

On Religion and Moral Legitimacy

Paul Kotschy

13 August 2019

Compiled on June 26, 2023

Abstract

DO RELIGIONS HAVE ANY MORAL RIGHT¹ to the claim that they offer people a moral advantage in life? No. In answering why not, this article explores the conflation of religion and morality—a conflation which seems to have been around for a long time, and which is now weakening with the rise of modern science, secularism and humanism. In particular, and perhaps controversially, this article examines the imputed² legitimacy of religion to make significant claims on modern morality, irrespective of whether or not those claims are relative or absolute in nature.

Unfortunately the evidence cited herein is skewed towards Christianity, although there are references to Islam. The skewness is because Christianity is the religion with which I am most familiar. I should apologise now for the skewness. Nonetheless, my moral reasoning below does not apply to Christianity alone.

The implied epistemology³ in this work is one of moral reasoning based on evidence drawn from history.

Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Antisemitism (0 to present)	2
3	Extirpation of Manichaeism (5th to 9th century CE)	5
4	Persecution of the Cathars (1209 to 1350 CE)	6
5	European wars of religion (1521 to 1648 CE)	6
6	Trans-Atlantic slave trade (late 15th to late 19th century CE)	6
7	Christianisation of South America (1492 to 1800s CE)	9
8	William Lane Craig’s “Divine Command Ethics” (2007 to present)	9
9	Belligerence of modern Islamic fundamentalism (present)	10
10	Genocide of the Yazidis (2014 to 2015 CE)	11
11	Conclusion	12

¹I declare this article to be my own work, my own study, and my own analysis. Errors and inaccuracies are my own.

²*Impute*—Attribute or assign a value to something by inference.

³*Epistemology*—Epistemology asks the question, “How do we know what we know?”.

1 Introduction

WHY IS A RELIGION'S moral legitimacy important? If a religion claims to hold a moral compass to guide peoples' behaviour, then it is important. This is so *even when a religion's track-record has little bearing on our behaviour now or in the future*. Our children demand moral legitimacy from us as parents when we proffer moral injunction on them. Our children expect us to say, "Do the good things we do, not just the good things we say!" Surely then, the faithful must demand same from their forebears, their deities, and from the respective interventions of the deities in their lives.

And of course, if a religion's dogma is true, together with its unique message of God's archetypal Empathy—call it objective Love—then there must be sufficient evidence in history of that Love being expressed through the religion. The evidence must reveal an impact which extends well above the secular societal baseline. When a religion's faithful followers in a society time and time again do not rise above this secular baseline, i.e., above the moral behaviour of ordinary unfaithful people in the same society, then legitimacy is impugned.

How can a religion gain moral legitimacy? A religion's foundational texts and its faithful followers both contribute to its moral legitimacy. This is because what is both written and done in the name of the religion is important. Therefore, a religion gains legitimacy when the moral precepts in the foundational canonical texts and the moral behaviour of its faithful followers are aligned with empathy and/or social relational reciprocity *as we understand them today*.

The closer this ethical alignment, the more we can trust the underlying dogmatic and doctrinal claims of a religion. Simply put, this alignment is a very important litmus test for the relevance of the religion and for the veracity of its dogma. (To be sure, there are other important tests.) For example, I judge modern Islam to have lower moral legitimacy than modern Christianity, say. Islam's holy texts (the Qur'an and Hadith) and its more fundamentally inclined followers seem to exhibit less empathy and reciprocity than modern Christianity's counterparts.

So to examine the moral legitimacy of Christianity and Islam, I embark on a brief sojourn in history.

2 Antisemitism (0 to present)

ANTIPATHY AND ANTAGONISM towards the Jewish people and Judaism has persisted for hundreds of years, and was most fully expressed in the Holocaust of World War II.^[1, 2] Exact reasons for this antisemitism are not clear to me. But it does seem that religious dogma, doctrine and ethos contributed in part to the tragic stigmatisation of the Jews over time.

The Roman province of Judaea was formed in 6 CE. The Jewish people eagerly sought political emancipation from the weight of governor Quirinius' rule.^[3, 4, 5] And so the allure of a messianic figure brightened. In the 1st century CE, Jesus was one such candidate messianic figure.

In that century, and certainly before the First Jewish-Roman War (66–73 CE), Christianity and Judaism were somewhat indistinguishable. Opinion on the divine nature and messianic status of Jesus had not yet coalesced. Those that attributed such status to Jesus still adhered to Mosaic Law and ritual. Indeed, Christians were still considered Jewish as they gathered in synagogues. The oral instruction which was centred at the Second Temple in Jerusalem offered some flexibility in religious thought and exegesis.

After the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE during the First Jewish-Roman War, and then especially after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE), the Jewish people were left scattered and persecuted. This provided impetus to migrate from an oral instruction on Jewish culture and religion to a written one. The effect of this migration was to formalise and codify the differences between early Jewish Christianity and early Rabbinic Judaism.^[4]

And as the two written traditions and religious practices diverged, philosophical and cultural tensions increased. The Jewish Christians proposed an apocalyptic future, with Jesus as the divine messiah for both Jew and gentile, thereby not only renewing but also extending God's covenant with the Jews. This posed a major threat both to the philosophical integrity of Judaic monotheism, and to a Jewish sense of cultural

identity which fostered a belief that they alone were the people “chosen by God”. In turn, it rendered Jewish Christianity heretical.^[6, 7, 8]

Thus was the genesis of the schism between Christianity and Judaism.

At about the end of the 1st century, the Gospels of Matthew and John were written. It should not be surprising therefore that the author of the Gospel of John could have written these polemical words describing a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a conservative Jewish sect which resisted Hellenisation. Jesus was quoted by the author as saying:

If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. [...] Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. [...] Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. —John 8:42–47

And on the adjudication of Jesus by the fifth prefect of Judaea, Pontius Pilate,^[9, 10] the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote:

‘What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ Pilate asked.

They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’

‘Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man's blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility!’

All the people answered, ‘His blood is on us and on our children!’

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. — Matthew 27:22–26

It is from these two biblical extracts that the seeds of antisemitism germinated.

The expansion of the Roman Empire inevitably exposed its citizens to various regional cults. Nascent Christianity was one of these. The curious Christian trinitarian deity offered a simplified and more accessible religious system than the subtler hierarchical stratification of divinity in the ancient Greek and Roman mythologies. Formerly, access to and favour of the deities was obtained through learning, ritual and sacrifice. Now, Christianity emphasised individual faith, an adherence to fiat dogma, and the final human sacrifice of Jesus to replace all others.^[11, 12]

Emperor Constantine I (272–337 CE) convened an important ecumenical council meeting in 325 CE in the city of Nicea in Anatolia (also known as Asia Minor). The primary purpose of the Council of Nicea was to resolve the lingering dilemma over the nature of the divinity of Jesus. Was Jesus pre-existent before his physical incarnation, such that the Son and the Father have equal status as divine members of the Trinity? Or, did the Son come into existence at some crucial moment, “adopted” by the Father either at the birth of Jesus, during his baptism, his resurrection, or at his final ascension?



Fresco of the First Council of Nicaea. It is located in the Sistine Salon at Vatican.^[13] Emperor Constantine is seated left in the foreground, and Arius on the far right is being rebuked.

The Council of Nicaea helped not only to consolidate Christianity's separation from Judaism, but also to legitimise and cement the growing antipathy towards the Jews held by Christians. After the Council meeting, Constantine wrote in a letter to the churches in the East:

[I]t appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the **Jews**, who have impiously **defiled their hands with enormous sin**, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with **blindness of soul** [...] Let us then have nothing in common with the **detestable Jewish crowd**; for we have received from our Saviour a different way. —Eusebius^[14]

And for the benefit of the bishops who were not present at the Council meeting, Constantine wrote:

It was, in the first place, declared improper to follow the custom of the **Jews** in the celebration of this holy festival, because, their hands having been **stained with crime**, the minds of these **wretched men** are necessarily blinded. [...] Let us, then, have nothing in common with the Jews, who are our adversaries. [...] Let us avoid all contact with **that evil way**. [...] For how can the Jews entertain right views on any point who, after having compassed the death of the Lord, being **out of their minds**, are guided not by sound reason, but by an **unrestrained passion**, wherever **their innate madness** carries them. [...] lest your pure minds should appear to share in the customs of a people so **utterly depraved**. [...] Therefore, this irregularity must be corrected, in order that we may no more have any thing in common with **those parricides** and the **murderers of our Lord**. [...] no single point in common with the **perjury of the Jews**. —Constantine^[15]

By the 5th century, the Jewish Christian community had died out. What remained in the Roman Empire was Rabbinic Judaism which was supported by the Masoretic Text and the Babylonian Talmud^[16], and Nicene Christianity with the Old and New Testament as its canonical texts.^[8, 6]

It is interesting to note that had the Jewish people living in the Holy Land been less insular with their religious mysticism, Judaic monotheism may well have spread across the Roman Empire. Instead, under Emperor Theodosius I (347–395 CE), Nicene Christianity with its now codified trinitarian dogma became the official religion of the Western Roman Empire and the Byzantium Empire.

Thus was the stage set for a competition between Christianity, Islam and Manichaeism for the hearts and minds of people in Europe, the Middle East, and near Asia. And, with a legitimacy offered by the above-mentioned two biblical extracts, together with a shared sense of the “Father” godhead, and a seemingly insatiable proselytising urge, the world was primed for two thousand years of antagonism directed at the Jewish people, in part sanctioned or abetted by the Christian Church.

Indeed, it may then not surprise that a certain German Christian luminary could see fit during the Renaissance to vilify the Jews with such rancorous verbage that it would today be considered hate speech of the most

pernicious form. That luminary was Martin Luther (1483–1546), a founding figure in the Christian Protestant Reformation.^[17]

Luther's attitude reflected a tradition which saw Jews as outcasts, guilty of the murder of Christ, and of stubbornly resisting conversion.^[18, 19] Luther became increasingly bitter towards the Jews when his efforts at converting them failed. In keeping with John 8:44 above, he referred to the Jews as **"the devil's people."** In one of his works entitled *Von den Juden und Ihren Lügen* (*On the Jews and Their Lies*), published in 1543, he advocated **"sharp mercy"** against the Jews by setting synagogues and schools on fire, destroying Jewish texts, censuring rabbis, confiscating their property and money, and razing their homes. He called them **"envenomed worms"** that should be forced into labour or **"expelled for all time."** In Luther's words, **"[W]e are at fault in not slaying them."**

We may never know the full extent to which Luther's writing contributed to the racial antisemitism of the Nazis prior to and during World War II. Still, there is evidence that many German Protestant clergymen and theologians during the Nazi Third Reich used Luther's hostile publications to justify the antisemitic policies of the National Socialists in Germany.^[20]

Lest we forget, Luther is the same Christian thinker and leader who helped introduce a new form of Christianity, eschatologically distinct from that of the established Roman Catholic Church, and espousing a new path to salvation through grace and faith in Jesus. A new path which tacitly but effectively absolves the faithful of any individual moral accountability for acquiring heavenly bliss after death. To be sure, Luther's growing hostility was not based on race, ethnicity, nor proximity. It was based on religion.

If Martin Luther were alive today, I think he would be widely condemned for his views and utterances. And anything good he might have to offer society, and the Christian community in particular, would be eclipsed by his flagrant disregard for the rights of *all* peoples. For me, Martin Luther would be irrelevant today because he lacks moral legitimacy. And he lacks moral legitimacy because he does not represent the morals of today, neither Christian nor secular.

From the hands of early Christian writers in the 1st century, the founding of Christian orthodoxy in the 4th century, the Lutheran reformations in the 16th century, to the ideological support of the holocaust of World War II, the mark of theocratically motivated antisemitism has sullied and stained the windows of Christian churches for a very long time.

Perhaps the core of this enduring antisemitism, in which Christianity has shown deep complicity, is the belief by the faithful that the canonical texts of the New (and Old) Testament are the infallible, immutable, hallowed and inspired "Word Of God". And therefore, that these texts must be relevant for all time, regardless of the historical context in which they were written and redacted.

Antisemitism was there in 1st century, as evinced in the early Apostolic writings. Antisemitism was there in the 4th century at the genesis of orthodox Christianity, as reflected in the writings of Emperor Constantine. Antisemitism was there in the Renaissance period when Protestantism was ignited, as amply reflected in the writings of Martin Luther. How tragic it is that time and time again, our laziness and our ideological arrogance numb our awareness of the contexts of different peoples and of different times. *Insight into context matters.* Would we still be so willing to bow our heads and bend our knees in facile deference if we dared to look down and see this blood of 2000 years of antisemitism on our hands?

3 Extirpation of Manichaeism (5th to 9th century CE)



STARTING IN THE 3rd century and centred in modern Iran, Manichaeism was once a major religion. It rivalled Christianity and Islam in geographical extent and cultural influence.^[21, 22]

Indeed, the celebrated early Christian thinker and writer, Augustine (354–430), converted from Manichaeism to Christianity in 387 CE, just when the Roman Empire was collapsing around him under the influence of the barbarian invasions. Augustine's conversion helped re-infuse early Christianity with a strong dualistic sense, as was prevalent in the gnostic Jewish-Christian milieu of the 1st and 2nd centuries.^[11, 23, 12, 24]

Due to intense persecution and vigorous attack by Islamists, Buddhists, the Christian Church, and the Roman state, the Manichaeism religion almost disappeared from western Europe in the 5th century, from the eastern portion of the Roman empire in the 6th century, and from China in the 9th century. The motivation for the persecution and attack was not political. It was religious, just as it was for Luther against the Jews, and just as it was with the Cathars in southern Europe.

4 Persecution of the Cathars (1209 to 1350 CE)

DURING THE Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) followed by the Medieval Inquisition, the gnostic Cathar movement in southern Europe suffered brutal and systematic persecution by the established Christian Church. This resulted in the total extinction of Catharism.^[25, 26]

On 22 July 1209, at the start of the Crusade, the town of Béziers was besieged. A military commander on the side of the Catholics, named Arnaud-Amaury, was asked how to tell the Cathars and the Catholics apart. His reply was:

“Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius. **(Kill them all, the Lord will recognise His own.)**”

Arnaud-Amaury then wrote to Pope Innocent III, the initiator of the military campaign against the Cathars:

“Today your Holiness, twenty thousand heretics were put to the sword, regardless of rank, age, or sex.”

Again, the motivation for this persecution was not political. It was religious.

5 European wars of religion (1521 to 1648 CE)

THE EUROPEAN WARS of religion were a series of Christian religious wars which were waged in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries.^[27] They began with Martin Luther’s excommunication from the Catholic Church in 1521, leading to the formation of the Protestant Reformation movement.^[28] There were arguably many causes for the conflict over time, but religion was the primary one. Warfare across Europe intensified after the Catholic Church began the Counter-Reformation movement in 1545 to quell the growth of Protestantism.^[29] The conflicts culminated in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which devastated Germany and killed one-third of its population, a mortality rate⁴ twice that of World War I.^[30, p.142]

6 Trans-Atlantic slave trade (late 15th to late 19th century CE)

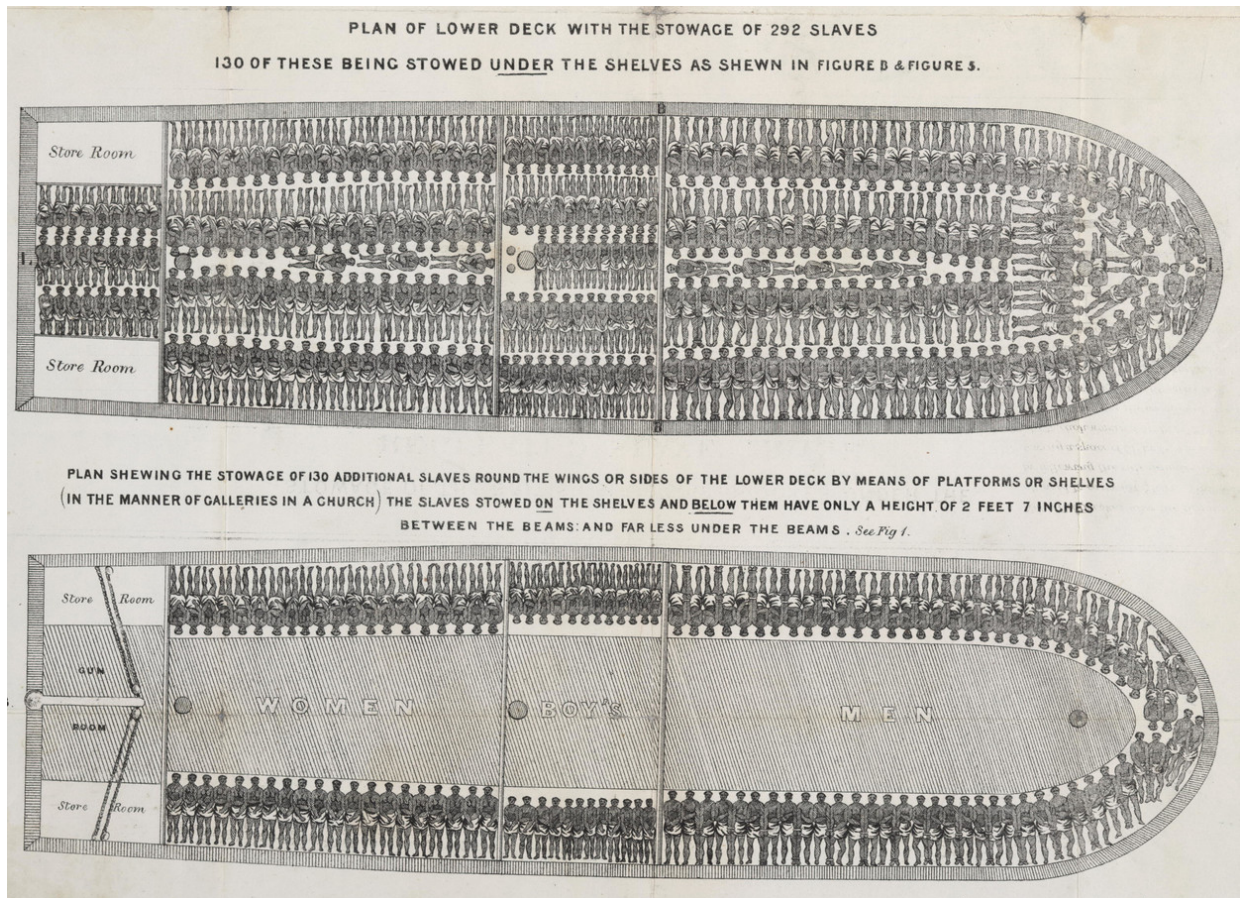
PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY was deeply complicit in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The trade began in the late 15th century, and came to an end with the defeat of the Confederacy in the American Civil War in 1865, thus spanning a period of about 400 years. During this time, the size of the trade increased exponentially, until its decline after being outlawed by the British Parliament in 1807 and the US Congress in 1808.^[31, 32, 33, 34]

Proponents of the illicit trade used biblical sources to legitimise their involvement. For, in the Old Testament we read:

[...]And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.’ And he said, ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant.’ —Genesis 9:18–27

⁴Deaths per number of citizens

This biblical extract gave the trans-Atlantic slave trade a racial slant, for it was argued that Ham's descendents (Canaan) were dark and physically strong, not unlike the indigenous peoples in Africa. Leviticus 25:39–41, 44–46 clarifies the difference between slaves and hired servants, and that keeping slaves is right and acceptable in the eyes of God.



Schematic of the stowage of the British slave ship *Brookes* under the regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788.^[35]

And in the New Testament texts verses such as these are to be found:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. —Ephesians 6:5–9

Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive. —Titus 2:9–10

Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you, although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. —1 Corinthians 7:21–22

These extracts from the New Testament clearly show that master-slave relationships existed at the time the texts were written and redacted, and that the relationships were considered normal. Indeed, it is perhaps what is *not* written that is most telling. For the texts do not excoriate the masters for violating the basic human rights of the slaves.

Just how far the biblical texts go in supporting such human rights violations is shown in these two extracts:

If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life. —Exodus 21:4–6

and

Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property. —Exodus 21:20–21

So it seems that I am allowed to beat my male and female slaves, provided that they do not die!

For many years after the slave trade was outlawed, the virtues and sanction of slavery were still being preached from Protestant pulpits located in the south and mid-Americas. To be sure, the preachers were often highly regarded and respected members in Protestant Christian society. They were not considered psychopaths, and nor were their congregants. In this regard, refer to such ecclesiastical luminaries as Bishop William Meade (1789–1862) of Virginia, and Bishop Stephen Elliott (1806–1866) of the Diocese of Georgia.

Bishop William Meade wrote:^[36, 37, 38]

[I]s it not possible you may have done some other bad thing which was never discovered, and that Almighty God, who saw you doing it, would not let you escape without punishment one time or another? And ought you not, in such a case, to give glory to him, and be thankful that he would rather punish you in this life for your wickedness than destroy your souls for it in the next life? But, suppose that even this was not the case (a case hardly to be imagined), and that you have by no means, known or unknown, deserved the correction you suffered; there is this great comfort in it, if you bear it patiently, and leave your cause in the hands of God, he will reward you for it in heaven, and the punishment you suffer unjustly here shall turn to your exceeding great glory hereafter.

[...]

Almighty God hath been pleased to make you slaves here, and to give you nothing but labor and poverty in this world, which you are obliged to submit to, as it is his will that it should be so. And think within yourselves, what a terrible thing it would be, after all your labors and sufferings in this life, to be turned into hell in the next life, and, after wearing out your bodies in service here, to go into a far worse slavery when this is over, and your poor souls be delivered over into the possession of the devil, to become his slaves forever in hell, without any hope of ever getting free from it! If, therefore, you would be God's freemen in heaven, you must strive to be good, and serve him on earth. **Your bodies, you know, are not your own; they are at the disposal of those you belong to;** but your precious souls are still your own, which nothing can take from you, if it be not your own fault.

In September 1862, soon after the American Civil War (1861–1865) had begun, as the presiding Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America, Stephen Elliott, delivered an auspicious sermon. Extracts of the transcript are as follows:^[39]

We can find that interest only in the institution of slavery which was the immediate cause of this revolution. We can find the sin only in that presumptuous interference with the will and ways of God, which coalesced rapidly with infidelity, and ended in a bold defiance of the Word of God.

[...]

If we examine the religious condition of the world we will perceive that Christian influences are steadily at work every where else except in Africa. Europe is Christian in its entire length and breadth. America has been re-peopled altogether from Christian nations, and the cross is adored over all her wide area, save where the rapidly expiring Indian tribes yet break its continuity. England, France, and Russia are fast casting over Asia the spell of their vast political power, and the old worship of Brahma and the moral teachings of Confucius and the imposture of Mohammed are tottering to their fall. Australia is peopling under the auspices of Great Britain, and wherever she goes, her Church goes with her. Africa alone is uninfluenced by Christianity, and whence is that influence to proceed?

[...]

How, then, is that dark spot upon the world's surface to be enlightened? Who is to pierce those pestilential regions and preach the everlasting Gospel?[...] The indomitable missionaries of the Moravian Church

have tried it until Sierra Leone has been a very Golgotha to them.

[...]

We are driven to look for some agency which shall be able, through national affinities, through a like physiological structure, through a oneness of blood and of race, to bear the burden of this work, and ultimately, in God's own time, to plant the gospel in their Father-land, after they themselves shall have been prepared, through a proper discipline, for the performance of this duty. And I find this agency in the African slaves now dwelling upon this Continent and educating among ourselves.[...] [A]nd it is this conviction, and not any merit in ourselves, which makes me confident that we shall be safely preserved through this conflict.

[...]

He has caused the African race to be planted here under our political protection and under our Christian nurture, for His own ultimate designs, and He will keep it here under that culture until the fullness of His own times, **and any people which strives against this divine arrangement will find that it is running against the thick bosses of Jehovah's buckler.** Those who have looked at slavery superficially, have permitted themselves to be moved away from scriptural decrees by such trivial things as are the necessary accompaniments of all bondage, and have rashly yielded to their sensibilities the conclusions which ought to be drawn exclusively from the Word of God.

In the light of modern secular sensibility, which places a high value on the rights and freedoms of individual people, this deep complicity of Protestant Christianity in the trans-Atlantic slave trade appears morally reprehensible. Indeed, as with antisemitism, not only was this human trafficking done on such a grand global scale, but it was done with the blessing of the canonical texts, New and Old. And it aligned with the insatiable urge for the Christian to proselytise the world, to convert the heathen using whatever means necessary. Furthermore, it made economic sense.

7 Christianisation of South America (1492 to 1800s CE)

THE COLONISATION of South America by the Spanish, beginning in 1492, was accompanied by the Christianisation of South America. Following the decree of the *Spanish Requirement (Requerimiento)* in 1513, for example, the Christian Spaniards purged almost all native cultural practices and edifices. This is why so little is known today about the indigenous Olmec, Nazca, Aztec, Inca and Maya civilisations of South America. Their pagan animist religions have been replaced by Christian Catholicism.^[40]

8 William Lane Craig's "Divine Command Ethics" (2007 to present)

WILLIAM LANE CRAIG is a prominent evangelical Christian apologist. He is widely known for his public debates in which he argues for the existence of the Christian God(s). To me, Craig's so-called "Divine Command Ethics" theory leads to moral positions which I find questionable. For example, on God commanding the Israelites to commit "genocide" on the people living in the so-called Promised Land, Craig wrote:

"God has the right to command an act, which would have been sin, but which is now morally obligatory in virtue of that command.

[...]

God had morally sufficient reasons for His judgement upon Canaan, and Israel was merely the instrument of His justice.

[...]

Israel is a special people set apart for God Himself." —William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* website.^[41]

This reflects two views that Craig holds about his God, namely, 1. the "Do as I do and not as I say" aphorism is not to be applied to his God. And 2. Craig's God does not regard all people on Earth equally, and his God demonstrates favouritism.


These two views enable Craig to then write this about the slaughter of the Canaanite children:

“God knew that if these Canaanite children were allowed to live, they would spell the undoing of Israel. The **killing of the Canaanite children** not only served **to prevent assimilation** to Canaanite identity, but also served [to illustrate] **Israel’s being set exclusively apart** for God.

The death of the Canaanite children was actually their salvation. [...] We forget that those who die are happy to die for heaven’s incomparable joy. Therefore, **God does these children no wrong in taking their lives.**” —William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* website.^[41]

Here Craig uses his theistic ideology and his concept of God to morally justify killings inflicted by one group of people on another innocent group. By doing so, he distorts something which is so obviously wrong into something which he thinks is good. It is difficult for me to find words which adequately express my sense of revulsion.

9 Belligerence of modern Islamic fundamentalism (present)

ODERN ISLAMIC fundamentalism seems to demonstrate a clear penchant for committing heinous atrocities in the name of Allah. Organisations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda which are active in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and in other targeted places around the world, are giving graphic expression to this.

In September 2015, the prominent British Islamic activist, Anjem Choudary, said:^[42]

“You can’t say that Islam is a religion of peace because Islam does not mean peace. Islam means submission.”

And when asked about the September 11 2001 and the July 7 2005 London bombings, he replied:^[42]

“For the people who carried it out, it was legitimate. If you look at the will of Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, they would be justified. There are many verses from the Qur’an to say that’s the Islamic argument.”

Qurannic verses such as these, when taken together, offer such adequate impulse and sanction:

And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter [...] and fight them until fitnah is no more, and religion is for Allah. —Qur’an 2:191

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war). But if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them. For Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. —Qur’an 9:5

And if two parties of Believers fall to fighting, then make peace between them. And if one party of them does wrong to the other, fight you that which does wrong till it returns unto the ordinance of Allah. Then, if it returns, make peace between them justly, and act equitably. For Allah loves those who are fair (and just). —Qur’an 49:9

Prophet! Rouse the believers to wage war. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will subdue two hundred. If a hundred, they will subdue a thousand of the disbelievers. For these are a people without understanding. —Qur’an 8:65

Oh you who believe! When you meet those who disbelieve marching for war, then turn not your backs to them. And whoever shall turn his back to them on that day—unless he turn aside for the sake of fighting or withdraws to a company—then he, indeed, becomes deserving of Allah’s wrath, and his abode is hell. And an evil destination shall it be. —Qur’an 8:15

Fight those who believe not in Allah or the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission and are subdued. —Qur’an 9:29

Indeed those who are opposing Allah and His Messenger are bound to be humiliated. The Almighty has ordained: I and My Messengers shall always prevail. Indeed Allah is Mighty and Powerful. —Qur’an 58:20

10 Genocide of the Yazidis (2014 to 2015 CE)

THE YAZIDIS are monotheists who practice an ancient gnostic faith. Their belief system contains vestigial links to early Gnostic elements in both Islam (including Sufism) and Christianity (including Gnosticism), Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, and other pre-Islamic Mesopotamian and Assyrian religious traditions. At the time of the genocide, a Yazidi community was located in the area of Mount Sinjar in Nineveh province of northern Iraq.



Yazidi people flee on foot from Sinjar mountain towards the Syrian border. But thousands were captured and enslaved. (Photo courtesy REUTERS.)



Yazidi refugees hold a banner as they wait for the arrival of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Special Envoy, Angelina Jolie, at a Syrian and Iraqi refugee camp in the southern Turkish town of Midyat in Mardin province, Turkey, on 20 June 2015. (Photo courtesy REUTERS/Umit Bektas.)

The Islamic religious fundamentalist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other followers of Islam in the region consider the Yazidis “devil worshippers.” In August 2014, ISIS attacked these Yazidi settlements, killing at least 3100 people. Nearly half of these people were executed, either shot, beheaded, or burned alive. The rest died from starvation, dehydration, or injuries sustained during the ISIS siege on Mount Sinjar.^[43, 44, 45, 46]

About 6800 Yazidi people were kidnapped. Escapees recounted the abuses they had suffered, including forced religious conversion, torture, and sex slavery. By 2017, over one-third of those reported kidnapped were still missing. All Yazidis were targeted regardless of age and gender, but children were disproportionately affected. They were as likely as adults to be executed but constituted 93.0% of those who died on Mount Sinjar.^[43, 44, 45, 46]

At the time of the genocide attack, the military commander of the ISIS in Raqqa, Iraq, was someone called Abu Omar al-Shishani.



Former ISIS military commander, Abu Omar al-Shishani.

In a recorded interview on 17 September 2014, al-Shishani had this to say:^[47]

1. *Interviewer*
OK, so who is being crucified? Who is being beheaded?
2. *al-Shishani*
Everybody who stands about and make trouble in our land will be **get crucified. This is according to Shariah.**
3. *Interviewer*
Tell about this caliphate. How big do you want it to be?
4. *al-Shishani*
We want it, *inshallah*, to be without borders [...] till the law of Allah is above every law.
5. *Interviewer*
So you want the entire world to be under the law of Allah?
6. *al-Shishani*
Correct sir.
7. *Interviewer*
We've heard about these people in Iraq called the Yazidis, or the Yezidis? What are they?
8. *al-Shishani*
They are the **filthiest of creatures on Earth.**
9. *Interviewer*
So you're fighting them?
10. *al-Shishani*
We will fight them. **We will take their women. We will take their children. They have to come to Islam or they will get wiped out. There is no place in the world for these devil worshippers.**
11. *Interviewer*
How long do think this conflict is going to go on for—this establishment the caliphate?
12. *al-Shishani*
[...] *Jihad* continues until the rule of Allah is universal.

This recording extract, together with extensive other evidence concerning ISIS, clearly shows that the genocide, kidnapping, and dislocation of the Yazidi people in northern Iraq was motivated by religious ideology.

11 Conclusion

MY SOJOURN in history has shown me that many religious people have committed acts which we would today consider morally objectionable, sometimes even repugnant. I've learned about the faithful engaging in slavery, persecution, ignominious and defamatory rhetoric, committing acts of violence and genocide, and displaying gross insensitivity to foreign peoples' culture and heritage. And I've learned that these engagements have sometimes spanned very long times, despite having allegedly important resources at the followers' disposal—resources such as access to their respective holy texts, an established ecclesiastical leadership, a like-minded community of people, and most significantly, *the same potential for a purported communion or relationship with their god or gods as we have today.*

From the historical evidence, I conclude that:

1. Religions' faithful followers have often not acted with empathy, and they have often not shown social relational reciprocity.

2. This behavioural inadequacy has often been tacitly or overtly endorsed by the holy texts.
3. Widespread conversion from one religion to another happens not by gentle and peaceful means, but by force, fear, and political domination or intrusion.

To me, the evidence reveals that the insatiable and unrelenting proselytising urge of Islam today and Christianity of yore grossly conflicts with the modern ethic of respect for the rights, freedoms and expressions of *all peoples*, irrespective of race, creed, gender, predisposition, and proximity. What may have seemed acceptable back then, is no longer acceptable today. And it is this acceptability mismatch which reveals a tragic lack of empathy and reciprocity in important matters, and which therefore impugns the brittle morality of many religions today, especially the ones based on ancient outdated holy texts.

Conversely, the vigour of secular moral relativism is precisely that it is *not brittle*. As norms, values and behaviours in society inevitably evolve, so we will codify new sets of morals to help govern our collective mutual coexistence. One such codification is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted initially by John Peters Humphrey, and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Another codification to which I subscribe is Peter Singer's *Principle of Equality*. The principle demands that suffering be counted equally with like suffering regardless of human or animal.^[48, 49] The principle effectively grants moral consideration to all sentient beings, not only to humans.

There is evidence in history of an "Expanding Circle of Empathy" over time. But the evidence shows that the expansion is *not* due to religious impulses or interventions. Instead, with a nod of gratitude to Steven Pinker, it is due to the "better angels" of our own human nature.^[30]



I was once taught, in accordance with Acts 1:8, that the Holy Spirit of Christianity would assist the faithful in extending the "Good News" of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples on Earth. Given my sojourn, and given Christianity's extensive reach around the world, I am impelled to ask, "If indeed the Christian deities—and the Holy Spirit in particular—are real supernatural entities, what was meant by Acts 1:8? Force and fear?"

Were the captain, officers and crew onboard many Christian slave trading ships praying to the Holy Spirit while their stowage of slaves lay shackled and dying below deck? Did the Holy Spirit endow the Catholic military commanders, such as Arnaud–Amaury, with superior battle strategy with which to eliminate the Cathars, thereby helping spread "true" Christianity throughout Europe during the Middle Ages? Did the Holy Spirit reason that because the "end justifies the means," the Christianisation of South America was sufficient to destroy the rich cultural heritage of the continent?

"And what about you, Allah? Are you happy with all this incendiary explosive bloodshed that is needed to ensure submission to your will and ways? And is it really true, according to Omar al-Shishani, that the Yazidi community in northern Iraq are devil worshippers, and therefore should suffer a tragic genocide, kidnapping, and dislocation under the ravages of ISIS?"

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. History of antisemitism. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_antisemitism. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [2] Wikipedia contributors. Antisemitism in Christianity. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism_in_Christianity. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [3] Flavius Josephus. *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary. Judean war*. Number 9004169342. BRILL, 2008. Translated by Steve Mason.
- [4] Hayim Ben-Sasson (ed). *A History of the Jewish People*. Number 978-0674397316. Harvard University Press, 1985.
- [5] Wikipedia contributors. Jewish-Roman wars. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish-Roman_wars. Accessed 22 April 2019.

- [6] Delbert Burkett. *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity*. Number 052-1007-208, 9780521007207. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Also available at <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=EcsQknxV-xQC>.
- [7] Wikipedia contributors. History of Early Christianity. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_early_Christianity. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [8] Wikipedia contributors. Nicene Christianity. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Christianity. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [9] A.N. Sherwin-White. A. Frova, L'iscrizione di Ponzio Pilato a Cesarea. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 54:258, 1964.
- [10] Jerry Vardaman. A New Inscription Which Mentions Pilate as 'Prefect'. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 81:70–71, 1962.
- [11] chapter Dualistic Christianity, page 130. In ^[12].
- [12] Richard Tarnas. *The Passion of the Western Mind. Understanding the Ideas that have Shaped Our World View*. Number 0-345-56809-6. Harmony Books, a division of Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1991.
- [13] Author unknown. Fresco of the First Council of Nicea. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:THE_COUNCIL_OF_NICEA_Fresco_in_the_Sistine_Salon_Vatican.jpg. Accessed 5 July 2019.
- [14] Eusebius. *Life of Constantine (Book 3)*, chapter 18. Available at Christian Classics Ethereal Library's <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iv.vi.iii.xviii.html>. Accessed 30 June 2019.
- [15] Theodoret. *The Ecclesiastical History of Theodoret (Book 1)*, chapter 9—The Epistle of the Emperor Constantine, concerning the matters transacted at the Council, addressed to those Bishops who were not present. Available at Christian Classics Ethereal Library's <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf203.iv.viii.i.x.html>. Accessed 30 June 2019.
- [16] Wikipedia contributors. Origins of Rabbinic Judaism. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origins_of_Rabbinic_Judaism. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [17] Wikipedia contributors. Martin Luther. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther. Accessed 22 April 2019.
- [18] Graham Noble. Martin Luther and German anti-Semitism. *History Review*, 42:1-2:246, 2002.
- [19] Robert Michael. *Holy Hatred: Christianity, Antisemitism, and the Holocaust*. 1st Ed. Number 978-1403974723. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- [20] Christopher J. Probst. *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*. Number 978-0253001009. Indiana University Press, 2012.
- [21] Jason David BeDuhn and Paul Allan Mirecki. *Frontiers of Faith: The Christian Encounter With Manichaeism in the Acts of Archelaus*. Number 9789004161801. BRILL, 2007.
- [22] Wikipedia contributors. Manichaeism. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [23] chapter Further Contraries and the Augustinian Legacy, page 138. In ^[12].
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. Gnosticism. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [25] Wikipedia contributors. Albigensian Crusade. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albigensian_Crusade. Accessed 19 April 2019.

- [26] Wikipedia contributors. Catharism. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharism>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [27] Wikipedia contributors. European wars of religion. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_wars_of_religion. Accessed 11 October 2020.
- [28] Wikipedia contributors. Reformation. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation>. Accessed 11 October 2020.
- [29] Wikipedia contributors. Counter-Reformation. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Counter-Reformation>. Accessed 11 October 2020.
- [30] Steven Pinker. *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Number 978-0-143-1220-12. Penguin Books, 2011.
- [31] Wikipedia contributors. Atlantic slave trade. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [32] Jeffrey Robert Young (ed). *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740–1829: An Anthology*, page 198. Number 978-1570036170. University of South Carolina Press, 2006.
- [33] The Adverts 250 Project. An Exploration of Advertising in Colonial America 250 Years Ago This Week—David and John Deas. Retrieved from <https://adverts250project.org/tag/david-and-john-deas/>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [34] Library of Congress. Stowage of the British slave ship Brookes under the regulated slave trade act of 1788. Retrieved from <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a34658/>. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [35] Prints & Photographs Online Catalogue, US Library of Congress. Stowage of the British slave ship Brookes under the regulated slave trade act of 1788. Retrieved from <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a34658/>. Accessed 29 January 2020.
- [36] Bird Wilson. *Memoir of the Life of....* Number 978-1271130788. Nabu Press, 2001. This is a reproduction of ^[37].
- [37] John Johns (1796-1876) and William Sparrow (1801-1874). *A Memoir of the Life of the Right Rev. William Meade, D.D., Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Virginia*. Baltimore, Innes & company, 1867. Also available at <https://archive.org/details/memoiroflifeofri00john/page/n10>.
- [38] Harriet Beecher Stowe. *A Key to "Uncle Tom's Cabin;" presenting the original facts and documents upon which the story is founded*, page 249. Number 1-557094934. John P. Jewett & Co. of Boston and Jewett, Proctor & Worthington of Cleveland, Ohio, and Low & Company of London, 1853. This source contains some of the writings of Bishop William Meade.
- [39] Stephen Elliott, Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia. "Our Cause in Harmony with the Purposes of God in Christ Jesus." *A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, on Thursday 18th September, 1862*. Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2000. Also available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/impls/elliott5/elliott5.html>. Accessed 16 April 2019.
- [40] Wikipedia contributors. Spanish Requirement of 1513. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Requirement_of_1513. Accessed 19 April 2019.
- [41] Reasonable Faith website William Lane Craig. Slaughter of the Canaanites. Retrieved from <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/slaughter-of-the-canaanites/>. Accessed 13 August 2020.
- [42] YouTube contributors. Anjem Choudary—Islam is a violent ideology, not a religion of peace (Sept 2015). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTkDCBqCLrM>. Accessed 24 April 2019.

- [43] V. Cetorelli V, I. Sasson, N. Shabila and G. Burnham. Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey. *PLoS Medicine*, 14(5):e1002297, 2017. Available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28486492/>. Accessed 30 January 2020.
- [44] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 11 September - 10 December 2014. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/UNAMI_OHCHR_Sep_Dec_2014.pdf. Accessed 12 August 2020.
- [45] Amnesty International. Iraq: Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State’s systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE14/011/2014/en/>. Accessed 12 August 2020.
- [46] Jason Louv. Why Does ISIS Consider the Yazidi “Devil Worshipers”? Retrieved from <https://ultraculture.org/blog/2014/08/08/yazidi-devil-worshippers/>. Accessed 12 August 2020.
- [47] YouTube contributor: “This is The End Times”. ISIS Commander discloses their terrifying next move in chilling interview. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=me1MpM6989k>. Accessed 12 August 2020.
- [48] Peter Singer. *Animal Liberation*. Jonathan Cape, 1976.
- [49] Mary Midgley. *Animals and why They Matter*. Number 0-8203-0704-1. The University of Georgia Press, 1983.