and Aristotle were both in favor of abortion to keep population down
 - e. Athenagorus, Tertullian and other church fathers opposed abortion – Tertullian wrote “We may not destroy even the foetus in the womb” (Apology 9)
 - f. Over time the church as a whole officially opposed abortion – the Synod of Elvira in Spain condemned abortion as a whole and Valentinian outlawed it in 374 AD
3. *Christians opposed the Depravity and Violence of Gladiatorial Shows*
 - a. Gladiators were usually slaves, condemned criminals or prisoners of war – fought to death
 - b. Christians were opposed and appalled by the gladiatorial games because they reflected a lack of care for human life – saw these as evil as infanticide
 - c. Tertullian devoted an entire chapter to admonishing Christians not to attend the games in his writing *De Spectaculis* (Concerning Shows)
 - d. Christian Emperor Theodosius I (378-395) ended gladiatorial games in the West and Honorius followed in 404 in the East
4. *It was Christian influence that led to a higher regard for human life and the ending of infanticide, abortion, child abandonment, gladiatorial games, and other evils

B. Freedom and Dignity for Women (*UtI* 97-122)

1. “A respectable Athenian woman was not permitted to leave her house unless she was accompanied by a trustworthy male escort, commonly a slave appointed by her husband. When the husband's male guests were present in his home, she was not permitted to eat or interact with them. She had to retire to her women's quarters...the Greek wife had virtually no freedom” (98).
 - a. Greek women had no freedom (Plutarch *Lycurgus* 15.8; Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 16-19)
 - b. Women were deemed inferior to men (Euripedes, Aeschylus)
 - c. Roman women were commonly under the law of *manus* which placed her under the absolute control of her husband who owned her and all her possessions – according to Plutarch a man

could divorce a woman if she went in public without a veil (Romulus 22.3) though the wife could never divorce him

- d. Jewish women had low status – they were barred from testifying in court according to the Talmud and Mishna and were barred from public speaking
2. *Jesus Christ's actions and teachings brought women new heights of status and dignity* – this often angered both his friends and enemies
 - a. Jesus treated the Samaritan woman with respect (John 4:5-29) even though Jewish teaching said one who talks with a woman in public brings evil on himself
 - b. When Jesus visited Mary and Martha's house (Luke 10:38-42) Martha took the traditional female role of preparing a meal but Mary did what only men should do, sit and listen to Jesus' teachings – Jesus defended her even though teaching God's word to women was not allowed by Jewish law (Sotah 3.4 – "Let the words of the Law be burned rather than taught to women... If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lechery")
 - c. Jesus taught Martha (John 11:25-26)
 - d. Jesus appeared to women after his resurrection – this was amazing because women could not testify in a court of law so their testimony of seeing Jesus would be viewed with skepticism by men... it is the sort of thing the later church would be embarrassed about and change but they did not change it out of desire to be accurate to what happened
 - e. Many women followed Jesus (Mark 15:41; Lk. 8:1-3)
3. *Earliest Church Welcomed Women*
 - a. Apphia, "our sister" was a leader in the church at Colosse (Philemon 2)
 - b. Nympha had a church in her house at Laodicea (Colossians 4:15)
 - c. Priscilla and her husband Aquilla had a church that met in their house (1 Cor. 16:19)
 - i. Priscilla was a fellow worker with Paul (Rom. 16:3)
 - d. Phoebe was a key leader, a deacon and leading officer, in the church at Cenchraea (Rom. 16:1-2)
 - i. Phoebe was given the task to deliver the letter to Rome!
 - e. Lydia was a woman engaged in business, despite the cultural attitude against this, yet Paul welcomed her as a friend and new sister in Christ (Acts 16)
 - f. Euodia and Syntyche were Paul's fellow workers (Phil. 4:2-3)
 - g. "Paul esteemed women as his peers. They helped gather and lead the church; they prayed and prophesied in public assemblies" (106)
 - h. *Paul also wrote things that seem to go in opposition to this so it is a difficult tension to resolve. Refer to my paper on Women in Ministry
4. *Women were the driving force in early Christianity's spiritual and numerical growth (107)*
 - a. Leopold Zscharnack – "Christendom dare not forget that it was primarily the female sex that for the greater part brought about its rapid growth. It was the evangelistic zeal of women in the early years of the church, and later, which won the weak and mighty" (107)
 - b. Christianity's appeal to women was a threat to Rome's cultural life
5. *Christianity Becomes a "Man thing"*
 - a. Christian leaders after about 150 AD reverted to Greco-Roman ideas about women – women were slowly excluded from leadership roles
 - b. Church Fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem and Jerome were prejudiced against women
 - c. *Refer to future lesson on "why does Christianity oppress women?"
6. *Christianity's Enduring Legacy*
 - a. Christianity set up a new family standard – Emperor Valentinian removed the age-old law that men ruled over their wives – women had more rights in the family
 - b. Ancient practice of marrying pre-pubescent brides gave way as Christian women married later than pagan women

- c. When Christ came women were veiled in most cultures – over time the practice of veiling women disappeared (it is still prominent in Muslim countries)
 - i. Paul told women to cover their head, not face (1 Cor. 11:5-16) and when he commanded women to dress modestly he did not mention a veil (1 Tim. 2:8-9)
 - d. Christ’s view of monogamous marriage led to the ending of polygamy
 - i. There was polygamy in the OT but that does not mean God approved of it – we are told what happened which does not mean God desired it to happen in all cases
 - e. Widows were honored, not burned alive – in India for thousands of years when a husband died the woman was burned with him whether she liked it or not (suttee or sati) – other cultures practiced this also but when Christianity came to these area with respect for widows the practice was ended
 - f. Influence of Christianity also led to the end of Chinese foot-binding and Clitoridectomy (often called female circumcision; akin to amputating the penis on a man)
7. *Christianity brought freedoms for women never known before. At the same time, some men (and many Christians, sadly) have deemed women as “less”. Christianity has not been perfect, but for the most part Christianity has been better for women rather than worse.

C. Hospitals and Health Care Routed in Christianity’s Influence (Utl 151-167)

- 1. Only Greek and Roman type hospitals were geared towards treating soldiers – Christianity introduced hospitals for the poor and general public
- 2. First hospital was built by St. Basil in Caesarea about AD 369 – by the mid-sixth century hospitals were securely established
- 3. Christians also provided care for the mentally disturbed, something unprecedented in Roman and Greek culture – the first mental asylum was built in AD 321

D. Christianity’s Influence on Education (170-191)

- 1. Education had been around for a long time but Christians were the first to offer it to both sexes in some form – instructed both in the tenets of the faith; admittedly the education of girls did not go beyond this
- 2. Christians taught people from all social classes and ethnic backgrounds – not just the wealthy
- 3. Teaching the deaf came from the work of Abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee, Thomas Gallaudet, and Lauren Clerc in the 1700s and 1800s, all of whom were Christians
- 4. Teaching the blind came from the work of Louis Braille, a dedicated Christian
- 5. Christians formed the first universities – Greek and Roman thinkers founded no permanent institutions
 - a. The first universities grew out of monasteries; many universities founded after 1200 AD

E. Christians gave dignity to labor that had not existed in Greco-Roman world (194-214)

- 1. Christianity had the view that all work is honorable and worthy of pay

F. Foundations of Modern Science come from a Christian Worldview (218-243)

- 1. We will examine this further in a few weeks in regards to our science study but it is clear that the early scientists such as Francis Bacon, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton and others were Christians

G. Abolition of Slavery was a Christian Achievement

- 1. Difficult for though the early Christians opposed slavery over time many Christians owned slaves; as some began to preach against it others preached for it and both used the Bible
- 2. William Wilberforce worked tirelessly in British Parliament to make slavery illegal and it was his Christian faith that motivated him; other abolitionists such as John Newton were Christians
- 3. Some say slavery was abolished due to philosophy of natural rights from people like John Locke that gave rise to the Enlightenment – though these philosophers did see all humans as equal there is little evidence they applied these abstract ideas to real life; many continued to own slaves

*Many of the things we enjoy in our world came about due to Christian influence; it was Christian ideas that gave women new dignity, caused all work to be seen as worthwhile, led to the rise in modern science, and the abolition of slavery. Our world is definitely better as a result of Christianity.

V. The Verdict

A. Jesus said: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers’” (Matt. 7:21-23)

1. This shows us that some who claim to be followers of Jesus and claim to do God’s will are mistaken
2. John writes “They went out from us, but did not really belong to us” (1 John 2:19) which again implies that not all who claim to be Christians are Christians

3. Point: Not all who call themselves “Christian” are truly followers of Jesus

B. The Bible has been used to justify horrors (slavery, oppression of women) and good things (abolition, dignity of women). How do we know what the Bible truly says?

1. Proper understanding of the Bible – it is an unfolding story of God’s relationship to humans. As the relationship deepens and changes some things God once allowed are no longer allowed. The Bible as story shows us morality is not as simple as finding a verse: the Bible is not a list of commands.
2. Through the whole story what do we find: God is a just God who wants the right done
 - a. Over time the abolitionists saw this over-arching focus. God allowed sins for a time, even in the Bible, and now the time had come to eliminate slaver.
3. Culture greatly influences how we study the Bible
 - a. Early Christians were persecuted and followed Jesus closely in preaching nonviolence; when Church and State were married Christians now looked at the nation of Israel in the OT and identified with them, thus justifying wars.
 - b. Work to get past this cultural influence as much as possible
4. **Point: God is a God of justice, love and grace – we must focus on those attributes. Most of all, we focus on living as Jesus did which is primarily a life of sacrifice for others.**

C. All humans are sinful

1. Even Christians are still a sinful mess – it is possible that those guilty of some evils were truly Christians. This is not condoning their sin; it is admitting we all fall short.
2. God is a loving God who has grace for the over-zealous believer and the executed heretic – we cannot know who of those historic people is in heaven or hell...it is not our place
3. Point: We must apologize for the sins of those who went before us in Christ

D. We live lives of love and justice as best we can today, learning from the mistakes and triumphs of those before us

Conclusion:

Church history has shown that Christians are capable of good and evil; just as non-Christians, whether atheists or Muslims, are also capable of good or evil. It is important for a Christian to balance the accusations of evil with proclamation of the good; but the good does not cancel out the evil. This shows that Christians, like all people, need help. The best we can do is apologize for what has been done, admit not all who claim to be Christians truly are though we cannot know whom that applies to, and we must strive to live holy lives.

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