

Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion

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“What Christianity has to offer the world is bound up in its strangeness. Only a distinctive word can be truly good news in a world like this. In a secularizing age, though, Christianity is often not simply odd to the world but also unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. In this book, Rebecca McLaughlin takes seriously both the Bible and the questions of nonbelievers. If you’re a non-Christian and have wondered why Christians think and do as they do, this book will be a good start to exploring those questions. If you’re a believer, this book will not only equip you intellectually but also call you to compassion and empathy for your questioning, unbelieving neighbor, as well as prepare you to bear witness to the Light that has come into the world.”

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Confronting Christianity

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Confronting Christianity

12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion

Rebecca McLaughlin

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For Natasha,

and for all my other fiercely intelligent friends

who disagree with me, but will do me the

honor of reading this book

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[Introduction](#)

In 1971, Beatles star John Lennon had a dream. Closing his eyes to the atheist regimes of his day, he dreamed of a brotherhood of man with no heaven, no hell, no countries, no possessions, “nothing to kill or die for,” and “no religion.” This dream persists. “Imagine” was sung reverentially at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Despite prescribing an antireligious pill swallowed by only a tiny fraction of the world, it is seen as an anthem of unity across ideological differences. As its notes rang out in PyeongChang, the sister of the supreme leader of North Korea—a state that has tried “no religion” and still found much to kill and die for—graced the crowd.

Eight years before “Imagine” was released, another prophet shared another dream. He dreamed that “one day in Alabama . . . little black boys and black girls [would] be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”¹ But in the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s vision, peace and brotherhood sprang not from the loss of faith but from its fulfillment. King dreamed that “one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed” (Isa. 40:4).

Who was right?

At the time John Lennon dreamed, another set of prophets spoke. Sociologists of religion foretold that global modernization would drive secularization. As the world became more educated, more advanced, more scientific, religious belief would retreat. It had happened in Western Europe, so

the rest of the world would follow. There was only one problem with the so-called secularization hypothesis. It failed.

In Western Europe and North America, the proportion of people identifying as religious has certainly shrunk. But at a global level, not only has religion failed to decline, but sociologists are now predicting an increasingly religious world.² While numbers do not tell the whole story, by 2060, the latest projections suggest, Christianity will still be the largest global belief system, having increased slightly, from 31 percent to 32 percent of the world's population.³ Islam will have grown substantially, from 24 percent to 31 percent. Hinduism is set for marginal decline, from 15 percent to 14 percent, and Buddhism from 7 percent to 5 percent. Judaism will hold stable at 0.2 percent. And by 2060, the proportion of humanity identifying as atheists, agnostics, or "none" will have declined from 16 percent to 13 percent. Yes, declined.⁴ For those of us who grew up under the secularization hypothesis, this comes as a surprise—pleasant or otherwise. So, what is happening?

Part of the answer lies in the link between theology and biology: Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Jews outbreed the nonreligious.⁵ Sixty percent of the world's religiously unaffiliated live in China, where fertility rates have been deliberately controlled. But even within the United States, religiosity correlates with fertility.⁶ This may be a comfort to secularists, who would rather imagine believers outbreeding them than outthinking them. But the presumed link between education and secularization is weak. While the gaps are closing for younger generations, Jews and Christians are still the most educated groups, with the smallest educational gap between men and women.⁷ In the US, while nominally religious people are more likely to declare themselves nonreligious if they are more educated, professing Christians with higher levels of education appear to be just as religious as those with less schooling. Indeed, highly educated Christians are more likely to be weekly churchgoers.⁸

Furthermore, while many Americans are becoming nonreligious, the traffic flows both ways. A recent study found that nearly 40 percent of Americans raised nonreligious become religious (typically Christian) as adults, while only 20 percent of those raised Protestant switch.⁹ If that trend continues, my secular friends are twice as likely to raise children who become Christians as I am to raise children who become nonreligious.¹⁰ And the kind of religious beliefs people hold today are not the kind that fit comfortably into the "Coexist" bumper sticker. In North America, partly thanks to immigrant believers, full-blooded Christianity is outcompeting theologically liberal faith.¹¹

But perhaps the biggest shock to the secular system is China, a country that has tried hard to imagine and enforce no religion. Conservative estimates from 2010 put China's Christian population at over sixty-eight million, representing 5 percent of its vast population.¹² But Christianity is spreading so fast that experts believe China could have more Christians than the US by 2030, and that it could be a majority-Christian country by 2050.¹³

Fenggang Yang, a leading sociologist of religion in China, argues that we need to undergo a paradigm shift akin to a scientific revolution as we adjust to the failure of the secularization hypothesis.¹⁴ Much academic discourse rests on the assumption that religion is withering under the scorching heat of modernization. Secular humanism is seen as the shared ground on which we all can stand. But this framework has crumbled. Today, we must wake up to the fact that Lennon's dream was a fantasy. What is worse, it was a fantasy fueled by white Western bias and grounded on the assumption that the world would follow where Western Europe led. The question for the next generation is not How soon will religion die out? but Christianity or Islam?

For many, this is a troubling thought. Full-blooded religious belief worries us. We envisage extremism and violence, the stifling of free thought, and the subjugation of women. In some parts of the world, the resurgence of traditionalist Islam has borne this unappealing fruit. But for many

raised in the secularizing West, biblical Christianity also triggers moral and intellectual objections: What about science, suffering, and sexuality? What about the Crusades? How can you say there is one true faith? How can you take the Bible literally? Doesn't the Bible justify slavery? How could a loving God send people to hell?

If you resonate with these questions, this book is for you. I feel their weight. If I give smug, simplistic answers, I have failed. I have spent decades of my life engaging with brilliant friends who have principled reasons for dismissing Christianity. But I have also spent years working with Christian professors at leading secular universities in fields ranging from physics to philosophy. Some grew up in the church. Others encountered Christianity later. All have found that their faith has stood the test of their research and left them more convinced that Christianity represents our tightest grasp on truth and our best hope for the world. This book aims to look closely at important questions through the lenses these friends have given me, and to share that experience with you.

Often, when we observe from a distance, we misinterpret. Look up at the night sky and you will see much darkness. But train a telescope on the blackest patch, and a million galaxies explode into view. John Lennon dreamed of a religion-free world where there would be "nothing to kill or die for." Staring into the dark night of segregation, Martin Luther King preached an antithetical message: that "there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for. And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live."¹⁵

¹. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream . . ." (speech delivered at the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," August 28, 1963), <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

². See "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

³. See "Projected Change in Global Population, 2015–2060," Pew Research Center, March 31, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf_17-04-05_projectionsupdate_changepopulation640px/.

⁴. See "Size and Projected Growth of Major Religious Groups, 2015–2060," Pew Research Center, April 3, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf-04-05-2017_-projectionsupdate-00-07/.

⁵. Global fertility rates are as follows: Muslims (3.1), Christians (2.7), Hindus (2.4), Jews (2.3), unaffiliated (1.7), Buddhists (1.6). See "Total Fertility Rate by Religion, 2010–2015," Pew Research Center, March 26, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/pf_15-04-02_projectionsoverview_totalfertility_640px/.

⁶. See, for example, Sarah Hayford and S. Philip Morgan, "Religiosity and Fertility in the United States: The Role of Fertility Intentions," *Social Forces* 86, no. 3 (2008): 1163–88.

⁷. See "Religion and Education around the World," Pew Research Center, December 13, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/12/13/religion-and-education-around-the-world/>.

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<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china>.
13. See Antonia Blumberg, “China on Track to Become World’s Largest Christian Country by 2025, Experts Say,” Huffpost, April 22, 2014,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/04/22/china-largest-christian-country_n_5191910.html.
14. See Fenggang Yang, “Response by Fenggang Yang—Agency-Driven Secularization,” in Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2014), 128.
15. Martin Luther King Jr. (address at a freedom rally, Detroit, Michigan, June 23, 1963), Stanford University (website), accessed August 27, 2018,
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/address-freedom-rally-cobo-hall>.

1

[Aren’t We Better Off without Religion?](#)

Most college freshmen try to blend in. I stuck out. My English-major classmates were preternaturally cool. Some modeled; others starred in films. I did neither. But it wasn’t just my lack of time in front of a camera that set me apart: I showed up to college with a three-inch wooden cross around my neck.

One guy assumed I was being ironic, and we struck up an unlikely friendship. He was into drugs. I was into Jesus. We both loved books. I could have increased my credibility no end by confessing that I was quietly falling in love with a succession of girls. But I didn’t. I was still hoping it was a phase I would grow out of.¹ So, for the time being, I was just one of a handful of Bible-clinging oddities among my mystified, secularized, and occasionally scandalized peers.

The Christian student group at Cambridge was larger and more active than people imagined. We knocked on dorm-room doors to deliver gospel booklets and discuss Jesus. But most casual observers of the Cambridge scene at the turn of the millennium would have bet these groups would subside: full-bodied Christian belief was simply no longer viable in a world-class university.

New Atheist Narratives

Since then, New Atheists have spun a credibility-killing web around faith. In 2004, Sam Harris published *The End of Faith: Religions Terror, and the Future of Reason*, followed in 2006 by *Letter to a Christian Nation*. That same year, Richard Dawkins released *The God Delusion*, which remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for fifty-one weeks. In 2008, the late Christopher Hitchens launched his tour de force of new atheist persuasion, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. These rhetorically gifted men preached that Christianity was neither plausible nor desirable. Dawkins ridiculed a faith disproved by science. Hitchens sought to puncture the sagging balloon of public opinion that imagined Christianity was a force for good.

Invigorated by these triumphs, atheists have boldly claimed the moral and intellectual high ground—even when that has meant trespassing. In a popular 2011 TED talk, “Atheism 2.0,” School of Life founder Alain de Botton advocated a new kind of atheism that could retain the goods of religion without the downside of belief. He salivated over the black American preaching tradition and the enthusiastic response of congregants: “Thank you Jesus, thank you Christ, thank you Savior!” Rather than abandoning rapture, de Botton suggested secular audiences respond to atheist preaching by lauding their heroes: “Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen!”² One wonders how Shakespeare, whose world was fundamentally shaped by Christianity, would have felt about being cast as an atheist icon. But when it comes to Jane Austen, the answer is clear: a woman of deep, explicit, and abiding faith in Jesus, she would be utterly appalled.³

Likewise, at the 2016 “Reason Rally,” designed to mobilize atheists, agnostics, and “nones,” multiple speakers invoked Martin Luther King’s March on Washington—as if a rally that despised Christianity would have pleased one of the most powerful Christian preachers in American history. In the same year, I stumbled upon an Atlantic article that promised to explain “Why the British Tell Better Children’s Stories.”⁴ As a Brit living in America, I read it eagerly, only to find it arguing that American children’s stories are less compelling because they are more Christian. The author cited *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* as examples of stories shaped by paganism, failing to note that Tolkien and Lewis were passionate Christians who grounded their stories in the death-and-resurrection truth claims of Jesus. J. K. Rowling, another author referenced on the side of good-old British paganism, chose not to disclose her fragile Christian faith until the last Harry Potter book was published, precisely because of its Christian influence: she feared it would give the story away.⁵ The trend persists. In an oddly appropriating act, the 2018 film version of Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* expunged its many Christian references.

Meanwhile, brilliant skeptical storytellers have captured our imaginations. Margaret Atwood’s 1985 dystopian novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has been revived in a popular Hulu dramatization. It imagines New England ruled by a pseudo-Christian sect, the Sons of Jacob. Women’s bank accounts are suspended. Women are forbidden to read or work jobs. Those still fertile after a nuclear fallout are assigned to male “Commanders,” who seek to impregnate them in a monthly ceremony, supposedly modeled on Abraham’s impregnation of his wife Sarah’s handmaid. Partly inspired by the 1980 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Atwood envisages a similarly repressive, supposedly Christian regime.

Back in my own motherland, the iconic sci-fi series *Doctor Who* takes viewers on breathless sprints

between the moving, the witty, and the profound. The Doctor is in many ways deeply Christlike, and Doctor Who is one of my all-time-favorite shows, but its anti-Christian messaging is hard to miss.⁶ “Weeping angels” feed on human lifespans. “Headless monks” are ruled by faith: decapitation has rendered them literally thoughtless. The fifty-first century church is a military operation. The list of compelling stories, shows, and songs that invite us to reject religion is long, and we forget how much of the cultural capital we see as universal was sculpted by Christianity.

To some extent, of course, we Christians have dug our own grave. The entrenchment of the culture wars has led many believers to lose touch with their heritage, while Christians and atheists alike assume that secular means normative. Christians invented the university and founded most of the world’s top schools to glorify God. And yet studying is seen as a threat to faith. Christians invented science, yet science is seen as antithetical to Christianity.⁷ Christians have told some of the best stories in history. But if the tales are too good, too entrancing, too magical, we assume that the authors cannot espouse this supposedly story-killing faith.

What fruit has this borne for today’s students?

The Rising Generation of “Nones”

In 2016, the largest survey of incoming freshmen to US universities found that 30.9 percent claimed no religious affiliation—a dramatic 10 percent rise since 2006.⁸ This group broke down into freshmen who selected “none” (16 percent), those who identified as agnostic (8.5 percent), and those who claimed atheism (6.4 percent). While the growth of the nonreligious population has been rapid, this is no license to cede the university to secularism. Sixty-nine percent of US college students still identify as religious, and 60.2 percent identify as Christian. To be sure, checking the box on a survey is not proof of active faith. But when more students identify as Baptist than atheist, we need to be careful about exaggerated claims of secularization. Nor is the decline in religious affiliation a by-product of diversity: atheism in America is overrepresented by white men, while women and students of color are more likely to be religious.⁹ Indeed, at historically black universities, 85.2 percent of students identify as Christian, and only 11.2 percent as agnostic, atheist, or none.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the proportion of religiously unaffiliated students in the US is growing—fast. So, are today’s students simply waking up to the fact that we do not need religion anymore?

At an empirical level, the answer seems to be no.

Religion: A Miracle Drug

In 2016, Harvard School of Public Health professor Tyler VanderWeele and journalist John Siniff wrote a USA Today op-ed entitled “Religion May Be a Miracle Drug.”¹¹ The piece begins, “If one could conceive of a single elixir to improve the physical and mental health of millions of Americans—at no personal cost—what value would our society place on it?” The authors go on to outline the mental and physical health benefits that are correlated with regular religious participation—for most Americans, going to church—even to the extent of reducing mortality rates by 20–30 percent over a fifteen-year period. Research suggests that those who regularly attend services are more optimistic, have lower rates of depression, are less likely to commit suicide, have a greater purpose in life, are less likely to divorce, and are more self-controlled.¹²

Of course, we need only open a newspaper to see that religious beliefs can cause harm. But to say that religion is bad for you is like saying, “Drugs are bad for you,” without distinguishing cocaine from life-saving medication. In general, religious participation appears to be good for your health and happiness. Turn this data on its head and the trend toward secularization in America is a

public-health crisis.[13](#)

What makes religious participation so powerful?

The Power of Relationships

Part of the answer is relationships. Religion fosters relationships, and relationships matter. The director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, a seventy-five-year study of well-being, summarizes its findings like this: “Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”[14](#) Throughout the study, the subjects expected their happiness would depend on fame, wealth, and high achievement. But, in reality, the happiest and healthiest people prioritized relationships with family, friends, and community.

Perhaps we do not need a seventy-five-year study to convince us that loneliness is lethal. Our single-portion society teaches us to prioritize choice over commitment. We resist being tied down because we fear missing out, and in doing so, we miss out on the things that matter most. But does the power of community account for the impact of religion? Would going to the local golf club once a week and enjoying a shared interest with a consistent group yield similar results? It seems not. Community support alone seems to account for less than 30 percent of the positive effect of religious participation.[15](#) So, what else is in play?

The Benefits of Seven Biblical Principles

I want to explore seven counterintuitive biblical commands and how they relate to the findings of modern psychology. This is not an exhaustive list, and I make no claim that Christianity holds a monopoly on these principles or that a positive effect on health and happiness is the litmus test for truth. But as this chapter is entitled “Aren’t We Better Off without Religion?,” it seems logical to examine some of the principles of the world’s largest religion and see how they impact our ability to thrive.

It Really Is More Blessed to Give Than to Receive

In our acquisitive culture, the biblical demand that Christians serve and give to others feels out of joint. The claim that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) cuts against the grain of our individualized, success-focused mind-set. But a growing body of research suggests that giving is good for us. Volunteering has a positive impact on our mental and physical health.[16](#) Actively caring for others often yields greater physical and psychological benefits than being cared for.[17](#) Helping others in the workplace seems to improve career satisfaction.[18](#) And financial generosity has psychological payoffs.[19](#)

Many nonreligious people are passionately engaged in serving and giving, while many Christians live self-centered lives. But as atheist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observes:

Surveys have long shown that religious believers in the United States are happier, healthier, longer-lived, and more generous to charity and to each other than are secular people. . . . Religious believers give more money than secular folk to secular charities, and to their neighbors. They give more of their time, too, and of their blood.[20](#)

No Christian lives up to the radical example of Jesus, who gave his life to save his enemies. Too many churches enable a self-focused Christianity that ignores New Testament ethics. But the faint echoes of Christ in the lives of Christians seem to pay dividends—both for society and for individuals.

Love of Money Disappoints

For those of us raised on a steady diet of capitalism, the Bible's critique of wealth is tough to swallow. Jesus taught that it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:23–24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:24–25). The apostle Paul called the love of money “a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). But in the US at least, the love of money is still holding sway. In the 2016 survey *The American Freshman*, 82.3 percent of freshmen checked “becoming very well off financially” as an “essential” or “very important” life objective.²¹ This represents an increase of nearly 10 percent in the last decade and has overtaken “raising a family” as a top priority.²² Beyond our student years, many of us live as if money will buy us happiness, sacrificing family and friendship on the altar of career. But as Haidt comments, “Wealth itself has only a small direct effect on happiness because it so effectively speeds up the hedonic treadmill.”²³

A little money can make a big difference to the truly poor—a reality reflected in the Bible's unrelenting demand that those with extra share with those without. But while the literature is complex, there is evidence to suggest that beyond a basic level of security, increased wealth is only slightly correlated with an increased sense of well-being.²⁴ As economist Jeffrey Sachs notes in the *World Happiness Report 2018*, in the US, “income per capita has more than doubled since 1972 while happiness (or subjective well-being, SWB) has remained roughly unchanged or has even declined.”²⁵ The biblical warnings against the love of money turn out to be more true than we realized: invest your life in money over relationships, and the returns will not satisfy.

Work Works When It's a Calling

While the Bible eviscerates the love of money, it does not call us to a leisurely life. Rather, it tells a story in which humans are made to be in relationship with God and with each other, and to pour themselves into meaningful work. In the first century, few people had our freedom to choose their profession. If your father was a carpenter, you had better be into woodworking! But regardless of their situation or status, people could choose how they worked. The apostle Paul encouraged Christian slaves (a significant proportion of the early church) that even their work could be a calling, and exhorted them to put their hearts into it, seeing themselves as working for the Lord, not any human master (Col. 3:23–24).²⁶ So Christians are called to see work as part of their worship—whether they are designing a building or sweeping its floors.

Again, this proves to be good advice. Psychological research suggests that we need meaningful work to thrive. If we work just for money, we tend to find it unsatisfying; but if we put our hearts into our work and see it as a calling that resonates with our values, connects us to people, and fits within a larger vision, we experience joy. University of Pennsylvania psychology professor Angela Duckworth tells a parable to illustrate this: “Three bricklayers are asked, ‘What are you doing?’ The first says, ‘I am laying bricks.’ The second says, ‘I am building a church.’ The third says, ‘I am building the house of God.’ The first bricklayer has a job. The second has a career. The third has a calling.”²⁷

We can apply this to the least glamorous jobs. One study observed the attitudes of janitors emptying bedpans and cleaning up vomit in a hospital. Those who saw themselves as part of a team caring for the sick, and who went above and beyond to do their job with excellence, saw their work as a calling and enjoyed it far more than those who worked just for a paycheck.²⁸ So, whether we are performing brain surgery or cleaning up vomit, we can put our hearts into our work, connect it with a larger purpose, and gain satisfaction.

We Really Can Be Happy in All Circumstances

This view of work ties into a yet more counterintuitive biblical claim. After multiple experiences of physical and psychological trauma, the apostle Paul wrote this from prison: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:12–13 NIV). This sounds like wishful thinking. But modern psychology suggests that we have a highly developed ability to synthesize happiness. Harvard psychology professor Daniel Gilbert calls this our "psychological immune system." To illustrate the point, he quotes the seventeenth-century polymath Thomas Browne: "I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty to riches, adversity to prosperity. I am more invulnerable than Achilles; fortune hath not one place to hit me."²⁹

Gilbert asks, "What kind of remarkable machinery does this guy have in his head? Well, it turns out it's precisely the same remarkable machinery that all of us have." Gilbert (a self-declared atheist) does not note that Browne was drawing on his Christian faith to immunize himself against suffering. Indeed, Browne's *Religio Medici*, from which Gilbert quotes, is a theological memoir structured around the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Gilbert highlights other individuals who have found joy in adversity, including Moreese Bickham, an African American man who was dubiously convicted of murdering two white police officers and spent thirty-seven years in prison. On his release, Bickham declared: "I don't have one minute's regret. It was a glorious experience."³⁰ Again, Gilbert does not mention that Bickham was sustained by his Christian faith, or that he thanked God for the injury he suffered prior to his imprisonment: "I never had a personal relationship with [God]," Bickham reflected, "until I was laying at the point of death with a bullet shot [through the] top of my heart."³¹

The ability to synthesize happiness is not limited to followers of Jesus. Buddhism devotes much attention to helping people maintain internal peace in the face of adversity. Jewish and Muslim practices also anchor to inner well-being. But there is a remarkable correspondence between the psychological immune system Gilbert describes and the biblical call to contentment.

Gratitude Is Good for Us

The possibility of contentment in all circumstances relates to another counterintuitive biblical ethic. Paul commands Christians to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:16). This seems unrealistic, even insensitive. But Paul was writing not from an armchair but from profound experiences of suffering: beatings, shipwreck, rejection, sickness, and the prospect of execution. And psychologists today have discovered that conscious, daily gratitude is quite literally good for you. In experimental comparisons, those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week than those who recorded hassles or neutral life events.³² Psychology professor Robert Emmons calls gratitude "the forgotten factor in happiness research."³³

Gratitude is buried at the heart of Christianity. Christians believe not only that God created us and every good thing we have, but also that he offers us salvation as a free gift, won for us by Jesus's death in our place. For the Christian, therefore, thankfulness is not just a positivity technique: it is a deep disposition toward a life-giving and life-saving God.

Self-Control and Perseverance Help Us Thrive

Much contemporary culture revolves around instant gratification. But Christians are called to live lives characterized by long-term endurance and costly self-control. For example, the apostle Peter urged his readers, "Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;

and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love” (2 Pet. 1:5–7 NIV). Jesus called the Christian life a “hard” road (Matt. 7:14), and multiple biblical texts describe a race that we must run with endurance and passion. For example, the writer to the Hebrews urges, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:1–2).

Once more, the Bible judges the human condition well. Unglamorous as they are, perseverance and self-control appear to be key predictors of flourishing across a range of indexes.³⁴ Indeed, psychologist Angela Duckworth suggests that the quality of grit, which she defines as “passion and perseverance for very long-term goals,” can be more predictive of a person’s success than social intelligence, good looks, health, or IQ.³⁵

Forgiveness Is Foundational

When one of Jesus’s disciples suggested an upper limit for forgiveness—“as many as seven times?”—Jesus replied, “Not . . . seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21–22). He taught his followers to pray,

Forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. (Luke 11:4)

And as he was being nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed for the soldiers who were executing him, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Jesus grounded human forgiveness in the radical forgiveness of God, arguing that forgiven people must forgive. Again, this turns out to be for our good. Forgiveness—particularly forgiveness not dependent on the actions of the offender—has been linked to multiple positive mental and physical health outcomes.³⁶

In the New Testament, the forgiveness ethic is coupled with the command not to take revenge. But this is not ultimately an abandonment of justice. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that final justice lies in the hands of God. Christians are commanded to protect the weak and vulnerable, but not to seek their own revenge or vindication. Instead, Christians must forgive as they have been forgiven.

How do these counterintuitive strands of biblical wisdom weave together in the fabric of a life?

Would You Rather Be Bob or Mary?

In 2006, the same year that Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion*, atheist psychologist Jonathan Haidt published *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*. In one of the book’s most striking moments, Haidt sketches two profiles. First, we meet Bob: “Bob is 35 years old, single, white, attractive, and athletic. He earns \$100,000 a year and lives in sunny Southern California. He is highly intellectual, and he spends his free time reading and going to museums.”³⁷

Next, we meet Mary:

Mary and her husband live in snowy Buffalo, New York, where they earn a combined income of \$40,000. Mary is sixty-five years old, black, overweight, and plain in appearance. She is highly sociable, and she spends her free time mostly in activities related to her church. She is on dialysis

for kidney problems.

Mary has health problems, lives in relative poverty, and has doubtless endured a lifetime of discrimination. But Haidt throws us a curveball: “Bob seems to have it all, and few readers of this book would prefer Mary’s life to his. Yet if you had to bet on it, you should bet that Mary is happier than Bob.” Haidt bases his diagnosis on a range of factors, the first of which are Mary’s advantages of stable marriage and religion—and the two are not unrelated. While simply identifying as a Christian does not reduce your likelihood of divorce, regular church attendance seems to have a significant protective effect on marriage.³⁸ Frequent church participation and the battery of psychological goods that comes with it enable Mary to beat out her more privileged counterpart.

What should we make of this data indicating that religious people have a happiness advantage? Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker dismisses it with a quip from George Bernard Shaw: “The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one.”³⁹ But this is too easy an out. Drunk people are not more self-controlled, more likely to care for others, more deeply engaged with their work, more likely to be healthy and long-lived, or less likely to divorce than are sober people. The metaphor of religious participation as an elixir to improve mental and physical well-being is far more apt.

We Need Something Larger Than Ourselves

Haidt summarizes our basic psychological needs like this: “Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger.”⁴⁰ That “something larger” might take various forms, but a sense of connection to God is its most visceral incarnation. And that kind of connectivity is hard to replicate. We can commit ourselves to a political ideology, or to an ethical cause, like pursuing racial justice or campaigning against human rights abuses. These are good in themselves and will certainly bring meaning to our lives. But, as we will explore in chapter 4, when we examine the historical and philosophical foundations of many of our deepest ethical commitments, we find ourselves stumbling upon Christianity again.

So What?

We began this chapter wondering if we are simply better off without religion. My classmates at Cambridge certainly thought so. But while it is impossible to explore all the relevant data, there is compelling evidence that many individual and social goods arise from religious participation, and that Christianity in particular is well aligned with the findings of modern psychology.

Does this alignment prove that Christianity is true? Certainly not! Rather, it should raise a hundred questions in our minds—questions the chapters following will explore. But the positive effects of religious participation on our mental and physical health should give us pause before we buy the claim that religion poisons everything. Tyler VanderWeele, Harvard professor and world expert on the mental and physical benefits of religious participation, believes that Christianity provides the best framework for understanding different aspects of reality.⁴¹ He suggests that “any educated person should, at some point, have critically examined the claims for Christianity and should be able to explain why he or she does, or does not, believe them.”

No matter what we currently believe, we must all confront Christianity: the most widespread belief system in the world, with the most far-reaching intellectual footprint, and a wealth of counterintuitive wisdom concerning how humans should thrive. So let’s begin.

1. We will explore this puzzle piece in chap. 9, “Isn’t Christianity Homophobic?”

2. Alain de Botton, "Atheism 2.0," TEDGlobal (video), July 2011, https://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_atheism_2_0.
3. See Rebecca McLaughlin, "Jane Austen's Answer to Atheism 2.0," The Gospel Coalition, January 22, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jane-austens-answer-atheism-2-0/>.
4. Colleen Gilliard, "Why the British Tell Better Children's Stories," The Atlantic, January 6, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/01/why-the-british-tell-better-childrens-stories/422859/>.
5. See Jonathan Petre, "J. K. Rowling: 'Christianity Inspired Harry Potter,'" The Telegraph, October 20, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3668658/J-K-Rowling-Christianity-inspired-Harry-Potter.html>.
6. See Rebecca McLaughlin, "How the Hero of 'Doctor Who' Is—and Is Not—Like Jesus," The Gospel Coalition, January 12, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/hero-doctor-not-like-jesus/>.
7. We will unearth the Christian origins of science in chap. 7, "Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?"
8. See Kevin Eagan et al., *The American Freshman: National Norms 2016* (Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, 2017), 38, <https://heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2016.pdf>.
9. Sixty-eight percent of self-identified atheists in the US are men, and 78 percent are white, compared with 66 percent of the general population. See Michael Lipka, "10 Facts about Atheists," Pew Research Center, June 1, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists/>.
10. See Eagan et al., *American Freshman*, 38.
11. Tyler VanderWeele and John Siniff, "Religion May Be a Miracle Drug," USA Today, October 28, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/10/28/religion-church-attendance-mortality-column/92676964/>.
12. For a detailed literature review on the effect of religious participation on health and well-being, see Tyler VanderWeele, "Religion and Health: A Synthesis." in *Spirituality and Religion within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice*, ed. Michael J. Balboni and John R. Peteet (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
13. VanderWeele summarizes his research thus: "Public health relevance is often described as a function of the prevalence of the exposure and the size of the effect. On these grounds, religious participation, as will be argued in this review, is a powerful social determinant of health." VanderWeele, "Religion and Health," 357.
14. Robert Waldinger, "What Makes a Good Life? Lessons from the Longest Study on Happiness," TEDxBeaconStreet (video), November 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness.

15. See, for example, Shanshan Li et al., "Association of Religious Service Attendance with Mortality among Women," *JAMA Internal Medicine* 176, no. 6 (2016): 777–85.
16. For a summary of this research, see Caroline E. Jenkinson et al., "Is Volunteering a Public Health Intervention? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Health and Survival of Volunteers," *BMC Public Health* 13 (2013): 773. See also Donald P. Moynihan, Thomas DeLeire, and Kohei Enami, "Volunteering Makes You Happier, but Why You Volunteer Also Matters: Other-Oriented Motivations and Cumulative Life-Satisfaction," Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs (website), November 2017, <https://www.lafollette.wisc.edu/images/publications/workingpapers/Moynihan-2017-004-volunteering.pdf>.
17. See, for example, Susan Brown et al., "Providing Social Support May Be More Beneficial Than Receiving It: Results from a Prospective Study of Mortality," *Psychological Science* 14, no. 4 (2003): 320–27.
18. Donald P. Moynihan, Thomas DeLeire, and Kohei Enami, "A Life Worth Living: Evidence on the Relationship between Prosocial Motivation, Career Choice, and Happiness," *American Review of Public Administration* 4, no. 3 (2015): 311–26.
19. See, for example, Lara B. Aknin et al., "Prosocial Spending and Well-Being: Cross-Cultural Evidence for a Psychological Universal," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 4 (April 2013): 635–52.
20. Jonathan Haidt, "Moral Psychology and the Misunderstanding of Religion," *Edge*, September 21, 2007, https://www.edge.org/conversation/jonathan_haidt-moral-psychology-and-the-misunderstanding-of-religion. Haidt warns, "You can't use the New Atheists as your guide to these lessons. The New Atheists conduct biased reviews of the literature and conclude that there is no good evidence on any benefits except the health benefits of religion."
21. Eagan et al., *American Freshman*, 47.
22. The same survey in 2006 reported that 75.5 percent of students indicated that "raising a family" was an "essential" or "very important" life objective, while 73.4 percent of students indicated that "being very well off financially" was an "essential" or "very important" life objective.
23. Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 89.
24. See, for example, Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton et al., "High Income Improves Evaluation of Life but Not Emotional Well-Being," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 287, no. 38 (2010); and E. Diener et al., "Wealth and Happiness across the World: Material Prosperity Predicts Life Evaluation, Whereas Psychosocial Prosperity Predicts Positive Feeling," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 99, no. 1 (2010): 52–61.
25. John F. Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey D. Sachs, *World Happiness Report 2018* (New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2018), 146.
26. We will explore the biblical texts on slavery and whether the Bible justifies slaveholding in chap. 10.

- [27.](#) Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 149.
- [28.](#) Haidt, Happiness Hypothesis, 222.
- [29.](#) Dan Gilbert, "The Surprising Science of Happiness," TED2004 (video), February 2004, https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_gilbert_asks_why_are_we_happy. The quotation comes from Simon Wilken, ed. *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne: Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, bks. 5–7, Religio Medici (London: Henry G. Bowen, 1852), 444.
- [30.](#) Quoted in Kevin Sack, "After 37 Years, Inmate Tastes Freedom," *New York Times*, January 11, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/11/us/after-37-years-in-prison-inmate-tastes-freedom.html>.
- [31.](#) Quoted in "Former Death Row Prisoner Moreese Bickham Dies at 98: He Served 37 Years for Killing Klansmen Cops," *Democracy Now*, May 5, 2016, https://www.democracynow.org/2016/5/5/former_death_row_prisoner_moreese_bickham.
- [32.](#) See, for example, Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (February 2003): 377–89.
- [33.](#) For a scholarly introduction to the field, see Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, eds., *The Psychology of Gratitude*, *Studies in Affective Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- [34.](#) See, for example, Angela Duckworth and James J. Gross, "Self-Control and Grit," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 23, no. 5 (2014): 319. For more on the importance of self-regulation, see, for example, Laurence D. Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Mariner, 2015), 16.
- [35.](#) Duckworth, *Grit*, 149.
- [36.](#) For surveys of research, see Loren L. Toussaint, Amy D. Owen, and Alyssa Cheadle, "Forgive to Live: Forgiveness, Health, and Longevity," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 35, no. 4 (2012): 375–86; Loren L. Toussaint, Everett L. Worthington, and David R. Williams, eds., *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015).
- [37.](#) Haidt, Happiness Hypothesis, 87.
- [38.](#) For a summary of this research, see VanderWeele, "Religion and Health," 368.
- [39.](#) Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 287.
- [40.](#) Haidt, Happiness Hypothesis, 222.
- [41.](#) For more thoughts from Professor VanderWeele, see Tyler VanderWeele, "Evidence, Knowledge and Science: How Does Christianity Measure Up?," *The Veritas Forum*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.veritas.org/how-does-christianity-measure-up/>.

Doesn't Christianity Crush Diversity?

Senganglu Thamei (Sengmei to her friends) is a New York Times feature waiting to be written. Born to the Rongmei tribe in the extreme northeast of India, she is a professor of English literature at Delhi University and writes short stories that reimagine the tales of her tribe from the perspective of their marginal women. Alongside this subversive retelling of tribal narratives, Professor Thamei is keenly engaged in preserving tribal culture. And preservation is necessary. Like the other Naga tribes, the Rongmei were reached by Western missionaries in the early nineteenth century. Today, the tribe is over 80 percent Christian, and tribal traditions are declining.

For many, the idea that Christianity is a white, Western religion, intrinsically tied to cultural imperialism, stands as a major ethical barrier to considering Christ. We celebrate diversity and lament the ways religion has been used by Westerners to destroy indigenous cultures. When I met Sengmei in June 2016, my white guilt complex went into overdrive. I knew the history of British imperialism in India, but I knew nothing of the Naga tribes, and if you are looking for a cliché of missionary activity, it doesn't get much more painful than white American Baptists preaching to remote tribal communities with a tradition of headhunting!

But Sengmei's personal narrative complicates the picture. Raised by nonreligious parents, she started following Jesus when she was a teenager, after a Rongmei friend brought her to church. Today, Sengmei is married to a man from a kindred tribe (the Liangmai), who pastors a multiethnic, multicultural church in New Delhi, and her passion for literature is surpassed only by her passion for sharing her faith.

Sengmei's story illustrates an uncomfortable truth: some of the people most affected by the wrongs of Western Christians are also some of biblical Christianity's most ardent advocates. Indeed, Sengmei warned me not give Western missionaries too much credit for the Christianization of the Naga tribes. Westerners saw only a handful of converts, who then effectively evangelized their tribes. (The Rongmei people were reached later than the other Naga tribes, by Kuki missionaries.) And while Sengmei deplores the ways Western culture was packaged with Christianity, she is equally clear about the positive effects of Christianization, particularly on the status of tribal women.

I visited India to meet with twelve Christian academics. Ten came from Naga tribes and represented seven different indigenous languages. Tribal Indians, though not counted in the caste system, often face racial discrimination, and the fact that most are Christians adds to their alienation in a country dominated by Hinduism. But my new friends were keen to explode the misconception that Christianity is innately Western. As cultural anthropology professor and proud Naga tribe member Kanato Chophi put it, "We must abandon this absurd idea that Christianity is a Western religion."

Is Literacy Western?

Perhaps an analogy will help. It's not that there is no connection between Christianity and Western culture. Christianity dominated Europe for centuries. Many cultural artifacts produced in the West—paintings, plays, poems, and palaces—are infused with Christian ideas. But while Christianity held a monopoly on Western culture, Western culture never held a monopoly on Christianity. Indeed, calling Christianity "Western" is like calling literacy "Western." Western

culture has undoubtedly been shaped by literacy, and Westerners have sought to impose literacy on others—often to the detriment of traditional living. But there are at least three reasons why no one in his or her right mind would claim that literacy is innately Western: first, literacy did not originate in the West; second, most literate people today are not Westerners; and third, it is frankly offensive to the majority world to suggest that they are literate only by appropriation. The same reasons make the claim that Christianity is a Western religion indefensible. What’s more, the Bible itself rejects that claim.

The Bible’s Diversity Ethics

Contrary to popular conceptions, the Christian movement was multicultural and multiethnic from the outset. Jesus scandalized his fellow Jews by tearing through racial and cultural boundaries. For instance, his famous parable of the good Samaritan was shocking to its first hearers because it cast a Samaritan—a member of a hated ethno-religious group—as a moral example. Today’s equivalent would be telling a white Christian who had been raised with unbiblical, racist assumptions a story in which the hero was a black Muslim. Likewise, John’s Gospel records Jesus’s life-changing conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well. Jews did not associate with Samaritans—much less a Jewish rabbi with a morally compromised Samaritan woman! But Jesus didn’t care. Or rather, he cared deeply about this marginalized, religiously and sexually suspect female foreigner.

The diversity of the Christian movement kindled by Jesus caught fire after his resurrection. Before leaving them to return to his Father, Jesus commanded his Jewish disciples to “go . . . and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), and in the book of Acts, which records the first wave of Christianity, God’s Spirit enabled them to proclaim Jesus’s message in different languages. Those who heard were “from every nation under heaven,” including people from modern-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Italy (Acts 2:5–11).¹ Moreover, the hyper-Jewish apostle Paul, whose mission was to reach the non-Jewish world, ripped up the social barriers of his day. He wrote to the church in Colossae, “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11);² and to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

"Compelling reading, not only because of its intellectual rigor but also because of its honest, empathetic humanity." —John C. Lennox

Religion’s decline in the modern world turns out to be a myth.

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