

Session 6:

Does religion poison everything?

“Violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience.” -Christopher Hitchens in *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*

This quote is a great representation of a currently popular series of accusations made towards religion and faith in general – the accusation is that religion is a destructive force in the world – a destructive force that modern people would do well to outgrow and leave behind.

1. Skeptics will often use Scripture and history to their advantage here.

a. The Bible, they say, is full of bloodshed, violence, genocide – and often this is encouraged and perpetrated by God Himself. Of course, the ultimate example of the bloodthirstiness of God is Hell itself.

b. And history is full of war, violence, and oppression committed in the name of God. Everything from the Crusades to the slave trade to the actions of modern terrorists is trotted out as evidence that religion is barbaric and dangerous to progress and civilization.

2. What about Scripture? We would be wise to acknowledge that there are in fact difficult passages of scripture. Anyone who has read Scripture “from cover to cover” has encountered strange, difficult to understand passages. But are these passages a justification for rejecting all of Scripture? Can you think of any such passages?

a. Many of the difficult passages of Scripture could find a resolution with good hermeneutics (the discipline of proper interpretation):

i. Is the supposed immorality of the passage described or prescribed? Scripture reveals the whole spectrum of human sin in all of its grossness. But we should not assume that simply because it is in scripture that it is endorsed by God.

ii. Does the historical background provide any help in understanding the passage? The fact is that the Bible was written many thousands of years ago in a culture very different than our own. It is simply illegitimate to impose contemporary cultural norms on an ancient text (see the example of Deut. 22:28-29 and 2 Samuel 13:1-20).

iii. It may be warranted in allowing some poetic license with certain texts. This is especially true of the “imprecatory” (cursing) psalms.

iv. There is a long history among Christians of interpreting all of the scripture through the lens of Jesus. So, we should always interpret difficult passages in light of the revelation of the Gospel in Jesus. In other words, always start with Jesus.

b. It is unjustified to reject all biblical morality because of a handful of difficult passages.

i. Skeptics say that the Bible is misogynistic. But how does Scripture actually promote the dignity and worth of women especially in light of the prevailing ancient culture?

ii. Skeptics say that the Bible is racist. But how does Scripture actually promote equality among the races?

iii. Skeptics say that the Bible teaches violence. But how does Scripture actually promote peace and reconciliation?

c. One has to wonder what skeptics would base their moral outrage upon. The fact is that when skeptics rail against the supposed “immorality” of Scripture they are actually assuming the morals of Scripture often without even realizing it.

3. What about Hell? How would you talk to a skeptic who is struggling with belief in God because of the existence of Hell?

a. Consider the fact that we are all indignant when evil and injustice goes unpunished in this world.

b. Consider the fact that the gospel says that we all are evil sinners. In comparison to the holiness of God, we are all worthy of judgment.

c. Consider the fact that God is perfect in holiness. To ignore the existence of brokenness and sin would require Him to deny His character. To ignore the existence of brokenness and sin would also require Him to abandon His love for what He has made.

d. Consider the fact that Hell is ultimately our choice. Hell is God finally giving us over to our desire to be free of Him. As C.S. Lewis observed, Hell is locked from the inside.

e. Consider finally the fact that the true scandal of the Gospel is heaven and not hell. While we believe that Hell is an unfortunate reality for those who have

rejected God, the gospel tells us that even though we all deserve Hell we have been offered Heaven instead. Any apologetic discussion that gets focused on Hell without a mention of Heaven is not being fair to the gospel.

4. What about history? Is history full of violence and oppression committed by religious people?

a. Is it true that some violence has been committed in the name of Christ? Yes. Unfortunately, it is true. But it is a hasty generalization to assume that because some violence has been committed in the name of Christ; Christian belief is therefore violent.

b. This argument ignores the complicated causes of much of the violence that is produced in the world. For instance, to simply say "Islam caused September 11" is lazy reasoning and ignores the fact that real causation is often very complicated.

c. This argument obscures or totally ignores the evil that has been perpetrated by secularists. The fact is that tens of millions of people have died within the last 100 years mostly at the hands of leaders who were avowed atheists or statist.

d. This argument also ignores or dismisses the good that has been done by the Church through the centuries. See the book by Alvin Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, for a thorough treatment of this topic. The fact is that Christianity has had a positive transformative impact on every culture where it has taken root.