

## The Evils of Christian History: A Threefold Approach

A key criticism of Christianity today concerns the problematic history of the Church, whether the “Christian jihad” of Charlemagne or the recent child sexual abuse scandals and cover-ups. Avoiding both the whitewashing of history and acquiescing to the mantra that “religion does more harm than good,” Professor Dickson will propose a threefold approach to this vital question of public Christianity today.

**John Dickson’s** story is eclectic. Starting out as a professional singer-songwriter, he now works as an author, speaker, historian, and media presenter. He was the Founding Director of the Centre for Public Christianity (2007-17). He has published over 20 books, two of which became television documentaries, with a third, *For the Love of God: How the Church is Better and Worse Than You Ever Imagined*, released in Australian cinemas in June 2018. John has held a variety of teaching and research positions before moving to Wheaton College, including in the Ancient History Department at Macquarie University (2002-2015), the Hebrew, Jewish, and Biblical Studies Department at Sydney University (2011-2021), Ridley College Melbourne (2019-2022), and the Faculty of Classics at the University of Oxford (2015-2023). A busy public speaker, he lives in Wheaton, Illinois, with his wife Elizabeth and the youngest of their three children.

### INTRODUCTION

Ipsos Poll, 2017

A 2021 Roy Morgan study found that just 30% of people saw ministers of religion as “high” or “very high” “for ethics and honesty”, well below nurses (88%), dentists (71%), university lecturers (53%), and even accountants (38%).

<https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/roy-morgan-image-of-professions-survey-2021-in-a-year-dominated-by-covid-19-health-professionals-including-nurses-doctors-and-pharmacists-are-the-most-highly-regarded-but-almost-all-professions-d>

“Whether as singleness (this God against the others) or totality (this is all the God there is), monotheism abhors, reviles, rejects, and ejects whatever it defines as outside its compass” (Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. University of Chicago Press, 1998, 63).

“The three monotheistic religions call on their faithful to renounce life in the here and now because they will one day be forced to accept its loss. Their glorification of a (fictional) beyond prevents full enjoyment of the (real) here below. They establish death on earth for the sake of eternity in heaven. The religion of the one God seeks to promote self-hatred to the detriment of the body, to discredit the intelligence, to despise the flesh, and to prize everything that stands in the way a gratified subjectivity.” (Michel Onfray, *The Atheist Manifesto*. Arcade Publishing, 2005, 66-67)

## 1. CONCEDE CHRISTIAN FAILINGS

Theological

Matt 5:3, Matt 7:3-5

Historical

Murder of Hypatia 415. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.14-15

Charlemagne versus Saxons 870s. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 8; *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* 8.

July 15, 1099

Decety, J., et al., “The negative association between religiousness and children’s altruism across the world,” *Current Biology*, 25 (2015), 2951-2955.

## 2. AVOID EXAGGERATIONS

Was the murder of Hypatia part of a broader Christian trend of opposing women and stifling education? (Catherine Nixey, *Darkening Age*)

Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.14-15; Philostorgius, *Church History*, 8.9

Was Charlemagne’s policy ‘baptism or sword’ typical?

Alcuin of York (735-804), *Epistolae Karolini*, Alcuin to Meginfrid, Ep.110; Ep.111. Decree *Capitulare Saxonicum*, 28 October 797.

Spanish Inquisition

Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

French Revolution

<https://www.britannica.com/place/France/The-Reign-of-Terror>

The problem isn’t religion/irreligion but the human heart with a *passion unrestrained*—a passion for power, land, rights, honour, wealth, or religion.

## 3. DISCERN CHRISTIANITY’S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

What is Christianity’s *uncommon/unique* contribution to humanity?

Teresa Morgan, *Popular Morality in the Early Roman Empire* (CUP, 2007).

Luke 6:27-31

First international aid project: 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9

First citywide food roster: Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43.11

Freeing slaves: Augustine, Letter 10\*, To Alypius; Eligius 600s Dado, *Vita Eligii* 1-2.

First public hospitals: Basil: Gregory of Nazianzus, "Funeral Oration on Basil the Great"; Jerome, "On the Death of Fabiola," Letter 77.6.

## **CONCLUSION**

The beautiful tune