

## **The 2008 C.S.Lewis Lecture**

### **Outgrowing Religion**

#### **Does the West need its Christian roots?**

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#### **Teaser**

To what extent do the values we hold dear in the secular West owe a debt to Christianity? Would the 'mature post-religious' West have emerged if not for Christian thought and practice? Significant contemporary intellectuals, such as Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor have been reassessing the place of Christianity in the success of Western culture and finding a greater debt than previously accepted. What would happen if the West gave credit where credit is due and reconsidered the importance of the Christian faith for not only mature societies, but also for individual thriving?

#### **Introduction**

Are we growing out of religion? Are we in an era where thinking people are moving on from the beliefs of the past, leaving them behind as superstitious and unnecessary? And, if so, is this a good thing?

These questions shape what I wish to say tonight, and have been taxing my mind for a long time now, in particular because of the collection of books being published by the New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others) and their claim that we would be better off without religion.

I speak to you as an Australian, where religion has not been the cause of deep division nor bloodshed, where the dividing lines are between drinkers of beer and wine. I am all too aware that I have not lived in your context, and that for me the question of whether we would be better off without religion is more one of enquiry than one of history and personal experience.

With an awareness of that limitation, let me ask you: do mature people grow out of religious faith?

In his bestselling book, *The God Delusion*, Professor Dawkins writes this:

There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else...has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point...The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as

meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it.”<sup>1</sup>  
(p.360).

Hitchens similarly describes religion as an early phase of human development, one which he jettisoned as an illusion “before my boyish voice had broken” (p.4)<sup>2</sup> “I can't believe,” said Hitchens in an American interview, “there is a thinking person here who does not realize that our species would begin to grow to something like its full height if it left this childishness behind, if it emancipated itself from this sinister, childish nonsense.”<sup>3</sup>

Statistics might be on the atheists' side. A study in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* by sociologist Phil Zuckerman goes so far as to suggest that as a society matures—as it becomes wealthier, healthier and politically more stable—there is a trend towards atheism.

High levels of organic atheism are strongly correlated with high levels of societal health, such as low homicide rates, low poverty rates, low infant mortality rates, and low illiteracy rates, as well as high levels of educational attainment, per capita income, and gender equality. Most nations characterized by high degrees of individual and societal security have the highest rates of organic atheism, and conversely, nations characterized by low degrees of individual and societal security have the lowest rates of organic atheism.<sup>4</sup>

Zuckerman acknowledges that it is difficult to determine causality: does being an atheist make for a better society, or does a better society generate more atheists? However, he leans towards the latter: as people become better off, they stop believing in God. I leave any interpretation of that until later, but Zuckerman's conclusion is that atheism and collective well-being go together.

In a more philosophical mode, the recently deceased American philosopher, Richard Rorty, described a movement through human history from the age of religion, through the age of reason, to the age of literature. As an arts graduate myself, this gives me not a little pride to consider literature as indicative of a greater stage of evolution for the human species! However, Rorty's claim is a serious one about the nature of knowledge: it was first considered to be God-given, then to be

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Allen & Unwin, 2007, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1107/newsfeature.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns” in Michael Martin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion on Atheism*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.65.

carefully discerned by the logic of human reasoning, and finally, in a recognition of the limitations of such thinking, to be considered a ‘most impressive’ exercise in aesthetics.

These claims all strike a consistent note. Religion is a thing of childhood, it is claimed—whether it be an individual’s childhood, who through moral and philosophical education ‘outlearns’ it, or a society’s childhood, when nascent attempts at organising a community on supposedly God-given foundations give way to something that seems solid and dependable, and has no need for reference to God.

My questions in response to this claim are simple but broad: What debt do we owe the Christian faith for the things we hold dear in our society? What would the West lose if we outgrew the Christian religion? Is it even possible to leave Christianity behind in the way that has been suggested?

There is, in fact, immense interest among intellectuals in whether or not the Christian understanding of humanity, the world and God is basic to social goods. This must be stressed, because the intellectual media does not pay sufficient attention to these voices and this direction of thinking. An anecdote from Dawkins is more quotable than the deeper reflections of an archbishop. I want to alert you to some of the brightest, most considered and scholarly thinkers on the topic of Christianity’s value to society, in order to demonstrate that they are claiming a very significant place for Christian thinking for today’s western civilisation. This is not Richard Dawkins, with his vein-popping rhetoric and dismissive anecdotes. This is not Christopher Hitchens, with his faux-history and tabloid moralising. These voices come from places of deeper learning concerning how societies are formed, what holds them together, and what is lost when key beliefs are removed.

Charles Taylor, the American philosopher, is one such figure. In his enormous work, *A Secular Age*, he explores why it is that in AD1500 no-one in the West could imagine life without a divine reality—without angels and afterlives—and in AD2000 almost everyone can? How did the public mindset shift so radically? Taylor says that the narrative of our lives changed so that the supernatural was missing; or, to use another image of his, everything about our lives began to make sense within a natural or “immanent” frame, and God and the supernatural, if they exist, were left somewhere outside the frame. Taylor writes as a Catholic, but his perspective on contemporary society rings true: many people have left God out of the frame, so to say. But Taylor’s genius is to recognise that this says nothing about whether it is wise, true or good to do so—it just says it is now practicable. He also acknowledges that this new ‘framing’ of life takes place because of the old framing; that is, without the old supernatural frame, the natural one would not have emerged. For instance, he acknowledges that for humanism to develop its teaching on benevolence, it needed the prior Christian teaching about love: “[T]his is true for exclusive humanism in relation to the Christian faith, in the centrality of benevolence, for instance. I have even argued that exclusive

humanism couldn't have arisen without this analogy to agape." (p.680). In other words, Christian teachings have provided the springboard for humanist teachings about love. Perhaps they have "outgrown" the Christian concept and found something more mature, as the New Atheists suggest?

We need more information, and it would be good to get it from a secular writer. Professor Jürgen Habermas has for 40 years been at the forefront of German political philosophy, seeking a democratic culture from the rubble of totalitarianism. His philosophy has sought to articulate a rational conception of a just and humane society. He has recognised that modernity has as much capacity to destroy human community—as witnessed by the mass violence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—as it has to structure and improve it. Having spent many decades arguing that religion would have to be right on the edges of this project of modernization, recently Habermas has changed his position. He now argues that religious thinking is at the centre of the task.

A long quote from a recent interview will serve to focus his ideas around our subject of religion and social maturity.

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk. (pp.150-151).<sup>5</sup>

This difficult passage is making at least three significant assertions, and they are far stronger than those made by Charles Taylor. First, Habermas is acknowledging as others have that the values held dear in a globalizing world such as ours (human rights, liberty of conscience, social democracy) spring from Judeo-Christian thinking. Taylor claims as much. Second, Habermas is saying that Western societies have been adopting and adapting Christian principles all the while; it

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<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "A Conversation about God and the World", in Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky (trans.), *Time of Transitions*, Polity Press, 2006. (reprinted from a chapter in J. Habermas (ed. Eduardo Mendieta), *Religion and Rationality: essay on Reason, God and Modernity*, Polity Press 2002.

is how we have achieved what we have achieved. That is a more integrated view than Taylor offers. And third, Habermas is asserting, to the amazement of many of his followers, that there is no obvious alternative vision for human society. To suggest that there is an alternative to the justice of the Old Testament and the love of the New Testament, is silly postmodern waffle, says Habermas.

Even if a society wanted to ‘outgrow Christianity’, says Habermas, it would struggle to know where to go next. Here we have an eminent secular philosopher not just acknowledging the Western debt to Judeo-Christian thinking, but saying it is essential to the future.

Another writer argues that even when we claim to be post-Christian, we do so in a Christian way. In his recent book, *A Short History of Secularism*, British academic Graeme Smith argues that the West has entered not a post-Christian age, but a new Christian age in which secularism is the “latest expression of the Christian religion”. “Secularism,” he writes, “is not the end of Christianity nor is it a sign of the godless nature of the West...Secularism is Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine. It is the ongoing commitment to do good, understood in traditional Christian terms, without a concern for the technicalities of the teachings of the Church.”<sup>6</sup>

For instance, much of Western thinking gives a very high position to the individual, but understands that this position is modified by the needs and desires of the ‘society’. Or, put differently, individuals who are free to make moral and ethical choices, will generate a different set of social relations to those who are not. For example, persons born into a caste or class system, will not have the scope to forge certain kinds of friendships or marriages or working communities. We in the West often take for granted this high status afforded to the individual, but it only takes a small amount of historical and cross-cultural education to recognise that it is far from universal. Rather, the idea that an individual has a moral will and ought to be free to exercise it has emerged from Christian re-thinking of the ancient Greek understanding of persons and the Jewish notion of conforming to God’s own will.<sup>7</sup>

Individual ‘rights’ that we hold dear as Westerners—acting on our conscience, assessing what is true for ourselves, making personal moral judgements—are not universal truths, but outworkings of the Christian concept of the will in relation to God. Rather than saying, with Americans, that it is a self-evident truth that all (men!) are created equal, we ought to say that this idea of equality emerges from the Christian worldview. “Christianity introduced the notion that we are all radically equal,” writes Smith. “People are children of God. This was not the case in classical society”.

Theologian Timothy Gorringer claims that the Gospel story of God’s incarnation in Christ is in fact the key to the Western notion of human equality:

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<sup>6</sup> Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*, (I.B.Tauris, London, 2008), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 154.

According to this, in taking 'flesh', God assumed all human beings—black, white, female and male, Dalit and high-born, cognitively disabled and others—into a full filial relation, and therefore into equality.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in one of his many controversial addresses, Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, sought to establish the foundations of the legal rights of the individual. He identifies two significant features of such a foundation, that a human being is in some way related to God, and that same human being has a degree of individual freedom:

[B]oth of these things are historically rooted in Christian theology, even when they have acquired a life of their own in isolation from that theology. It never does any harm to be reminded that without certain themes consistently and strongly emphasised by the 'Abrahamic' faiths, themes to do with the unconditional possibility for every human subject to live in conscious relation with God and in free and constructive collaboration with others, there is no guarantee that a 'universalist' account of human dignity would ever have seemed plausible or even emerged with clarity.<sup>9</sup>

It would be easy to misunderstand the claim here: it is not that only Christians today hold the view that all people are equal; rather, it is the assertion that in the history of ideas, the notion of personal equality has emerged as a result of Christian teachings. It is, in my view, wonderful that such a teaching is widely accepted now by people of many faiths, or no faith; it is also important, I think, to give credit for the idea to its originators.

In his recent book, *Discovering God: the Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, American sociologist Rodney Stark outlines the social benefits of the Christian faith. He describes the social moral imperatives of Christianity—loving your neighbour, doing unto others as you would have them do to you, and being more blessed by giving rather than receiving—as “truly revolutionary”.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he examines the different responses that Christians and pagans made

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Gorringer, 'Slouching Towards Jerusalem: Achieving Human Equality' in William F. Storrar & Andrew R. Morton, *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (T & T Clark, London, 2004), 327.

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Civil and Religious Law in England: a Religious Perspective'. Retrieved from <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1575>. 29 February 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: the Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, (HarperOne, New York, 2007), 318.

to the plagues that struck the Roman Empire in 165 and 251. Whereas most pagans—wealthy business people, priests, political leaders—fled to the safety of the countryside, the Christians (both the wealthy, who could have left, and the poor, who had less choice) stayed to nurse the sick, whether Christian or pagan.

Stark identifies the social good that Christianity does as a key reason for the rise of Christianity in the first few centuries after Jesus:

It has often been suggested that Christianity compensated people for their lives of misery by promising them a glorious life to come (often denigrated as “pie in the sky”). Possibly so, but it seems far more significant that Christianity actually made life much less miserable in the “here and now”!<sup>11</sup>

Again, the idea of loving one’s neighbour, does not emerge from nowhere and does not receive universal acclamation; rather, it is a revolutionary idea that seems to emerge from Jesus’ interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures’ commands to express love for those around you. It is certainly not the case that only Christian or Jewish people express any love for their neighbour in need! But when we look at where this particular value or ethic has come from, we are lead back to the distinctive teachings of Jesus.

Can we go further say that the “love your neighbour” command is still making a distinct difference in people’s behaviour today? Writing in *The Guardian* in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, British socialist and atheist Roy Hattersley made an awful observation: almost all of the aid work was being done by people with Christian beliefs. “Notable for their absence,” he wrote, “are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers’ clubs and atheist associations”.<sup>12</sup> Now, I want to be very careful here to make clear what I am *not* claiming. I am not claiming that Christians are better people than atheists (although Hattersley does in fact make that claim!); rather, I am suggesting that this kind of observation suggests that Christian faith often delivers moral imperatives and actual behaviour when other world views, such as atheism, does not. If we want altruistic actions in times of human crisis—as well as in the every day—we ought to pause before happily tossing faith overboard.

The veteran *Time* magazine reporter and author, David Aikman, will also make this distinctive claim for broader social issues. An expert on the rise of Christianity in China, he has been witnessing first-hand the move from atheistic Communism towards whatever is around the corner for the Chinese. Aikman recognises that capitalism has brought about major change in China, but

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<sup>11</sup> Stark, *Discovering God*, 318.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/sep/12/religion.uk>. Retrieved 9 Sept 2008.

claims that for the underpinnings of the society as a whole, Chinese leaders are looking towards Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Christian lawyers are leading the way in civil rights discussions in China because, according to Beijing constitutional scholar Fan Yafeng, “more and more Chinese public intellectuals say that only Christianity can provide a solid foundation for the rule of law in China”.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, I turn to another famous philosopher already mentioned. Richard Rorty, the recently deceased pragmatist from Stanford, famously dismissed religion in most of his writing. However, in his last decade, he too, like Habermas, came reluctantly to see a place for religious people in the social project of America. Rorty suggested that there is a kind of religious enquiry which suits our age: he calls it “a religion of democracy” or “romantic polytheism”.<sup>15</sup> In romantic polytheism, the religious instinct of human beings would be preserved (rather than denied or despised, as it was in his earlier writing), but any reference to capital-t Truth, or to God or even gods would have to be surrendered. Theists could be involved in today’s social plans, as long as they were willing to...

...get along without personal immortality, providential interventions, the efficacy of sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant of Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Rorty saw something good in Christianity and other religions, but couldn’t accept any of its supernatural teachings. In his last work before he died, he had a dialogue with the Catholic philosopher Gianni Vattimo. In it, Rorty speaks of his sense of the holy:

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law...I have no idea how such a society could come about. It is, one might say, a mystery. This mystery,

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<sup>13</sup> David Aikman, *The Delusion of Disbelief: Why the New Atheism is a Threat to Your Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness*, SaltRiver Books, Nashville, 2008, pp.166-171.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Carnes, “China’s new legal eagles”, *Christianity Today*, Sept 2006, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” in M. Dickstein (ed), *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1998). See also Jason Boffetti, “How Richard Rorty Found Religion”, *First Things*, 123, May 2004, pp. 24-30. Retrieved 17 June from <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0405/articles/boffetti.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Penguin, London, 1999, p. 156.

like that of the Incarnation, concerns the coming into existence of a love that is kind, patient, and endures all things.<sup>17</sup>

Rorty's hope is consistent with the hopes of a Christian—that love will reign, that a time of peace will come, and humanity will fulfil its potential. Rorty's social vision has not moved on from Christianity, rather, one might say, it has appropriated Christianity: it has borrowed the story and just changed the names.

What are we to make of these subtle and complex statements about the Christian religion from today's leading intellectuals? It seems to me that there are aspects of religion that thoughtful people of our time feel they must outgrow. But our enquiry so far is suggesting that there is not really any way of outgrowing them, and that even if we did we would lose a lot of what we desire. They are at the very base of who we are as Westerners, what we value, and how we got to be the society and the individuals we are today.

There is an urge to outgrow the Christian moral framework. But it has provided the principles of justice and love and other-person-centredness that we hold dear.

There is an urge to outgrow the metaphysics of Christianity, with its belief in a personal God, an incarnate Son of God, a Holy Spirit and a heavenly realm. But these are the very teachings from which the social vision, accepted as good, emerges. Throw out the Christian God of love, of justice and mercy, and of providence, and the teachings float freely in mid-air, lost in mystery just as Rorty said.

I suggest that far from being immature aspects of human yearning, these are in fact *mature* concepts, proper and true fulfilments of human needs. Could it not be that these teachings of Christianity, so fruitful for society, delivering multiple social goods, tried and tested for many centuries, are also, in fact, true?

I want to finish with three calls to maturity.

My first is for a mature type of Christian expression, that is intelligent, informed and self-reflexive (a quality Habermas identifies as essential in a pluralistic, postnational world). By this I do not mean a religion that changes its teaching simply to reflect the etiquette of the age – that would be pointless—but a religion that can revisit its way of speaking, say sorry when it needs to, and try again to express its ancient beliefs about God in a way is attractive and make sense. If I may say so, this is our vision at the Centre for Public Christianity.

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty & Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, p.40.

There *are* infantile expressions of Christianity. Sometimes they are simply unsophisticated – which doesn't mean they are false. But other times they are caricatures, lies or misunderstandings. It is beholden upon Christians to correct these errors and continually explain what is and is not a true understanding of the Christian faith.

My second is for a mature kind of Western secularism, that sees the importance of Christianity to our past, present and future rather than only seeing the negative in Christians and in churches. We see this kind of secularism we see in Habermas and Rorty. Both are seeking what Christianity claims to provide, even though neither acknowledges Christianity as the specific provision of what they long for. For myself, I am willing to see in Christianity the provision of the 'longed for' by so many of our philosophers, our artists, our activists, our moral and ethical leaders, and so many ordinary citizens. I recognise that it is this specific Christian claim to be true that is so offensive to many. But simply because it is offensive does not mean it is false.

My third call (a bold one, this) is for a mature kind of Irish thinker, who gives religion the time of day, who is at least as interested in what is in the Bible as what is on You Tube, who has taken the time to form a view on Christianity, given its significance to Western life. Even if this mature thinker eventually decides Christianity is but a "useful delusion", he will have at least made this decision through genuine enquiry, not through preconceived and untested hearsay. He may, of course, decide that it is not a delusion at all; that Christian faith not only provides a basis for society, but it also, and even more immediately, addresses the needs of the individual human being in God's world.

That's my 'modest proposal' for the Irish, and it's far less controversial than the one Jonathan Swift offered. I hope it is one you will consider taking up. Far from being childish, one can, in fact, 'grow up' into the reasonable Christian faith, its life-giving hope and its neighbourly love, taking seriously the words and deeds of Jesus as not only the legacy of successful civilisation, but also the true communication of God to the needy human heart.