

## 1 Christianity and Progress

- Module: History
- Lesson 38

## 2 Some Recommended Sources

- Rodney Stark, *How the West Won*, and *The Triumph of Christianity*
- David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*
- James Hannam, *God's Philosophers*
- John Mark Reynolds, *When Athens Met Jerusalem*

## 3 Common Historical Myths and Christianity

- Rome was a vibrant and growing culture until Christianity brought it to an end and precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire.
- Following the fall of the Roman Empire, Western civilization was plunged into a thousand years of "Dark Ages", the so-called "age of faith" (as opposed to the "age of reason").
- During the Dark Ages the church resisted and suppressed cultural and scientific progress for the sake of religious dogma.
- The church's opposition to cultural, intellectual, and scientific progress and all "profane" learning was epitomized by the burning of the library of Alexandria (390 A. D.) and its 700,000 volumes by an enraged mob of Christians.
- The "age of faith" finally yielded to the "age of reason" with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.
- The epitome of the long running "war between science and religion" was the trial and conviction of Galileo.

## 4 A Long Line of Myth-makers

- Zosimus (late 5th-early 6th century), a pagan Byzantine writer.
- Voltaire (1694-1778) (French Enlightenment philosopher)
- Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) (*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)
- John William Draper (1811-1882) (*History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*)
- Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) Early evolutionist ("Darwin's Bulldog"), and agnostic.
- Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) Aristocratic British philosopher, mathematician, historian, and much more. Self-described agnostic and/or atheist.

## 5 The Greek Miracle

- The Greek city states saw dynamic intellectual, literary, artistic, technological, political, and military progress from c. 600-338 B. C.
- This "Greek Miracle" may be considered the beginning of the road to modernity.

- The Greek Miracle wanes and progress stagnates as city states are subsumed into various Greek empires (such as the Athenian empire). (The maintenance of empire tends to detract from intellectual, cultural, technological, and scientific energies.)
- Christianity actually preserved much of Greek interest in philosophy and the rational God.

## 6 **The End of the Roman Empire**

- Rome's intellectual and technological prowess was largely borrowed from Greece.
- Rome's progress was impeded by the same phenomenon that eventually stunted Greek progress: empire.
- Historians do not agree on what caused the fall of the Western Roman Empire. As more than two hundred different causes have been claimed by historians. There is no credible evidence that Christianity caused the fall of Rome, nor even that Rome's fall was essentially an internal failure.
- The fact that the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire remained for another 1000 years, heavily influenced by Christianity, strongly suggests Christianity was not the cause of the fall of the Western Empire.
- The fall of Rome appears to be chiefly due to flawed long-running strategic military policies.

## 7 **The End of the Roman Empire**

- Rome's military defeat was due to several factors:
  - Altered defensive strategies that had been in place for nearly a century.
  - These altered strategic policies contributed to a diminishing of military training and discipline.
  - Improved "barbarian" military tactics and discipline. (Many "barbarian" military leaders were former Roman soldiers.)
- Major advances that followed the fall of Rome.
  - Agriculture (iron plow, padded horse collar)
  - Industry (use of wind and water power)
  - Transportation (development of wagon brakes and swiveling front axles)
  - Arts
  - Warfare

## 8 **Access to Greek Learning**

- Most of the vibrant intellectual activity of the Greco-Roman world was actually the product of the Greeks and therefore written in Greek.
- With conquering of the Western Empire by the European barbarians, knowledge of Greek in the West virtually died out, leaving Westerners with little or no access to the philosophical and scholarly traditions of the earlier Greco-Roman world.

- Meanwhile, the scholarly traditions of the Greco-Roman world remained alive in the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire, which retained its knowledge of Greek.
- As large sections of the Byzantine Empire progressively fell to the Islamic conquest, these intellectual resources (both writings and scholars) were absorbed into Arabic societies.
- Eventually Western thinkers regained a knowledge of Greek and access to the great intellectual resources of earlier Greek philosophical and scholarly traditions, enlivening Western scholarship.

## 9 Christianity and Scientific Progress

- The Possibility of Progress
  - The “idea” of progress—
    - “...the idea of progress was inherent in Jewish conceptions of history and was central to Christian thought from very early days.” (Rodney Stark)
  - European idea of progress “is unique in human history.” (Moses Finley, 20th century classical scholar)
    - Pagan and eastern religions tended to view time/history as circular, rather than linear, hence there was no inherent value or purpose in progress.
  - Progression of knowledge and theology is characteristic of Western civilization.
- Medieval science and discovery was extensive.
  - Every major scientific breakthrough in later centuries was built upon discoveries and developments that occurred during the Medieval era.
  - European (Christian) Medieval progress was profound, extensive, and eclipsed anything in the rest of the world.

## 10 The Myth of the “Dark Ages”

- The term “Dark Ages” and the concept of such a period of intellectual and scientific stagnation originated in the 14th century.
- Supposedly, nothing of intellectual, scientific, technological, or artistic significance occurred, chiefly due to Christianity’s preoccupation with dogma and resistance to progress.
- Faith was viewed as being a direct antithesis to reason. Christianity was “at war” with science, as epitomized by its persecution of Galileo.

## 11 The Reality: There Were No “Dark Ages”

- Historians today reject at virtually every point the myth of the “Dark Ages.”
- The Medieval era was a period of vibrant intellectual, scientific, technological discovery and development.

- Virtually all such vibrant growth was fostered and financed by the Church, and took place in the universities which were sponsored exclusively by the Church.
- Nearly all the great intellectual minds of the Medieval era, as well as during the period of the Renaissance, were Christians.

## 12 The Church and Science

- The church, throughout the Medieval era and the Renaissance, historically supported and encouraged scientific enquiry and intellectual endeavors.
- The church was the chief patron of science.
- All early universities were founded and supported by the church.
- Virtually all early scientists, including Copernicus and Galileo, were Christians.
- “Contrary to the conventional narrative, science did not suddenly flourish once Europe cast aside religious ‘superstitions’ during the so-called Enlightenment. Science arose in the West—and only in the West—precisely because the Judeo-Christian conception of God encouraged and even demanded this pursuit.”  
-Rodney Stark, How the West Won-

## 13 The West vs. the Rest

- In the Far East, especially China, numerous significant inventions were made. (e. g. gunpowder, canons, mechanical clocks, printing press, etc.)
  - In most cases, the Chinese failed to appreciate the potential for the development of these inventions for the benefit of Chinese society.
  - After the invention of the mechanical clock, the court Mandarins ordered all the clocks destroyed.
  - After a period of two decades of remarkable seagoing voyages to India and Africa under the Chinese explorer Zheng He in the early 15th century, the Chinese emperor halted the building of any more seagoing vessels and destroyed those of Zheng He.
- It was left up to the Christian West to appreciate the value of these inventions and discoveries, to develop them much further, and to employ them in the advancement of Western society and power.

## 14 The West vs. the Rest

- Illusions About Islamic Learning and Scholarship
  - The common view of Islamic culture concurrent with the Medieval era in the West is that while the Christian West lie intellectually moribund during the “Dark Ages”, Islamic science and learning flourished.
  - In reality, the sophisticated culture and learning attributed to Medieval Islamic peoples was, in most cases, actually the culture of the dhimminis (the conquered peoples), such as Judeo-Christian/Greek culture of Byzantium, Copts and Nestorians (Christian sects), Persians, and Hindus.

- Dhimminis not only originated most “Arabic” science and learning, they actually did most of the translating of those works into Arabic, giving the appearance that such works were Arabic in origin.
- As the dhimminis became progressively converted to Islam and distanced in time from their original culture, intellectual and scientific vibrancy of the Islamic world diminished and virtually vanished.

## 15 The Library of Alexandria

- A charge is often made, as evidence of historic Christian opposition to secular learning, that a Christian mob burned the library of Alexandria with its contents of 700,000 books (scrolls) in 390 A. D.
- Actually, the story of the burning of the library conflates two different events/libraries.
  - In the first case, the Royal Library of Alexandria, was apparently destroyed by fire—by Julius Caesar, in 47 B. C., nearly a century before the Christian era. (Even this story is debated by historians.)
  - No one actually knows how many volumes the library actually contained or what precisely they were. The actual number may have been as low as 40,000 volumes.
- In the second incident, in 391 A. D. Roman soldiers along with some Christian civilians, may have torn down or destroyed the Alexandrian temple called the Serapeum (the historical records are not clear), which was located on the site of the earlier library.
  - The destruction of the Serapeum was most likely a military operation, not the action of an enraged and uncontrolled mob, though reports vary.
  - There may have been a library associated with the Serapeum, but there is no mention of the destruction of such a library, even by the anti-Christian historians of the era.

## 16 The Case of Galileo

- Galileo Galilei (Galileo) (1564-1642)
- Published a defense of Nicholas Copernicus’ heliocentricity in Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems: the Ptolemaic and the Copernican (1632)
  - Copernicus had published his heliocentric theory (the sun as the center of the solar system) in On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres in 1548.
  - On the Revolutions had gone largely ignored until the early 17th century. In 1616 the Roman church determined it heretical.
  - Copernicus provided no proof of heliocentricity, and apart from his argument that the solar system orbited the sun, almost everything else in On Revolutions was incorrect.
- Galileo had been given permission by the church to publish on the Copernican model.
- In his Dialogue he caricatured his erstwhile friend, Pope Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini) as a simpleton (Simplico).

- The conflict between the church and Galileo was as much a political struggle between two immense egos (Galileo's and Urban's) as it was a religious issue.

## 17 **The Case of Galileo**

- In hindsight, the church had no business in meddling in the matter of Galileo's scientific work.
- The problem of proof:
  - Galileo could not offer proof for his theory.
  - Ironically, it was the church that was demanding proof, and Galileo who was demanding blind faith.
- Following his conviction by the Inquisition, Galileo was placed under house arrest in a luxurious villa, where he continued to publish and receive visitors.
- Galileo was never imprisoned or tortured, as some Enlightenment critics have claimed.
- The church's interference in the Galileo affair is the exception, not the rule.

## 18 **Christianity's Tension with Science**

- Some examples—
  - The supposed eternality of the universe. (Science has now largely acknowledged that Christianity's belief that the universe is not eternal is correct.)
  - Darwinian evolution. While still the dominant view in science, increasing scientific discoveries are calling into question the Darwinian model.
- How should we deal with the tensions?
  - Think carefully about the scientific evidence and claims. (What is the actual evidence, and what does it really imply?)
  - Think carefully about how we interpret Scripture. (Is there really a conflict, or is it only a perceived conflict?)
  - If the tension persists, the benefit of the doubt should be given to Scripture.

## 19 **Next Week:**

- Of Wars and Witches  
(the Crusades, witch hunts, and more)