

IF EASTER NEVER CAME

Would the World Be Better Off Without Christianity?

Text: Matthew 27:57-66; Matthew 5:11-16

Halting the Hoax?

What if Easter never came? What if the Jewish leaders we read about in Matthew 27 were right? What if the resurrection of Jesus was just a hoax that got headed off at the pass on the Saturday after Good Friday by some quick thinking Jewish leaders and some tough Roman guards? What if Easter, as we have been told about it, never happened? What would that mean?

Well, it means we could still get dressed up, only it wouldn't have to be so early! We could still do the whole basket thing and hunt for eggs and schedule it at a time when we wouldn't need a snow shovel to find them! We could eat jellybeans and talk about bunnies, because those are fertility cult things anyways, to which Christians gave new meanings. Easter could be about celebrating the good news everybody loves to hear: "The brunch is laden! It is laden indeed!"

You know, there are some people who really feel that we'd be better off if Easter never came, or if we had the good sense to recognize that it didn't in the first place. Prominent atheist, Christopher Hitchens says: "I can't believe there is a thinking person here who doesn't realize that... if it emancipated itself from this sinister, childish [religious] nonsense... our species would begin to grow to something like its full height."¹

One View of History

What Hitchens is articulating is a view being sold in a lot of places these days that says that not only is Christianity not particularly helpful anymore, it has been one of the huge, life-limiting problems on this planet. This is an idea which first gained prominence back in the late 1700's with the widespread reading of Edward Gibbon's book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon caricatured Christianity as having brought down the grandeur of classical civilization, fettering the human spirit and the life of the mind he said had been flourishing in Greece and Rome. As Christianity expanded it weakened the Roman Empire, paving the way for the Church to take over and subject the western world to its superstitions and regressive rules.

As the story line goes, the Church went on to ban and burn books, suppress science and womanhood, and plunge once-noble Europe into the Dark Ages. Bent on taxing people to fund their material and moral excesses and killing off all dissent, the Church's leadership crusaded across the Middle Ages, skewering infidels, racking and burning dissidents. But, thankfully, some courageous thinkers finally revolted against the Church's Darth Vader-like grip on the world and birthed the Renaissance. They

followed it up with the magnificent Enlightenment and the blessed staving back of religion and all its ignorance.

In time, thank man's goodness, these Bright Minds managed to invent the modern era and bring us to the present moment when, if with John Lennon we dare to imagine, we can be free of the Christian disease once and for all and enter a new age of progress and peace. In fact, we would have had that better world a whole lot earlier, if that big trumped up hoax about Easter never came. This is what is being taught as "history."

The Truth Sets Us Free

But that's quite a *revision* of history. I'll say more about that in a moment but, before going there (and to borrow from Tony Campolo) it seems essential to say that we have met the enemy and they are partly right. Jesus once said that only "**the Truth will set you free**" (**John 8:32**). If we are his followers, then we have to reckon honestly, even if painfully, with truth. The truth is that atheism has a foothold today in large part because there have been many times in history when people of Christian faith or under some religions flag have sinned boldly against God and people. Whether by ignorance, pride, greed, or some other deadly sin, they have repeated the very atrocities by which ostensibly religious people crucified Jesus because He threatened *their* institutional power or their personal box.

The truth is that over the centuries we religious people have been racially, sexually, politically, and socially bigoted in ways contrary to the full counsel of Scripture. We have looked to our own interests more than to the character of Christ or the needs of the world God so loves. We have sometimes justified our actions by selective reading of the Bible. And if we've grown up believing that the Christian Church or Christian America or anything other than Christ himself is substantially holier than everyone else, then the attacks of Atheism on Christianity today are actually God's good gift inviting us to remember that we too need the Savior and He is not done renovating our lives.

Reclaiming HIStory

At the same time, if we allow the atheist re-writing of history to stand unchallenged, we will do injustice to truth and imperil the future. So here is also the truth. As the message of Easter began to move out from Jerusalem in the middle of the first century, Roman civilization was already on the rocks. It was morally wasting, ravaged by political divisions, widespread slavery, the commonly accepted abuse of children, and a widening gap between the haves and the never-would-haves. When the Huns, Goths, and other northern tribes finally poured down into the heart of Europe they found a society so soft and rotting that they sliced through it like hot knife through butter. Greek and Roman decadence and Barbarian pillaging created the Dark Ages.

Many people still think that it was the support of the Roman Empire under Constantine that led to the explosive growth of Christianity. In reality, however, it was the collapse of the Empire that unleashed the Church to play the strategic role God had for it in this part

of history. As Dinesh D'Souza observes, "slowly and surely, Christianity took this backward continent and gave it learning and order, stability and dignity."² Because Christians believed that Christ was Lord of all the earth and that God had put eternity in all men's heart, Christian monks highly valued what was left of classical civilization, particularly its arts and letters. The monks studied, copied, and hid away the manuscripts that preserved the learning of late antiquity – saving for us the treasures of Greece and Rome.

Because Christian theology held that God was the divine Logos – the great mind that brought intelligent structure and order out of chaos – Christian monasteries became radiant centers of organized community and personal industry throughout Europe. They applied biblical principles of private property, civic stewardship, and limited government to a world that had lost them. And out of the wasteland of the Dark Ages, Christians produced hamlets, then towns, and eventually cities. The principles of commerce and elected leadership practiced in those monastic communities laid the vital and generative soil for the rise of capitalism and democratic society as we know them today.

Steadily, the Christian missionary movement stretched out, converting the Northern European barbarian hordes, the Angles and Saxons, and the tribes of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Warriors gradually became knights, infused now with new ideals of civility and chivalry that still inform our society. Because Jesus honored woman and valued children, the developing civilization of Europe began to take on his imprint in these ways, albeit imperfectly, but to an extent utterly foreign to other cultures of that time and to many in ours today.

Other religions, including the classic Greek and Roman ones, held that the gods (and therefore the movements of nature) were capricious or unknowable. But Christians believed that God was rational and had given human beings minds to discover his glory in the created order. Brief episodes of regression aside, Christianity was indisputably the world's most massive sponsor of the scientific enterprise. The Christian passion for the study of the Scriptures and the pursuit of truth led to the establishment of an untold number of schools and universities.

Because Jesus had said: "**Whatever you do for one of the least** – the poor, the imprisoned, the sick -- **you do for me**"... Because they knew a Lord who showed concern for the weak and the marginalized, Christ's followers developed innumerable hospitals, orphanages, and other centers of charity, again at a scale and to an extent unknown before on planet Earth. How many such schools and places of compassionate care STILL bear an inscription somewhere or a name that speaks of the spiritual fount out of which these living waters came? Yale professor, Jaroslav Pelikan, remarks that "Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of His name, how much would be left?"³

Bringing It Home

In his landmark book, *The Victory of Reason*, Rodney Stark -- a Berkeley PhD and Baylor professor of social science, once an atheist himself -- answers: "Had the followers of Jesus remained an obscure Jewish sect, most of you would not have learned to read and the rest of you would be reading from hand-copied scrolls. Without a theology committed to reason, progress, and moral equality, today the entire world would be about where non-European societies were in 1800. A world with many astrologers and alchemists but no scientists. A world of despots, lacking universities, banks, factories, eyeglasses, chimneys, and pianos. A world where most infants do not live to the age of five and many women die in childbirth. The modern world arose only in Christian societies. Not in Islam. Not in Asia. Not in a 'secular' society..."⁴ Name a single major charitable organization or culture-enriching entity founded by atheists.

Today we face an articulate and assertive army of anti-theists who are dug deep into academic society. They declare that if we could just leave religion behind and build instead on the inherent genius and goodness inside of humanity, we would have a better world. But the experiment has already been tried. It was tried in Russia and China and Korea and it led to the starvation, slaughter, and suppression of countless millions more than the Church for all its admitted flaws ever harmed. But by the tens of millions today, people in those same parts of the world are flocking into house churches and refurbished cathedrals and storefront worship centers, passionately seeking that generative seed of life that Europe and America once had but now in too many places seems too jaded or proud to pursue.

What is it? What took that first tiny band of beleaguered disciples -- dispirited, divided, desperately weak before the massive powers and patterns of this world -- and changed them? What could so alter their values and vision for living, and set them on a mission to gift the world with the same, even if it meant being crucified themselves for it? What set off the massive movement that resulted in the unbelievable blessings we enjoy today?

I will tell you what it was. They went to a tomb that was very well-guarded, but nonetheless empty. They met a man they'd seen crucified, dead, and buried, but who now was so clearly alive. And they realized that in this Jesus, his gospel, his Spirit, his body the Church there really was the power to change the world, one life, one household, one community at a time. Let it begin again. Let it start here. Let it begin with you as you let Jesus into your life. Because the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. And if that isn't worth singing hallelujah about, what is? Maybe it will be the brunch.

¹ Comment made by Christopher Hitchens (author of *God Is Not Great*) at a debate with Alister McGrath (author of *The Twilight of Atheism*) at Georgetown University.

² Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing Inc, 2007), p. 43.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through The Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.1.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), p.233.