

## **FEATURE: What Good Is Christianity?**

**PROF.:** Today, when I go out to the university, I get a lot more questions about whether Christianity is good. Has Christianity been good for women? Has Christianity been good for minorities? What about the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials? Has it been a good force in the world?

**FORMAT:** THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

**VOICE:** We're speaking today with Kenneth Samples in the Reasons to Believe office in Covina, California. Ken, give us a little bit of your background.

**PROF.:** I've been with Reasons to Believe for, next year will be 20 years. I'm the senior research scholar. I'm the non-scientist on the scholar team. I'm the theologian and philosopher. Before coming to Reasons to Believe, I was a college professor, taught philosophy and religion at a couple of community colleges. Prior to that, I worked at the Christian Research Institute with Walter Martin, the original Bible Answer Man. We studied different religious movements. I've been doing apologetics professionally for about 30 years.

**VOICE:** You made an interesting statement in the most recent Reasons to Believe newsletter. You said traditional apologetics has become less effective. To quote you, "While people still inquire about the faith's truthfulness, the question more often asked today is 'Is Christianity good?'" How did you come to that conclusion?

**PROF.:** When I was first doing apologetics about 30 years ago on the college campus, inevitably the questions would be questions of truth: "Does God exist?" "Is Christianity true?" "If it is, how do I know it?" There was a lot of focus on the person of Christ, particularly his resurrection. Today, when I go out to the university or we have an event, I get a lot more questions about whether Christianity is good. That doesn't mean people don't inquire about the resurrection or the truthfulness of Christianity. But it seems maybe with the emergence of what I would call the new atheism, there are questions like "Has Christianity been good for women? Has Christianity been good for minorities? What about the Inquisition? The Salem witch trials?" It seems to me that now people are inquiring, "I'm going to judge Christianity, not just on some of the truth claims, but has it been a good force in the world?"

**VOICE:** Um hum.

**PROF.:** And I suspect that's because we live in a postmodern culture, and there a lot of questions about whether traditional religion has really been good for people. I guess I picked that up about the last five years, that there's kind of a switch in the kinds of questions that I get.

VOICE: You used the term postmodernism. How would you define that, briefly?

PROF.: I would say that the secular postmodernism – because you could embrace postmodernism as a Christian; in fact, some do – I would say that Christianity is premodern. Modernity, the modern period, would be kind of from the Renaissance forward to about World War II and then after World War II there is what we call postmodernism. I would say some of the characteristics of postmodernism [are] a suspicion of language and truth claims. There's a lot more skepticism about the way things were done in the past.

VOICE: Everything is your opinion versus my opinion.

PROF.: A lot of relativism, yeah. You don't have truth; you have an opinion. We all have opinions, and sometimes they would say all opinions are equal. So I think the postmodern element contributes to the kind of question.

The traditional categories of Christianity are truth, goodness, and beauty. That's The Way, Christians looked at the world – through the prism of truth, goodness, and beauty. I'm aware today that a lot more people are interested in race, gender, and class. And so I think we're getting different questions because we're seeing the culture change, and people have different kinds of questions.

I still want to assert, I want to underscore that I still get the truth questions. But usually it takes a little longer to get to them.

VOICE: And you point out the fact that Christianity has helped to improve relationships related to slavery and various things.

PROF.: In fact, I think it's really a great opportunity. I think we can begin to unpackage that Christianity has been an incredibly good force in the world. I mean, I grew up during the civil rights movement, and so many of the leaders in the movement were Christians. Dr. Martin Luther King was a Baptist minister. Many religious people were very positive about treating people who are made in the image of God with dignity and respect.

And you could go even further back and argue that Christianity shaped our Western judicial system, our concept of justice, our ideas of hospitals and hospice and educational system. It does require us, I think, to know a little bit more of how Christianity has shaped the world. But I'm happy to do that, because I think we have a pretty good record. There are times when I have to point out that maybe there were times in Europe – these were so-called Christian nations – but anti-Semitism has been a significant problem at times. But I think we've got good reason to argue that, not only is Christianity true, but it's been very good for the world.

VOICE: You mentioned hospitals. As you drive down the street, most hospitals have religious names – Saint Matthew, Saint Mark, Saint Luke, Saint John, Baptist, Methodist...

PROF.: My wife has worked in hospitals for 25 years. She worked at St. Jude, a Catholic hospital. You walk into the lobby, and there is a Scripture passage on the wall, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I think wow, there's Jesus, who offers real care and comfort. So, yeah, hospitals are often named because of the religious mission that they have.

VOICE: And literacy has often been advanced by Christians – missionaries and various others.

PROF.: Absolutely! With regard to literacy, the church in the Middle Ages was the one that continued to strive forward in terms of learning. Christianity is a bookish religion. We have a book, and we read from the book. And then the Protestant Reformation was a great boon to education and learning.

In fact, we could take one more step. In science, the medieval universities – Oxford, Cambridge and other universities – played a great role in the emergence of the scientific revolution in the 17th century.

So I think this different kind of question requires a little bit of a different kind of apologetic. That is, I think we have to know our roots; we have to know our history. I'm glad to do that, because I really love our history.

VOICE: Some have said that the Christian worldview paved the way for science to develop. What examples do have of that?

PROF.: I think that that is, in fact, true. I think it is important to realize that various civilizations made contributions to medicine and technology. Certainly the classical Greeks had a mathematical prism of looking at the world. China. Even Baghdad; algebra is an Arabic word, after all – they made contribution.

But nobody could sustain an experimental science until the 17th century. What comes out of that is, again, these medieval universities. Also Christian theologians arguing that the world was made by God and we were made in God's image. We can track the intelligibility that God has built into the world.

Moreover, the idea that you can trust math, you can trust logic. In lots of worldviews, you can't trust your senses. So I think it is very fair to say that the Christian worldview birthed science. That doesn't mean that other cultures didn't make contributions. But sometimes religious philosophies can inhibit science, like the circularity of ideas in the East. The Judeo-Christian has a linear view, that things begin and move toward a straight path. So I think there's good evidence to support this.

And unfortunately I often get the objection that religion has always been at war with science. That's almost completely false. There have been times when there were tensions – with Galileo and various things. But for the most part, Christianity has been a *strong* force in valuing science and technology.

VOICE: Polytheism has chaotic collisions between various gods. Atheism has randomness that's not proceeding toward a purpose of creating something that's going to be logical.

PROF.: Yes.

VOICE: So monotheism is the most fertile ground for science to develop.

PROF.: That's such an important point! David, I think we live at a time when a lot of secular people are unaware of how much the religious worldview of the West shaped science. They just see science at work. It's kind of like a train that's moving down the track, but they don't realize that you've got to have some philosophical framework – to trust math, to trust logic, and to have all these kinds of things.

In that context I would say also Judaism plays a very important role in this western way of looking at the world and valuing science.

VOICE: The number of Nobel Prizes won by Jewish people is really out of proportion.

PROF.: Yeah, that's right.

VOICE: So should Reasons to Believe add a division called Results to Believe?

PROF.: (LAUGHS) I do think that we need to scratch where people itch.<sup>1</sup> We can make the case very well that we think science is a very important enterprise, we think it does many good things in the world – but that it needs some kind of worldview context to make it work.

I think it is important to ask yourself what kinds of questions are particularly young people asking today. They have been influenced by the new atheism, which is a kind of “in your face” type of atheism. I think the old atheists were much more formidable, because they were more careful. They didn't overstate their case as much.

Christopher Hitchens was very strong that, not only was Christianity false, but it's just been a bad thing for the world.

VOICE: In closing, what resources do you recommend for someone who wants to pursue this in more depth than we've been covering today?

PROF.: Well, I have tried to write some of my own books in light of that. So I have a book called *Without a Doubt*. In that book, I try to answer the truth questions, but I also try to ask the question about whether Christianity has been a good thing. So I also have a chapter on tolerance. I have a chapter that deals with “what about science?”

I've tried to write an apologetics text that takes you in different places where people are at. And of course, my colleagues Hugh Russ and Fuz Rana and Dave Rogstad and A. J. have lots of material to address the nuts and bolts of science.

VOICE: In closing, what challenge would you give to someone who thinks religions have done more harm than good?

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1 Idiom meaning to deal with questions people have, not to talk about things that don't concern them.

PROF.: I guess I would go back and say, think about some of the most important things in life – caring for the poor, caring for the sick. Where did our educational system come from? What was the motivation to start those medieval universities? Why did science emerge? Our judicial system.

I think all of these institutions that we consider so critical to human thriving, so often have originated in a Judeo-Christian perspective.

The atheists have laid that challenge. I think we have good answers.

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