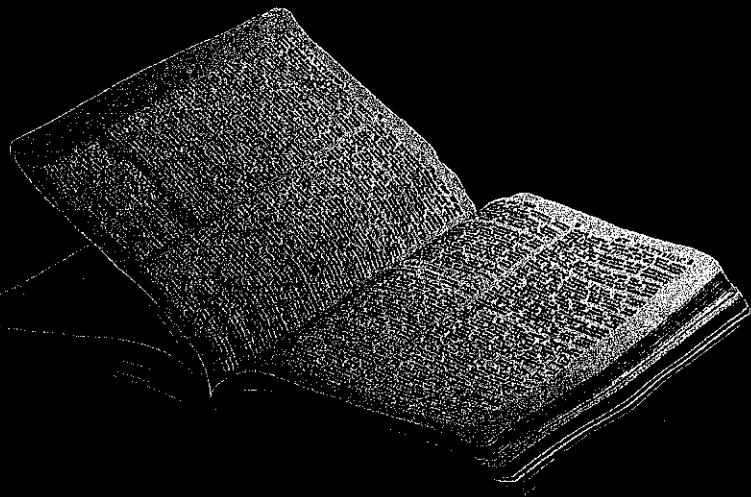


# Why I'm not a Christian



FRANK DOWNER SAINTILAN

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(1929 – 2016)

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## Introduction

*“How odd of God to choose the Jews” – Barry Jones*

Centuries ago, if you said you were a Christian it was clear what you meant. You accepted a whole collection of creeds and believed them with the full strength of your convictions. Handel wrote in *Messiah* (1740): “I know that my redeemer liveth”, not “I believe that my redeemer liveth”. In more recent times it has come to be used in a looser sense; for some people being a Christian now means little more than a person who leads a virtuous life.

But then people of all religions generally try to lead a good life. I think that before you can properly call yourself a Christian, you must have a certain minimum level of theological belief; that is, a belief in the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus, since Jesus is said to be the son of God and part of the holy trinity. I think you must also see Jesus as superlatively wise, just as Buddhists and Muslims see Buddha and Muhammad in that way. Indeed, Luke said that Jesus was “full of wisdom” (Luke 2:40).

Accordingly, the reasons I put forward for not being a Christian will centre on these two issues: first, why I doubt the existence of God, and second, why I doubt that Jesus was, by modern standards, superlatively wise, while recognising that, for his time, he apparently displayed some admirable qualities.

I will also consider the religion itself, to the extent that Christianity has, in my view been a negative influence in the world over the past two millennia. Much of the criticism I make is derived from within the church itself.

Over the millennia we have moved from an age of faith to an age of reason, usually better educated and perhaps more attuned to critical thinking. We no longer believe in magic and miracles and we no longer accept that religious faith must be respected because it is religious faith. To do so would make it hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers. And the fact that they, like the early Christians, are ready to give their lives for their faith does not necessarily make either faith believable.

Despite the growth in our knowledge of the universe, most of the population of the world has no understanding of the Earth’s (and also man’s) insignificance within the cosmos. This is totally at odds with the biblical picture of man’s central role as the steward of creation.

# 1. Doubts about God

*“God is a blank sheet upon which nothing is found but what you yourself have written.”*

– Martin Luther

The existence of God seems to be the only area of human understanding which is taken as self-evident despite a complete lack of objective evidence. Typically, this happens when nature and God are seen as one and the same. Things are said like “how can you smell an exquisite rose and say there is no God?” It is easy to forget the uglier side of nature such as the birth of twins joined head to head, the AIDS pandemic, or drought and floods.

Again, some ask how could a false religion have lasted so long? Yet astrology has lasted just as long, even though every objective test of it has proved negative. <sup>1</sup> Most papers and magazines have a ‘week by the stars’.

The background to Christian belief is the Jewish Old Testament, which from the outset assumes the existence of God in recounting how he made the universe. Unfortunately, this is tied to the cosmic knowledge of the early Jews, which by modern standards is negligible and quite unbelievable.

There are nonsensical statements in Genesis, such as day and night being made on day one and plants grown on day three, but the sun not being made until day four. God took a week to make the Earth, but only a few hours to make billions of ‘stars’ on day four.

By today’s standards the God of the Old Testament is a cruel despot. He is guilty of mass slaughter in Joshua 10:40: “Joshua conquered the whole land...everyone was put to death. This was what the Lord God of Israel had commanded”. He also had no qualms about parting the Red Sea for his ‘chosen’ people, then closing it to drown the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 14:23).

This God had many man-like qualities: jealousy, anger, wanting to be worshipped etc. Bishop Spong in a recent book <sup>2</sup> says that in human history God has looked and acted in a very human manner. Rather than man made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) it seems that God was made in the image of man. If horses had gods they would look like horses, the saying goes.

In the New Testament God has a character change to being a benevolent friend; a change from someone to fear to someone to love. You would think that a loving, personal god would want to save you from eternal suffering in hell because of your non-belief, by making himself unquestionably evident to all, for Jesus said in John 11:25 and Mark 16:16 that only through belief in him are you saved for eternal life.

In biblical times God intruded into human affairs. He spoke to humans (eg Luke 9:35) and on one occasion even obeyed one (Joshua 10:14) when he stopped the sun in the sky so that

Israel's army had time to defeat its enemies. (For the ancient Jews, the sun moved around the Earth, the centre of the universe, and not vice-versa).

The cosmic nonsense in the Old Testament continues in the New Testament. In Revelation 12 those tiny, twinkling stars in the sky make an ideal ornament for the woman who had a crown of twelve stars on her head – each star immensely larger than Earth. The Bible was not inspired by God, but is a very human document displaying the abysmal ignorance of the times.

There are two levels of non-belief. One is outright rejection of the concept of God ie atheism. This is however, just as dogmatic a belief, for you cannot prove that God does not exist. With the onus of proof on the one making the claim of God's existence, the more sensible position, surely, is to be agnostic, a word coined by Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) from a = not, gnostic = knowing. He never tired of emphasising the point that scepticism is the highest of duties when considering a claim which appears to be irrational.

The well-known atheist Richard Dawkins rejects the agnostic position on the grounds of probability. While he has no problem with using it in respect of such matters as the reason for the extinction of the dinosaurs (of which we know nothing), he believes that the probability that God exists is extremely low, whereas the agnostic position implies a fifty percent probability that God exists,<sup>3</sup> which he cannot accept. I think he is being inconsistent. I'm sure that Dawkins would be agnostic about life existing elsewhere in the universe, even though the probability is almost certain that it does. Also, the introduction of probability does nothing to strengthen Dawkin's argument. In biblical times the probability was 100% that the sun moved around the earth, whereas now it is zero. We can get things hopelessly wrong.

Whether they are called agnostics, atheists, secular humanists or free-thinkers, sceptics comprise a tribe whose basic tenets are "think for yourselves", "ask why" and "where's the evidence"?

In its early days, the Catholic Church laid it down as dogma that the existence of God can be proved by reason. Two of the 'proofs' put forward were used by Father Copleston S.J. in his debate on the existence of God with the philosopher Bertrand Russell on BBC Radio in 1948.<sup>4</sup> One is the 'first cause' argument, that since all things have a cause, then the universe itself must have a cause, namely God. Speaking as an agnostic, Russell responded that it was meaningless to speak of the universe in this way – it is simply *there*. If everything has a cause, then God must have a cause; if there is anything without a cause, it may just as well be the universe as God.

The other argument used by Copleston was the 'moral' argument, that unless there is God there is no difference between good and evil. Russell considered that they are two separate matters. While Copleston saw the moral law-giver as God, Russell thought it more likely to be one's parents, which should explain why people's consciences are so amazingly different in different times and places. He thought it strange that God spoke to cannibals differently than he spoke to other people, as they clearly had different values.

In this context, Russell has argued elsewhere<sup>5</sup> that if you believe there is a difference between right and wrong, you must ask whether the difference is due to God's fiat or not. "If it is, then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. If you are going to say, as theologians do, that

God is good, you must then say that right and wrong, have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good and not bad independently of the mere fact that he made them. If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God."

Another 'proof' for the existence of God is the argument from design. This says that everything in the world is just so we can manage to live in it, and if the world were ever so little different we could not manage to live in it. Voltaire parodied this argument with the remark that obviously the nose was designed to fit spectacles. But the most compelling evidence against the argument came from the work of Charles Darwin; it was not that the world was made to be suitable to living creatures, but that they evolved to be suitable to it. Today the classical proofs for the existence of God command little respect from philosophers.

For believers, the big problems remain. Foremost is the perennial problem of evil in the world. There are epidemics and wars, as well as injustices in which the good suffer and the wicked prosper, and many ask how could there be a personal, caring God in the Christian sense. Three centuries before Christ, Epicurus put the problem thus: "Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence the evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?"<sup>6</sup>

Pragmatically, the best case for belief was put in the form of a wager by Pascal three hundred years ago: it is prudent to believe; if you win, you gain all that heaven can offer. If you lose, you lose nothing. However, Alan Dershowitz,<sup>7</sup> Professor of Law at Harvard, feels that any God worth believing in would prefer an honest agnostic to a calculating hypocrite who would base belief on a cost-benefit analysis. He believes that the truly moral person is the non-believer who behaves well without the promise of reward or the threat of punishment.

The biblical world view is a thing of the past. The three tier system of heaven/Earth/hell (with God/man/Satan) is no longer viable with the explosion of knowledge over the past millennia, especially in astronomy and biology. We have changed from being a little below the angels (Psalm 8) to being a little above the animals because of our larger brains. The God "up there" has become the God "out there" for a spherical world, no longer the director of weather patterns or the bestower of sickness as a penalty for sin.

Other Gods have died in human history. No altars are today erected anywhere to Baal, Molech, Re, Jupiter, Zeus, Mars, Mithra, Thor or Osiris. There is no longer a need for them to explain the source of thunder coming from the heavens. No longer is it an angry God.

## 2. The Genesis Connection

*“If God made us in his image, we have certainly returned the compliment.”*

- Voltaire

The main attraction of Christianity is surely its promise of eternal life. It is natural to be afraid of death. In 1 Cor. 15:22 Paul said: “All people die because of their union with Adam”; that is, death is God’s punishment for the sin of the first humans (ie the Fall), and eternal life will only be restored to Garden of Eden days through faith in Jesus, who through his death on the cross atoned for man’s sin. This is the cornerstone of Christianity.

But most educated people today do not accept Adam and Eve as historical fact. A more credible explanation today of the origin of man is Darwin’s theory of evolution. We see biological change going on around us: mosquitos become immune to DDT, bacteria become immune to penicillin. Biologists debate the details of evolution but generally we agree that life evolved over billions of years. This is clear from the fossil record of the rocks, which can be dated with some accuracy. “Fish fossils start about four hundred million years ago; further back you get things like worms, and eight hundred million years ago everything was single-celled”.<sup>8</sup>

It used to be said that there is a ‘missing link’ between humans and apes. But with the fossil discoveries of the past half century, this is no longer so. The best known is Lucy, a specimen of *Australopithecus afarensis* found in 1974, who lived about 3.2 million years ago, walked upright (though not as well as us) and had an ape-sized brain. Michael Ruse<sup>9</sup> has written that: “Molecular comparisons [of DNA] suggest that we humans are more closely related to chimpanzees than chimps are to other apes” given that we have 98% of the same DNA.

The case for creationism made by fundamentalist Christians rests, at its best, on the argument of irreducible complexity. They cite, for example, the flagellar motor of bacteria, which is the only known example, outside human technology, of a freely rotating axle. Creationists claim that this complexity could not evolve as its parts are interdependent, and so the mechanism must be due to intelligent design by God. In countering this argument, evolutionists point to the Type Three Secretory System (TTSS) which contains protein molecules very similar to components of the flagellar motor. “To the evolutionist, it is clear that TTSS components were commandeered for a new, but not wholly unrelated function when the flagellar motor evolved.”<sup>10</sup> In general, the creationists’ position, is that if scientists don’t yet understand something, then God must have designed it.

In a report on church doctrine by a Commission appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York published in 1938, we read: “No objection to the theory of evolution can be drawn from the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2, since it is

generally agreed among educated Christians that these are mythological in origin and their value for us is symbolic rather than historical".<sup>11</sup> In 1996, even the conservative Pope John Paul II asserted that evolution is "more than a theory".<sup>12</sup> The 2008 exhibition in Canberra marking the sesquicentenary of Darwin and evolution, contained a statement that the Pope saw no contradiction between Christianity and evolution. This is hard to accept, if all people die because of their union with Adam. If the creation stories, like the Aboriginal dreamtime, are myths, then the Genesis connection undermines much of the rationale of Christianity – why the need for a Redeemer to atone for man's sin? Jesus becomes little more than an ethical teacher, and it is doubtful that Christianity would have survived for two millennia on that basis alone.

Writers in the media tend to get around incredulity in religion by maintaining that "truth is wider than historical fact"<sup>13</sup> and alluding to "partial and provisional truths".<sup>14</sup> This sounds suspiciously like "don't let the facts get in the way of a good story". The search for truth is likely to become a matter of interpretation of biblical passages. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, "No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says. He is always convinced that it says what he means".

There is a frequent misunderstanding that evolution means that humans evolved from apes. It is not that at all. The claim is that both of them had a common origin in the remote past. An interesting point is at what stage in evolution did humans acquire a soul, given that the church believes that animals don't have souls, but humans do.

Quote from physicist John Bell: "Humanity's ascent into insignificance: in 400 years, we've moved from the centre of the universe to an insignificant speck in one galaxy among 350 billion."



### 3. Magic and Miracles

*“Faith is believing what you know ain’t so”*

- Mark Twain

Many would-be reformers of religion would like to get rid of the magical elements which tie it to the thought forms of ancient times. Martin Luther was well aware that reason is religion’s arch enemy, and he frequently warned of its dangers: “Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason.”<sup>15</sup>

In biblical times people were, by our standards, uneducated, superstitious, and immersed in a world of magic and demons. This is reflected in the miracles of the New Testament. If Jesus was to be seen as a God, he had to be seen by the gospel writers as capable of supernatural doings with godlike power over natural phenomena. God could create out of nothing, so they wrote that he could feed the multitude with a few loaves and fishes. God could command the forces of nature to obey him, and so the storm was stilled. God’s power over water divided the Red Sea, and Jesus could walk on water. God had power over demons and life and so Jesus exorcised demons and brought dead people back to life (John 11:44).

Archbishop George Carey has written<sup>16</sup> that: “We may find it difficult to believe some of the miraculous things which he is said to have done” and that “if we are convinced today that the miraculous is just impossible, then we have a problem with Jesus”. Even some bishops and clergy admit that it’s unlikely the miracles happened, Carey adds.

The Persian God Mithra was a deity contemporary with Jesus and worshipped within the Roman Empire before the conversion of Constantine to Christianity. Mithra was also magical, saving mankind from a great drought by firing an arrow at a rock and starting a spring of water.

Other ancient belief systems feature miraculous births similar to that of Jesus, none of which are now taken seriously. The divine mother and child were worshipped in Greece, Egypt and even in China before Christianity came on the scene. The Hindu Devaki gave birth sexlessly to Krishna. Dionysus was miraculously conceived. Horus was born of the virgin Isis. Mercury was born of the Virgin Maia.

“Virgin births were a rather Gentile thing” says the Very Rev. John Drury, Chaplain of All Souls College at Oxford University. “You get it in a lot of the legends of Ovid where the god impregnates some young girl who has a miraculous son.”<sup>17</sup>

In Matthew 2:10 the Magi followed a star which “went ahead and stopped over the place where the child was”. Impossible! If you imagine the Earth as a ball one inch in diameter, the nearest star (Proxima Centauri) on the same scale would be 40,000 miles away. Attempts to locate Matthew’s star, involving supernovas, comets and planetary conjunctions have all had their day.

Sacramental eating to obtain manna is one of the most universal features of ancient religion. The Aztecs and Incas had ceremonies in which a dough image of their god was eaten by worshippers. Similarly, in the Catholic Church the God Christ is eaten by adherents as the wafer and wine are magically changed into flesh and blood (transubstantiation) when the priest gives effect to Christ's words in John 6:54 – "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life".

The genealogy of Jesus was important in the gospels. Luke 1:32 says that "the Lord will make him [Jesus] a king, like his ancestor David was." However, the gospels disagree on this lineage. In Matthew 1:17 it is 28 generations while in Luke 3:23 it is 42 generations and the names are different. But why the concern at all when the Holy Spirit and not Joseph was the father of Jesus?

To add further confusion, Matthew 1:20 says that Christ's divinity occurred at the time of his conception, while John 1:1-14 moved the divinity of Christ back to the creation itself. Paul opted for the time of his resurrection (Romans 1:4) and Mark 1:10 chose the time of his baptism.

The four gospels cannot agree on who exactly the 'twelve' disciples were; a total of fourteen individuals are identified by name altogether, and only nine are common to all four gospels.

The Bible's array of inconsistencies, absurdities and miracles does not inspire belief in the Christian message. Indeed, the evidence is so poor it would be thrown out of court in a legal action today. Revelation is only revelation to the person it is revealed to. To all others it is hearsay, and hearsay evidence is not accepted in our courts today.

The Roman Catholic Church clearly has no problems with miracles. Since John Paul II was ordained in 1978 there have been 464 saints canonised. That means at least 928 miracles have been verified – a fitting response to Woody Allen's cri-de-coeur: "My Lord, my lord, what has thou done lately?" In similar vein, a priest of the Anglican Church, Michael Goulder (Professor of biblical studies at the University of Birmingham) resigned in 1981 from the Church because God "no longer had any real work to do." He no longer fights wars and defeats enemies, sends the storms, heals the sick, or rewards goodness and punishes evil.<sup>18</sup>

A problem with Christianity is the duality of the physical and the spiritual. Angels are a case in point; on the one hand they are depicted in the gospels as physical – they roll away stones from tomb entrances, yet they have magical properties of survival in the freezing vacuum of space, where, by the way, their wings would be useless.

Another problem with the church is the lack of logic. Pope John Paul II attributed his survival of an assassination attempt in Rome to an intervention by Our Lady of Fatima: "a maternal hand guided the bullet". But why didn't she guide it to miss him altogether? The surgeons who operated on him for six hours were no doubt also maternally guided.

People today tend to seek spiritual nourishment from religion. Many look for God within themselves rather than "up there", just as Buddhists live inside a God-consciousness. The theistic God of the past, replete with magic and miracles, is dying as we learn more about the universe and our place in it.

## 4. Jesus – Man or God?

*“It is ridiculous to suppose that the great head of things, wherever that be, pays any regard to human affairs.”*

- Pliny the Elder, 100AD

To call yourself a Christian and accept Jesus as divine, you would, at the very least, have to regard him as superlatively wise. It is hard to do this when Jesus displayed the ignorance of his time in his understanding of the cosmos. He said that on his second coming “the stars will fall from the heavens” (Matthew 24:29). This is impossible since there are billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars, each star immensely larger than Earth. It would have seemed quite possible to Jesus, since the biblical concept of the universe was a dome over the Earth studded with tiny, twinkling stars made by God on day four of the creation week (Genesis 1:8). Although Jesus having been around at the creation (John 1), you would have expected him to know better.

Jesus also displayed the ignorance of his time in his belief that demons or malignant spirits are responsible for mental illness which can be cured by casting them out (eg Mark 5:8 and 9:25). Jesus can hardly be a God if he is not omniscient.

Jesus exhibited rather strange, ungodly behaviour on other occasions. He cursed and withered a fig tree because it had no fruit (Matthew 21:18) but it was not the right time of the year for figs (Mark 11:13). In the episode of the Gadarene Swine, he put the devils into the pigs and sent 2,000 of them to their death (Mark 5:13) when being omnipotent he could have simply sent the devils away.

It is clear that Jesus saw himself as the son of God. When the High Priest asked him “are you the Messiah, the son of the blessed God”, he answered “I am” (Mark 14:62). He made the same claim in John 10:36.

Christian clergy are not at all unanimous in accepting the virgin birth which links Jesus to God. A typical case is the most Rev. Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh and leader of the Scottish Episcopal Church. When he retired in 2000 he said that he no longer believed Jesus was the son of God “literally and biologically” but was simply an “extraordinary man”.<sup>19</sup> The Rev. Dr Keith Archer, of Salford, said: “It is not particularly important [the virgin birth] because it is a debateable translation of a Hebrew prophecy, which first appeared in Isaiah.” Luke built on Matthew’s mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14 – the Hebrew word refers to a woman of marriageable age rather than a virgin.

Even if the story was true, Jesus was at least half human because Mary would have contributed 50 percent of his DNA. When the Church realised this, they got around the problem of inherited sin (from Mary) by declaring that Mary was also the result of

immaculate conception. The virgin mother made Jesus sinless and worthy of being the sacrificial paschal lamb destined for the cross (1 Cor, 5:7).

The divinity of Jesus suffered a further blow when he did not fulfil his prophecy that he would return to Earth during the lives of the people then living. He made this clear in Matthew 16:28: "There are some here who will not die until they have seen the Son of Man come as King." He made the same point in Matthew 10:23, Matthew 24:34, Mark 9:1, Mark 13:30, Luke 21:32 and John 14:3. Two millennia on we are still waiting for his second coming and the dead are still waiting to go to heaven or to hell.

## 5. Morality and Christianity

*“That the saints may enjoy their beatitude and the grace of God more abundantly, they are permitted to see the punishment of the damned in hell.”*

- St. Thomas Aquinas

A serious defect in the moral character of Jesus is that he believed in Hell. Surely any person who is profoundly humane could not believe in everlasting punishment. The doctrine of hell is a doctrine of cruelty.

As depicted in the gospels – which is our only record – Jesus certainly believed in eternal punishment in hell, where, he said: “the worms that eat [sinners] never die, and the fire that burns them is never put out” (Mark 9:48).

He goes on and on about hellfire, especially in Matthew’s gospel where there are about a dozen references to it. In Matthew 13:41 Jesus said: “The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all those who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace.....” This can happen to you even for not liking his preaching. He berated the Pharisees: “You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

Socrates or the Buddha would, I think, have welcomed your disagreement. Socrates was bland and urbane to people who would not listen to him, and in Buddhist teachings, students are encouraged to doubt, and not to believe until their own experience validates what they are taught.

Jesus is highly regarded by Christians for his sayings and teachings, especially those in the ‘sermon on the mount’. In general this is well deserved, such as his sayings to be merciful to others and to work for peace (Matthew 5: 7-9). His advice to settle disputes before they go to court is useful (Matthew 5:25) and his wish in Matthew 6:1-6 that we pray in private and not in public is laudable although it is not encouraged by the Church.

Another well-known saying “turn the other cheek” (Luke 6:19) was used by Buddha and Lao-Tzu (founder of Taoism in China) about 500 years before Christ. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:29) is also not a Christian original. Confucianism (again about 500BC) centres on the virtue known as *jen*, which is a major aspect of altruism (*shu*), usually stated as this “golden rule”.

Jesus is hardly the Prince of Peace when he said he did not come to bring peace to the world but a sword – to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother etc (Matthew 10:34). Gentle Jesus indeed!

Some of his sayings are more idealistic than realistic. For example, (Matthew 19:21) to sell *all* you have and give the money to the poor will leave you poorer than the poor. We are taught not to judge others (Matthew 7:1) yet our judicial system is full of judges. As for “love your enemies”, tell that to believers Bush, Blair and Howard after their invasion of Iraq. And I must admit to some difficulty with Luke 6:30: “when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back.”

There are some teachings of Jesus which border on the nonsensical:

- Don't be worried about the food and drink you need to stay alive (Matthew 6:25)
- Faith can move mountains into the sea (Matthew 21:21)
- Believers can safely handle snakes and drink poison (Mark 16:18)
- If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for (Matthew 21:22)

A moral failing of Jesus is that he accepted slavery. In Matthew 10:24 he said “no slave is greater than his master.” Nowhere did he speak out against it.

Belief in Jesus is a prerequisite for salvation. In Acts 4:12 it is said that salvation is to be found through Jesus alone, and in John 11:25 Jesus says you are only saved through faith in him. That is to say that hell is the promised fate for most of mankind, including Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists etc. Everlasting punishment for so many (not because they have done anything wrong) is hardly a moral example for Christianity to set. Islam is equally prescriptive that it is only through belief in Allah and his prophet Muhammad that salvation comes. Since both can't be true, one or both of them must be false. The philosopher David Hume<sup>20</sup> compared it to a jury facing conflicting witness testimony – you can't place much trust on either witness.

It is commonly thought by Christians that you cannot have morality without religion, and even that the moral teachings of Jesus are evidence of his divinity. In fact, morality *per se* has nothing to do with religion. In the words of Hugh Mackay:<sup>21</sup> “Morality is different from religion. Religion addresses the metaphysical questions: ‘Why are we here?’ Morality tackles a more practical question: ‘How should we live together?’ Religion does its work in the interior, spiritual realm; morality is an exterior social construct. Cheating, lying and exploiting other people are not wrong because this or that religion says so; they are wrong because societies can't function harmoniously unless people agree to respect each other's rights, needs and well-being.”

Whenever an ethical question is raised today, it is likely that someone will base their argument on ‘what the bible teaches’, writings which claim to represent God's final word on the subject. However, they need to cherry-pick from what the Bible teaches, disregarding teachings to put to death homosexuals (Leviticus 20:13), or anyone who works on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:14). Also it's in order to stone to death disobedient children (Deuteronomy 21:18) or to sell your daughter into slavery (Exodus 21:7).

Foremost among the divine rulings as a prime ethical statement are the Ten Commandments of the ancient Jews (Exodus 20) which are also revered by Christians as part of their religion.

A significant thing about the commandments is that they were regularly violated by the Jews when dealing with people outside the Jewish world. Consider, for example, the one against bearing false witness. This is exactly what Moses did, at the suggestion of God, when he told the Pharaoh he was only taking the Jews for a few days into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to God, when he really proposed to take them out of Egypt (Exodus 3:18).

The commandment not to kill was flouted by the Jews. For example, Joshua murdered five captured Amorite kings (Joshua 10:26) and God ordered the Jews to go to war against the Amalekites for what they did to Israel. It's quite in order to kill when dealing with the non-Jewish world, according to God.

Not many of the Ten Commandments are operative today. We have no problem with graven images – our churches are full of them. Civil contracts are no longer sworn “in the name of the Lord” so that, if broken, the offending party would be “taking the Lord’s name in vain”. As Bishop Spong points out,<sup>22</sup> it is a common misconception that this has to do with profanity. Profanity may be blasphemous or in bad taste, but it has nothing to do with “taking the Lord’s name in vain.”

A dire warning in the Ten Commandments and in Exodus 34:7 which flies in the face of any concept of justice is that God “does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the fathers up to the third and fourth generations.”

The commandment not to do any work on the Sabbath under pain of death (for even the gathering of firewood) is now rejected by all except fundamentalist Jews. It is hard to see a divine origin in Commandments which are now clearly inadequate, especially when they say that you must not covet your neighbour’s slaves. The world has moved on.

The Bible and the Koran served as a medieval police presence to preserve law and order. Bad behaviour could be a passport to hell, imposing a form of moral code on the community. In the modern world the churches argue that Rationalism (or Secularism or Humanism) fail to provide a moral basis for life. In response, Rationalists claim that community ethics are stronger now than when religion was the authority, citing such things as slavery abolition, free speech, homosexuality reform and womens’ rights.

Private schools in Australia are often sought because parents believe that they will provide a more moral education for their children. This, of course, is challenged by the State schools and even some private schools have a good word for secular education. Sydney Grammar School’s Principal, John Vallance considers that “It’s too

often assumed that virtuous behaviour has its grounding in some religious world view. Many of the modern public virtues that we all subscribe to as a community have their origins in other communities, not so much in religious teaching.”<sup>23</sup> He cites Plato and Aristotle as well as the philosopher Erasmus and the figures of the European Enlightenment, particularly Voltaire, as important sources of his own approach to education and the teaching of moral virtue.

Many people adopt the pragmatic argument that religious dogma is useful; for example that it is a good thing to love your neighbour. But often their reason for holding this view is not derived from Christ’s teaching. On the contrary, it is because they already hold this view they regard Christ’s teaching as evidence of his divinity. They have, in other words, not an ethic based on a theology but a theology based on an ethic.

With regard to good and evil, it is an uncontested fact that hatred, cruelty, intolerance and indifference to human misery are evil; that love, kindness, tolerance and truth are good, so unquestionably good that many would say we don’t need God to assure us of their worth. Also, doing something because God said to do it does not make a person moral; Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac because God told him to (Genesis 22:10) does not make Abraham moral, it merely shows that he was obedient. You should be a person of good character because it is right to be such a person. Good character consists of recognising the selfishness inherent in each of us and trying to balance it against the altruism to which we should all aspire.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell thought that we can’t decide what sort of conduct is right or wrong except by reference to its probable consequences. The question of whether something is good or bad is the same as the question of whether or not it promotes human happiness, Russell thought.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Bishop Spong thinks that the basic guide to ethics is that “we look into the depths of our humanity and identify the behaviours that enhance life and call them good, and those that diminish life and call them evil.”<sup>25</sup> An agnostic and a theologian here find common ground and show that an ethical life can be lived without religion.

There is growing evidence that our biology is the ultimate source of our moral reasoning. Recent research in academia in the mind sciences has shown that all humans, irrespective of their race, age, gender, or religious belief, share a biological code for living a moral life. The research, by Hauser and Singer, involved presenting people with moral dilemmas in hypothetical situations. For example, if five people in a hospital each require a different organ transplant to survive, is it permissible for a doctor to take the organs of a healthy person who happened to be visiting the hospital? 97% of subjects agreed that it is morally forbidden to do so. Consider then a similar situation involving the killing of one person to save others, where a runaway trolley is on a railway line. A person standing by a set of points is in a position to divert the trolley into a siding. If he does so, one person trapped on the siding will be killed. If he does not, the trolley will continue on and kill five people trapped on the



main line. 90% of people said it was permissible to divert the trolley, killing the one to save the five. There was no significant difference between atheists and religious believers in making these judgements.<sup>26</sup>

In respect of right and wrong, it is disappointing to identify current behaviour which calls into question the morality of fundamentalist Christians. There is a *Left Behind* series of evangelical thrillers in the USA which had sold more than 60 million copies worldwide. The latest, *Glorious Appearing*, has Jesus returning to Earth to wipe all non-Christians from the planet. "It's disconcerting to find ethnic cleansing celebrated as a height of piety" writes Nicholas Kristof.<sup>27</sup>

Like some modern-day cults, Jesus encouraged his disciples to abandon their families to follow him: "If any man comes to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his whole life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26) (the *Good News Bible* changes it to "cannot be my disciple unless he loves me more than"...). Being a follower of Jesus is not easy, and I feel that at times in history there have been more inspiring teachers. Although Martin Luther King was a Christian, he derived his philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience from Gandhi, who was not.

## 6. The Record of Christianity

*“Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully  
as when they do it from religious conviction.”*

- Blaise Pascal

Archbishop George Carey wrote in *Jesus 2000*:<sup>28</sup> “As the third millennium begins it is important to acknowledge that many awful things have been done in the name of the Church which blight the good name of the founder of Christianity. At times in its history, the church has defamed the name of Jesus Christ. It played a part in the Crusades, of course, and in the victimisation of Jews in the Middle Ages and in Nazi Germany, the conquistador invasions of South America and the ‘wars of religion’ at the time of the Reformation. It has contributed to the oppression of women, to policies of imperialism, slavery and the repression of free speech; and in so many other situations sadly, it has proved a stumbling block to the establishment of a just and lasting peace. All these examples – a mere selection – demonstrate the terrible way in which we have let Jesus Christ down.”

Clearly, Christianity has not been a very positive influence in the world. Carey might have also mentioned the church inquisitions. Their rationale, as expressed by Innocent III in 1199, was that it is far worse to offend against eternal than temporal authorities, and so as you punish traitors with death you must equally punish those who err in faith. This is capable of a wide interpretation; in 1536 William Tyndale was burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English.

In June 2004 the Pope apologised for the inquisitions. It is still functioning, however, as the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. A recent book by Paul Collins described the assault on intellectual freedom of seven people, including Father Tissa Balasuriya, a Sri Lankan thinker and social justice activist, whose 1997 excommunication caused a worldwide outcry. Collins, a Catholic priest, author, broadcaster and Church historian, tells what it’s like to be accused by anonymous informers, investigated in secret and tried at arm’s length with no recourse to appeal.

Islam was the focus of scientific advancement in the middle ages, as adherence to a biblical cosmos and the creation myth held back the advance of scientific knowledge. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) taught that revealed truth is certain, and if science appears to contradict it, we may be sure that we are mistaken in our science. Galileo was forced to recant his heresy in 1633 that the Earth moved around the sun.

On 28 December, 1991, the Vatican finally admitted that Galileo had been right and the Church, as well as the Bible, had been wrong about the shape of the universe and the place of human beings within it.

Appeals to the scriptures were used to support the divine right of kings and to defend slavery (eg Leviticus 25:44). It was a medieval tenet that class divisions were God made. Native cultures have been devastated by missionary zeal. Dispossessed tribes say that before the white man came, they had the land and the white man had the Bible. Now they have the Bible and the white man has the land.

In Australia, the role of the Church in the so called 'stolen generation' of aboriginal children, is a tragic example of people from one culture having a misguided sense of what's best for people from another culture.

In World War II German and Italian churches supported the Axis while English and American churches supported the Allies. None came out against the war, to love your enemies as followers of Jesus. Instead, each side saw God as their Ally.

It is not surprising that Archbishop Carey wrote <sup>29</sup> that "organised religion and Jesus do not always mix happily" and Bishop Spong wrote <sup>30</sup> that a brief reading of human history will reveal that the religious systems of human beings, more often than not, have set the members of the human family against one another in a fratricidal killing struggle.

## 7. Sex and Gender Issues

*“For my part, I say that mature girls must not bathe at all,  
because they ought to blush to see themselves naked.”*

– Saint Jerome

It is puzzling why the Bible and Christianity are so concerned with sex. Why, for example, do people with high, even rigid attitudes to sexual morality not have any moral rules for Christians at war?

The Christian attitude to sex, like other Christian fundamentals, goes back to Adam and Eve. For Saint Augustine, the sin of Adam had been passed on (by semen) to every other human being. The connection between sex and sin was clearly established.<sup>31</sup>

Monks within the early Church tended to regard women as primarily the temptress. They have thought of her mainly as the inspirer of impure lusts. Whereas Hinduism developed a spiritual aspect of sexuality and Buddhism is fairly relaxed about sex, the Christian Church has largely treated the subject as taboo. Only recently has the liberal wing of the Church moved to adapt to community values. The conservative wing is still living in the past. For example, Christian ideas about contraception began to be challenged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 1960s even Catholic theologians were pushing for change. But in 1968 Pope Paul VI overrode the recommendations of his own Commission to denounce family planning and contraception.

The continuing opposition by the Catholic Church to the use of condoms in the fight by the World Health Organisation against the pandemic of HIV/AIDS illustrates again the negative effect of religious dogma. Theologically, it is said that the Church could change its position and see condoms as the lesser of two evils, but it refuses, saying that sexual abstinence is the only totally effective prevention, a policy many see as doomed to failure given human nature.

From the earliest writings in the Old Testament comes the model for the subservient role of women. In Genesis 3:16 God told women that you will be subject to your husband. It was carried through into the traditional wedding vow to love, honour and obey. The biblical view of woman as the property of man is still evident in the Christian marriage ceremony, when one man ‘gives the bride away’ to the other man.

Saint Thomas Aquinas advocated the indissolubility of marriage on the ground that the father is useful in the education of the children because (a) he is more rational than the mother and (b) being stronger he is better able to inflict physical punishment. A modern education would reject both reasons.

There are parallels to this evaluation of women in the Buddha's negative response to women who longed to become his disciples, and in Islam which has always been hostile to the equality of women.<sup>32</sup>

Christ's view of adultery seems bizarre today: "anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). How better to produce a sinful, guilt complex.

His view of divorce seems equally strange today: "If a man divorces his wife, even though she has not been unfaithful, then he is guilty of making her commit adultery if she marries again" (Matthew 5:32).

Although Jesus had nothing to say about abortion, many of his followers today have strong views on the subject and would like to impose those views on the community. Whereas evolution sees man as just another mammal, Genesis sees man as a holy being, made in the image of God. "Thou shall not kill" means only the killing of men, not the other animals in the food chain. Even a few embryonic stem cells are holy according to fundamentalist Christians and not to be used in medical research which might eventually cure diseases and save lives. Of course it's much worse with embryos; to terminate them is to "murder babies", even though an early embryo has the sentience as well as the semblance of a tadpole. And it's quite in order to burn down or blow up abortion clinics and even shoot the doctors working there. In 2003 in the USA Paul Hill was executed for the murder of Dr John Britton and his bodyguard James Barrett. A certain kind of religious mind cannot see the difference between killing a microscopic cluster of cells on one hand, and a fully grown doctor on the other.<sup>33</sup>

The most vociferous opponent of abortion has been Mother Teresa of Calcutta. When she was in Melbourne in 1977 she surprised a group of nuns at the time of the Granville train disaster by saying: "You see, sisters? God will not be mocked. The souls of all the aborted babies cry out for justice, and this is God giving them justice"<sup>34</sup> (83 died in this disaster).

The Anglican Archbishop, Dr Rowan Williams, has said that he may not be able to prevent a permanent split in the Anglican Church between the evangelical wing and the liberal wing over homosexuality. In a BBC interview, Dr Williams said he believed that faithful homosexual relationships did not conflict with the Bible's teaching. "It seems to me rather sad, and rather revealing, that when it comes to sex we suddenly become much less intelligent about our reading of the Bible", Dr Williams said.

Scriptural injunctions against homosexuality were written at a time when homosexual behaviour was regarded as an expression of lust or sexual indulgence. It was not until the twentieth century that it was regarded as a fundamental human sexual orientation.<sup>35</sup> Given that this is now considered to be not a matter of choice but rather

like being born left-handed, prejudice against homosexuals becomes a case of ignorance. The biblical pronouncements that people remember tend to be those which relate to their prejudices. Consider the Roman Catholic treatment of homosexuals in denying them communion. Leviticus 21:20 states that a person may not approach the altar of God with defective vision. Are people wearing glasses to be also refused communion? On the Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV program "The Weekly with Charlie Pickering" (broadcast 8:30pm, 15 July 2015) Bishop Spong was invited to comment on Archbishop Pell's view that homosexuality is a choice, not a genetic disposition. His comment was that it showed Pell's ignorance.

Despite the shortage of clergy, the Church's treatment of women continues to deny them full participation in the Church. This is largely a legacy of St Paul's view that women are to be submissive; they are forbidden to teach or to have authority over a man, but they are to keep silent (1 Timothy 2:12). Such views are typical of Paul. He is not at all keen on marriage. In 1 Cor. 7:8 he says to the unmarried and the widows: "It would be better for you to continue to live alone as I do." He is also particular about who sleeps with whom; or hearing that a man was sleeping with his stepmother, he said: "you are to hand this man over to Satan for his body to be destroyed" (1 Cor 5:5). Paul really had a problem with sex.

## 8. The Crucifixion

*“It is ridiculous to suppose that the great head of things, wherever that be, pays any regard to human affairs”*

– Pliny the Elder, 100AD

The crucifixion was a disaster for the early followers of Jesus, but this was not to last. St. Paul, the real founder of Christianity, was an ex-Pharisee who preached the ancient Jewish religion of altar and sacrifice. He came up with the satisfying rationale of the death of Jesus – the idea of a sacrificial person who is offered up to God as an atonement for the sin of mankind, inherited from Adam. Hence Paul’s barbaric proposition that God required a blood sacrifice of his son before forgiving mankind of its sins.

In Romans 3:24-26 Paul says that “all are put right with God through Jesus Christ, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his death he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him.”

This human sacrifice is in keeping with Hebrews 9:22 in which Paul says that “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”. I would choose to loathe rather than worship a deity who required the sacrifice of his son, Bishop Spong declared.<sup>36</sup> “Barking mad”, said Richard Dawkins.

Clearly this was God’s plan. In the gospel of Luke (9:28-32), the disciples Peter, John and James heard and saw Jesus talking with the long-dead Moses and Elijah “about the way in which he would soon fulfil God’s purpose by dying in Jerusalem”. God incarnated himself as Jesus in order that he should be tortured and executed in atonement for the hereditary sin of Adam. Poor Judas received a bad deal given that his “betrayal” was a necessary part of the cosmic plan. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself executed in payment? And who was God trying to impress? Presumably himself – judge and jury as well as execution victim.

The Bible’s account of the crucifixion is far from credible. The magical elements which gild the lily – the darkness over the land for three hours, the earthquake, the graves opening and many people raised to life (Matthew 27:51) – are not mentioned at all by Mark, Luke or John and are significant happenings which surely would have left historical records.

Burton Mack, a Professor of Early Christianity, has written<sup>37</sup> that Mark’s so called passion narrative contains many improbable features, such as the trial by night which would have been illegal; the basis for the charge of blasphemy which was probably

trumped up; the failure of the witnesses to agree, which would have called for a mistrial; the insinuation of the crucifixion taking place on Passover, which would have been an outrage; the disciples falling asleep in the midst of it all; Pilate having Jesus executed as the “King of Jews” without a good reason to consider him so, and so on. Mark’s story was written forty years after Jesus’ time in the wake of the Jewish – Roman war, when none of the principal players was likely to be still around to say it wasn’t so.

We know that there has been at least one hoax. The “miraculous” shroud of Turin, claimed to bear the imprint of Christ’s body after the crucifixion, was radio carbon dated by the McCrone Research Institute in Chicago in the late 1980s and was found to have been made in the mid-fourteenth century. To its credit, the Church agreed to the test and accepted the result.

Bishop Spong is adamant that the image of Jesus as a rescuer who died for our sins has to go. Original sin and atonement have been unquestionable, sacred mantra, with the crucifix as the central symbol of Christianity. It does not warrant this status.



## 9. The Resurrection

*“Easter: a national celebration of chocolate”*

– Mike Barfield in *A Cynic’s Dictionary*

The resurrection is at the heart of Christianity, the basis for the Christian promise of eternal life. St. Paul said: “If Christ is not risen our faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). Historically, his rising from the dead is very much a moot question.

Where do the bones of Jesus lie? If there was a physical, bodily resurrection (for example in Acts 1:9 “he was taken up to heaven as they watched”) then the bones of Jesus are inside his body in heaven, wherever that is. Were they, on the other hand, buried somewhere in the Middle East? That is to say, was the resurrection a physical or a spiritual/metaphysical event?

The church takes this matter seriously. Lloyd Geering, a Presbyterian theologian, was the subject of a heresy trial in New Zealand over where the bones of Jesus are.

It would have taken Jesus billions of years travelling at the speed of light (300,000 km per second – that is Sydney to London in less than one tenth of a second) to cross the universe known to our telescopes, only to be frozen solid by the -270° C temperature of space. Of course, the gospel writers did not know this. They visualised heaven out of sight beyond the clouds with angels flying as God’s messengers between heaven and Earth.

Even at the top, there seems to be some scepticism in the church of the resurrection as fact. Archbishop Carey wrote that “I must tell you frankly that while we can be sure that Jesus lived.....and that he was certainly crucified on the cross, we cannot with the same certainty say that we *know* that he was raised by God from the dead.....we must make our way to the resurrection by a leap of faith.”<sup>38</sup> Also, Archbishop Peter Carnley provoked the ire of Sydney Anglicans in 2000 by suggesting that the resurrection may have been metaphorical rather than literal.<sup>39</sup> When Bishop Spong opted for a spiritualised version, Archbishop Peter Jensen responded that “I can’t see much point in reinterpreting the resurrection.....If we do not believe in this, why believe at all?”<sup>40</sup>

Bishop Spong has written<sup>41</sup> that the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection were not original to Christianity but were adopted in the ninth decade in Matthew’s gospel (after the writings of Paul and Mark) when Matthew 28 told of the women grasping

Jesus' feet in the garden after his resurrection. It is a difficult subject as almost every detail of the resurrection in one gospel is contradicted in another gospel.

The Christian resurrection shows striking similarities with other ancient beliefs. In the resurrection of Osiris, the Egyptians saw the pledge of a life everlasting for themselves beyond the grave. The Persian God Mitra, a contemporary of Jesus, held a farewell banquet before ascending to heaven after his work on Earth was done. His followers commemorated this by a solemn sacrificial meal, though water was used instead of wine. Also, he will one day give them a better life and has promised a resurrection. The borrowings between the religions of Mithra and Jesus have long been acknowledged.

After his death, Muhammad flew from Mecca to Jerusalem before also ascending to heaven, but he did not promise an early return flight to Earth as Jesus did – the greatest 'no show' in history.

The central tenet of Christianity is the doctrine of the atonement with God through the sacrifice of Jesus as the Redeemer, and the resurrection was the symbol of the acceptability by God of the sacrifice made on the cross. Neither makes much sense today, particularly if they are looked at as historical statements. Indeed, John's gospel makes no such claim. The John people were not interested in either a redemptive death or an apocalyptic confrontation. It was merely God's appearance on Earth and return to his heavenly abode.<sup>42</sup> In the words of Bishop Spong:<sup>43</sup> "Let it be clearly stated, the gospels are not in any literal sense holy, they are not accurate, and they are not to be confused with reality. They are rather beautiful portraits painted by first-century artists, designed to point the reader toward that which is, in fact, holy, accurate and real." Sadly, this only serves to put us on the unproductive path of speculative interpretation of the gospels.

## 10. Formation of the New Testament

*“Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived.”*

– Oscar Wilde

It is misleading to think of the New Testament as a collection of authentic documents written at the time Jesus lived, which bear witness to his life and the formation of the early Christian church. A typical example of this misunderstanding is a letter to the Editor of a newspaper which said: “I prefer to read [in the New Testament] the account of people who were actually there and interacted with Jesus on a daily basis” (*Sydney Morning Herald* letters, 21 July, 2004).

Biblical scholars have shown that the gospels were not written by eyewitnesses. Mark’s gospel was the first to appear in about the year 70, that is about forty years after Christ’s death. It was heavily influenced by Paul’s letters which have been dated in the 50s. The apostle Paul had not been a witness to Christ’s life. He claimed authority to spread the faith as an apostle direct from God (Galatians 1:15). Having previously been an opponent of Jesus he needed a spectacular conversion to justify himself, hence the dramatic event on the road to Damascus.

Andrew Norman Wilson <sup>44</sup> contends that Jesus had no intention of founding a religion. Rather, he was a minor Galilean exorcist, no more significant than dozens of other similar prophets who caused trouble for the Romans. The faith that bears his name was invented by Paul of Tarsus. It was Paul’s brilliant mythologising of Jesus as the Christ that ensured his immortality, Wilson maintains. Jesus promised us the Kingdom of God, but through Paul we got the church instead.

Matthew’s gospel was written in the 80s very much as Mark had written it, even word for word in some parts such as the account of the second coming in Mark 13:24 and Matthew 24:29.

The gospel of Luke and John were written around the turn of the century. Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke about 110 and there were other writings as late as 140 to 150. The timespan of these Christian beginnings is nowhere acknowledged in the content of the New Testament. To complicate matters, the writings stem from different groups with different cultures, histories and attitudes. In some cases it is possible for scholars to trace the connections between writings and show, for example, that authorship was not the person it was made out to be. Indeed, the contemporaries of Jesus would have died before much of it was written, which increased the scope for creative writing on the part of the story tellers.

The reason that the Christian Bible includes the Old Testament is to try to give some credence to the claim that Jesus is the Messiah of the Jews. The Jewish prophets of the Old Testament are said to prefigure the coming of Jesus in a number of passages.

The gospel writers struggled to make their stories agree with the Old Testament prophets. For example, Micah 5:2 predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Luke acknowledged that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, but to get them to Bethlehem before Jesus was born he had them there for a census. Historians know, however, that it was a local census under Governor Quirinius, not one of the whole empire under Caesar Augustus, as Luke said. Also it happened in AD6, much too late. And why on Earth would the Romans have required Joseph to go to a town where a remote ancestor lived nearly 1,000 years earlier? <sup>45</sup>

In December 2007 the Vatican's nativity scene in St. Peter's Square depicted Joseph's Nazareth home rather than the manger in Bethlehem. <sup>46</sup> The reason given was that the shift underscored the idea that Jesus was born not just in a single place but everywhere for everyone. How disingenuous! The biblical prophets are the fortune-tellers of today.

The gospel stories were not written by Christ's contemporary disciples but were attributed to them to give the accounts more prestige, Burton Mack, a Professor of Early Christianity claims. This is "pseudonymous" writing, a common practice in those times. The only texts from the first century that scholars consider authentic in authorship were written by Paul, Mack claims. <sup>47</sup>

In the early days of Christianity churches were linked to centres of power around the Mediterranean in Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Caesarea, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Carthage. These centres battled for control of ideology and political influence. The transformation of the early Jesus movements into the Christ cult, where Jesus was acclaimed as the Christ and the Lord of the universe, moved attention from the teachings of Jesus to the notion of martyrdom and resurrection. There were ideological struggles over the Jewish-Gentile dilemma (including whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised to become Christians) and the long-lasting struggle for supremacy between the various gnostic schools and the apostolic tradition, which was claimed to be the only guarantee of Christian truth.

The event that triggered the creation of the Christian Bible was the conversion of Constantine, often dated at 313AD. He became the sole emperor of the Roman Empire in 324AD and called the first council of Christian bishops to meet in Nicaea in 325AD. Within a few short years under Constantine's prodding, baptisteries and basilicas dotted the landscape, the site of the empty tomb had been 'discovered' and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built upon it. Bishops gathered in councils to agree upon Christian doctrine, ritual was regularised, the calendar of festival events was established, salvation took the form of eternal life in a heavenly world, and Christendom was launched. <sup>48</sup>

The issue behind disputed books in forming a New Testament was whether their attribution to an apostle was authentic. Disputed books, according to Eusebius, included James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John. Some said Revelations was authentic, others said it was not. In 387AD Athenasius listed the writings Christians should consider as the New Testament. His list is identical to the Christian Bible, with the exception of the location of several letters. The New Testament had arrived, but as Nietzsche remarked, if God made a revelation to man, it is strange that the divine intention is not more clearly expressed. The special revelation is not very helpful if we cannot be sure of its meaning, or are left confounded by such beliefs as eternal suffering awaits anyone who questions God's infinite love.

## 11. Whither Christianity?

*“All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.”*

- Schopenhauer

As we enter the new millennium, Christianity is joining Islam as a mainly third world religion. Today more than two thirds of the worldwide Anglican community reside in developing countries. In Nigeria alone, on any given Sunday, 17.5 million Anglicans can be found in church, more than in England, Canada, Australia and the USA combined.<sup>49</sup>

It is generally accepted that traditional Christianity is declining in Western countries with older and smaller church congregations and a growing scarcity of clergy. A report in the Australian Catholic Record shows that regular church attendance is decreasing with each generation. In 2001 it stood at 40% among Catholics then aged 56 and older, but dropped off to 8% among those aged 15 to 24. Acceptance of key Catholic beliefs follows the same trajectory.<sup>50</sup> Some believers have become ‘Cafeteria Christians’, picking and choosing what to believe and what to reject.

The fact that Christianity is strongest in countries with low levels of education suggests that the religious tragedy of our time is that we have no satisfactory image of God that rests comfortably with what we have discovered about the universe over the past two millennia, and more importantly since Galileo and Darwin. The problem is that science has been somewhat taboo in the Church because it is in conflict with basic Christian dogma based on Adam and Eve (compared with evolution) and the biblical concept of the universe (compared with the vastness of space).

Many educated people yearn for spiritual satisfaction but cannot accept a God in their own image reigning over a world of angels, devils, portents, miracles, demons, possession and the first century mindset.

Because of our capacity to ask “why am I here?” the religious impulse in humans is basic and universal. We now find that churches with a spiritual leaning are the ones showing growth. The emotional rather than the rational now tends to constitute the appeal of religion, and for some it is related to the fear of death. As evangelists know, the Christian promise of a life everlasting is a hard pitch to resist. Billy Graham traded on this wish for many years.

Yet life is no less precious because it must come to an end. If we can surrender the ancient dream of immortality we may be able to forge a new theology more relevant to our time, which among other things might emphasise our stewardship rather than our domination of earth.

With the growth of both the secular state and the level of public education, theologians have lost the leadership they once enjoyed in matters intellectual because of their authority and superior education. Archbishop Peter Jensen is reported as saying in his 2000 Halifax Portal Lecture: <sup>51</sup> “No one in their wildest imaginings would say that the churches are at the forefront of intellectual endeavour; that the theologians are worth consulting on matters of great significance.” The Archbishop gave a good example of this at the time of the 2004 Indonesian tsunami; while scientists explained it in terms of plate movements in the Earth’s crust, Jensen said that it was “part of God’s warning that destruction was coming.” <sup>52</sup>

In recent times there have been moves to try to bridge this gap between science and religion. One approach is to reshape religion by removing its magical elements. For example, Bishop Spong regards the ascension of Jesus as one of the easiest celebrations to transform into a post-theistic interpretation: <sup>53</sup> “We concentrate on the non-theistic aspects of the narrative, which suggest that the human has entered into the divine, that God and human life are not divided...” While the laity have shown some interest, theologians have made it clear that they are not interested.

In the first half of his book Spong demolishes Christian dogma before asking is there any alternative for a non-believing Christian. He ignores agnosticism and embarks on his non-theistic rebirth of Christianity.

A more promising prospect, perhaps, has come from the scientific side. The physicist Paul Davies has written: <sup>54</sup> “To evoke God as a blanket explanation of the unexplained is to make God a friend of ignorance. If God can be found, it must surely be through what we discover about the world, not what we fail to discover.” There is no place for a ‘God of the gaps’.

In similar vein, Chet Raymo maintains that our diminished sense of the sacred has resulted not so much from the growth of knowledge as from the failure of traditional religion to incorporate scientific discovery into a framework of spirituality and religious worship. <sup>55</sup>

Some progressive elements within the church have also championed this cause. In an article in a Jesuit publication, the priest David Toolan <sup>56</sup> urged his fellow theologians to embrace a new kind of ecological theology, one that is informed and energised by what science has learned about the universe. He was following in the footsteps of the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, <sup>57</sup> who maintained that theology must not merely accommodate evolution, it must take evolution as its starting point. He insisted that the surest way to know God is through his creation and the truest knowledge of creation is that provided by science.

If the scientific story of creation is to flow into religion, the story will need to be translated from the language of scientific discovery into the language of celebration, Raymo believes. As we look with wonder and awe at the pictures from the Hubble

Space Telescope of distant galaxies and nebulae, it seems strange that such experiences are not more central to our religious celebrations. Such pictures are the cathedrals of our time in connecting us with the sacred, Raymo suggests. In the words of Carl Sagan, cosmologist: "Science has beauty, power and majesty that can provide spiritual as well as practical fulfilment."

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# Why I'm not a Muslim



FRANK DOWNER SAINTILAN

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(1929 – 2016)

*“Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.”*

- Voltaire

## **1. Muhammad and the Koran**

Islam had its genesis in Arabia in about 620AD, when Muhammad, then about 45 years of age and illiterate, went out onto a hillside near Mecca, alone, and claimed to have heard an awe-inspiring voice say “Oh Muhammad! Thou art Allah’s messenger, and I am Gabriel.” He then raised his eyes and saw an angel, in the likeness of a man, standing in the sky above the horizon. He returned to his wife Khadijah in distress. She reassured him, saying that Allah (God) would not let a harmful spirit come to him, and that it was her hope that he was to become the prophet of his people. On their return to Mecca she took him to her cousin, an old man who knew the scriptures of the Jews and the Christians. He declared his belief that the heavenly messenger who came to Moses of old had come to Muhammad, and that he was chosen as the prophet of his people.

Over subsequent years Muhammad received revelations from angels. It was noticed even by some of his wives that the Prophet was capable of having a ‘revelation’ that happened to suit his short-term needs, and he was sometimes teased about it.<sup>1</sup> For the first years of his mission the Prophet preached only to his family and friends, while the leaders of Mecca denounced him as a soothsayer, a sort of magician or a madman.<sup>2</sup>

The revelations to Muhammad were transcribed into the Koran (of which suras are the verses) to become holy scripture and the infallible word of Allah for all Muslims. Believers also read the hadiths (not the revelations, but the sayings of Muhammad) in association with the Koran to clarify, supplement and expand the range of guidance. There was also the development of the Muslim law (Sharia) widely accepted by Muslims to be a divinely inspired extension of the Koran and hadiths, to bring everything into conformity with God’s will.

For the serious Muslim, the simple aspects of daily life such as ablutions and meals are ritualised. According to Schuon<sup>3</sup> all things are done as symbols of divine bliss. He sees the Koran as having a ‘miraculous power’ whereby certain verses can chase away demons and heal the sick.<sup>4</sup>

The Koran comprises 114 suras and covers the obligations of believers to Allah in all aspects of their lives. It is like a pick and mix selection. If you want peace, you can find peaceful verses. If you want war, you can find bellicose verses.<sup>5</sup> Each sura is written as spoken by the angel who made the revelation. We only have Muhammad’s word for this; there is no corroboration. A recurring theme is the Garden of Delight (Heaven), which awaits believers and the ‘painful doom’ (Hell) which awaits non-

believers and wrongdoers at the resurrection. “The curse of Allah is on disbelievers” the Koran says in sura 2:89. Allah’s mercy is to be obtained principally by prayers, fasting, almsgiving and good deeds. If possible, Muslims should visit Mecca at least once during their lives. A man is necessarily damned by lack of faith.

Islam has the legacy of Christianity, Judaism and pre-existing Middle East societies because that is the world in which Muhammad lives. There are thunder, trumpets and earthquakes at the last judgement in both the Koran and the Bible. In return for drawing on biblical prophecies and gospels, all Islam asks is to be accepted as the absolute and final revelation following in the footsteps of Abraham, Moses and Jesus as a messenger of God.<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong has suggested that the Arabs of the time had a wounded feeling that they had been left out of history. God had appeared to Christians and Jews “but he has sent the Arabs no prophet and no scripture in their own language.”<sup>7</sup>

Sura 5:90 of the Koran says to Jews and Christians “O people of the scripture! Now has our messenger come to you to make things plain after an interval of messengers”. Sura 61:6 states that Jesus said: “I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming that which was revealed before me in the Torah [the books of Moses] and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the Praised One”. A footnote on p398 in Pickthall’s translation of the Koran explains that the ‘Praised One’ is the name of the Prophet of Arabia yet to come, and is believed by many Christians in the east to be Muhammad.

The claim that Muhammad’s role as a prophet of God was foretold by Jesus is based in the Gospel of John. In the three related places (John 14:16-17, John 15:26-27 and John 16:7-15) it is clear that the promised “Helper” (or the “counsellor” in some bible translations) to come after Jesus is the Holy Spirit, and not Muhammad as many Muslims believe today.

It must be said that Muhammad’s message was a step forward for the time and place. In pre-Islamic times, Arabia comprised small, relatively isolated communities. Families, class, and the confederations built on them, were the basic units of society. The Arabian Bedouin was an animist and a polytheist who believed that all natural objects and events were living spirits who could be either helpful or harmful to man.<sup>8</sup> There were about 300 tribal gods in Arabia, and a strict class system. Muhammad’s message that there is only one God and that everyone is equal in the sight of God had popular appeal (Buddhism similarly has popular appeal with its disregard of Hindu castes).

Warraq<sup>9</sup> suggests that Muhammad was the first to say to the people of Mecca and the masters of the Arabian desert, that forgiveness was no weakness but a virtue. Up to then, the tribes of Arabia had been divided by centuries of blood feuds, revenge killings, retaliation and animosity. All of the male kin were held responsible for the protection of family members, but the Koranic teachings tried to reduce the devastating effect of blood feuds that often resulted from this obligation. They urged

that the aggrieved party accept compensation in money rather than in blood. <sup>10</sup> If any person was to be killed, it should only be the guilty party and not any of his male relations, which only breeds further retaliation. An eye for an eye results in all becoming blind.

Muhammad left no instruction as to who was to take up his mantle when he died. Quarrels over the leadership gave Islam its first major schism – between the Sunni and the Shia – before Islam was even established as a system. <sup>11</sup>

At the end of his life in 632 Muhammad had created an Arabian federation and provided relief from the destructive anarchy of Arabian life. By 750 the Arab-Muslim empire extended from Afghanistan to Egypt. By 900 it extended from India to Spain.

There were other positive teachings in the Koran. In some respects it improved the status of women and children, who were no longer to be considered as mainly chattels or potential warriors. It sought to promote mutual aid and charity, and there were prohibitions against gambling and alcoholic beverages.

The Koran addressed many communal problems, such as norms for business transactions, where one should deal justly, honour contracts etc. Sometimes these norms were ethical rather than legal; for example the rule against usury did not specify a maximum rate of interest, but taught that people in need should not be exploited. <sup>12</sup>

An academic of the University of New England, Laurence Tamatea, says that Islam is attractive because of its universal message, its “sense of community, sense of belonging, of a brotherhood and sisterhood.” Sociologically, it has a strong, in-group cohesion.

Despite the good points, however, Muhammad was a man of his times, with kindness within the faith and cruelty outside it in his dealings with Jews, Meccans and his rivals. In his mission to win hearts and minds, Muhammad executed the male members of a Jewish clan and seized their property for his followers. <sup>13</sup>

Schuon <sup>14</sup> notes that Islam is often reproached with having propagated its faith by the sword. He makes no apology for this. The question to be put here, he contends, is simply the following: “Is it possible for force to be used with the aim of affirming and diffusing a vital truth? Beyond doubt the answer must lie in the affirmative, for experience proves that at times we must do violence to irresponsible people in their own interest.” How doubly sad that this is a present day view.

There are a number of places in the Koran where it is taught that fraternisation with non-believers is not acceptable:

- Sura 3:28 “Let not the believers take disbelievers for their friends...”
- Sura 5:51 “O ye who believe! Take not Jews and Christians for friends....”
- Sura 60:13 “O ye who believe! Be not friendly with whom Allah is wrath....”

- Sura 9:123 “O ye who believe! Fight those of the disbelievers who are near to you, and let them find harshness in you.”

This outlook may well be inherited from the Jews. For example, the orthodox Lubavitch branch of Judaism does not socialise with gentiles.

But further, the Koran sees the world as a battleground between believers and non-believers:

- Sura 61:19 “He it is who has sent his messengers with the guidance and the religion of truth that He may make it conqueror of all religions.”
- Sura 61:4 “Allah loveth those who battle for his cause.”
- Sura 4:104 “Relent not in pursuit of the enemy.”
- Sura 9:123 “O believers, fight the unbelievers who are near to you.”
- Sura 47:4 “Now when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, then it is smiting of the necks.”
- Sura 9:5 “Slay the idolaters wherever you find them.”
- Sura 4:89 “They long that ye should disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that ye may be on a level [with them]. So choose not friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back [to enmity] then take them and kill them wherever you find them.”

This is really no different to Moses’ stricture in Deuteronomy 13:6-10: “Even your brother or your son or your daughter or the wife you love or your closest friend may secretly encourage you to worship other gods....do not even listen to him. Kill him! Be the first to stone him, and then let everyone else stone him too. Stone him to death! He tried to lead you away from the Lord your God.”

To compound the problem, the Koran encourages believers to kill for the one true religion by promising rewards in the afterlife. Sura 4:74 says: “Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life in this world for the other. Who so fighteth in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him we shall bestow a vast reward.” Also, those who die fighting for Allah do not have to await Judgement Day and resurrection like the rest of us before going to heaven or hell. Sura 3: 169-170 says: “Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With the Lord they have provision. Jubilant [are they] because of that which Allah has bestowed on them of his bounty.”

The danger of this incitement to violence is that devout Muslims believe that the Koran is the word of God and as such is to be taken literally. While Christian history has similarities – for example Pope Urban II in the 11<sup>th</sup> century promised the remission of sins to everyone who took part in the Crusades against Muslims, and a martyr’s crown to any Crusader who fell in battle – they are not bible-based and are no longer an incitement to violence. If, however, you criticise Islam, you risk your life as Salman Rushdie found some years ago for implied insults to Muhammad in his *Satanic Verses*. And in November 2002, students at Tehran University demonstrated against the hardline Iranian judiciary for its death sentence on a reformist scholar,



Professor Hashem Aghajari, for a speech in which he was charged with insulting the Prophet Muhammad by calling on people not to follow religious leaders blindly. There is no freedom of speech in fundamental Islam.

The Koran decrees punishment which can only be described as barbaric. Sura 24:2 says: "The adulterer and the adultress, scourge each of them [with] a hundred stripes [lashes], and let not pity for the twain withhold you from obedience to Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day. And let a party of believers witness their punishment". Sura 5:38 states: "As for the thief, both male and female, cut off their hands. It is the reward of their own deeds, an exemplary punishment from Allah. Allah is Mighty, Wise." Such punishments contravene Article 5 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that no one shall be submitted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Yet this is happening today in parts of the world under Sharia law.

In Islam, everything that happens is the will of Allah. Predestination rules! For example:

- Sura 9:51: "Nought befalleth us save that which Allah has decreed for us."
- Sura 3:145 "No soul can ever die except by Allah's leave and at a time appointed."
- Sura 14:4 "Allah sendeth whom He will astray, and guideth whom He will."
- Sura 57:22 "Nought of disaster befalleth in the earth or in yourselves but it is in a Book before we bring it into being..."

This doctrine of predestination appears to deny free will and it seems that Allah may create some beings to consign to hell. Schuon<sup>15</sup> grapples with the concept of joint free will and determinism. He says: "the idea of predestination, so strongly marked in Islam, does not do away with the idea of freedom. Man is subject to predestination because he is not God, but he is free because he is 'made in the image of God.' To deny predestination would amount to pretending that God does not know events 'in advance' and so is not omniscient." What a logical muddle!

To a large degree the harsh practices of Islam, such as the criminal code and the treatment of women, merely reflect the practices of pre-Islamic Arabia. Things did not get worse with the rise of Islam – in some respects they got better – but the pre-existing situation was so bad that fundamental Muslim practices today still leave much to be desired. Some Muslim feminists argue that the Koran is descriptive of a given time and place, and that with changes in historical and social conditions new adaptations are necessary.

In former times it was somewhat similar when Christian churches, at the Parish level, wielded considerable authority in secular matters. Church courts had jurisdiction in many areas of civil law such as family, property, commercial and even in some matters of criminal law. The Church was also an important educational institution.<sup>16</sup>

The writings of Muhammad have never been short of detractors. Over the past thirty years the scholarship of John Wansbrough and Patricia Crone has transformed the study of Islamic history. Both of them have exposed the early biographies of Muhammad as works of “pious imagination”.<sup>17</sup> Crone found no hard evidence for the existence of the Koran in any form before the last decade of the seventh century (Muhammad died in 632). Like the gospels of the New Testament, it was produced well after the events occurred.

Anwar Shaikh, like the Mu’tazilites of the ninth century, questioned the validity of the revelations in his 1994 book *Eternity*.<sup>18</sup> He argues that the ancient tradition of revelation creates more problems than it solves. He sees “revelation” as a device which makes a man (the revelationist) divine, but reduces the status of God, who becomes dependent on the revelationist (ie the prophet) to execute his will.” He cites chapter and verse from the Koran and the hadiths of the Prophet, to demonstrate that Allah accepts the political and material needs of Muhammad far too easily for a supreme being. In Shaikh’s view, it is the Prophet and not Allah who stands at the centre of Islam. He provides from the Koran the example: “O Believers, do not walk in front of the Prophet. Do not raise your voice above his.” He asks himself why? Why should Allah raise one human above others? Once you begin to ask ‘why’ the structure is undermined.

Muhammad, like Jesus, saw himself as divine. Schuon writes<sup>19</sup> that “The Envoy of Allah testified as to his own nature, for he said: ‘He who has seen me has seen God’”. He also writes<sup>20</sup> that Muhammad said that (like Jesus in John 1:3) he was a prophet before the creation.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmed was a Muslim preacher in Pakistan who claimed that he had experienced a divine revelation. Since the Koran had explicitly stated that Muhammad was the last prophet, this was viewed as an outrageous blasphemy.<sup>21</sup>

The ancient mindset required to believe the Koran as the word of God is no different to that required to believe the same of the Bible. Any modern, educated person with an enquiring mind, whose basic tenets are “think for yourself”, “ask why”, and “where’s the evidence?” should have difficulty in accepting many elements of Christian and Islamic scripture.

A good reason not to be a Muslim is that the revelations comprising the Koran came from angels, mythical creatures whose wings would have been useless out in space where there is no air. No angels means no revelations. No revelations means no Koran.

## 2. Sex, Gender and Islam

*“Fanatics have their dreams wherewith they weave a paradise for a sect.”*

– John Keats

There is no sexual equality in traditional Islam. This largely reflects the harsh situation for women in pre-Islamic Arabian culture, with patriarchal authority and male-based kinship. In those days women had no standing. Their inferior status meant that they were not full members of the group. The pagan Arabs even had a practice of burying alive girl children whom they deemed superfluous.<sup>22</sup> Marriages were arranged by the heads of families. The lives of women in the ruling classes were marked by seclusion and veiling in pre-Islamic times.

The prevailing ideologies that legitimised male dominance held that men were physically stronger and more intelligent than women, who were more subject to their emotions, and by their very nature inferior to men. This attitude was bolstered by the belief, which pre-dated Islam, that the honour of a man’s lineage depended on the honourable conduct of the women of the family. Womens’ sexuality was in mens’ eyes, the essential aspect of their femininity.<sup>23</sup>

Deep within Middle Eastern cultures is the fear of uncontrolled sexuality. Unrestrained looks are sure to lead one into danger and therefore it is prohibited not only to look at a woman lustfully, but to look at her at all, so that the eye and the heart should remain pure and secure against temptation.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, in fundamentalist Islam, women are covered in public.

“Covering” or wearing the hijab scarf or the all-enveloping chador, is understood as a shield protecting women against men, and society against the danger of temptation represented by women. But while it conceals and secludes women, ironically it also creates mystery and attractiveness. It has an ambivalent significance in terms of purity and passion, autonomy and subordination, and dependence and interdependence.<sup>25</sup>

There is no requirement in the Koran to wear the chador. The only requirements are:

- Sura 24:30 “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for them. Lo! Allah is aware of what they do.”
- Sura 24:31 “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers....”<sup>26</sup>

As in early Christianity, the notion that women are impure is evident in Sura 4:43 of the Koran: “O ye who believe! Draw not unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which you utter, nor when ye are polluted, save when journeying upon the road till ye have bathed. And if ye be ill, or on a journey, or if one of you cometh

from the closet, or ye have touched women, and ye find not water, then go to a high, clean soil and rub your faces and your hands [therewith]. Lo! Allah is Benign, Forgiving”.

It has been argued that “the most profound teaching of Islam is the subordination of human beings to God and avoidance of any life experience in politics, art or love that competes with this ultimate religious demand. The Islamic concept of man as a slave or servant of God, the humble, unassuming devotee of the divine being is the model for the relations between males and females. Islam requires male control over females because of the perceived threat of uncontrolled sexuality and because of the potential for women to create allegiances that compete with man’s obligation to God. From this point of view Islam is intrinsically hostile to the equality of women and to the development of a full person-to-person love relationship between men and women.<sup>27</sup>

With the adoption of the Koran, women gained some legal rights and an assured position. It was, however, a second-class position. Sura 4:34 says: “Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property [for the support of women]”. There are no equal rights for men and women. Wives had to obey husbands but husbands didn’t have to obey wives. Men may have up to four spouses but women can’t – they may have to share their husbands with other wives. For Christendom, the strictest religious ideal had been celibacy, with monogamy a concession to human nature. For Muslims, monogamy is the ideal, with polygamy the concession to human nature.<sup>28</sup>

In the decades after World War I, newly independent states such as Turkey and Iran were at the forefront of changing status for women. The University of Istanbul was made co-educational in 1921 and primary education was made compulsory for both sexes in 1924. Similarly in Iran in the 1930s education was opened to women, the veil and the chador were outlawed and child marriage was made more difficult.

In the wake of World War 2 more Muslim countries gained independence from the control of Western colonial powers, but this was followed by a backlash as state and religion were absorbed into an Islamic revival. There was fear that the Western influences would undermine the traditional authority of fathers and religious teachers and subvert Islamic beliefs and culture. The revival included a wide variety of movements, some democratic and some authoritarian. Many promote Islam as a comprehensive blueprint for a modern way of life and call for the formation of Islamic states, with Sharia law, to enforce an Islamic morality.<sup>29</sup>

Women were the losers in this revival. In Algeria, in a reversal of the legislation of earlier decades, the legal code of 1984 permitted polygamy and gave husbands the right to unilateral divorce. In Iran, the Islamic revival in 1979 implemented a radical program. Women were required to wear the hijab in the workplace. The sexes were segregated in schools. Public flogging and stoning were instituted for men and women accused of adultery. The minimum age for marriage for women was lowered from 18 to 13 and restrictions on polygamy were removed.<sup>30</sup>

When the fundamentalist Taliban gained control in Afghanistan, they stopped the education of girls and the employment of women. In Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to drive cars and must be veiled from head to foot in public.

In parts of Malaysia, the rise of Islam since the 1970s has resulted in similar changes. It has been made more difficult for women to get divorces, public education has been curtailed, and there are in some places separate aisles and queues for men and women in supermarkets.

Honour killings, wherein a woman in the family is murdered by a male in the family for bringing the family into dishonour, was a pre-Islam custom in tribal Bedouin culture, but is still widely practised. According to a United Nations conservative estimate, about 5,000 women lose their lives in each year by such killings.

A newspaper report<sup>31</sup> told of a French woman on a business trip to Dubai who reported to police that three men had gang-raped her the previous night. When interviewed by police, the men said they saw her drinking alcohol and thought she was a prostitute. The police rejected the woman's account, then arrested and charged her as the guilty party with "adulterous sexual relations", a crime that carries a maximum 18 month jail term under Muslim Emirates Sharia law. The French Foreign Ministry hired a lawyer to defend the woman, and the outcome is unknown at the time of writing.

Cases such as this cast doubt on the ability of Islam to come to terms with modern concepts of human rights. In Australia, Muslim men in gang-rape trials have mounted the defence that their strict, religious upbringing made them believe they could rape Australian non-Muslim girls.<sup>32</sup> Having met some of the products of the Muslim "education" system in Afghanistan and other places, Christopher Hitchens is aware of the repression and ignorance of young males in the Muslim world, who are often kept apart from all female company, taught in effect to despise their mothers and sisters, and subjected to stultifying rote recitations of the Koran. Their problem is not so much that they desire virgins as that they *are* virgins; their emotional and psychic growth irremediably stunted in the name of God, Hitchens writes.<sup>33</sup>

In the matter of homosexuality, Islam's strictures are almost pathological. For males it means death. By contrast lesbianism is treated indulgently – a strong reprimand and a warning. But pity the woman who gets pregnant out of wedlock. At the time of writing, a court in northern Nigeria is considering the appeal of a woman sentenced to death by stoning for having a baby ten months after a divorce, taken by prosecutors as proof that she had extramarital sex.<sup>34</sup> It is hard to disagree with the writer Anwar Shaikh that "Islam is the most sex obsessed religion in the world."

The challenge is to define roles for women in society, education and employment without compromising positive Islamic values. It is a problem which reflects a range of political, ideological and religious agendas. Western society no longer has regard to

some New Testament teachings such as 1 Timothy 2:12 that women are forbidden to teach or have authority over a man. Muslim society, to a large extent, still lives in biblical times when it comes to the treatment of women. Sura 4:24 of the Koran for example says: “You are also forbidden to take in marriage married women, except captives who you own as slaves.”

### 3. The Fundamental Problem

*“Many people would sooner die than think. In fact, many do.”*

– Bertrand Russell

Some say that fundamentalism is a natural response to what has been happening in the world. To live with global uncertainties today is not easy, and there is a strong desire therefore to go back to our cultural womb where we felt safe, where there were absolutes and certainties as set out, for example, in the Bible or Koran.

But as discussed above, biblical doctrine does not stand up well to critical analysis and the Koran fares no better. According to Warraq<sup>35</sup> the Koran contains errors, contradictions, and historical anachronisms. Not a problem! writes Schuon<sup>36</sup>: “A sacred text with its seeming contradictions and obscurities is in some ways like a mosaic or even an anagram; but it is only necessary to consult the orthodox, and so divinely guided, commentaries in order to find out with what intention a particular affirmation was made and in what respects it is valid.” But why wasn’t it divinely clear in the first place if it is the word of God? Unfortunately, like the Bible, we have to rely on hearsay and anecdotal evidence from long ago which cannot be tested.

Associated with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the Israeli/Palestinian standoff, a wave of terrorism is threatening the West. Instead of trying to understand the causes behind Islam’s jihad and entering into a dialogue to try to resolve differences, America divided the world into good and evil nations and pursued vengeance in the wake of the Twin Towers disaster rather than turn the other cheek. Chris McGillion wrote<sup>37</sup> that it is not hard, from a Muslim perspective, to construe the US led war in Iraq as a new religious crusade. President Bush invoked God’s blessing in his decision to go to war; he is surrounded by advisers with strong links to the Christian right and the pro-Israel lobby, and his natural constituency is to be found in ‘bible belt’ America. Bush ends his speeches with ‘God Bless America’ while Osama bin Laden begins and ends his by praising Allah.

Professor S.P. Huntington, Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, wrote in 1993 of the ‘clash of civilisations’ in the US Journal *Foreign Affairs*. He contended that differences between civilisations such as Islam and the West are not only real, they are basic. Civilisations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and most importantly, religion. The peoples of different civilisations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the State, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries and they will not soon disappear. They are far more

fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes. The big question in his view is whether Islam is intrinsically able to modernise.

While the crusades are almost forgotten in the West, it is by no means so in the Middle East. In 1987, Muslims in Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Iraq celebrated the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory that led to the reconquest of Jerusalem. The historical conflict between Islam and the Christian West is still a powerful rallying symbol among many Muslims. The historical memory of the Arab goes very deep. Islam, like Christianity, aspires to global dominance and Muslims are fiercely protective of the control over their holy lands. Bush has pledged to set up a democracy in Iraq, hopefully to serve as a model for the rest of the Arab world. This would be anathema to Muslim countries, and radical Muslims in Iraq will have their own agendas. Already they are moving to fill the vacuum left by the fall of Saddam. He was a secularist who ruled a secular state, and represented the kind of enemy that radical Islamic movements have set themselves against; apostates who have corrupted their own societies by importing ideas from abroad.

Once the Taliban seized control in Afghanistan, it cut the country off from the world, then purged it of Western influences, from liberal ideas to women's rights. In the Bamiyan Valley of North Kabul in Afghanistan the two largest statues of Buddha in existence were carved into a cliff face in the fifth century. In an act of cultural vandalism they were blown up in 2001 by fundamentalist Muslims as false idols.

In neighbouring Pakistan, a country of 150 million, a struggle is going on for the hearts and minds of the next generation. State schools have collapsed due to a lack of funding, since the army has first claim on government funds. Private secular schools are only for the wealthy, while religious schools teach the glory of Pakistan and Islam.

Jobless youth have an identity crisis and are easily recruited for jihad or holy war against non-Muslims.<sup>38</sup> For the fanatical, war in the name of religion gives an identity and a purpose to life; it allows them to kill while believing in their own purity. Osama bin Laden<sup>39</sup> spelled it out brutally: "The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it."

Currently, the greatest terrorism danger in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia, "the world's leading financier of religious bigotry, militant medievalism, sectarian violence, and the subjugation of women".<sup>40</sup> The September 11 attack on New York was a Saudi operation in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens. Al-Qaeda was funded by wealthy Saudis, yet unlike Iraq, the country is safe from attack since it is a key American ally, a strategic base for its armed forces, and more importantly, the West's biggest supplier of oil.

Within Indonesia, the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist group is being helped by "Islamic boarding schools, or 'pesantren', which have harboured JI members and which have some sympathy for the aims of JI to create an Islamic state in south-east



Asia”.<sup>41</sup> Tariq Ali has written that at these schools verses from the Koran are learned by rote, and the children are taught the necessity of a devout life free from all doubt. The only truth is divine truth, and the only code of conduct is that written in the Koran and the hadiths. Anyone who rebels against this, rebels against Allah – the perfect indoctrination nurseries to provide fanatics. To make matters worse, the education of many Islamic religious leaders consists solely of Koranic studies, which does not bode well for change.

Ali concludes that “we are in desperate need of an Islamic Reformation that sweeps away the crazed conservatism and backwardness of the fundamentalists, but more than that, opens up the world of Islam to new ideas which are seen to be more advanced than what is currently on offer from the West. This would necessitate a rigid separation of State and mosque; the dissolution of the clergy; the assertion by Muslim intellectuals of their right to interpret the texts that are the collective property of Islamic culture as a whole; the freedom to think freely and rationally and the freedom of imagination. Unless we move in this direction we will be doomed to reliving old battles....”.<sup>42</sup>

Salman Rushdie, himself the subject of a fatwa, aired similar thoughts recently in the London *Times*: “What is needed is a move beyond tradition – nothing less than a reform movement to bring the core concept of Islam into the modern age...a Muslim Reformation not only to combat the jihadi ideologies but also the dusty, stifling seminaries of the traditionalists, throwing open the windows of the closed communities to let in much needed fresh air...The insistence within Islam that the Koranic text is the infallible word of God renders analytical scholarly discourse all but impossible. Why would God be influenced by the socio-economics of seventh century Arabia, after all? If, however, the Koran were seen as a historical document, then it would be legitimate to interpret it to suit the new conditions of successive new ages. Laws made in the seventh century could finally give way to the needs of the twenty-first. The Islamic Reformation has to begin here, with an acceptance that all ideas, even sacred ones, must adapt to altered realities.”<sup>43</sup>

Christopher Hitchens has written that while Jews and Christians have assumed a minimum willingness to consider “reformation”, no comparable project has even been undertaken in Koranic scholarship. “No serious attempt has been made to catalogue the discrepancies between its various editions and manuscripts, and even the most tentative efforts to do so have been met with almost Inquisitorial rage.”<sup>44</sup> A Syriac-Aramaic version of the Koran was produced in the year 2000 by Christoph Luxenburg, who proposed that the Koran is far better understood once it is conceded that many of its words are Syriac-Aramaic rather than Arabic. (His most celebrated example concerns the reward of a “martyr” in paradise; when re-translated and redacted the heavenly offering consists of sweet white raisins rather than virgins.)<sup>45</sup>

The Southern Baptists in America have proclaimed that “there is a war for souls underway in Iraq”. Franklin Graham, son of the evangelist Billy Graham, has described Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion”.<sup>46</sup> The *Left Behind* series of

evangelical thrillers in the USA have sold more than 60 million copies worldwide, and of which the latest has Jesus returning to Earth to wipe all non-Christians from the planet.

A recent book by Philip Jenkins <sup>47</sup>, Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn. State University, noted the global rise of conservative Christianity, which has more adherents than militant Islam and is growing just as fast.

With militant Christianity and militant Islam both on the march, a clash of civilisations is not as remote a possibility as many would believe. The boast of the Pakistani fundamentalists that in ten years' time they will control the army and hence Pakistan, raises a deadly spectre – an Islamic finger on the nuclear trigger. All in all a frightening scenario in what should be an enlightened age.

In a public debate on the eve of the Pakistani nuclear tests, the former chief of the Pakistani army General Mirza Aslam Beg said: “We can make a first strike and a second and even a third”. The prospect of nuclear war left him unmoved. “You can die crossing the street”, he said, “or you could die in a nuclear war. You’ve got to die someday anyway.”

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