

Why the 21st Century is the Most Christian Ever

A Post Christian World?

We often hear we live in a post-Christian world, and one gets the impression that many of us feel under siege. It is easy to understand why. We have witnessed significant declines in church attendance and seismic shifts in, for example, *mores* of sexual behaviour. We face not only ignorance of, but increasing hostility toward, Christianity. Nor has the cause of the gospel been helped by horrific child abuse, and even less by subsequent denials and/or cover-ups.

All this makes it even more important that we do not lose sight of the larger picture. Several years ago, Tom Holland, a popular historian of the early Roman Empire, wrote a piece for the *New Statesman* entitled, “Why I was wrong about Christianity”. He began by explaining that as a young boy he was obsessed with dinosaurs—weren’t we all?—finding them glamorous, ferocious and extinct. This evolved into a love of the ancient Greeks and Romans, who were likewise glamorous, ferocious and extinct. Compared to the God of Israel, with all his rules and condemnation of other gods, Apollo, Athena and Dionysus were far more charismatic. They enjoyed themselves. And if they were vain, selfish and sometimes cruel, it only endowed them with rock-star allure. For him, Christianity had ushered in a dark age of superstition, myth and “po-faced puritanical killjoys” who drained all the colour and excitement from the world.

But apex predators in children’s books are one thing; a living, salivating Tyrannosaur six feet in front of you is quite another. The more Holland immersed himself in that ancient world, the more alien and disturbing he found it. The Spartans trained their young men to kill uppity peasants by night. Julius Caesar slaughtered a million Gauls, enslaved a million more

and left 250,000 families with neither home nor hearth for the coming winter—and remember we are talking about first century BC and hence far smaller total populations—and, apart from some isolated Roman critics, no one really cared. It was not just the cruelty, endemic violence and callousness that concerned Holland, but the complete absence of any sense that the poor or the weak might have any value at all.

When Paul declared “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks”, he was not exaggerating. It is almost impossible for us to grasp how unspeakably offensive was his preaching of the cross. In antiquity, order was maintained by inflicting punishment, not by suffering for the world; by imposing leadership, not by washing others’ feet. Yet, as Holland noted, even in the so-called post-Christian West, most of us still think it is nobler to suffer than to inflict suffering, and that every human life is of equal value. Holland concluded by saying that he has now come to accept that in his morals and ethics he is neither Greek nor Roman but thoroughly and proudly Christian.

It seems to me that this argument is irrefutable. The morality of the West is irreducibly Christian—but then what would one expect after 2000 years of pervasive Christian influence? However, as significant as it is, does the argument go far enough? I initially trained as an aeronautical engineer. And while I knew every Sunday that God was real, each Monday I was confronted by the question: what did any of this have to do with turbfans at 30,000 feet?

In this essay I want to respond with an emphatic “Everything!” One cannot participate in our global 21st century world without being fundamentally Christian. In spite of how things might look, I want to argue that the 21st century is, in many respects, the most Christian the world has ever seen. In terms of our basic worldview, the gospel has

already won. Since these are huge claims and we have relatively little space, this essay will necessarily be more illustrative than comprehensive. Nevertheless, we hope the basic contentions will be clear enough.¹

The Gospel's Far-Reaching Impact

Recent scholarship has highlighted the gospel's radical impact on antiquity.² For example, Rodney Stark, one of American's leading sociologists of religion and writing as a non-Christian, concluded it was the early Christians who gave the ancient world, for the first time, its humanity. Australia's own Mark Strom traced Paul's uncompromising challenge to ancient notions of personhood and social hierarchies, which challenge has shaped Australian society to a degree perhaps unmatched in the rest of the world. Ian Scott outlined Paul's championing of historical experience as a way of knowing over against Hellenistic philosophy/theology, while Larry Hurtado reminded us of Christianity's astonishing achievement in ridding the world of the "gods", something that modernity takes for granted. The renowned classicist Edwin Judge delineated key areas in which Christianity transformed not just morality but, and at the very least equally importantly, how we understand and structure the world. Consequently, as Kavin Rowe has shown, it is not surprising that wherever the earliest Christians went, they encountered hostility. They proclaimed a radically new view of reality.

However, long before the gospel, those Scriptures from which it originated had already laid some remarkable foundations. Wholly against the grain of its Ancient Near Eastern neighbours, Genesis almost nonchalantly disenchanted the entire cosmos in asserting that creation

1 See the more in-depth discussion in Watts, "Christianity," in the attached bibliography.

2 I readily acknowledge my indebtedness throughout to the scholars listed below.

was not divine.³ Fully realized, the implications would be world-changing. No longer feared (e.g. Ps 121:6) nor worshipped—and, make no mistake, there was nothing even faintly romantic about either—creation was now free to be studied and understood. It also claimed that creation was “good”, not perfect. We will return to this, but that distinction has profound consequences. Then, almost as a word of prophetic promise, it claimed that creation was intended for flourishing—which was not most people’s subsistence experience—and for all—not merely for a handful of elites. Perhaps most radically, it was clear from the Torah that Yahweh was not human. Although emphatically personal, he was not merely a larger, more powerful version of ourselves. Furthermore, far from being relatively uninterested in human affairs (just so long as he was sated with sacrifices), Israel’s Yahweh was deeply interested in our behaviour, and especially in how we treated one another. He much preferred mercy to burnt offerings, which in any case he did not really need.

Arguably, Israel’s “living against the grain” came to a head in the nation’s 2nd century BC clash with Hellenism (the ancient Greeks called themselves Hellenes). Alexander’s ultimate project was to create one humanity, partly by incorporating the various nations’ gods into a single Hellenic pantheon (to which he also aspired), introducing his own canon of Hellenic texts and building model Hellenic cities. Against this program of creeping cultural homogeneity, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the LXX) can be seen as a deliberate act of cultural resistance. There was no pantheon, only Yahweh; no canon but Scripture; and Zion alone was the city of the Great King. Underpinning the Maccabean revolt, however mixed its motives and unhappy its outcomes,

³ See further Ian Provan listed below.

was a mortal clash between two very different ways of seeing the world. And, given that the Romans at the end of the first century AD were more Hellenised than the Hellenes, it foreshadowed the hostility to which, as we saw earlier, Acts bears witness.

It is vital, however, to understand that this conflict was not a matter of different religions. Although debated, it is highly doubtful that anyone in the ancient world thought they were practising “religion”. Assuming we could even define the term (an exercise far more difficult than we might initially imagine), seeing “religion” as merely an optional adjunct to one’s identity is a very recent Western conceit. They were simply being Roman, Hellenic, Egyptian, Jewish, and so on. Appeasing their ancestral gods was as much who they were as was their family, ethnicity and culture. The gospel was never simply a matter of merely removing Zeus’ nameplates from his temples and replacing them with dedications to Jesus. Even if the ancients could not fully articulate it, they sensed the profound threat. And they were right. The gospel mounted a fundamental and radical challenge to the entire social fabric and substructure of antiquity, hence the Thessalonians’ maddened outburst: “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here too!” (Acts 17:6). This was a life-and-death struggle between, to use Kevin Rowe’s helpful phrase, two radically and profoundly incompatible “grammars of life”.

Why “grammar”? Although stories, treatises and poems are surely more than grammar, they would, nevertheless, be impossible without it. Grammar enables us to frame, clarify and communicate our thoughts. Its structure is what facilitates our creativity and personal agency. The gospel, as John so well understands, is God’s grammar for living out his eternal life in his creation. Not only so, but as surprising as it might

sound, the gospel was apparently designed to overthrow antiquity, which in the first century meant Hellenism. And to the extent that it has succeeded, Jesus' relevance could not be greater: his gospel provides the "grammatical structure" for life in the modern world.

The Gospel Origins of Modernity⁴

With all this in view, the remainder of this essay outlines the gospel's radically different views of cosmology (what reality is), epistemology (how we know), sociology and politics (nature of society), anthropology (what it means to be human), and virtue/ethics (how we should behave). In particular, the gospel claimed that change was a gift, knowing was about the senses and testing, cities should be dynamic, all people were of equal value, the body is not the enemy, and that love and compassion are central.

The Gift of Genuine Change

In antiquity, change was highly problematic. For the Egyptians, the only good pharaoh was the one in whose reign nothing happened. The turbulent history of the Hellenes, characterized by violent swings between extremes and an unstable geography, gave an even greater impetus to finding something stable. Parmenides had declared that the true could not change; after all, one plus one must always equal two. If something changed, it was not true, and hence not real, at least in any fundamental sense. The truly real was unchanging and therefore perfect, as mirrored in the beautiful and static heavens (hence the word *cosmos*, whose root meaning is "ordered" and "beautiful").

Of course, they realised things around them changed. Heraclitus had early recognized that one could not step into the same river twice. Empedocles

⁴ Defining "modernity" and locating its origins are remarkably difficult and lie well outside the narrow confines of this essay.

solved the tension by arguing that all change was merely rotation. So for the Stoic Chrysippus (which school challenged Paul in Athens, Acts 17:18), there could never be anything new; everything was repeated down to the very last detail. Genuine change was not merely impossible, it was illogical and inconceivable. A perfect cosmos ultimately became a prison where human agency and significance were at best marginal. (One of the pagan philosophers' complaints against Christians was that they made people too important.) This is why no one in antiquity ever discussed innovative thinking. If something was "new" or radically different, it must be wrong; hence the opposition to the gospel.

Of course, people still invented things—that is what people do—but among the elites such "distractions" were rarely applied practically. Invention *per se* never became the focus of, in the modern sense, serious scientific knowledge, not least because it concerned the things that could be otherwise.

But for the early Christians, genuine change was not only possible; it was a gift to be celebrated. As we saw earlier, Genesis from the very beginning made the remarkable claim that creation was good, meaning, deliberately, not perfect. A perfect cosmos, the moment it changes, is no longer perfect. But in a good world—formed and filled (Gen 1)—there is space for flourishing, growth, discovery, creativity and, consequently, human agency and significance. Accordingly, one of the key features of early Genesis, even if regularly missed, is human creativity, even among those of us who rebelled against God (4:2, 17, 20-22). Whatever else we do, humans "make"; our worldview merely facilitates or hinders the making. Paul, so far as we know, was the first person in antiquity to speak of "transformation" in the sense of genuine, positive change (Rom 12:2). It is difficult for us, in a world so thoroughly Christianised, to

grasp just how radical these ideas were. But all of our modern talk about innovation, designing for change and creativity—which we take so much for granted—is only possible because of the gospel. In one sense, you really can thank Jesus for your smartphone.

Knowing through the Senses and Testing

Perhaps the Hellenes' greatest achievement was their speculative leap that the cosmos could be understood solely through the resources of the human mind. Since the only things in human experience that could be perfect and unchanging were ideas, only the "rational" could be true. This is why they loved geometry, with its perfect theoretical shapes, none of which existed in the changeful world of the senses. The philosophers' "logos"—with which many of us are familiar because of John's radically transvaluative usage; that is, of a first century Jew, Jesus!—was essentially mathematical, implying a rigidly determined outcome. For this reason, while changeful history could be helpful in offering general principles by which to live (for Aristotle poetry was better because it at least distilled those principles), truth was confined to philosophy whose universal timelessness and strict logic ensured certainty. As a side note, this might give the lie as to why some forms of "Christian" theology look far more like philosophy—*theologia* is, after all, Plato's *ad hoc* word for the "rational science of the divine" ("science" here meaning "logically demonstrated knowledge")—than the Scriptures with their profound historical and cultural particularity of narrative and letter. This might also explain why neither the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible nor the NT ever described what they did as "theology", and hence the derisive antipathy of the professional "theologians" to Paul (Acts 17:18).

The resultant conviction was that if something was "rational"—that is, made sense in appropriately trained human minds (characteristically

male)—it must be true. It was a brilliant idea, except that it was wrong. Consider, for example, Aristotle, one of the brightest people who ever lived. In his view, it was perfectly rational that heavier objects should fall faster than light ones. But they do not. All he had to do was systematically test his theory by dropping a range of objects. But why test a perfectly rational explanation against a world that, because of its changefulness, was already suspect? It would take another eight hundred years for John Philoponus, another Greek but now a Christian, to prove Aristotle wrong... by experiment. (It turns out that Galileo, he of the Leaning Tower of Pisa fame and a thousand years later, had read Philoponus; but, humble chap that he was, he refrained from mentioning it.)

This is not to say that the Hellenes never got it right. Heliocentrism—the idea that the Earth revolves around the Sun—was early proposed by Aristarchus of Samos. But it *is* why they never developed science, at least not in the sense that we now understand it. The cosmos is not “rational”. It does not conform to what we speculate it should “logically” be, at the very least because it does not start with us. It is apparently “intelligible”, but only insofar as we start outside ourselves, allowing the cosmos to be what is, carefully observing, and then holding our ideas to account against its reality.

This is why, in the gospel’s cosmos, gifted as it was with change, using the senses and testing is exactly the way the Scriptures say we should learn. We have to look first, think second, and test what we think we have understood against what we see and hear. This applies equally and especially to Israel’s God. Whatever else, Yahweh’s celebrated “I AM who I AM” response to Moses implies that Israel has never met a “god” like him, and hence must not speculate. Instead, what we have in the

Exodus is a thorough-going emphasis on the senses, on what Israel saw and heard, thereby confirming through their experience Yahweh's power, wisdom, faithfulness, justice and compassion.

The same applies to Jesus. Christians understood that which was from the beginning by what they had heard, seen, looked at, touched and testified to (1 John 1:1-3). This is not Hellenistic speculative "rationality". But nor it is blind "faith". It is what was tested through experience.

Although the Scriptures speak of history and personal agency, and science addresses impersonal matter, the epistemological parallels are nevertheless clear. This is why science as we now know it, and the technological explosion that accompanied it, developed only in the Christian West and nowhere else. Certainly not in Hellenistic antiquity. From this perspective, to pit the gospel against science not only makes a category error—Christianity is neither a religion nor "rational" speculation—but also fails to recognize that seeing, hearing, touching, handling and testing lies at the very heart of both.

Dynamic Societies

For the Hellenes, it was logical that the ideal society should mirror the unchanging rational cosmos. This notion was epitomized in Plato's ideal Republic, with its rigid hierarchy of the best elite males at the head, descending down through the lesser ranks of women, artisans, slaves, non-Greeks and Barbarians. Of course, in the everyday world, reality *will* have its way. Elite families became impoverished and the lesser-born very occasionally did well—though the latter were never allowed to forget the stigmata of their lowly origins.

Even so, anchored to its conception of a static and perfect cosmos, we are not surprised that Hellenistic culture essentially goes nowhere. If the true and real is expressed only in the single ideal form, where is the

imperative to innovate, to experiment or to try new ideas? In spite of the perfections of classical Hellenic art, in one sense, to have seen one statue is to have seen them all. But this is not just an Hellenic trait. Shanghai's Cultural History museum is not dissimilar. One only has to compare both to the Louvre to notice the stark differences in creativity and manifold diversity. Nor is this a question of race. Humans do make things, and the Chinese early on invented printing, water clocks, gunpowder, primitive blast furnaces and much longer keel lines on their ships. Instead, it is a matter of whether one's "grammar of life" inspires or inhibits human creativity, goes with or against the grain of the cosmos and what it means to be human. The point was grasped nearly a decade ago by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. He warned that Beijing needed to embrace pluralism and a free society if it was to make the leap into frontier technological innovation.

In contrast, the gospel's "grammar" transformed the Hellenic body metaphor. No longer was the head made up of elite males backed by their extensive genealogies of power-hungry "noble" families. There was now only one head: a self-sacrificing, foot-washing servant Christ. And after this, everything is gift. We cannot, on the basis of status, race or gender, "know" in advance someone's gifts or contribution to society, that merely being prejudice. Like the cosmos, we have to pay attention to all people, and to each individual, regardless of his or her origins.

Furthermore, if everything is gift, where is boasting? Not only is society dynamic, but everyone is, ultimately, of equal value. Thus Paul writes some of the most radical words in the Hellenistic world: in Christ, there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. And why? Because, in the

gospel's grammar of life, all are made in God's image, Christ died for all, and all, in him, can be indwelt by the one and the same Spirit.

Why did the ancient world never give rise to movements for the betterment of the poor, the worker, the disabled, the disadvantaged and the slave? Because it was the gospel, not reason, that told us the world really could really be different, and that all people mattered.

Being Human

For the Greeks, the body was a problem. In their folk culture, that the word for body, *soma*, sounded much like the word for tomb, *sema*, helped launch the remarkably resilient idea of the battle between the pure eternal soul and its tomblike body. (This is a conflict that continues, alas, to infect various forms of Christianity.) And if the true and real could not change, what does this say about the body, which obviously ages, leading inevitably to the corruption of death? Even those exercises aimed at building the ideal body were primarily motivated by the desire to have the body reflect the trained mind and purified soul, not because of any particular value attributed to the body itself. Consequently, bodies were either abused or indulged, both of which extremes Paul had to confront early among his converts (e.g. Col. 2:16-23; 1 Cor. 6:12-30). In either case, the presupposition was the same: the body had no eternal significance.

But according to the Scriptures, humans cannot be in the image and likeness of God without a body. The word "image" always meant something physical, three-dimensional and in the round. This is why Yahweh declares himself to be Israel's healer (Exod 15:6); why Jesus, the Lord among us, heals people; and why bodily resurrection is central to Israel's and the gospel's hope: one simply cannot be human without a body. One might, therefore, need to be careful of talk about "saving

souls”. If by soul we intend the Scriptural idea of “lifed-ness”, then fine. But any sense of the soul being an independent superior substance defiled by physical existence is clearly out of court. After all, God himself saw that creation was in and of itself “very good” (Gen. 1:31), and through which he has given us all things richly to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17).

The Scriptures’ high view of the body also undergirds their well-known constraints around sexual behaviour, especially when compared to the general laxity, if not oppression, of the surrounding cultures. For example, the primary sexual *more* for elite first-century males was, “Whose body can I enjoy with impunity?” But for Christians, the issue was neither “gender”, orientation, love, monogamy nor commitment. Instead, the body was for the LORD, and the LORD was for the body (1 Cor. 6:13-20). Since the very physicality of maleness and femaleness came from God’s own creative word, which word reflects his character, and since God is eternally faithful, the only appropriate venue for sexual expression is between one man and one woman in life-long commitment.

Paul’s implication that people who sleep around do not know God (1 Thess. 4:1-8) does not come from his being a bigoted first-century Jew who could not cope with more tolerant Roman practices. It was based on the creation account of the one true God, and that emphatically over against the dehumanizing idolatry of an oppressive antiquity (Rom 1). In this he is simply following his Lord, for whom the only options are one man and one woman for life or being a eunuch, meaning no sexual activity (Matt. 19:3-12). Not only were his Jewish disciples taken aback; it is deeply offensive, if for other reasons, to our culture too.

Shockingly in the first century, this concern was not only for elite male bodies. Everybody’s body mattered, including the slave girl whose master could no longer use her as he wished; the seven-year-old boy sold

as a sexual plaything for exorbitant prices on the slave markets (this fact alone makes the current child-abuse scandals in the church unspeakably sickening); and the disabled person who was compelled to dance for the general merriment of wealthy guests. The poor, the weak, the discarded: they all matter. The gospel alone gave the West and modernity the notion of universal human rights, grounded in our being made in God's image.

This last point bears some expansion. It seems from the Scriptural perspective that one cannot separate respecting one's own body from respecting someone else's body, or respecting the body sexually and respecting it politically; after all, having bodies is what makes us all human. One wonders how long it will be before the idea that I can do whatever I please with my body bleeds over into treating other people's bodies however I please; before dishonouring my own body leads to my dishonouring the bodies of others?

A New Way of Life

In the world of Homer, virtue was essentially an expression of elite male virility: buffed up warriors, courageous in vicious battle, and able to speak well. As his *Iliad* illustrated, the result was terrible conflict, cycles of revenge, and, as we saw earlier, a brutal carelessness of the lives of the masses. I suspect many of our summer blockbusters are, in one way or another, recycled "heroic" Greek myths: not a great model for world peace then or now. It could be argued that Aristotle intended his "nothing to excess" ethics to bring some stability to this tumultuous blood-letting. But since his ethics were essentially about maintaining the *status quo*, his idea of, for example, justice meant keeping the elites where they belonged. Compassion was not just weak, hence marginally acceptable in females; it was potentially immoral because it transgressed justice. In the

first century, virtue had mutated into an elitism of status, education and wealth. Even so, it often devolved into vicious and vengeful competition. But in the gospel's "grammar of life", matters were radically different. Worshipping at the feet of a crucified God, Christians were about neither virtue—courage is not a Christian idea; we are strong not in ourselves but in the Lord—nor ethics—there was nothing of the "untroubled, aloof and self-composed golden mean" in the cross.

Instead, the gospel emphasized trust, hope and care, which are neither self-focussed nor of our own effort but directed toward others and effected through the Spirit. Christians were generous and compassionate because that is what unique Yahweh, a god unlike any other, is like.

In sum, those folks who proudly boast of their sole reliance on "reason" would do well to remember that it was Hellenic "reason" that produced the endemic violence, injustice, devaluation of the masses—including women, slaves, the poor, the weak and the disabled—and hopelessness of the changeless ancient world.

The Question

So now we come to the question. Having briefly surveyed some characteristic features of antiquity—and, so as not to be misunderstood, I am not at all suggesting that everything from antiquity is worthless; there was much that impresses still—consider now the modern world with its emphases on innovation and change, where genuine knowledge comes through the senses and testing, where cities are dynamic, in which all people (at least putatively) are said to be of equal value regardless of race, gender or social status, where the body is not the enemy, and compassion and love for others are seen as hallmarks of genuine humanity. What does the modern world most resemble: Hellenistic antiquity or the gospel?

It seems clear to me that one cannot genuinely participate in the modern world without inhabiting the gospel's grammar of life—and this includes modern China (as several of their most highly-placed intellectuals admit). The gospel has in many large respects already won. And it has won, not because we started with unaided human reason, but because we first trusted the gospel. I am on occasion quizzed as to why I believe this stuff. After all, what relevance could these ancient Jewish texts have in our modern world? To this I sometimes cheekily reply: "Well, do you like your iPhone?" The proof of the gospel is everywhere in the modern world's eating. Let the "new money" parade its flashy bling. We are the "old money", who in one sense have nothing to prove. After all, we own, as it were, "most of England".

Where to from here?

Why have most of us Christians not seen this, or if we have, seen it almost solely in moral terms? For a start, it is perfectly understandable. Encountering others is impossible without making some kind of judgment about them: are they kind, arrogant, patient, intolerant, etc.? And much of human suffering does come down to how poorly we treat one another. I suspect that this is why many of us read Scripture as though it starts with the Fall, and why our grammar is fundamentally about good and evil, which leads us, if we are not careful, to traffic in guilt and shame. This is ironic—not least for those who regularly champion Scriptural inerrancy—since it is not where the Scriptures themselves start. They start with life and creativity (as John's gospel, with its emphasis on eternal life, well understands). Perhaps, too, having dallied in the Hellenistic agora, we have been seduced by the attractions of logic and perhaps, if we are honest, by the vanity of being among the educated, rationalistic elite. I suspect the latter is why it took so long for

the gospel to work its new creational wonders. It was not long into the Patristic period before the elites of the church sought to marry the gospel with Plato and then, in the Medieval period, with Aristotle, both of whom needed to be discarded for the modern to be born. But by then, alas, we had already saddled the gospel with those unhelpful allegiances, effectively putting it “on the wrong side of history”.

Having spoken of these matters in several settings, I know the immediately pressing question: why is the modern world in such mess? I think the answer is relatively straightforward. Designers tell us that every decision reflects our character. The incredible freedom and unimaginable agency offered by the gospel only brings life when we humans reflect the character of unique Yahweh, who created this entire cosmos. Since that character is most fully expressed in Jesus, the continued flourishing of modernity depends utterly on our imitating him. In such a case, never has Jesus been more relevant. This of course raises several more and searching questions: how well do we who own his name understand his gospel, and even more importantly, ourselves reflect his character? But time has gone, and these questions will have to be addressed at another time.

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