

Christians Need to Read: *What's So Great About Christianity*

Dinesh D'Souza, one of the great conservative, political commentators of our time *and* a *New York Times* best-selling author, got tired of seeing renowned atheists, such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, spread their atheist rhetoric via their *New York Times* best-selling books. Dinesh D'Souza was going to fight back with a book defending the Christian faith: *What's So Great about Christianity*.

What's So Great about Christianity came out and hit the *New York Times* best-seller list. Dinesh D'Souza, in his book, focused on rebutting what he terms to be the “new atheists” and their specific attacks on Christianity.

Not only does Dinesh D'Souza fight against these atheists via his book, but also he participates in public debates in which he tackles atheism, secular humanism and agnosticism head-on.

In this sample, you have several chapters of this groundbreaking book. Tyndale House Publishers will be bringing *What's So Great About Christianity* to you for release in November 2008. Your customers will find this product to be an indispensable book of logical thoughts that are written in an easy to understand manner and that can be used to refute non-biblical, widely held beliefs in secular society. This book is perfect for any one wanting to have discussion with their agnostic or atheistic neighbor. The contents will help any parents who need to have tough conversations with their teenage or adult children who have bought in to the lie of secular humanism that is commonly taught at public schools and universities.





Dinesh D'Souza, a former White House domestic policy analyst, is the author five *New York Times* best sellers, including *Illiberal Education* and *What's So Great about America*. D'Souza has been called one of the "top young public-policy makers in the country" by *Investor's Business Daily*. The *New York Times Magazine* named him one of America's most influential conservative thinkers. The World Affairs Council lists him as one of the nation's 500 leading authorities on international issues. D'Souza's

articles have appeared in virtually every major magazine and newspaper, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Vanity Fair*, *New Republic*, and *National Review*. He has appeared on numerous television programs, including the *Today Show*, *Nightline*, *The News Hour*, *O'Reilly Factor*, *Moneyline*, and *Hannity and Colmes*.

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WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT CHRISTIANITY

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P R E F A C E

**A CHALLENGE TO BELIEVERS—AND
UNBELIEVERS**

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED UPON to be “contenders” for their faith. This term suggests that they should be ready to stand up for their beliefs, and that they will face opposition. The Christian is told in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reasons for the hope that is within you.” But in order to give reasons, you must first know what you believe. You must also know why you believe it. And you must be able to communicate these reasons to those who don’t share your beliefs. In short, you must know what’s so great about Christianity.

This is the arena in which many Christians have fallen short. Today’s Christians know that they do not, as their ancestors did, live in a society where God’s presence was unavoidable. No longer does Christianity form the moral basis of society. Many of us now reside in secular communities, where arguments drawn from the Bible or Christian revelation carry no weight, and where we hear a different language from that spoken in church.

Instead of engaging this secular world, most Christians have taken the easy way out. They have retreated into a Christian subculture where they engage Christian concerns. Then they step back into secular society, where their Christianity is kept out of sight until the next church service. Without realizing it Christians have become postmodernists of a sort: they live by the gospel of the two truths. There is religious truth, reserved for Sundays and days of worship, and there is secular truth, which applies the rest of the time.

This divided lifestyle is opposed to what the Bible teaches. The Bible tells Christians not to be of the world, sharing its distorted priorities, but it does call upon believers to be in the world, fully engaged. Many Christians have abdicated this mission. They have instead sought a workable, comfortable *modus vivendi* in which they agree to leave the secular world alone if the secular world agrees to leave them alone. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould proposed the terms for the treaty between the secular and religious

worlds when he said that secular society relies on reason and decides matters of fact, while religious people rely on faith and decide questions about values.¹ Many Christians seized upon this distinction with relief. This way they could stay in their subculture and be nice to everyone.

But a group of prominent atheists—many of them evolutionary biologists—has launched a powerful public attack on religion in general and Christianity in particular; they have no interest in being nice. A new set of anti-religious books—*The God Delusion*, *The End of Faith*, *God Is Not Great*, and so on—now shapes public debate. These atheists reject the Gould solution. They say that a religious outlook makes specific claims about reality: there is a God, there is life after death, miracles do happen, and so on. If you are agnostic or atheist, you have a very different understanding of reality, one that is formed perhaps by a scientific or rationalist outlook. The argument of the atheists is that both views of reality cannot be simultaneously correct. If one is true, then the other is false.

The atheists have a point: there are not two truths or multiple truths; there is one truth. Either the universe is a completely closed system and miracles are impossible, or the universe is not a closed system and there is the possibility of divine intervention in it. Either the Big Bang was the product of supernatural creation or it had a purely natural cause. In a larger sense, either the religious view of reality is correct or the secular view is correct. (Or both are wrong.) So far the atheists have been hammering the Christians and the Christians have been running for cover. It's like one hand clapping. A few pastors have stood up to the atheists' challenge, but they have not, in general, fared well. Pastors are used to administering to congregations that accept Christian premises. They are not accustomed to dealing with skilled attackers who call the Christian God a murderer and a tyrant and who reject the authority of the Bible to adjudicate anything.

This is not a time for Christians to turn the other cheek. Rather, it is a time to drive the money-changers out of the temple. The atheists no longer want to be tolerated. They want to monopolize the public square and to expel Christians from it. They want political questions like abortion to be divorced from religious and moral claims. They want to control school curricula so they can promote a secular ideology and undermine Christianity. They want to discredit the factual claims of religion, and they want to convince the rest of society that Christianity is not only mistaken

but also evil. They blame religion for the crimes of history and for the ongoing conflicts in the world today. In short, they want to make religion—and especially the Christian religion—disappear from the face of the earth.

The Bible in Matthew 5:13–14 calls Christians to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” Christians are called to make the world a better place. Today that means confronting the challenge of modern atheism and secularism. This book provides a kind of tool kit for Christians to meet this challenge. The Christianity defended here is not “fundamentalism” but rather traditional Christianity, what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity,” the common ground of beliefs between Protestants and Catholics. This Christianity is the real target of the secular assault.

I have written this book not only for believers but also for unbelievers. Many people are genuine seekers. They sense there is something out there that provides a grounding and an ultimate explanation for their deepest questions, yet that something eludes them. They feel the need for a higher sense of purpose in their lives, but they are unsure where to find it. Even though they have heard about God and Christianity, they cannot reconcile religious belief with reason and science; faith seems unreasonable and therefore untenable. Moreover, they worry that religion has been and can be an unhealthy source of intolerance and fanaticism, as evidenced by the motives of the September 11 terrorists. These are all reasonable concerns, and I address them head-on in this book.

This is also a book for atheists, or at least for those atheists who welcome a challenge. Precisely because the Christians usually duck and run, the atheists have had it too easy. Their arguments have gone largely unanswered. They have been flogging the carcass of “fundamentalism” without having to encounter the horse kick of a vigorous traditional Christianity. I think that if atheists are genuine rationalists, they should welcome this book. It is an effort to meet the atheist argument on its own terms. Nowhere in this book do I take Christianity for granted. My *modus operandi* is one of skepticism, to view the claims of religion in the same open-minded way that we would view claims of any other sort. The difference between me and my atheist opponents is that I am skeptical not only of the allegedly irrational claims of religion but also of the irrational claims made in the name of science and of skepticism itself.

Taking as my foil the anti-religious arguments of prominent atheists like

Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and the others, in this book I will demonstrate the following:

1. Christianity is the main foundation of Western civilization, the root of our most cherished values.
2. The latest discoveries of modern science support the Christian claim that there is a divine being who created the universe.
3. Darwin's theory of evolution, far from undermining the evidence for supernatural design, actually strengthens it.
4. There is nothing in science that makes miracles impossible.
5. It is reasonable to have faith.
6. Atheism, not religion, is responsible for the mass murders of history.
7. Atheism is motivated not by reason but by a kind of cowardly moral escapism.

I end this book by showing what is unique about Christianity and how our lives change if we become Christians.

If I may address unbelievers directly for a moment, I hope that you will not read this book merely as an intellectual exercise. It seeks to address practical problems that we all face in life. You, like many Christians, live in a split-screen world. You are, I suspect, a Darwinian in your science and an anti-Darwinian in your morals. You revere science and reason but wonder if they give you a full grasp of the world. You are a rationalist at work and a romantic in your personal life. You have been engaged in the pursuit of happiness for a fairly long time; ever wonder why you haven't found it? How long do you intend to continue this joyless search for joy? Older societies had much less and felt abundant; why do you, in the midst of plenty, continue to feel scarcity pressing down upon you? No doubt you, like the believer, know that every breath you take fends off death. Clearly this is something for which you should prepare, but have you? Death forces upon you a choice that you cannot escape. You must choose God or reject Him, because when you die all abstentions are counted as "no" votes. So if you are wondering if this book is an invitation to convert, it is. I hope you will read it as if your life depended on it, because, in a way, it might.

CHAPTER ONE

**THE TWILIGHT OF ATHEISM: THE
GLOBAL TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY**

“The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning.”¹

—Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*

GOD HAS COME BACK TO LIFE. The world is witnessing a huge explosion of religious conversion and growth, and Christianity is growing faster than any other religion. Nietzsche’s proclamation “God is dead” is now proven false. Nietzsche is dead. The ranks of the unbelievers are shrinking as a proportion of the world’s population. Secularism has lost its identification with progress and modernity, and consequently it has lost the main source of its appeal. God is very much alive, and His future prospects look to be excellent. This is the biggest comeback story of the twenty-first century.

If God is back, why don’t we see it? The reason is that many of us live in the wrong neighborhood. “Visit a church at random next Sunday,” Brent Staples writes in the *New York Times*, “and you will probably encounter a few dozen people sprinkled thinly over a sanctuary that was built to accommodate hundreds or even thousands.” Yes, I’ve seen the “empty pews and white-haired congregants” that Staples describes.² But then, Staples lives in New York and I live in California. We live among people who are practically atheist.

Of course my neighbors do not think of themselves as atheist. Very few of them belong to atheist organizations or subscribe to atheist literature. Some of them who are highly educated like to think of themselves as agnostic: they haven’t made up their minds because the evidence simply isn’t in yet. Others even consider themselves Christian, either because they were born that way or because they attend church

occasionally. The distinguishing characteristic of these people is that they live as if God did not exist. God makes no difference in their lives. This is “practical atheism.” We all know people like this. Some of us hardly know anyone not like this. And sometimes we live this way ourselves.

If we live in the wrong neighborhood, we risk missing the most important development of our time: the global revival of religion. It’s happening on every continent. In my native country of India, Hinduism is undergoing a resurgence. So is Islam. As I have written about Islamic radicalism and terrorism I am often asked, “When will the Muslims understand the importance of secularism? When will we see an Islamic Reformation?” My answer is that Muslims will never understand the importance of secularism. Nor do they need to, because as we shall see, secularism is increasingly unimportant as a global phenomenon. Moreover, Islam is in the middle of a reformation. We see a resurgence of Muslim piety not just in the Middle East but also in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Turkey, and East Africa. At one time Turkey provided a model of Islamic secularism, but not any longer. No Muslim country is going the way of Turkey, and in recent years even Turkey has stopped going the way of Turkey.

Some Western analysts describe the religious revivals around the world in terms of the growth of “fundamentalism.” This is the fallacy of ethnocentrism, of seeing the world through the lens of our own homegrown prejudices. Remember that fundamentalism is a term drawn from Protestant Christianity. It is an American coinage that refers to a group of early twentieth-century Protestant activists who organized against Darwinian evolution and who championed the literal reading of the Bible. Fundamentalism is a meaningless term outside this context.

There are, of course, Hindu militants and Islamic radicals of the bin Laden stripe, and they are indeed a menace to the world. But the growth of religious militancy and the growth of religion are very different. One may seek to benefit from the other, but the two should not be confused. The resurgence I am talking about is the global revitalization of traditional religion. This means traditional Hinduism, traditional Islam, and traditional Christianity. By “traditional” I mean religion as it has been understood and practiced over the centuries. This is the type of religion that is booming.

Traditional religion is the mainstream, but it is not the only form in which religion appears today. There is also liberal religion. One can hardly speak of liberal Islam, as liberalism is essentially a nonexistent force in the Muslim world. But there are liberal Jews, whose Jewishness seems largely a matter of historical memory and cultural habits. Here in the West, there are lots of liberal Christians. Some of them have assumed a kind of reverse mission: instead of being the church's missionaries to the world, they have become the world's missionaries to the church. They devote their moral energies to trying to make the church more democratic, to assure equal rights for women, to legitimize homosexual marriage, and so on. A small but influential segment of liberal Christianity rejects all the central doctrines of Christianity. H. Richard Niebuhr famously summed up their credo: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."³

I have met liberal Christians who are good and sincere people. But their version of Christianity is retreating, in two senses. Liberal Christians are distinguished by how much intellectual and moral ground they concede to the adversaries of Christianity. "Granted, no rational person today can believe in miracles, but..." "True, the Old Testament God seems a mighty vengeful fellow, but..." "Admittedly religion is responsible for most of the conflict and oppression in history, but..."

This yes-but Christianity in full intellectual withdrawal, and it is also becoming less relevant. The liberal churches are losing members in droves. Once these churches welcomed one in six Americans; now they see one in thirty. In 1960 the Presbyterian church had 4.2 million members; now it has 2.4 million. The Episcopal church had 3.4 million; now it has 2.3 million. The United Church of Christ had 2.2 million; now it has 1.3 million.⁴ Traditional Christians who remain within liberal churches become increasingly alienated. Some have become so disgusted that they have put themselves under the authority of more traditional clerics based in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast.

Unfortunately the central themes of some of the liberal churches have become indistinguishable from those of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, and the homosexual rights

movement. Why listen to Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong drone on when you can get the same message and much more interesting visuals at San Francisco's gay pride parade? The traditional churches, not the liberal churches, are growing in America. In 1960, for example, the churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention had 8.7 million members. Now they have 16.4 million.⁵

The growth of traditional religion and the decline of liberal religion pose a serious problem for a conventional way of understanding religious trends. This is the way of secularization: the idea that as an inevitable result of science, reason, progress, and modernization, the West will continue to grow more secular, followed by the rest of the world. The more confident exponents of secularization believe, as Peter Berger puts it, that "eventually Iranian mullahs, Pentecostal preachers, and Tibetan lamas will all think and act like professors of literature at American universities."⁶

For a good part of the last century, this secularization narrative seemed plausible. Secular people believed it and reveled in it, while religious people believed it and bemoaned it. But now we see a problem with the thesis. If secularization were proceeding inexorably, then religious people should be getting less religious, and so conservative churches should be shrinking and liberal churches growing. In fact, the opposite is the case.

Some scholars put this down to "backlash" against secularization, but this only begs the question: what is causing this backlash? The secularization thesis was based on the presumption that science and modernity would satisfy the impulses and needs once met by religion. But a rebellion against secularization suggests that perhaps important needs are still unmet, and so people are seeking a revival of religion—perhaps in a new form—to address their specific concerns within a secular society.

Of course the secularization thesis is not entirely invalid. In Europe, Australia, and Canada, religion has been expunged from the cultural mainstream. It has been largely relegated to a tourist phenomenon; when you go to Chartres and Canterbury, the guides tell you about architecture and art history and little about what the people who created those masterpieces actually believed. According to the European Values Survey, regular churchgoers number, depending on the country, between 10 and 25 percent of the population. Only one in five Europeans says that religion is important in life. Czech president Vaclav Havel has rightly described Europe as "the

first atheistic civilization in the history of mankind.”⁷

The religious picture in Europe is not unremittingly bleak. Ninety percent of Greeks acknowledge the existence of God, and only 5 percent of Greeks are atheists. Ireland still has church attendance figures of around 45 percent, twice as high as the Continent as a whole, although Irish Catholicism has also weakened in recent decades. Along with Ireland, Poland and Slovakia are two of the most religious countries in Europe.⁸ And some commentators have noted that even Europeans who are not religious continue to describe themselves as “spiritual.” These analysts argue that Europe has not abandoned religion in general but only “organized” religion.

But if Europe generally supports the secularization thesis, the United States presents a much more problematic case. America has not gone the way of Europe. True, church attendance in the United States has declined in the past three decades. Still, some 40 percent of Americans say they attend church on Sundays. More than 90 percent of Americans believe in God, and 60 percent say their faith is important to them. Surveying the data on religion, Paul Bloom writes in the *Atlantic Monthly* that “well over half of Americans believe in miracles, the devil, and angels. Most Americans believe that after death they will actually reunite with relatives and get to meet God.”⁹ All of this is a serious difficulty for the secularization thesis, because America is at the forefront of modernity. The thesis would predict that America would be the most secular society in the world. In fact, America is the most religious country in the Western world.

Perhaps the greatest problem for the secularization theory is that in an era of increasing globalization and modernization, the world as a whole is becoming more religious, not less. In a recent survey, Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart sum up the evidence. Despite the advance of secularization in the West, they write, “The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before, and they constitute a growing proportion of the world’s population.” Consequently, the West is more secular but “the world as a whole is becoming more religious.”¹⁰

Even more remarkable is that the religious revival is occurring in places that are rapidly modernizing. China and India today have the fastest growth rates in the world, and religion is thriving in both places. Turkey is the one of the most modern of the Muslim countries, and Islam has steadily gained strength there. In Central and South America, the upwardly mobile classes are

embracing Pentecostal Christianity.

The global spread of American culture, with the secular values it carries, seems not to have arrested or even slowed the religious upsurge. The reason is that many non-Western cultures are actively resisting secularism. A common slogan in Asia today is without Westernization.” Many people want American prosperity and American technology, but they want to use these to preserve and strengthen their traditional way of life. They want to live in a world of multiple modernities.

We often read that Islam is the fastest-growing religion. Not true. Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in the world today. Islam is second. While Islam grows mainly through reproduction—which is to say by Muslims having large families—Christianity spreads through rapid conversion as well as natural increase. Islam has become the fastest-growing religion in Europe, which for more than a thousand years has been the home of Christianity. Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc wrote in 1920 that “the faith is Europe and Europe is the faith.” Belloc was convinced that the future of Christianity lay in Europe.

Ironically, while Europe has moved away from Christianity, the Christian religion has been expanding its influence in Central and South America, in Africa, and in Asia. For the first time in history, Christianity has become a universal religion. It is in fact the only religion with a global reach. Buddhism and Islam, like Christianity, are religions with global aspirations, but these aspirations have not been realized. Buddhism never established itself even in the land of its founding, India, although it found adherents in the cultures of Southern and Eastern Asia. Even though it has a few followers in the West, Buddhism remains a religion with, at best, a regional impact. Islam is vastly stronger, but even Islam is regional, with little or no sway in the United States, Canada, Central and South America, or Australia. By contrast, Christianity is a force on every continent and in every major region of the world, with the sole exception of the heartland of Islam, the Middle East.

The new face of Christianity is no longer white and blond but yellow, black, and brown. “If we want to visualize a typical contemporary Christian,” Philip Jenkins writes in *The Next Christendom*, “we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.” The vital centers of Christianity today are no longer Geneva, Rome, Paris, or London. They are Buenos Aires, Manila, Kinshasa, and Addis Ababa. “The era of Western

Christianity has passed within our lifetimes,” Jenkins observes, “and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning.”¹¹

In 1900, more than 80 percent of Christians lived in Europe and America. Today 60 percent live in the developing world. More than two out of three evangelical Christians now live in Asia, Africa, and South America. Here are some numbers Jenkins provides: Europe today has 560 million Christians and America has 260 million, yet many of these are Christian in name only. In comparison, there are 480 million Christians in South America, 313 million in Asia, and 360 million in Africa. The vast majority of these are practicing Christians. There are more churchgoing Presbyterians in Ghana than in Scotland.

Oddly enough, this Christian growth occurred after the period of European conquest and colonialism ended. The old boys in pith helmets are long gone, but the faith that first came with them has endured and now thrives without them. It’s just like the early times of Christianity. After Constantine converted and Theodosius proclaimed Christianity the state religion toward the end of the fourth century, Christianity was carried by the Roman empire. Yet the faith spread fastest after the collapse of that empire, and soon all of Europe was Christian. We’re witnessing a comparable pace of growth for Christianity in the rest of the world.

A century ago, less than 10 percent of Africa was Christian. Today it’s nearly 50 percent. That’s an increase from 10 million people in 1900 to more than 350 million today. Uganda alone has nearly 20 million Christians and is projected to have 50 million by the middle of the century.¹² Some African congregations have grown so big that their churches are running out of space. While Western preachers routinely implore people to come every Sunday to fill the pews, some African preachers ask their members to limit their attendance to every second or third Sunday to give others a chance to hear the message.

Central and South America are witnessing the explosive growth of Pentecostalism. As David Martin shows in his study *Tongues of Fire*, partly this is a shift within Christianity: millions of South American Catholics have become evangelical Protestants.¹³ In Brazil, for example, there are now 50 million evangelical Protestants whereas a few decades ago there weren’t enough to count. The movement of Catholics into Protestant evangelicalism should not be considered purely lateral,

however, as the conversion of lackadaisical nominal Catholics to an active, energized evangelicalism can perhaps be considered a net gain for Christianity. Even within Catholicism there is an expanding charismatic movement that has grown in response to the success of the Protestant evangelicals. This charismatic Catholicism emphasizes many of the same themes as “born again” Christianity, including a personal relationship with Christ. And the Catholic numbers remain huge: Brazil had 50 million Catholics in 1950, but now it has 120 million.

Despite the limitations imposed by the Chinese government, it is estimated that there are now 100 million Christians in China who worship in underground evangelical and Catholic churches. At current growth rates, David Aikman observes in his book *Jesus in Beijing*, China will in a few decades become the largest Christian country in the world.¹⁴ In Korea, where Christians already outnumber Buddhists, there are numerous mega-churches with more than 10,000 members each. The Yoido Full Gospel Church reports 750,000 members. The Catholic church in the Philippines reports 60 million members, and is projected to have 120 million by mid-century.

What distinguishes these Christians, Philip Jenkins writes, is that they immerse themselves in the world of the Bible to a degree that even devout Western Christians do not. For poor people around the world, the social landscape of the Bible is quite familiar. They, too, live in a world of hardship, poverty, money-lenders, and lepers. The themes of exile and persecution resonate with them. Supernatural evil seems quite real to them, and they have little problem in understanding the concept of hell.¹⁵ Some of them even expect the miracles of ancient times to be witnessed in their own lifetimes. I remember an African preacher who visited a church I used to attend in Northern Virginia. He insisted that through God’s grace he had performed innumerable healings. When one of the assistant pastors looked at him a bit doubtfully, he pointed to the Bible and said, “Young man, there is a big difference between you and me. You see this book right here? We believe it.”

This Third World Christianity is coming our way. South Korea has become the world’s second-largest source of Christian missionaries, with 12,000 preaching the faith abroad. Only the United States sends more missionaries to other countries.¹⁶ We may be seeing the beginning of a startling reversal. At one time Christian missionaries went to the far continents of Africa and Asia, where white priests in robes proclaimed the

Bible to wide-eyed and uncomprehending brown and black people. In the future, we may well see black and brown missionaries proclaim the Bible to wide-eyed and uncomprehending white people in the West.

We might think that this preaching will fall on unreceptive ears. But I'm not so sure. The Washington Post reports that there are 150 churches in Denmark and more than 250 in Britain run by foreigners as "part of a growing trend of preachers from developing nations coming to Western Europe." Stendor Johansen, a Danish sea captain, seems to reflect the sentiments of many Europeans who are joining the new congregations. "The Danish church is boring," he says. "I feel energized when I leave one of these services."¹⁷ If more people come to share these sentiments then secularization may ultimately be reversed even in Europe.

Peter Berger writes about what he calls the "myth of secularization." He means that the thesis of inevitable secularization has now lost its credibility. In fact, it is going the way of Zeus and Baal. Berger's work points to the reason for this. Ultimately secularization may be reversed even in Europe.

Berger argues that modernization helps people triumph over necessity but it also produces a profound crisis of purpose in modern life. The greater the effects of modernization, the stronger the social anxiety and the striving for "something more." As Wolfhart Pannenberg puts it, "Secular culture itself produces a deep need for meaning in life and therefore also for religion."¹⁸ This may not be religion in the same form in which it is imbibed in Nigeria or Korea, but it is traditional religion all the same, no less vital for having adapted to new circumstances. It is quite possible that a renewed Christianity can improve modern life by correcting some of the deficiencies and curbing some of the excesses of modernity.

I have found this to be true in my own life. I am a native of India, and my ancestors were converted to Christianity by Portuguese missionaries. As this was the era of the Portuguese Inquisition, some force and bludgeoning may also have been involved. When I came to America as a student in 1978, my Christianity was largely a matter of birth and habit. But even as I plunged myself into modern life in the United States, my faith slowly deepened. G. K. Chesterton calls this the "revolt into orthodoxy." Like Chesterton, I find myself rebelling against extreme secularism and finding in Christianity some remarkable answers to both intellectual and practical concerns. So I am grateful to those stern inquisitors for bringing me into the orbit of

Christianity, even though I am sure my ancestors would not have shared my enthusiasm. Mine is a Christianity that is countercultural in the sense that it opposes powerful trends in modern Western culture. Yet it is thoroughly modern in that it addresses questions and needs raised by life in that culture. I don't know how I could live well without it.

In the end, though, my story doesn't matter very much, and neither does it matter whether the West returns to Christianity. Perhaps the non-Western Christians will convert the Western unbelievers, and perhaps they won't. Either way, they are the future, they know it, and now we know it too. Christianity may come in a different garb than it has for the past several centuries, but Christianity is winning, and secularism is losing. The future is always unpredictable, but one trend seems clear. God is the future, and atheism is on its way out.

CHAPTER TWO

**SURVIVAL OF THE SACRED: WHY
RELIGION IS WINNING**

“The vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.”¹

—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

THE CONTINUED GROWTH OF RELIGION worldwide has not gone unnoticed by leading atheists. Some of these nonbelievers, most of them Darwinists, express candid puzzlement at religion’s enduring vitality. These Darwinists are convinced that there must be some biological explanation for why, in every culture since the beginning of history, man has found and continues to find solace in religion. Biologist Richard Dawkins confesses that religion poses a “major puzzle to anyone who thinks in a Darwinian way.”²

Here, from the evolutionary point of view, is the problem. Scholars like anthropologist Scott Atran presume that religious beliefs are nothing more than illusions. Atran contends that religious belief requires taking “what is materially false to be true” and “what is materially true to be false.” Atran and others believe that religion requires a commitment to “factually impossible worlds.”³ The question, then, is why humans would evolve in such a way that they come to believe in things that don’t exist.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett states the problem clearly: “The ultimate measure of evolutionary value is fitness—the capacity to replicate more successfully than the competition does.”⁴ Yet on the face of it religion seems useless from an evolutionary point of view. It costs time and money, and it induces its members to make sacrifices that undermine their well-being for the benefit of others, who are sometimes total strangers.

Religious people build cathedrals and pyramids that have very little utility except as houses of worship and burial. The ancient Hebrews sacrificed their fattest calves to Yahweh, and even today people slaughter goats and chickens on altars. Religious people sometimes forgo certain

foods—the cow is holy to the Hindus, and the pig unholy to the Muslims. Christians give tithes and financial offerings in church. The Jews keep holy the Sabbath, as Christians keep Sunday for church. Religious people recite prayers and go on pilgrimages. Some become missionaries or devote their lives to serving others. Some are even willing to die for their religious beliefs.

The evolutionary biologist is puzzled: why would evolved creatures like human beings, bent on survival and reproduction, do things that seem unrelated and even inimical to those objectives? This is a critical question, not only because religion poses an intellectual dilemma for Darwinists, but also because Darwinists are hoping that by explaining the existence of religion they can expose its natural roots and undermine its supernatural authority. Biologist E. O. Wilson writes that “we have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences.” He expresses the hope that sometime soon “the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly material phenomenon.”⁵

So how far have these evolutionary theories progressed in accounting for the success of religion? “The proximate cause of religion might be hyperactivity in a particular node of the brain,” Dawkins writes. He also speculates that “the idea of immortality survives and spreads because it caters to wishful thinking.”⁶ But it makes no evolutionary sense for minds to develop comforting beliefs that are evidently false. Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker explains, “A freezing person finds no comfort in believing he is warm. A person face to face with a lion is not put at ease by the conviction that he is a rabbit.”⁷ Wishful thinking of this sort would quickly have become extinct as its practitioners froze or were eaten.

Yet Pinker’s own solution to the problem is no better than Dawkins’s. He suggests that there might be a “God module” in the brain that predisposes people to believe in the Almighty. Such a module, Pinker writes, might serve no survival purpose but could have evolved as a byproduct of other modules with evolutionary value.⁸ This is another way of saying there is no Darwinian explanation. After all, if a “God module” produces belief in God, how about a “Darwin module” that produces belief in evolution?

Still, the question raised by the Darwinists is not a foolish one. Biologists like Dawkins and Wilson say there simply must be some natural and evolutionary explanation for the universality and persistence of religious belief, and they are right. There is such an explanation, and I am pleased to provide one in this chapter. The Reverend Randy Alcorn, founder of Eternal Perspective Ministries in Oregon, sometimes presents his audiences with two creation stories and asks them whether it matters which one is true. In the secular account, “You are the descendant of a tiny cell of primordial protoplasm washed up on an empty beach three and a half billion years ago. You are the blind and arbitrary product of time, chance, and natural forces. You are a mere grab-bag of atomic particles, a conglomeration of genetic substance. You exist on a tiny planet in a minute solar system in an empty corner of a meaningless universe. You are a purely biological entity, different only in degree but not in kind from a microbe, virus, or amoeba. You have no essence beyond your body, and at death you will cease to exist entirely. In short, you came from nothing and are going nowhere.”

In the Christian view, by contrast, “You are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God. You are created in His image, with capacities to think, feel, and worship that set you above all other life forms. You differ from the animals not simply in degree but in kind. Not only is your kind unique, but you are unique among your kind. Your Creator loves you so much and so intensely desires your companionship and affection that He has a perfect plan for your life. In addition, God gave the life of His only son that you might spend eternity with Him. If you are willing to accept the gift of salvation, you can become a child of God.”

Now imagine two groups of people—let’s call them the secular tribe and the religious tribe—who subscribe to these two worldviews. Which of the two tribes is more likely to survive, prosper, and multiply? The religious tribe is made up of people who have an animating sense of purpose. The secular tribe is made up of people who are not sure why they exist at all. The religious tribe is composed of individuals who view their every thought and action as consequential. The secular tribe is made up of matter that cannot explain why it is able to think at all.

Should evolutionists like Dennett, Dawkins, Pinker, and Wilson be surprised, then, to see that religious tribes are flourishing? Throughout the world, religious groups attract astounding numbers of followers and

religious people are showing their confidence in their way of life and in the future by having more children. By contrast, atheist conventions draw only a handful of embittered souls. One of the largest atheist organizations, American Atheists, has around 2,500 members. Throw a stone in the faculty parking lot of an elite American or European university and you have a good chance of hitting an atheist. But throw a stone anywhere else and you really have to aim.

The important point is not just that atheism is unable to compete with religion in attracting followers, but also that the lifestyle of practical atheism seems to produce listless tribes that cannot even reproduce themselves. Sociologists Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart note that many richer, more secular countries are “producing only about half as many children as would be needed to replace the adult population” while many poorer, more religious countries are “producing two or three times as many children as would be needed to replace the adult population.” The consequence, so predictable that one might almost call it a law, is that “the religious population is growing fast, while the secular number is shrinking.”⁹

Russia is one of the most atheist countries in the world, and abortions there outnumber live births by a ratio of two to one. Russia’s birth rate has fallen so low that the nation is now losing 700,000 people a year. Japan, perhaps the most secular country in Asia, is also on a kind of population diet: its 130 million people are expected to drop to around 100 million in the next few decades. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand find themselves in a similar predicament.

Then there is Europe. The most secular continent on the globe is decadent in the quite literal sense that its population is rapidly shrinking. Birth rates are abysmally low in France, Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Sweden. The nations of Western Europe today show some of the lowest birth rates ever recorded, and Eastern European birth rates are comparably low.¹⁰ Historians have noted that Europe is suffering the most sustained reduction in its population since the Black Death in the fourteenth century, when one in three Europeans succumbed to the plague. Lacking the strong religious identity that once characterized Christendom, atheist Europe seems to be a civilization on its way out. Nietzsche predicted that European decadence would produce a miserable

“last man” devoid of any purpose beyond making life comfortable and making provision for regular fornication. Well, Nietzsche’s “last man” is finally here, and his name is Sven.

Eric Kaufmann has noted that in America, where high levels of immigration have helped to compensate for falling native birth rates, birth rates among religious people are almost twice as high as those among secular people. This trend has also been noticed in Europe.¹¹ What this means is that, by a kind of natural selection, the West is likely to evolve in a more religious direction. This tendency will likely accelerate if Western societies continue to import immigrants from more religious societies, whether they are Christian or Muslim. Thus we can expect even the most secular regions of the world, through the sheer logic of demography, to become less secular over time.

In previous decades, scholars have tried to give a purely economic explanation for demographic trends. The general idea was that population was a function of affluence. Sociologists noted that as people and countries became richer, they had fewer children. Presumably, primitive societies needed children to help in the fields, and more prosperous societies no longer did. Poor people were also believed to have more children because sex provided one of their only means of recreation. Moreover, poor people are often ignorant about birth control or don’t have access to it. From this perspective, large families were explained as a phenomenon of poverty and ignorance.

This economic explanation is partly true, but it falls short of the full picture. Many poor people have large families despite having access to birth control and movie tickets; it turns out they generally want larger families. Sure, they are more economically dependent on their children, but on the other hand, rich people can afford more children. Wealthy people in America today tend to have one child or none, but wealthy families in the past tended to have three or more children. The real difference is not merely in the level of income—it is that in the past children were valued as gifts from God, and traditional cultures still view them that way.

Muslim countries, with their oil revenues, are by no means the poorest in the world and yet they have among the highest birth rates. Practicing Catholics, orthodox Jews, Mormons, and evangelical Protestants are by no

means the poorest groups in America, and yet they have large families. Clearly religious factors are at work here. The declining birth rates in the West as a whole are, in considerable part, due to secularization. The religious motive for childbearing has been greatly attenuated, and children are now viewed by many people as instruments of self-gratification. The old biblical principle was “Be fruitful and multiply.” The new one is “Have as many children as will enhance your lifestyle.”

The economic forecasters of the disappearance of religion have proven themselves to be false prophets. Not only is religion thriving, but it is thriving because it helps people to adapt and survive in the world. In his book *Darwin's Cathedral*, evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson argues that religion provides something that secular society doesn't: a vision of transcendent purpose. Consequently, religious people develop a zest for life that is, in a sense, unnatural. They exhibit a hopefulness about the future that may exceed what is warranted by how the world is going. And they forge principles of morality and charity that simply make them more cohesive, adaptive, and successful than groups whose members lack this binding and elevating force.¹²

My conclusion is that it is not religion but atheism that requires a Darwinian explanation. Atheism is a bit like homosexuality: one is not sure where it fits into a doctrine of natural selection. Why would nature select people who mate with others of the same sex, a process with no reproductive advantage at all? It seems equally perplexing why nature would breed a group of people who see no higher purpose to life or the universe. Here is where the biological expertise of Dawkins, Pinker, and Wilson could prove illuminating. Maybe they can turn their Darwinian lens on themselves and help us understand how atheism, like the human tailbone and the panda's thumb, somehow survived as an evolutionary leftover of our primitive past.

CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

**A FORETASTE OF ETERNITY: HOW
CHRISTIANITY CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE**

“Finally it is not a matter of obedience. Finally it is a matter of love.”

—Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*

NOW THAT WE KNOW WHAT MAKES CHRISTIANITY UNIQUE, we need to ask ourselves whether we should adopt it. In this book I have tried to meet the strongest critiques and objections to Christianity, but that is not always enough. Scholar and preacher John Stott tells the story of a man who was full of questions. Every time Stott answered his question, he had another question. One day Stott asked him, “If I were to answer your problems to your complete intellectual satisfaction, would you be willing to alter your manner of life?” The man blushed and smiled slightly, and Stott realized that his resistance to Christianity was not intellectual. The man didn’t want Christianity because he feared it would mess up his plans and disrupt his life.¹ For many people, the reluctance to embrace Christianity is as practical as it is intellectual. They want to know what Christianity’s benefits are, and how their lives will change if they become Christians. I conclude this book by addressing these concerns.

Christianity is an embrace not merely of a teaching but also of a person. So let’s look at Christianity’s central figure, Jesus Christ. Our secular culture cannot get enough of Christ. Two thousand years after his death, he continues to be a big story, as well as the focus of never-ending controversies. The Da Vinci Code seems to have inspired a whole host of spinoffs, all alleging in some way that the Christ of the Gospels was not the real Christ. Oscar-winning director James Cameron released a documentary denying Christ’s resurrection on the basis that the tomb containing his remains has now been located. Cameron’s film also suggests that Christ married Mary Magdalene and had a son. On a trip to India I encountered the headline “Jesus Faked Death on Cross.” According to the story, Jesus staged the whole thing to escape from his enemies.² Christopher Hitchens goes further,

suggesting that Christ may be a mythical rather than a historical figure, alluding to the “highly questionable existence of Jesus.”³

Even some biblical scholars—a group that can be quite hostile to Christianity—engage in massive attempts at revisionism. Among their conclusions: the real Christ did not claim to be divine, he didn’t want to found a church, and his simple message of love was subsequently distorted by Christians into an elaborate theology. Typical of this debunking theology is the Jesus Seminar, a group whose members vote on whether central events in the Bible actually happened. So far, the group has decided that Christ’s divinity is a myth, the virgin birth is a myth, Christ’s resurrection is a myth, and that fewer than 20 percent of the sayings attributed to Christ were really said by him.⁴ These “discoveries” are regularly trumpeted in the media.

Put aside the credibility of these claims for a minute and ask a different question: Why are these issues such a big deal? If you are not a Christian, why would you care? There are three important reasons.

The first answer is that Christ remains the most influential figure in history. Any list of world-transforming individuals would no doubt include Moses, Buddha, and Muhammad. Moses, Buddha, and Muhammad, however, occupy totally different places in Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam than Christ occupies in Christianity. Moses, Buddha, and Muhammad never professed to perform miracles; indeed, they never claimed to be anything more than men. They viewed themselves simply as God’s messengers. Christ is the only person in history who has defined a whole religion around his person.

Even people who are not Christian or even religious are influenced in big and small ways by Christ. They divide history into the time before and after his birth, BC and AD. Sunday is a worldwide holiday, not, as many believe, because it is the day of the Sabbath (which is Saturday) but because it was traditionally held to be the day of Christ’s resurrection. The history of the West, indeed of the world, is incomprehensible without Christ, and would be unimaginably different had he not lived.

The Christ we encounter in the New Testament is so extraordinary that it’s hard to imagine the Gospel writers inventing such a person. C. S. Lewis once noted that, along with Socrates and Samuel Johnson, Christ is one of the few historical figures we would recognize instantly if he walked into the room. Yet we know Christ, as we know Socrates, through the reports of others.

Neither ever wrote a single word. The Bible gives a single instance where Christ wrote with his finger on the ground, but we don't know what he wrote. But when we hear Christ's voice in the four Gospels, it is unmistakable.

Shakespeare is our greatest dramatist, but there is no single character in Shakespeare who can match Christ's eloquence. "By their fruits you shall know them." "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." "Turn the other cheek." "Man does not live by bread alone." "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

While there is much about his early life that we don't know, we do know that Christ existed. This is the second reason Christ is such a big deal. He's a historical figure, and the great events that defined his life really happened. Historians debate whether some other figures of ancient times, like Homer, existed at all, but there is general unanimity among historians that Christ was a real person. Do you believe in the existence of Socrates? Alexander the Great? Julius Caesar? If historicity is established by written records in multiple copies that date originally from near contemporaneous sources, there is far more proof for Christ's existence than for any of theirs. The historicity of Christ is attested not only by Christian but also by Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources. Apart from the Gospels, we find references to him in Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, and Josephus. Tacitus in his *Annals* deplores "the detestable superstition" of "Christus," the founder of a new sect called Christianity. These sources testify not only that Christ lived but also that he had a big following, that he alienated the Jewish and Roman authorities, and that he died by crucifixion.

While the Gospel accounts individually provide different angles and emphases, together they offer a remarkably coherent account of Christ's life. The earliest Gospels were composed only thirty or so years after Christ's death, and the last was written before 100 AD. Moreover, historians have innumerable early manuscripts of scripture, a vastly greater body of material than they possess of many ancient and classical texts, and so they are in a good position to confirm that the biblical writings are authentic.⁵ Finally, in recent decades archaeologists have been compelled to reconsider people and events long regarded as legendary. They have located the tomb of Caiaphas,

the high priest who interrogated Jesus, and have unearthed an ancient plaque honoring Pilate, the Roman prefect who decreed Christ's crucifixion. Skeletal remains exist showing that Roman crucifixions were performed in precisely the manner outlined in the Bible. Summarizing the evidence, writer Jeff Sheler notes that "the picture that has emerged overall closely matches the historical backdrop of the Gospels."⁶

Let us now consider the historicity of Christ's resurrection. "If Christ had not been raised," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith." The resurrection is the most important event in Christianity. Since the nineteenth century, some biblical scholars have refused to accept the biblical account of the resurrection because it was produced by people obviously biased in Christ's favor. Interestingly, Christ's followers, by their own admission, did not expect his resurrection. Arriving three days after his death, some of them brought spices to the tomb to anoint his body. Only then did they observe that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. The fact of the empty tomb was admitted by the Roman guards and also by the Jewish magistrates, who told the Roman authorities that Christ's followers must have stolen the body.

The apostles were deeply skeptical about reports of a resurrection, and the Bible tells us that Christ had to appear before them several times before these doubts were dispelled. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:6 that Christ "appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep." Paul here appeals to direct historical evidence: the testimony of multiple witnesses who actually saw Jesus alive after his execution. Of this group, Paul says that some are dead but most are alive; in other words, many were in a position to confirm or refute him. In the history of hallucinations, is there a single instance in which five hundred people all saw the same person and were all equally mistaken?

Still, we must ask whether these early Christians were serious about Christ's resurrection, whether they were being truthful about what they saw, and whether it mattered to them. These questions are not difficult to answer. The disciples became so convinced of what they had seen that their dirges of lamentation were replaced with cries of joy. Proclaiming Christ crucified and Christ risen, they launched the greatest wave of religious conversion in history. The number of Christians increased from around one hundred at the time of Christ's death to around thirty million by the early fourth century,

when the Roman emperor Constantine himself converted to Christianity. These conversions occurred in the teeth of fierce opposition and the persecution of the greatest empire in the ancient world, the empire of Rome. The early Christians did not hesitate to identify themselves with a man who had been branded a traitor and a criminal. They endured imprisonment, torture, exile, and death rather than renounce their commitment to a resurrected Christ. Even from a secular point of view, the evidence for the resurrection is surprisingly strong. Indeed, coming from so many witnesses with so much to lose, it might even be sufficient to convince an impartial jury in a court of law.

A third reason Christ continues to play a central role in our culture is that he makes claims on our lives that we can reject but not ignore. Christ is the most divisive figure who has ever lived. This is strange because he was a man who never hurt anyone, who lived a blameless life, and whose teachings about love and peace are universally praised. Yet whenever I write about Christ, I receive hate mail. Some of it is directed to me, but most of it seems to be provoked by antagonism toward my subject. If you doubt this, start talking at your next picnic or dinner party in a serious way about Christ. The reaction you get will either be gushingly enthusiastic or coldly hostile. Christ's teachings are so challenging that if we accept them they change our lives. If we reject them, they provoke in us either seething animosity or a willful desire to exclude Christ from our lives, or at least to amend him so that he doesn't make us feel uncomfortable.

Throughout history, people have tried to twist and trim Christ's words to suit their predispositions. This strategy of evasion and sly revisionism is quite common today. We hear from the Jesus Seminar and other sources that Christ didn't concern himself with the afterlife, when in reality he concerned himself with that as much as with anything else. We hear from milque-toast Christians and many others that Christ spoke only about divine love, when in reality he also frequently spoke about divine condemnation. (Hell is mentioned at least three times in the Sermon on the Mount.) We hear from those who wish to avoid conflict at all costs that Christ was a peacemaker, but he said in Matthew 10:34, "I come not to bring peace but the sword."

This strategy of "cutting Christ down to size" is best illustrated by the example of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson agreed with many of Christ's moral precepts but was offended by Christ's claim to be divine, to perform miracles,

and to secure for men a path to heaven. So Jefferson compiled his own private bible in which he, quite literally, took scissors and cut out all Christ's teachings that he didn't like. The virgin birth? Gone. Miracles? Snip, snip. The resurrection? Out. Hell? Ancient history. The "gospel according to Jefferson" was not published until long after his death, but it illustrates the lengths to which people will go to avoid confronting Christ as he really was.

Continuing in this tradition, Richard Dawkins writes that "the historical evidence that Jesus claimed any sort of divine status is minimal."⁷ Yet in the Gospel of John 8:58, Christ says, "Before Abraham was, I am." Not only does Christ claim to have existed before Abraham, but in using the term "I am" he is also invoking God's own self-description as revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Christ also says "I and the Father are one" and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." The disciples seem to have gotten the message. They routinely referred to him as Ruler, Messiah, Son of David, King of the Jews, King of Israel, and Lord and Savior. On several occasions, Christ corrects and updates the Jewish scriptures, thus claiming for himself the authority of divine revelation. Christ also purports to forgive sins. Ordinarily an offense can be forgiven only by the person who has been wronged. It requires divine power to forgive sins perpetrated against others, and Christ claims precisely this kind of authority. He also insists, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and "I am the resurrection and the life." The Jewish leaders of the time understood Christ to be assuming the traits of divinity, and in the Jewish monotheistic tradition, it is blasphemous for a man to claim to be God. That was the basis on which the Sanhedrin issued their death sentence against Christ.

It is impossible to remain neutral about these things. This is the message I have been trying to convey in this book. What can be said about Christ can also be said about Christianity. It matters. It is the very core and center of Western civilization. Many of the best things about our world are the result of Christianity, and some of the worst things are the result of its absence, or of moving away from it. Christianity's central claims about God and the nature of reality are supported by the greatest discoveries of modern science and modern scholarship. There are good intellectual and moral reasons to embrace Christianity. For all its eloquence and vehemence, the atheist attack fails. Despite all this, there remains an all too human resistance on the part of many people to becoming Christians. They want to know what's in it for

them. This question may shock some Christians, but it is not a bad one. In a low sense, it can be taken to mean: how will Christianity give me financial success and a problem-free life? Christianity offers no such formula. The lives of Christians, far from being problem free, are often infused with struggle and sacrifice. In a higher sense, the undecided person is quite right to wonder how Christianity will make his life better. After all, he is considering not only whether to believe something but whether to base his life on it. Addressing myself specifically to unbelievers who possess an open mind, I conclude this book by enumerating some concrete ways in which Christianity can improve our lives.

First, Christianity makes sense of who we are in the world. All of us need a framework in which to understand reality, and part of Christianity's appeal is that it is a worldview that makes things fit together. Science and reason are seamlessly integrated in a Christian framework, because modern science emerged from a Christian framework. Christianity has always embraced both reason and faith. While reason helps us to discover things about experience, faith helps us discover things that transcend experience. For limited, fallible humans like us, Christianity provides a comprehensive and believable account of who we are and why we are here.

Christianity also infuses life with a powerful and exhilarating sense of purpose. While atheism in most of its current forms posits a universe without meaning, Christianity makes of life a moral drama in which we play a starring role and in which the most ordinary events take on a grand significance. Modern life is typically characterized by gray disillusionment. Christianity gives us a world that is enchanted once again. This is not a return to the past or a denial of modern reality; rather, it is a reinterpretation of modern reality that makes it more vivid and more meaningful. We now see in color what we previously saw in black and white.

What produces this change of orientation? Christians live *sub spe cie aeternitatis*, "in the shadow of eternity." Life can be terribly unfair, and this is for many people a natural source of cynicism and frustration. In the *Gorgias* and in other Platonic dialogues, Socrates strives to prove that "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong." The proof is a failure because there are bad people in the world who prosper and there are good people who undeservedly come to grief. But Christianity produces an enlargement of perspective that prevents us from being jaded by this realization. Christianity

teaches that this life is not the only life, and there is a final judgment in which all earthly accounts are settled. The Christian knows that *sub specie aeternitatis* it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong.

The business tycoon or law partner who cheats people and runs out on his wife may be viewed as a successful man of the world, but the Christian perceives him, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a truly lamentable figure. By contrast, the poor peasant who crawls to the altar on his knees—a failure by all the world's standards—is one who is preparing to receive his heavenly reward. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, he is the truly fortunate one. Here we have the meaning of the phrase “the last shall be first.” It simply means that the standards of worldly success and divine reward are quite different. Without the perspective of eternity, this necessary inversion of values would be lost to us. Seeing things in a new light, the Christian can face life and whatever it brings with a sense of peace and hopefulness that are rare in today's world.

Contrary to what secular critics say, the Christian does not and cannot hold our life on earth to be unimportant. Indeed, it is of the highest importance. The reason is startlingly obvious, and yet often goes completely unnoticed: it is this life that determines our status in the next life. Our fate for eternity hinges on how we live now. So living *sub specie aeternitatis*, far from being a way to escape the responsibilities of life in this world, is actually a way to imbue life with a meaning that will outlast it. It is to give life much greater depth and significance because it is part of a larger narrative of purpose and truth.

Christianity also offers a solution to the cosmic loneliness we all feel. However successful the secular life, there comes to every thinking person the recognition that, in the end, we are alone. Christianity removes this existential loneliness and links our destiny with God. Our deepest relationship is with Him, and it is a relationship that is never-ending and always faithful. The secular person may wonder what this relationship feels like. It is an enduring experience of the sublime. Have you ever had a moment with someone you love in which you are transported into a transcendent realm that seems somehow outside space and time? Ordinarily, such experiences are rare and never last for long. For the Christian, the sublime is a part of everyday life. Milton terms this a joy surpassing Eden, “a paradise within thee, happier far.”⁸ Another benefit of Christianity is that it helps us to cope well with suffering and death. Time magazine reported on the case of a woman who

suffered a series of tragedies. Her husband was laid off. She had a miscarriage. A month later her first cousin was diagnosed with cancer. Then two hurricanes struck her hometown. Finally, one of her best friends died from a brain tumor. Here is the woman's reaction: "We're putting our lives in God's hands and trusting He has our best interests at heart. I've clung to my faith more than ever this year. As a consequence, I haven't lost my joy."⁹ Joy under these conditions simply isn't natural, and that is this woman's point—only the supernatural can produce enduring joy in the face of life's tragedies. When we are in pain and feeling hopeless, Christianity raises our spirits. We don't know why we are in this situation, but we have faith that there is a reason, even if only God knows what that is. Perhaps God is trying to teach us something, or to draw us closer to Him by intimating to us our mortality. Christianity also gives us the hope that when someone dies, we will see that person again.

Then there is the matter of our own death. Ordinarily we do our best to avoid thinking about mortality, and many of us resist going to funerals. Funerals remind us of our own extinction, and the notion that we will one day cease to exist is a source of anxiety and terror. But Paul writes, "Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory?" For Christians, death is a temporal end but not a final end. The secular person thinks there are two stages: life and death. For the Christian, there are three: life, death, and the life to come. This is why, for the Christian, death is not so terrifying.

Finally, Christianity enables us to become the better persons we want to be. The decent and honorable things we do are no longer a matter of thankless routine. This isn't just a morality we made up for ourselves. Rather, we are pursuing our higher destiny as human beings. We are becoming what we were meant to be.

Christianity not only makes us aspire to be better, but it also shows us how to be better. In marriage, for example, Christianity teaches that marriage is not merely a contract. If we treat it that way and use it for our own benefit, it doesn't work very well. For Christians, marriage is a covenant not merely between the two parties but also between them and God. The operating principle of Christian marriage is agape or sacrificial love. This means that marriage functions best when each partner focuses primarily on the happiness of the other. This can be attempted as a secular proposition but human selfishness makes it very difficult. Christian marriage is much easier, because God is now a central part of the relationship. So when there are hardships in

marriage, we pray to God and He gives us grace. Agape is not so much human love as it is God's love shining through us. This is a bountiful resource that is available for the asking, and when we make agape the ground of our marriages and relationships, we find that the whole system works and we are much happier as a result.

We want to be better parents, and what better examples can we provide for our children than the Christian dad and mom practicing the sacrificial love of agape? We want to be good citizens, and can we find a more inspiring model of genuine compassion and charity than Mother Teresa? A man who saw her embrace a leper told her he wouldn't do that for all the money in the world. She replied that she wouldn't either; she was doing it for the love of Christ. This is the same motive that seems to have propelled humanity's greatest acts of heroism and sacrifice.

We want to raise the level of our personal lives, bringing conscience into harmony with the way we live. Christianity gives us a reason to follow this interior guide; it is not simply our innermost desire but the voice of God speaking through us. We want to be good because virtue is God's stamp in our hearts, and one way we relate to Him is by following His ways. As Thomas More said, in the final analysis we are good not because we have to be but because we want to be. Seemingly incorrigible criminals, alcoholics, and drug addicts have reformed their lives by becoming Christians. Earlier in this book I quoted Steven Weinberg's claim that "for good people to do bad things—that takes religion." Actually, the exact opposite is true: for bad people to do good things—that takes religion.

Ultimately we are called not only to happiness and goodness but also to holiness. Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." What counts for God is not only our external conduct but also our inward disposition. Holiness does not mean merely performing the obligatory rituals on the outside; it means staying pure on the inside. Yet holiness is not something we do for God. It is something we do with God. We couldn't do it without Him. In order for us to be more like Christ, we need Christ within us. In the words of that disheveled prophet John the Baptist, standing waist-deep in the river, "He must increase and I must decrease." Paul says the same thing in Galatians 2:20: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." This is Christ's countercultural challenge to us. In a society based on self-fulfillment and self-esteem, on

looking after yourself and advancing yourself, Christ calls us to a heroic task of self-emptying. He must increase and we must decrease. This we do by allowing his empire an ever greater domain in our hearts. Goodness and happiness flow from this.

For the Christian, human joys are a small foreshadowing of the joys that are in store. Terrestrial happiness is only a foretaste of eternity. As the book of Revelation 21:4 puts it, “God will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.” It is in this spirit that the Christian awaits this final moment of destiny, relishing the gift of life while every day proclaiming, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus. We are ready.”

NOTES

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