

## Jesus-Shaped Cultures: The Historical Impact of the Gospel

Many key features of Western civilization—democracy, human rights, science, the free market, public education—are the legacy of the biblical faith being lived out by believers in society. Furthermore, this point is acknowledged by various historians and other scholars who are not theists at all. Moreover, these democratizing goods cannot be sustained through politics and legislative fiat because what gave rise to them is much deeper and far more transformative.

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**INTRODUCTION:** *Christopher. Hitchens*: “Religion poisons everything”; *Martin Marty*: 17 different definitions of “religion.”

- **PRESUMING A WORLDVIEW:** Everyone—atheist, theist, etc.—has a worldview, and whatever the worldview, it should be justified—not simply assumed.
- **PICKING YOUR POISONING:** Atheism has done a lot of “poisoning” (e.g., Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, Pol Pot).
- **PERCEIVING OUR FLAWS:** The Bible makes clear that we all are flawed and fallible and in need of God’s grace.
- **PARSING “RELIGIONS”:** Not all traditional “religions” are created equal (e.g., salvation by grace vs. self-salvation, dhimmitude in Islam).
- **PRESUMING HYPOCRISY:** We’re not denying bad things done in the name of God/Christ (Jesus predicted this!).
- **POSSESSING (NOT JUST PROFESSING) CHRIST:** It may be more instructive to observe professing Christians in hostile settings rather in places where one easily calls oneself a Christian but lives like a moral relativist.

### 1. WORLDVIEW AND PRACTICE: Roots, Shoots, and Fruits

**Worldvoice:** articulated by *a model religious or philosophical spokesperson or even worshiped deity*—Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Shiva, Marx (“roots”).

**Worldview:** *philosophical, religious, intellectual precepts/outlook* (“shoots”).

**Worldvenue:** *Visible expression of beliefs through concrete social customs/practices* (“fruits”).

**Biblical voice** (Gen. 1:27; Mt. 7:12) vs. **the Book of Manu** (caste system): **B.R. Ambedkar**: “Hindu society seems to me, to stand in need of a moral regeneration that is dangerous to postpone” (“Annihilation of Caste: A Response to Mahatma Gandhi”); Reformer **Jotirao (Mahatma) Phule (1873)**: “[Missionaries] thus emancipated the Shudras [backward castes] from the unnatural and inhuman slavery which was imposed by the wicked Brahmins.” **Kancha Ilaiah (activist, author, reformer)**: Within Hinduism, “there is no appreciation, per se, of a healthy man-woman relationship which is rooted in the concept of equality.”

## 2. TRANSFORMATION & HISTORY: How Faithful Jesus-Followers Helped Transform Culture

### a. Transformation of Culture: Early Church Era and Middle Ages

- **Moral/social reforms**
- **After AD 313 (Constantine):** Outlawing gladiatorial games; prohibiting child abandonment/infanticide; creation of hospices (AD 325) and hospitals (AD 369)—motivated by Jesus’ words: “I was sick and you looked after me” in Matthew 25:36.
- **Missionary endeavors and church planting**
- **Technology**

**b. Transformation through Reformation: Democracy, Education, and Moral Reforms:** The democratizing roots of the Protestant Reformation (starting in 1517) focused on three core, transformative values:

- 1) PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS (“a kingdom of priests”: cp. 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6)—rather than the more hierarchical structures of Catholicism/Eastern Orthodoxy;
- 2) BIBLE IN THE VERNACULAR: the right of every believer to study the Bible for himself in his own language;
- 3) GOODNESS OF VOCATIONS: the appropriateness of pursuing any honest vocation to the glory of God.

**\*Various Democratizing Gains for Humanity: Political scientist Robert Woodberry** (Baylor University) (“Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* [2012]): “Conversionary Protestant” (missionary) Christians in particular were responsible for these remarkable gains: “*the development and spread of religious liberty, mass education mass printing, volunteer organizations, most major colonial reforms [abolishing slavery, widow-burning, foot binding, female circumcision, pre-pubescent marriage of girls, etc.], and the codification of legal protections for nonwhites in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*”

**EXCURSUS: “But What About Greek Democracy, the Renaissance, and Enlightenment Influences?” *These are all inadequate explanations:***

- Greek “democracy”: *The city-state of Athens was aristocratic and founded on slavery. Some were born to rule, others to be slaves (cf. Plato, Aristotle).*
- Renaissance: fundamentally Christian (“*humanities*” [*studia humanitatis*])—not “humanism”/paganism); cf. Puritan John Milton’s appropriation of pagan figures.
- Enlightenment: Many figures were shaped by Protestantism (Rousseau, Locke, Grotius, etc.)

### c. Transformation in the Modern Era: Science, Bioethics, Human Rights

**#1: Modern Science:** The pillars of modern science who believed in the Bible, divine design, and the possibility of miracles

**#2: Bioethics**

**#3: Human Rights:** Max Stackhouse (Princeton): “intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as ‘secular,’ ‘Western’ principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else than out of key strands of the biblically-rooted religion.”

### 3. CHRISTIANITY AND THE “CRITICS”: REINFORCEMENT FROM NON-THEISTIC SCHOLARS

#### SUMMARY THOUGHTS:

- “PROOF” OF TRUTH?
- POINTERS TO REALITY
- POWER TO TRANSFORM
- POSING OF A QUESTION

#### *Recommended Reading*

Johnston, Jeremiah. *Unimaginable*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018.

Schmidt, Alvin. *How Christianity Changed the World*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2004.

Stark, Rodney. *The Victory of Reason*. New York: Random House, 2006.

Woodberry, Robert. “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy.” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012).