



**RESPECTED
TO
IRRELEVANT
TO
*DANGEROUS***

*DOES RELIGION POISON
EVERYTHING?*

BY
JIM DENISON

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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***DOES RELIGION POISON
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JAMES C. DENISON, PH.D.

WITH RESEARCH BY JAMES PEEL

“I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilization, as the church has done so often in human history.”

–Roman Catholic Cardinal Francis George of Chicago in 2010¹

RESPECTED TO IRRELEVANT TO *DANGEROUS*

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recently issued a stinging rebuke of the Catholic Church over its response to the clergy abuse scandal. That's not surprising news. Here's what is: the U.N. commission also chastised the Church for its positions on abortion, contraception, and homosexuality.²

This is the first time the United Nations has pressured the Church to change its long-held beliefs, claiming that these beliefs are actually dangerous. They charge that the Church's positions on these issues harm people and must be altered.

My point in this paper is not to discuss abortion, contraception and homosexuality. Rather, it is to expose the tipping point our culture has reached. There was a day when the church was recognized as the leading authority in Western culture. Then Christianity became marginalized, widely viewed as irrelevant but tolerated as harmless. Now the faith has become dangerous in the eyes of many, an aberration that must be opposed and even eradicated.

Richard Dawkins calls religion "the root of all evil" and describes it as "a virus in the software of humanity that must be expunged." Christopher Hitchens' international bestseller, *god is Not Good*, states in its subtitle that "religion poisons everything." Sam Harris claims that "science must destroy religion."³

How did we come to this place? What does it mean for you and the future of our faith and culture?

HOW WE GOT HERE

I'm old enough to remember when stores were closed on Sunday out of respect for God and because most people went to church. Billy Graham was named one of the "most admired" men in America an unequalled 57 times. A pastor was the "parson," the leading "person" in the community. Presidents, Supreme Court justices, senators and congressmen were nearly always people of active Christian faith, at least in their public profile. The vast majority of Americans called themselves Christians.

Then, over time, the church began losing its position of respect and relevance. An academic movement called postmodernism convinced us that there is no such thing as absolute truth, making the Bible a diary of religious experience rather than the objective word of God.

Relativism convinced us that there are no objective values, that you have no right to force your beliefs on me. Pluralism convinced us that there is no one right religion. As more and more Americans began encountering other world religions, they came to believe that Christianity is just one way to God, that the various religions are different roads up the same mountain. It doesn't matter what you believe, so long as you're sincere and tolerant—or so we've been told.

The sexual revolution of the 60's called into question the church's moral authority. Roe v. Wade contradicted the Church's position on conception. Clergy moral failures made headlines. It became conventional wisdom that the church is largely irrelevant to modern life.

The effects of this marginalization of religion in the Western world are clear. A recent Harris Poll conducted a large survey of religious beliefs in France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, and the U.S. America was the most religious country, with 73% describing themselves as believing in "any form of God or any type of supreme being." Behind us, belief in the existence of God falls quickly: 62% in Italy; 48% in Spain; 41% in Germany; 35% in England; and 27% in France believe in any form of a supreme being.⁴

In Great Britain today, there are four times as many Muslims attending mosque on Friday as Christians attending worship on Sunday. Twenty-five percent of Brussels is Muslim. Fifty-four million Muslims live in Europe; their numbers will continue to increase due to immigration and high birth rates.

Judges in the U.K. are considering a plan that would scrap the traditional religious oath in court, since "many giving evidence in criminal cases no longer take it seriously."⁵ A recent study there found that too many pupils were leaving public school with "a very limited understanding" of Christianity; one authority admitted,

“we found that children couldn’t say why Jesus was important.”⁶ New Zealand is now considered to be “post-Christian,” as those with no religious affiliation now comprise its largest single population group.⁷

In America, the number of atheists and agnostics has quadrupled over the last 20 years. The number of people who have no religion is the fastest growing demographic in America. “Spiritual but not religious” is the movement of our time.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently released their “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.” Among its findings:

- More than one-quarter of American adults (28%) have left the faith in which they were raised in favor of another religion, or no religion at all.
- Among Americans ages 18-29, one in four say they are not affiliated with any religion.⁸

The number of Americans who indicate confidence in religion has plummeted from 32% in 1976 to 20% in 2008. “The scientific community” ranks at 40%, twice that of “religion,” which is now on a level with “banks/financial institutions” at 19%.⁹

According to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), the number of Americans who describe themselves as “Christian” has dropped from 86% to 76% since 1990. Self-described “Baptists” have declined as a percentage of the population by 3.5%; “mainline Protestant” by 5.8%. At the same time, the number who say they have “no religion” has nearly doubled to more than 15%. That is almost the number who call themselves “Baptist.” The number who call themselves “atheist” or “agnostic” has quadrupled, and is now almost twice the number of Episcopalians in our country.¹⁰

But now we’re seeing another shift: the Church is not just irrelevant—it’s dangerous. Its beliefs must be opposed as actively and strongly as possible.

Atheist Richard Dawkins is famous for his T-shirt, “Religion: Together we can find the cure.” In *The God Delusion* he calls the God of the Old Testament “a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹¹

In his mind, and in the minds of many like him, faith in such a deity should no longer be tolerated by modern society. His call is being heard loud and clear around the world.

THE GLOBAL PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

John Allen, a respected international journalist, calls the global persecution of Christians “the most dramatic religion story of the early twenty-first century, yet one that most people in the West have little idea is even happening.” He describes this aggression as “the most compelling Christian narrative of the early twenty-first century.” According to him, “Christians today indisputably are the most persecuted religious body on the planet.”¹²

The scope of persecution

According to the evangelical group Open Doors, 100 million Christians worldwide today face interrogation, arrest, torture, and/or death because of their religious convictions. Todd Johnson of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary documents that 100,000 Christians, 11 per hour, have been killed on average every year of the past decade. The Catholic humanitarian aid group Aid to the Church in Need describes this global assault on believers as “a human rights disaster of epic proportions.”¹³

While 30 percent of the world’s population identifies as Christian, 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination around the world are directed at Christians. One scholar estimates that 90 percent of all people killed on the basis of their religious beliefs are Christians. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has identified 16 countries where “heinous and systematic” offenses, including torture, imprisonment, and murder, occur against religious communities. The only religion under attack in all 16 countries is Christianity.¹⁴

Terrorist attacks against Christians escalated 309 percent between 2003 and 2010. The number of people living in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion grew 70 percent from 2011 to 2012. There have been 70 million martyrs since the time of Christ; 45 million of them in the 20th century. In other words, more Christians died for their faith in the last century than in the previous 19 combined.¹⁵

Persecution against Christians is especially prevalent in the Muslim world. As *Newsweek* reported, “in recent years the violent oppression of Christian minorities has become the norm in Muslim-majority nations stretching from West Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and Oceania. In some countries it is governments and their agents that have burned churches and imprisoned parishioners. In others, rebel groups and vigilantes have taken matters into their own hands, murdering Christians and driving them from regions where their roots go back centuries.”

What about the allegation that the West, post-9/11, has become Islamophobic? According to *Newsweek*, “a fair-minded assessment of recent events and trends leads to the conclusion that the scale and severity of Islamophobia pales in comparison with the bloody Christophobia currently coursing through Muslim-majority nations from one end of the globe to the other. The conspiracy of silence surrounding this violent expression of religious intolerance has to stop. Nothing less than the fate of Christianity—and ultimately of all religious minorities—in the Islamic world is at stake.”¹⁶

The Barnabas Fund, a U.K.-based international body formed to support persecuted Christians, lists 10 forms of aggression against believers, in ascending order of ferocity:

1. Social discrimination, such as pressure on a Christian woman to convert to Islam if she marries a Muslim.
2. Institutional discrimination, such as difficulties obtaining building permits to construct or repair Christian churches.
3. Employment discrimination, such as bias against Copts in Egyptian military and public sectors.
4. Legal discrimination: denying Christians and other religious groups access to the courts, legal representation, or action by police when they are attacked.
5. Suppression of Christian missionary activity, as in Iran, where missionaries are routinely arrested and deported or incarcerated.
6. Suppression of conversion to Christianity, usually through “blasphemy” or “apostasy” laws. Nearly half the countries in the world have laws that criminalize apostasy, blasphemy, or defamation of religion.
7. Forced conversion from Christianity, sometimes involving “reconversion” ceremonies where Christians are made to embrace the religion they left for Christ.
8. Suppression of corporate worship, as when authorities in China or Saudi Arabia raid “house churches.”
9. Violence against individuals, the most common and most lethal form of the global war on Christians.
10. Community oppression, when entire churches or faith groups are attacked.¹⁷

Myths about persecution

Four myths about the global persecution of Christians are often repeated today.

ONE: Christians are at risk only where they are a minority. The fact is, many believers have been martyred in majority-Christian countries such as Russia and the Philippines.

TWO: it's all about Islam. In fact, more Christians have died in the Democratic Republic of Congo (where the vast majority identify as Christian) than at Muslim hands. Significant repression continues in North Korea, where as much as one-fourth of the Christian population is jailed, Cuba, and India.

THREE: many “martyrs” were not killed because they were Christian but for other reasons. It is true that many persecutors are motivated by factors other than religion. For instance, drug traffickers, Mafia members, and other criminals have killed multitudes of Christians for opposing their activities. However, the Christians who died at their hands were motivated by their faith. They stood up for oppressed people and against oppressors because they were serving Jesus. As a result, their commitment makes them martyrs for Christ.

FOUR: Christians are at fault if they are persecuted. If they engage in missionary activity where prohibited, for instance, they have themselves to blame for the authorities' reaction. However, such situations create only a small number of martyrs. And we should ask if it is not a form of religious persecution to prevent a religion from carrying out its faith principles such as witnessing.

Persecution in the West

Is persecution against Christianity growing in the West? The following examples illustrate a disturbing and escalating trend.

In the United Kingdom, the 2006 Equality Act made it illegal for adoption agencies to refuse same-sex couples who seek to adopt children. Numerous Catholic adoption agencies have closed as a result, many of which served children with Down syndrome and other disabilities.¹⁸

The High Court in the U.K. recently ruled that Christians with biblical views on sexual ethics are unsuitable as foster parents. The ruling related to a dispute between a married couple and their local town council, which blocked their application to foster a child because the couple was unwilling to promote the practice of homosexuality to a young child.

The Court determined that in a conflict between religious and sexual orientation discrimination, “the equality provisions concerning sexual orientation should take precedence.” It also determined that “a local authority can require positive

attitudes to be demonstrated towards homosexuality.”¹⁹ A BBC analyst stated, “The case is likely to be seen as a landmark decision, as senior judges ruled so decisively against any idea that attitudes might be justified purely because they were Christian in origin.”²⁰

Ironically, a radio advertisement in the U.K. asking listeners to report instances where they felt “marginalized in the workplace” was recently banned by authorities. They claimed that the ad was “directed to a political end,” violating communications laws in that country. The group placing the ad considers the ban “an attack on freedom of speech for everyone.”²¹

A 2004 federal law in France added “anti-gay comments” to a class of prohibited speech including racist and anti-Semitic insults. French Catholic leaders are concerned that the law might prevent bishops from opposing gay marriage.²² In Quebec, officials are debating a proposal by the ruling party that would ban the wearing of religious symbols in public buildings.²³

A writer reports that the “marginalization of Christians continues in Canada.” Here’s evidence: a judge in Quebec ruled that a Roman Catholic family could not home school their children, as this would not socialize them properly. Instead, he ordered them to place their children in socialized daycare. Canadian Broadcasting Company reported a pro-life rally attendance at 5,000, when observers placed the number at 10,000 to 18,000. By contrast, the CBC also reported that a million people attended a gay pride parade in Toronto, when observers placed the number at 200,000.²⁴

Persecution is especially mounting against those who defend biblical marriage. Commentator Michael Cohen notes in *National Review Online* that there have since been between 200 and 300 legal proceedings in Canada against critics and opponents of gay marriage.²⁵

Religious leaders in England are warning that the government’s support of same-sex marriage will lead to significant legal challenges against the Church of England.²⁶ The former Archbishop of Canterbury foresees “serious and wide-ranging conflict between religious institutions and local authorities.”²⁷

In June 2012, Denmark’s parliament legalized same-sex marriage and made it mandatory for the Evangelical Lutheran Church to conduct gay marriages.²⁸ The legislation permits individual Lutheran ministers to decline, in which case “the local bishop must arrange a replacement for their church.”²⁹ There is apparently no provision for a bishop or congregation who object to same-sex marriage.

Persecution in America

Is the same pattern at work in the United States?

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo recently spoke out against “extreme conservatives who are right-to-life, pro-assault-weapon, anti-gay,” claiming that they “have no place in the state of New York.”³⁰ Note that he considers those who believe life begins at conception (a position consistent with his own Roman Catholic Church) to be “extreme” conservatives. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio defended the governor’s comments as “absolutely right.”³¹

It is interesting that Gov. Cuomo believes he can dictate who has a “place” in his state. If an evangelical Christian were to make such a statement, what would be the reaction?

In April 2013, a Catholic high school in Columbus, Ohio fired a teacher after it became public knowledge that she is a lesbian who lives with her partner.³² She sued the Diocese of Columbus under the city’s anti-discrimination law, which does not provide an exemption for religious organizations and carries a penalty of up to 180 days in jail. It is possible that the Catholic bishop will be sent to jail for upholding his church’s teachings.³³

Other examples:

- October 2004: A group of Christians in Philadelphia were arrested, spent 21 hours in jail, and were charged with multiple felonies for peacefully protesting at a gay pride event. The event was open to the public and held on city streets and sidewalks.
- June 2005: A manager with Allstate in Illinois was fired for writing an Internet column that was critical of same-sex marriage and espoused Christian beliefs. He was not at work when he wrote the column. He sued and reached a settlement.
- June 2005: A lesbian couple in Vermont sued the owners of a small inn for saying that, as Catholics, they would have a moral difficulty in hosting a same-sex civil union on their premises.
- March 2006: The California Supreme Court voted unanimously that the City of Berkeley could withdraw a rent subsidy for a Boy Scouts affiliate at the city marina because of the Scouts’ opposition to homosexuality.
- March 2006: Catholic Charities in Massachusetts was forced out of business after 100 years of ministry, because it would not place children with homosexual couples.

- April 2006: San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors urged Catholic leaders to defy Vatican directives telling agencies not to place children with same-sex couples.
- June 2006: Robert J. Smith was fired as a director of the Washington Metro Area Transit Authority for stating on a local cable show that gays and lesbians are “persons of sexual deviancy.” He stated that, as a Catholic, this was part of his religious beliefs.
- May 2007: eHarmony.com was sued in California for refusing to offer its dating services to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. The organization was founded by an evangelical Christian with strong ties to Focus on the Family.
- June 2007: The Oakland, California city government found the words, “Marriage is the foundation of the natural family and sustains family values” to be a hate crime. It reprimanded a group of city government employees for using these words on a flier in the workplace.
- October 2007: Oak Grove Camp Ground, a Methodist camp in New Jersey, lost its state tax-exempt status for refusing to host a same-sex union in its marriage pavilion.
- January 2008: Jon and Elaine Huguenin were tried before the New Mexico Human Rights Commission after refusing to photograph a same-sex commitment ceremony, citing their religious beliefs. The commission fined them \$6,600.³⁴
- New Mexico’s Supreme Court recently ruled that professional photographers may not refuse to work gay weddings, even if such work violates their religious beliefs.³⁵

In addition, employment may be a consequence of the same-sex marriage debate. According to Kerby Anderson, “If same-sex marriage becomes legal, then a natural next step will be to ban discrimination in hiring based upon sexual orientation. Churches, synagogues, religious schools, and faith-based organizations would not be allowed to refuse to hire someone who was a practicing homosexual.”³⁶

ESPN commentator Chris Broussard stated that Jason Collins, an NBA player who came out as gay, was living in “open rebellion to God.” He was called a bigot and purveyor of hate speech. Family Research Council spokesman Peter Sprigg comments: “In the current culture, it takes more courage for someone like Chris Broussard to speak out than for someone like Jason Collins to come out.”³⁷ Illustrating his point, the Southern Poverty Law Center in Alabama has branded Sprigg’s organization a hate group.

Many Christians in the academic world face ridicule for their faith. For instance, Elaine Howard Ecklund, an assistant professor at Rice University, polled 1,700 scientists at elite universities. She discovered that, contrary to stereotype, nearly half say they are religious. But they practice a “closeted faith”: “They just do not want to bring up that they are religious in academic discussion. There’s somewhat of almost a culture of suppression surrounding discussions of religion at these kinds of academic institutions.” Each person she interviewed insisted on anonymity.³⁸

A U.S. Army Reserve training presentation recently called evangelical Christians “religious extremists,” listing them alongside al Qaeda, Hamas, and the Ku Klux Klan.³⁹ A 14-year-old honors student and football player at Western Hills High School in Ft. Worth, Texas was suspended for telling a friend in class that he was a Christian and believed that “being a homosexual is wrong.” After legal counsel intervened, the suspension was reversed.⁴⁰

A 19-year-old student was told by a supervisor at California’s Sonoma State University that she could not wear her cross while working at the school’s freshman orientation. The university later apologized.⁴¹ A report prepared by the Family Research Council and the Liberty Institute listed these examples of rising discrimination against Christians:

- A high school valedictorian in Victor, Iowa was told he had to give a “secular” speech after he wanted to attribute his success to his faith in Christ.
- A Cisco employee was fired for expressing his views on traditional marriage in a book he wrote, though he never voiced these opinions at work.
- An eight-year-old was barred from singing “Kum Ba Yah” at a Boys and Girls Club in Port Charlotte, Florida, because the song includes the words, “Oh, Lord.”
- A nurse in Manhattan was forced to participate in a late-term abortion against her religious convictions, lest she face the loss of her job and license.⁴²

When evangelical pastor Rick Warren’s mentally ill son committed suicide, here was some of the response on Twitter:

- “Rick Warren compared Gay 2 mental illness/his son just killed himself 4 mental illness..Is Karma paying a visit 2 the #BigotedBibleBeater?”
- “well after all the dead gay kids Rick Warren is responsible for, I guess one of his is a small price to pay.”

- “I wonder if Rick Warren’s son was gay and killed himself because of his father’s anti-gay bashing?”
- “So who else is shocked that Rick Warren drove his gay son to suicide?”
- “I would’ve committed suicide if my dad was Rick Warren too.”⁴³

A group calling itself “Angry Queers” claimed responsibility for throwing baseball-sized rocks through nine church windows in Portland’s Mars Hill Church, including two 100-year old stained glass panes. They stated their hope that this “small act of vengeance will strike fear into the hearts” of Christians who teach biblical morality. Rather than discuss their differences with the church, the group states, “the only dialog we need with scum like Mars Hill is hammers through their windows.”⁴⁴

Christian Liberty Academy in Arlington Heights, Illinois planned an event to discuss the homosexual activist agenda and honor a pro-family activist. After its glass entry door was smashed by bricks, the perpetrators warned, “if this event is not shut down, and the homophobic day trainings do not end, the Christian Liberty Academy will continue to be under constant attack.”⁴⁵

Westboro Baptist Church is rightly condemned for its hateful rhetoric, but it has never attacked a person or building. Yet its vitriolic actions make headlines regularly. Why did these attacks receive so little media attention?

Catholic leader William Lori testified before the House Judiciary Committee in October 2012. He stated that “the bishops of the United States have watched with increasing alarm as this great national legacy of religious liberty . . . has been subject to ever more frequent assault and ever more rapid erosion.” Some of the examples he cited:

- Directives from the Department of Health and Human Services requiring faith-based relief agencies to provide a “full range” of reproductive services if they receive federal funding for their migrant care and anti-trafficking programs.
- A similar requirement by the U.S. Agency for International Development that contraception be included in international relief and development programs.
- A brief filed by the Department of Justice that labeled opposition to same-sex marriage as a form of “bias” and “prejudice.” Could such language be used in the future to prosecute religious groups for their opposition to gay marriage?
- The Department of Justice’s attempt to erode the ability of faith-based groups to hire and fire in keeping with their faith tenets. (The Supreme Court eventually upheld the ministerial exception.)

- The absence of strong conscience protections with regard to gay marriage laws. Clerks in New York who work in county clerks' offices and declined to register gay marriages have been fired; Catholic Charities have been driven out of adoption and foster care in locations such as Boston, San Francisco, and the District of Columbia.⁴⁶

WHY RELIGION IS CONSIDERED DANGEROUS

The pattern of aggression against Christians is clear, and escalating. Why? How has an institution that was respected and trusted become so vilified?

Religious beliefs are hazardous

“Angry atheists” such as Richard Dawkins were crusading against religion long before 9/11. However, this horrific tragedy gave them an unprecedented platform for their complaints. For others, the Holocaust furnishes grounds for disbelief.

Others reject religion as a result of their personal suffering. For instance, my father was a Sunday school teacher before fighting in World War II. He witnessed such atrocities that he never returned to church again. While he would not consider religion to be dangerous, he certainly struggled to find again its relevance and even its truthfulness.

Tragically, crimes in the name of religion are a tragic part of the human story. Cain killed Abel, apparently out of anger over a religious sacrifice that was not accepted (Genesis 4:1-8). Tribal warfare played a regrettable but significant role in the growth of early Islam. Wars between Hindus and Buddhists have marked their relations across their joint history. The Crusades were undoubtedly the most horrific chapter in Christian history.

Such a litany continues in our day. Eric Rudolph placed a bomb at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996; my family attended the Games that day and walked past his bomb only a few hours before it exploded. His terrorism killed two people and injured 150 others. He has been linked to a militia movement called Christian Identity. Behrin Breivik killed 77 people in Oslo on July 22, 2011 while claiming to be “100 percent Christian” and calling himself a “modern-day crusader.”⁴⁷

It's easy to see why religion is increasingly viewed as dangerous to humanity. In our day of 24/7 news, where events in remote parts of the world are as close as our cell phones, aggression committed in the name of faith makes instant headlines. Wouldn't it be better if religion were marginalized even further? Let's consider four responses.

ONE: “dangerous” must be defined.

Terrorism such as 9/11 is clearly dangerous on a horrific level to those who are its victims. But the issue is more complicated than it may seem.

I spoke recently for a meeting of The Men of Nehemiah. This ministry works with previously incarcerated men, teaching them job skills and helping them deal with substance abuse issues. They are located in a crime-ridden part of South Dallas. Some would say it was dangerous for me to park my car there and walk into their building. Many who join this organization leave gangs, exposing themselves or their families to retribution. On the other hand, those who join The Men of Nehemiah are significantly less likely to return to prison or to criminal behavior. How are we to judge the danger inherent in the ministry?

I have traveled widely in the Muslim world and taught world religions for more than 25 years. I wrote *Radical Islam: What You Need To Know* for the 10th anniversary of 9/11; in it I explained the logic behind the attacks. In brief: radicalized Muslims claim that the West has been attacking Islam since the Crusades, nearly a millennium ago. Since the Qur’an requires Muslims to defend their faith (cf. Sura 2:190-192), they believe they are obligated to attack Americans in response to our supposed aggression.

But why innocent citizens? Because we are a democracy in which we elect our leaders and support our military, they believe there are no innocent Americans. They view each of us as complicit in this “attack” on Islam. As a result, in their mind 9/11 was not an unprovoked attack on innocent citizens. To the contrary, it was a defense of Islam that struck at the heart of Western, “Crusader” imperialism: the Twin Towers represented finance, the Pentagon represented the military, and the White House or Congress (the apparent target of Flight 91 that crashed in Pennsylvania), the political.

We view those who hijacked airplanes as terrorists; they view them as martyrs. By contrast, they view our military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan not as self-defense but as an extension of Western imperialism. Since they consider America to be a Christian nation, if they were writing this essay they would cite our military actions as an example of “dangerous” religion.

Of course, I would not suggest that the assertions of radical Muslims are correct. To the contrary, most of the Muslim world views them as a horrific contradiction of Islam. My point is that “danger” must be defined. What seems dangerous to some is considered righteous to others. This is a simple fact of logic, one that answers the easy criticism by atheists that “all religion is dangerous” or “religion poisons everything.”

TWO: there is no such thing as “religion.”

In 2009 I was privileged to participate in a debate with Christopher Hitchens. His bestseller, *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* would be central to the discussion. In reading it, I was astonished to see how often he considers all religions as one and condemns all for the perceived crimes of some.

In point of fact, there is no such thing as “religion” per se. What color is it? How much does weigh? There are only religions—specific manifestations of religious principles and commitments. Just as there is no such thing as “leaves,” only individual leafs, so with religion.

When critics claim that “religion poisons everything,” we need to ask if this is true of each and every religion. Has the skeptic investigated every one? *The World Christian Encyclopedia* states that there are more than 10,000 distinct religions in the world. Has the critic studied Bulgyohwoi (a distinct variant of Buddhism), for instance?

It would be different if the world’s religions believed and taught essentially the same beliefs, but they do not. If Islam is correct about the afterlife, Buddhism is wrong. If Hinduism is right about the existence of thousands (some say millions) of gods, Judaism is wrong. These are not different roads up the same mountain, but very different mountains.

Imagine condemning all “medicine” because of the crimes of some doctors, or all “art” because of the excesses of some artists. The illogic of Dawkins’ claim that “religion is the root of all evil” is clear. In fact, it is the kind of non-fact-based rhetorical statement he so often accuses religious people of making.

THREE: evil acts are clearly not confined to religion.

The 20th century was the most bloody, war-torn era in human history. And yet each of its major wars was fought for political reasons, none of them religious in motivation. Are we to determine that “all politics are dangerous” and seek to restrict or abolish their activities?

Nuclear science has given us sustainable energy as well as atomic weapons and crises such as Chernobyl and Fukushima. Are we to castigate all nuclear scientists as dangerous?

Democracy is clearly one of the greatest forces for liberation and progress in human history. And yet it perpetuated slavery in America, an institution that was abolished only after the bloodiest war in our nation’s history. It has perpetuated abortion, leading to the deaths of more than 57 million babies. In the minds of many critics of religion, it permitted an “unjust” war in Iraq. Are we to abolish democracy and vilify its participants?

FOUR: religion is not to blame for its misuse. The same hammer that can be used by Christians to build Habitat for Humanity houses can be used by “Angry Queers” to attack churches.

Religious texts can be misinterpreted, to be sure. But medical texts can be misused by unscrupulous doctors. Physical laws governing explosives can be misused to destroy embassies. Airplanes can unite families or destroy buildings. The Internet can be used to make an airplane bomb; is this the fault of Tim Berners-Lee?

Philosopher Keith Ward: “It is not religion that causes intolerance. It is intolerance that uses religion to give alleged ‘moral’ support to the real cause of intolerance—hatred of those perceived or imagined to be oppressors or threats to one’s own welfare.”⁴⁸

Ward cites Machiavelli, who noted that “if you wish to be evil and to get away with it, you must take great care that you appear to be committed to morality and religion, to core values of great, even cosmic importance.”⁴⁹ Religion will continue to be used by evil people for their evil ends. Is this the fault of religion that it can be so misused? What about Nazi doctors who used medicine to “improve” the Aryan race through horrific experiments? As Ward notes, “There is no conceivable system of religious or political thought that has no potential dangers.”⁵⁰

In the first half of the 20th century, 20 million people were killed in the U.S.S.R., 65 million in China, two million in North Korea, and two million in Cambodia. Each was a victim of a government that was officially atheistic. Are we to blame all atheists for such atrocities?

Psychologists have long known that being religious, rather than harming adherents, actually helps them find greater happiness. For instance, a psychologist professor named Catherine Sanderson has concluded that religious beliefs “give people a sense of meaning” and “a sense of well being or comfort.” Being religious often engages us in social networks that bring significance and belonging. And it is good for those who engage in it.⁵¹

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, “there is overwhelming research evidence that people can live longer if they actively engage in formal religious activities and follow their faith’s behavioral prescriptions.” As one sociologist states, “regular and frequent religious attendance does seem to be one of the significant predictors of less stress and more life satisfaction.”⁵²

In Richard Dawkins’ universe, no Martin Luther King, Jr., no Gandhi or Mother Teresa, no Mozart, Bach, Rubens, or Michelangelo, no Red Cross, no St. Francis or Jesus. Would this be a less dangerous or more dangerous world?

We have evolved beyond religion

Another argument against religion is the claim that it originated in the earliest stages of human development as a product of beliefs we now know to be superstitious or mythological. For instance, some skeptics claim that we evolved from animism (worshipping the spirits in nature) to theism.

However, we have almost no evidence as to how our earliest ancestors interpreted their religious beliefs, as they have left us little more than archaeological remains. How did the inhabitants of Easter Island view their monoliths? This is a question hotly debated still today.

In fact, the earliest written religious records we possess preserve religious worldviews very similar to ours today. Orthodox Jews still view the Torah as God's law for life; modern-day Hindus still use the same ascetic disciplines as those reflected in their ancient literature. And so-called "ancient" beliefs such as animism are still to be found in some parts of the world. I encountered such beliefs when serving as a missionary on the island of Borneo.

The claim that we have evolved beyond religion sounds plausible until we examine the evidence. Then we discover precisely what critics of religion claim for our beliefs: that they are based on supposition, not fact.

Religion is based on illusion

This fact leads to another objection: that because religion makes claims that cannot be verified scientifically, it is based on illusion rather than evidential fact. We're told that statements, to be meaningful, must be capable of verification (the so-called "verification principle" in philosophy). Since religious statements cannot be verified beyond doubt by logic or experience, they are meaningless.

However, the verification principle cannot itself be verified. It is an axiom, an unverifiable presupposition. In that sense, it is like mathematical axioms. We cannot prove empirically that two parallel lines never intersect unless we are prepared to draw them forever. We cannot prove that $2 + 2 = 4$ rather than 5.

Are proponents of the verification principle prepared to call their assertion an illusion? Would they say the same of mathematics?

Religious beliefs are irrational

Yet another objection is that religion is dangerous because it is irrational, replacing facts and evidence with blind acceptance of theological assertions. Such critics often claim that the Enlightenment replaced "Dark Ages" mythology with "pure reason." They want our culture to affirm such reason and thus be "enlightened."

The Age of Enlightenment (17th-19th centuries) was actually, upon review, far less enlightened than these skeptics seem to admit. Keith Ward describes the era: “it was more obviously an age of increasingly aggressive nationalism ending in two world wars, repeated revolutionary conflicts, imperial expansion, the expansion of human slavery to industrial and global proportions, and violent political radicalism set against repressive absolutist monarchies.” He notes that as the Enlightenment progressed, “barbarism did not decrease. In the twentieth century it reached heights never previously imaginable. Where religion was restricted, as it was in National Socialist Germany, or even abolished, as it was in revolutionary France and Russia, what superseded it was cruel and inhuman to an unprecedented degree.”⁵³

I have visited Cuba eight times, and have seen first-hand the results of Castro’s cultural revolution. His atheistic worldview and economic system have led to widespread famine, horrific financial deprivation, and minimal health care for the vast majority of Cubans. Those who are part of the Communist Party elite, by contrast, live in luxury.

The simple fact is that every relationship requires a commitment that transcends the evidence and becomes self-validating. This is true of your decision to read this paper—you could check my credentials and examine my thesis, but you could not know that reading this essay is worth your time until you read it. You could not prove you should attend your school until you enrolled there; you could not prove you should choose your job until you began work. If my wife was waiting for proof that I would be a good husband or father, I’d still be unmarried and without children.

Religious worldviews can be as reasonable as any other worldviews, as all are based on unprovable axioms. Christians cannot prove God exists, but atheists cannot prove that he does not.

Religious worldviews can be as reasonable as any other worldviews; all are based on unprovable axioms, including atheism (which cannot prove that God does not exist). Copernicus was a lay canon of the Catholic church; Kepler believed that the heavens reveal the glory of God; Newton believed that God created the laws of nature which scientists “discover.” Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, is both a world-class scientist and a very devout Christian.

Claiming that “religion is irrational” is an example of irrational thinking.

Belief in an afterlife is harmful

Let’s consider one more skeptical claim: that belief in an afterlife is harmful to this life. Supposedly those who believe in life after this life are less likely to maximize their experience in this world. They will use religion as an “opiate of the people” (Karl Marx), a tool for oppressing those who endure such suffering in

expectation of heavenly reward. And they will sacrifice themselves and others in expectation of divine blessing (i.e., radical Muslim terrorists).

Actor George Clooney expresses well this conviction: “I don’t believe in Heaven and Hell. I don’t know if I believe in God. All I know is that as an individual, I won’t allow this life—the only thing I know to exist—to be wasted.”⁵⁴

By contrast, theists have the right to ask: why should atheists care more about this life than we do? With no fear of eternal consequences for present actions, aren’t they free to live as they wish? If they believe that life ends at death, why not seek personal pleasure and power at the expense of others?

The fact is, those who seek eternal reward for earthly deeds are even more motivated to do good in this life. Jesus taught his followers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned, knowing that we will receive heavenly reward for such earthly service (Matthew 25:31-40).

George Washington, in his 1797 Farewell Address, clearly asserted the need for religion in a moral society: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. . . . Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.”⁵⁵ Two years later, John Adams claimed that “our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”⁵⁶

Keith Ward:

The church did preserve ancient classical culture in times of chaos and anarchy. It inspired the building of great cathedrals and sublime works of art, in icons, mosaics and illuminated manuscripts. In its monasteries it gave rise to traditions of scholarship and philosophical debate, as well as helping to build a sound agricultural economy and a refuge for those seeking a sense of the presence of God. And in ordinary life it campaigned for hospitality for strangers, care for the sick, education for all, and the preaching of love, compassion and hope in a world darkened by plague, disease, the cruelty of war, and early death. These quotidian mercies are hugely positive factors that are largely hidden from the eyes of those historians who notice only the grand movements of the rich and powerful. But they are where we might expect to find the most positive fruits of a religion that has always claimed to speak most of all to the poor and everyday, and to let its works of charity be performed in secret, silently.⁵⁷

Justin the Martyr, one of Christianity's earliest defenders, could assure the emperor that Christians make the best citizens. C. S. Lewis noted:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither.⁵⁸

How should Christians respond to persecution?

Persecution against the Christian faith (what *Newsweek* calls "Christophobia") is continuing to escalate, in America and around the world. How should Christians respond?

Expect persecution

First, we should expect to suffer for our faith. Jesus was clear:

- "If the world hates you, know that it hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).
- "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19).
- "They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9).

The apostles agreed:

- John taught us, "Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 John 3:13).
- Paul warned us, "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).
- Peter encouraged us, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

More than a million Christians were killed in the first centuries of Christian faith. My youth minister used to say, if you and the devil aren't running into each other, you're probably running with each other.

Love and pray for those who persecute you

When we face persecution, Jesus' instruction is simple: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Consider each imperative in turn.

"Love" translates *agape*, the unconditional commitment to put another person first. It is a present active imperative verb, literally "love and keep on loving." "Enemies" translates *echthrous*, "one who is at war with you." Why? Because enemies of our faith can resist our logic, ignore our sermons and boycott our services, but they have no defense for unconditional love.

Jesus' other imperative is "pray for those who persecute you." "Pray" translates *proseuchesthe*, a present active imperative that could be translated, "pray and keep on praying." "Those who persecute you" translates *diokonton*, "those who are seeking to drive you out." Pray continually for those who persecute you, even as they persecute you.

Then God does what we cannot do. Human words cannot change human hearts. Only the Spirit can convict of sin and save souls. Only he can make Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle. Only he can turn enemies of God into disciples of Jesus.

J. Edwin Orr, one of the great historians of spiritual awakening, wrote a now-classic essay titled "Prayer and Revival."⁵⁹ He shows that in the wake of the American Revolution, the new nation slid into tragic moral decay. Drunkenness became epidemic—out of a population of five million, 300,000 were confirmed alcoholics; 15,000 of them died of drinking every year. Women were afraid of assault; banks were being robbed daily.

The churches were in serious decline. Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians all lost more members than they gained. One Congregational church did not see a new member in 16 years. An Episcopal bishop resigned his post, since he had not confirmed anyone in so many years that he determined he no longer had a ministry to fulfill.

The Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, wrote to James Madison that the church "was too far gone ever to be redeemed." Tom Paine predicted that "Christianity will be forgotten in 30 years."

A poll at Harvard University found not a single believer there. A similar poll at Princeton discovered two Christians among the student body. Students held a

mock communion at Williams College, staged anti-Christian plays at Dartmouth, and forced the resignation of Harvard's Christian president. Christians on campus in the 1790s were so few that they met in secret and kept their minutes in code.

What happened? Christians began to pray. Their prayer movement began in Great Britain under the leadership of William Carey, Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe. In New England, a Baptist pastor named Isaac Backus issued an urgent plea for revival in the new nation. Churches set aside the first Monday of every month to pray. Other prayer meetings sprang up. A prayer network began to cross the land.

The result was the Second Great Awakening, a movement of God that created Sunday schools, Bible societies, popular education, and led to the abolition of slavery in England and eventually in America. Many historians say this Awakening was critical to the preservation of the United States.

Expect the redemption of God

At its heart, persecution against Christians is an attack of the enemy. Jesus warned that Satan was “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44), a thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). It is no coincidence that persecution is increasing fastest in those regions where the church is growing most rapidly. But Scripture assures us that “he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

God redeems all he allows. His holy character requires him to redeem for greater good everything he allows or causes. In this case, he uses persecution to purify and strengthen his people. Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, noted that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

During my first visit to Cuba, I told one of the pastors that I was praying for persecution to be lessened against his people. He asked me not to pray in this way, since he and other pastors believed that the suffering they faced was vital to their health and purity. Then he confided that he and other Cubans were praying for persecution against Christians to increase in America, for the same reason.

Christophe Munzihirwa was Roman Catholic Archbishop of Zaire. He was assassinated by a group of Rwandan soldiers on October 29, 1996. At his funeral, someone quoted his favorite saying: “There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried.”⁶⁰ As God uses the suffering of his people to strengthen their faith, more of us will see more than we have ever seen before.

CONCLUSION

God promises that his will for us is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). You probably know that your Father has a will for where you live, that it was his plan for you to be where you are today. But did you know that he also has a will for *when* you live? By his providence, you were not alive 100 years ago or 100 years from now (if the Lord tarries). He knew that with his help, you could meet the challenges of this day. Otherwise you would not be alive to face them (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13).

You are one of his missionaries to a culture more opposed to faith than any in centuries. You are called to love and pray for this culture. You are called to prove your faith by your love, to earn the right to share the gospel. And you are called to pray urgently, passionately, daily for the great spiritual awakening so desperately need.

This is the need of the hour, and you are called to meet it.

We are called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), standing boldly but graciously for our Lord and his people. When our faith is attacked, God wants us to “make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15a). However, we are to make this defense “with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (vs. 15b-16). Then the apostle adds: “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil” (v. 17).

Phil Cooke is a filmmaker, media consultant, and author. He recently wrote,

The great challenge of the Church today is speaking into a culture that perceives us as an irrelevant, out of touch museum piece. . . . The Christian Church has to come to terms with the fact that while its role in leading American culture may be over, its voice at the table is not. That doesn’t mean we side-step issues that matter, but we speak the truth in a way that engages rather than condemns. In a media-driven culture, perception matters. Two thousand years ago, an obscure, marginal group following the teachings of Jesus became the dominant religious force in the Western world. They didn’t have political power, an army or vast wealth. But through their lifestyle, their relationships and their actions, they changed the perception of Rome, and eventually impacted the world.⁶¹

Let's close with the good news: the twenty-first century will look more like the first century than any in between. In apostolic Christianity, the church possessed no buildings or recognized "clergy." They worked in a culture which had no recognized definition of truth. They persecuted Christians by the thousands and eventually the millions. But they soon became the largest spiritual movement in human history.

They did their work by relevance. They showed a skeptical culture the love of God by their love. They rescued abandoned babies on trash heaps and adopted them as their own; they bought and freed slaves, befriended prostitutes, cared for lepers, and prayed for their persecutors. When they fed hungry bodies, they fed hungry souls. They proved the relevance and reality of their faith by their love.

So can we.

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