

Countering Christophobia

A Review of
***Christianity on Trial:
Arguments Against Anti-
religious Bigotry***
by **Vincent Carroll & David
Shiflett**
Encounter Books, San
Francisco, 2001

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To whom do we attribute the accomplishments of Western civilization? For several decades, post-modern intellectual elites and their followers in the general culture have considered this a question that shouldn't even be asked. In their minds, the 'achievements' of the West have been the oppression and impoverishment of people of colour (who were all peaceful egalitarian folk, of course), along with environmental destruction. And often these charges are laid at the door of Christianity, with its alleged intolerance, racism and sexism.

Carroll and Shiflett's book is the perfect antidote to these charges. In one sense, it is a more accessible companion to the more recent book by Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*,² reviewed last issue.³ The authors demonstrate that despotic tyranny, slavery, racism and environmental destruction have been practised all around the world for most of history. Only in the West, however, did humanity begin to rise up against these behaviours. And it was Christians, and often only Christians, who led the charge against them. They describe the commonest, broad charges against Christianity and turn them back on critics. In the process they document some of the intemperance that passes for journalism, and the peculiar

ignorance of history evident in the works of critics.

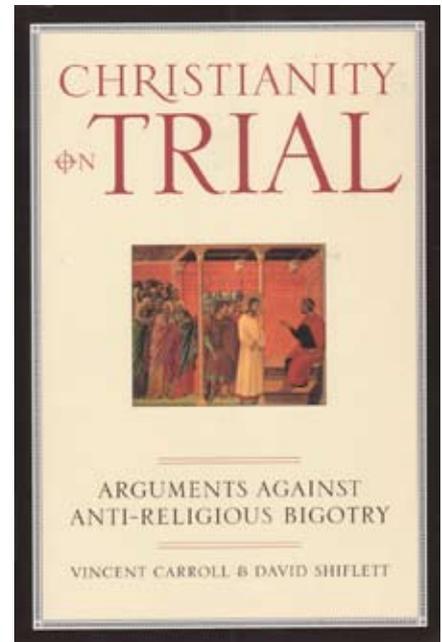
If the writings of sociopolitical pundits, essayists and commentators are any indication, it has been our observation that since 'September 11', the post-modern paradigm has begun to crack. On that day, the Western world was reminded that large parts of the globe have not risen above barbarism and tyranny. There seems to be a renewed realization that what the West has achieved in terms of egalitarianism, human rights, technological advancement and freedom is, in fact, unique and quite remarkable.

So that brings us back to the original question; to whom do we attribute the accomplishments of Western civilization? The standard line of modernist secularists is that it was the Enlightenment sceptics who broke the shackles of Christianity's Dark Age thinking, and brought about scientific discovery and the equality of all people.

But the authors show that this cannot be maintained. The Roman world and the rest of pagan Europe knew nothing of universal equality. It was introduced to Rome by the Apostle Paul, who declared that 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female.' So, when in 1776 Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he could write words such as 'we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal' and, as the authors put it, 'expect his readers not to laugh out loud' (as they would have done in most places and times).

Christians led the way to abolish slavery

The antislavery forces in the USA were influenced by William



Wilberforce (1759–1833), who tirelessly fought for 50 years against slavery in Britain, basing his opposition on biblical morality. Wilberforce realized that the dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28 did NOT extend to fellow humans. He also understood that 1 Timothy 1:10 lists 'slave traders' (*andrapodistēs*) with murderers, adulterers, perverts, liars and other evil people. Paul also encouraged Philemon to free his escaped slave Onesimus (Philemon 16), and ordered masters to treat their slaves in the 'same way' as they were treated, and not to threaten them (Ephesians 6:9). Such practice would see the end of slavery.

Wilberforce, in turn, had been influenced by the preaching of John Newton (1725–1807), who wrote the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*. Newton, in his earlier days, had been a slave trader himself before his conversion to Christ. After conversion, he first insisted that slaves were treated humanely, then came to see that since the slaves were also created in the image of God, the slave trade was wrong, regardless. He left the trade, became friends with the great evangelists George Whitefield and the Wesleys, became a minister, and testified to King George III about

the atrocities of the slave trade.

Another prominent antislavery activist in Britain was Granville Sharp (1735–1813). He was almost single-handedly responsible for a law that a slave became free from the moment he set foot on English territory. He also founded a society for the abolition of slavery. He was also a joint founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Society for the Conversion of the Jews. A noted Greek scholar, he published a detailed and accurate study, discovering a rule of grammar that's accepted by the majority of Bible translators today and now bears his name. But the existing English translations had overlooked this rule; thus, as he pointed out, they obscured the deity of Christ in places like Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1, which should say 'our (great) God and Saviour Jesus Christ'.

Because of their tireless efforts, Britain not only abolished slavery, but used her gunboats to enforce the ban on other nations—i.e. she imposed her morality on others!

Christianity on Trial points out that pagan philosophers, like Aristotle, regarded some people as natural slaves, and 'Enlightenment' philosophers hostile to Christianity such as Hume and Voltaire believed in inferiority of dark-skinned people. Darwinism added to the problem. Moreover, and a shock to sceptics, statements such as 'Things have come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade public life' were used by the 19th- century UK Prime Minister Lord Melbourne to support the status quo of slavery. Doesn't this sound like something comfortable in the mouth of a representative from the ACLU (the misnamed American Civil Liberties Union)?

Christians and the foundation of science

And then there is the question of science. It was Christianity that broke through the ancient pagan beliefs of repeating historical cycles (thus

accepting that progress was possible) and animism (which allowed natural objects to be scrutinized and studied). And as any good student of the history of science knows, it was practising Christians like Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler and Newton who laid much of the foundations of modern science. And even with the black mark of Galileo, the church was still the leading supporter of astronomy for the first two-thirds of the second millennium, both in social and financial terms.

The authors, in line with many historians of science, point out that the basis of modern science depends on the assumption that the universe was made by a rational Creator. An orderly universe

makes sense only if it were designed and created by an orderly Creator (cf. 1 Corinthians

14:33). But if polytheism or atheism were true, there would be no way to deduce that the universe is, or should be, orderly. The dominion mandate gives us permission to investigate creation; unlike animism or pantheism, systems which teach that the creation itself is divine. Since God is sovereign, He was free to create as He pleased. So where the Bible is silent, the only way to find out how His creation works is to investigate, not rely on humanly-created philosophies, as did the ancient Greeks.

Christianity on Trial does have good material on the Galileo matter, refuting one of the atheists' favourite misochristic arguments. It cites the science historian John Heilbron, 'Galileo's heresy, according to the standard distinction used by the Holy Office, was "inquisitorial" rather than "theological".' Heilbron's book *The Sun in the Church*⁴ shows that church-supported astronomers used the cathedrals *themselves* as solar observatories—hence the subtitle of the book, *Cathedrals as Solar*

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Observatories. This would have made no sense if the church had been antiscience. These solar observatories were called *meridiane*, and were 'reverse sundials', or giant pinhole cameras, where the sun's image was projected from a hole in a window in the cathedral's lantern onto a meridian line. The Ptolemaic model was further weakened by analyzing the sun's motion, yet this research was well supported. Heilbron's book was favourably reviewed by the secular science journals *New Scientist*⁵ and *Science*.⁶

The authors also use Jeffrey Burton Russell's *Inventing the Flat Earth*,⁷ a well-documented book that demolishes the charge that the church taught a flat earth. Prof. Russell can find only five obscure writers in the first 1,500 years of the Christian era who denied that the earth was a globe. But he documents a large number of famous Christian scholars, including the venerable Bede and Thomas Aquinas, who affirmed the earth's sphericity. Rather, the flat earthism was a totally baseless myth fostered by 19th-century writers with a huge anti-Christian axe to grind.⁸

The book also points out that the Christian worldview inspired developments essential to the rise of the modern scientific method. These include the logical thought patterns of the medieval scholastic philosophers, and the little-known but extensive inventiveness and mechanical ingenuity fostered by the monasteries. This does not mean they were right about everything, but the Middle Ages are often falsely dismissed as the 'Dark Ages'. Such a dismissal ignores the genuine industrial revolution, including inventions of water and wind power, labour-saving heavy ploughs, and ingenious architectural devices such as flying buttresses.

'Hitler was a Christian!' annihilating atheist arguments

The authors also rightly point out the error of trying to paint the Nazis as Christian, and document the stridently

anti-Nazi statements by the Confessing Church and Pope Pius XII and their work in saving lives.

In this section it would be better if some quotes were more thoroughly documented. But the authors' conclusion is totally in line with the opening address of the leading prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, Justice Jackson; e.g. 'The Nazi Party always was predominantly anti-Christian in its ideology', and 'carried out a systematic and relentless repression of all Christian sects and churches'.⁹ It is also consistent with the enormous amount of documentation by American Prosecutor General William Donovan, which showed that the Nazis also planned to systematically destroy Christianity.¹⁰

If the Nuremberg documentation weren't already enough, a book published after *Christianity on Trial* should clinch matters. Richard Weikart, Associate Professor of Modern European History at California State University, Stanislaus, wrote *From Darwin to Hitler*.¹¹ He documents how Darwinian biologists and social thinkers in Germany believed that Darwinism overturned traditional Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment ethics, in particular that of the sanctity of innocent human life. But while they supported moral relativism, they substituted the absolute of evolutionary 'fitness'.

It is actually no accident that Nazism originated in the country where liberal theology was spawned. Hardly surprising—they got rid of biblical absolutes, and had to replace them with some other absolutes, so why not the absolutes of the intelligentsia of their day? Conversely, while there was a Confessing Church (i.e. that believed the Bible) opposed to Hitler, they were in such a minority that the young German-born Ernst Mayr (later one of the leading evolutionists of the 20th century) could say, 'Indeed, in Germany at that time there was no Protestant fundamentalism.'¹²

'Greenie' gripes

Christianity on Trial also counters

much of the anti-Christian propaganda from certain influential sections of the environmentalist movement. For instance, the historian Lynn White Jr said in this context: 'Christianity [insists] that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.' Indeed, the dominion mandate is often savaged, because it records God commanding man to have dominion over the earth. However, the Hebrew word for dominion is *radah*, and 1 Kings 4:24–25 says that Solomon's *radah* resulted in peace, safety and 'each man under his own vine and fig tree'. So the type of *radah* must be decided by context. Since this was spoken by God into an Edenic situation, before the Fall, it is especially hard to imagine any sort of destructive or ruthless implication. The book points out that Christianity has had a positive effect on the environment.

Conversely, the book shows that pagan and communist countries have often had baneful effects on their environments. Consistent evolutionary thinking, of course, cannot permit the notion that the whole of creation is focused around mankind, so it seeks to portray such an attitude as arrogant anthropocentrism (man-centredness). Interestingly, the idea that because man is nothing special, we should treat other species with special favour suffers from an ironic inconsistency. Since these other species are all 'out for themselves', why should mankind, if we are 'just another species', not do likewise? In other words, it is the very uniqueness of mankind which gives us the capacity to exercise special care, benevolent *radah*.

Antidote to anti-Christianity

After this book, it may be fairly said that those who try to portray Christian history as one long period of tyranny and superstition have not the first clue what they are talking about. This is especially important to keep in mind when reading not only the gutter atheist websites in cyberspace, but also the ravings of liberals within the

church, such as John Shelby Spong.

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