

"Christianity offers humanity – help to be good neighbors"

Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* has been a *NY Times* Best Seller last 30-some wks .

Dawkin's website:

bk "shows how religion fuels war, forments bigotry, and abuses children.... *The God Delusion* makes a compelling case that belief in God is not just wrong, but potentially deadly." <http://richarddawkins.net/godDelusion>

interview on Fresh Air, Dawkins told Terry Gross that 6 yrs ago his literary agent discouraged idea of this bk. last yr when Dawkins brot it up again, agent egged him on, and easily found a publisher.

guesses "6 yrs of Bush" made people ready for it an editorial in *Christianity Today* quoted prof at Biola who has another explan : Islamist terrorism has provided main opening for bk (& others like it).

"They are taking advantage of Islamic radicalism to tap into subterranean American fears about religion. There's this notion that religious people will end up strapping dynamite to themselves" & so we have to stop religion.

what you say?

those of us who are persons-of-faith --what impact does our faith have on us? if we take Jesus and his teachings, put them into action -- what emerges? something "dangerous"?!

No way! I'm taking couple Suns to celebr Chrn faith consistently helps fulfill the best & most-basic hopes that we have.

last sermon looked at goal of human dignity.

"The teachings of Christianity encourage us to give dignity and respect to everyone we meet."

we not only have goal of human dignity, also want individuals/tribes/nations to live and work together in peace.

today:

Beliefs of Christianity help us be good neighbors--ones who do good, who can replace selfishness with caring.

begin w some instances that have got to be rather puzzling to Dawkins -- places where it sure looks like Chrn faith produces "ones who do good, who can replace selfishness with caring."

then show some of the many ways Chrn faith helps us be such persons.

then close w 2 more amazing instances.

instance #1

Syracuse University professor, **Arthur Brooks**, published bk ***Who Really Cares* (Nov 2006).**

said in interview: "If you asked me, I would have expected to find that religious conservatives are stingy. That's what academics think. That's what we are told all the time."

What he found instead was that Chrns --both liberal & conserv -- give more in "every measurable way."

sure, most of their money is given to churches.

but Chrns, Brooks says, give in every meas way --they also give more to secular charities, such as the Red Cross or their alma mater.

also donate twice as much blood.

and are more likely to "behave in compassionate ways towards strangers."

instance #2 - dramatic one of Chrn faith moving people toward being good neighbors - story of **Olmos prison in Argentina**

huge maximum-security facility --Argentina's largest. located 40 mi outside of Buenos Aires.

is vigorous ch in that prison!

consistently over last 10 yrs read news acc'ts that half of 3,000 inmates are members of Christ the Only Hope Church.

none of these men doing it for fun / to pass the time.

highly disciplined:

- fast Tues & Fri during breakfast & lunch.

- once a wk pair off & spend whole night (midnight to 6) in prayer & B study.

- give to the ch 10% of anything get from home or friends.

- agree to renounce smoking, homosexual acts, violence, drug use, and television viewing.

& in an environment where live together 24 hours a day, backsliding is easily detected.

For each infraction bro must tithe his time: 2 hrs & 40 min in prayer.

the Olmos warden is fan of the ch : "I've seen thousands of cases of inmates transformed, including some w terrible behavior converted into model prisoners."

Members of the church are the only ones allowed to staff the prison hospital. administrators know the bros won't smuggle drugs to the patients and will make sure medicine is distributed properly.

but has God really changed their lives? or is it just the prison ch disc ??

what happens when they get out of prison?

listen to recidivism rate: among general prison population, 40% of released prisoners get incarcerated again.

less than 1% of released evangelical inmates have returned behind bars.

--from *Christianity Today* magazine, September 16, 1996 "Maximum Security Unlikely Setting for Model Church"

how might Chr'n faith feed character? enc us to love and do good ?

5 ways (of many more) Chr'nity helps us be good neighbors--ones who do good, can be selfless.

Beliefs of Christianity move us toward doing good:

1. We are commanded to do good (eg. Exodus 20:1,13-16, Leviticus 19:18)

Exodus 20:1,13-16

Then God instructed the people as follows: ...

¹³ "Do not murder.

¹⁴ "Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵ "Do not steal.

¹⁶ "Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

Leviticus 19:18 NLT

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

if one is around Chr'n faith, will get reminded to do good.

2. Serving and obeying God (eg. Matthew 22:37-38, 28:18-20) lifts us beyond a focus on self

Matt 22:37-38 *Jesus replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.*

Matt 28:18-20 *Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. ..."*

we're naturally self-focused. --God made babies that way.

it's a matter of survival for babies to act like center universe /others exist to give comfort. --if they don't cry, no one knows they're hungry. if no one feeds them, they won't live.

but God also made a way for us to be lifted beyond selfish stance.

thru parents socializing us to care about other persons & their needs.

but also thru his call to serve Him, to choose make J Lord.

as I respond and begin relating to God as someone above me, to whom I must surrender / yield , I now have another boost beyond selfishness! serving something beyond myself. my ultimate concern/devotion lies beyond myself. it's like center of gravity has shifted from my concerns to God, who cares about what is best for me & those-around-me.

3. We face a final judgment (eg. 1Thessalonians 4:6, 2Corinthians 5:9-10) making us hesitate to do wrong

1 Thes. 4:6 TNIV *...no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.*

The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before.

2 Cor. 5:9-10 NLT *...our aim is to please him always... ¹⁰ For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies.*

could have stated the positive too. --that hope of heaven can motivate acts of goodness which have no earthly pay-off.

but stated the neg bec that actually has more power. hell is stronger motivator than heaven.

quote paper written by 2 Harvard profs . economist and political scientist. doing statistical analysis of about 60 countries looking at impact religion had on economic growth.

most dramatic of their findings:

The economy of nations whose people hold a firm religious belief in hell tend to grow faster.

article about them (Barro & McCleary) in *NY Times*, 2004, began:

Forget investment and savings rates, worker productivity and wage scales to determine which countries will become richer or poorer. What really stimulates economic growth is whether you believe in an afterlife -- especially hell. At least that's what two Harvard scholars have found after analyzing data collected in 59 countries between 1981 and 1999... [countries include Turkey, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan, where the Muslim faith dominates. (the Muslim belief in hell is often stronger than in Christianity.)]

the first two beliefs [overhead] can pull us toward doing good.

but often it's the fear of judg that is finally strong enough to counter pull of self-interest, that convinces us to behave morally when no one is looking.

many times & for many of us it's not enough. but clearly "moves toward ."

those 3 aspects [overhead] to some extent apply to the other faiths, as well.

- others call us to do good, give focus other than self
- some have healthy fear of final judgment. eg Muslim

are also diffs betw Chrnty & other religs :

when Chrns serve the God-that -J -revealed, what ask us to do?!

4. We are instructed to show agape-love (eg. Matthew 22:39, John 13:34-35), caring for persons we don't naturally love

Matthew 22:39 [after giving the first commandment, to love God, Jesus says:] A *second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

John 13:34-35 NLT *...now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. ³⁵ Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."*

other religs have instr to love / forms of Golden Rule.

OT: "love neighbor as self."

J came teaching a deeper, more radical love.

typically for the Jews, "neighbor" = in our land. one of us.

when a lawyer : "but who is my neighbor?", J told story of this "Samaritan" (who Jews despised) caring for, not a Sam, a Jew at great pers risk / cost.

taught us to love even enemies. no relig teacher had ever taught that.

& showed that same radical love. (look at in few mins.)

J spoke/taught in Aramaic.

when the church set out to write-about love J taught/showed in Grk language, didn't use word for friendship-love or family-love / didn't pick word for love that suggested a natural response of love --where love someone bec of what the other is or does (our friend, family).

chose a word little used in Grk of their day: agape

in Gk society, "agape" - weak/minor word. basically mnt "a preference" / a choice make in our mind.

Grks saw it as a love only "up here" [head] / love w no feeling, no depth .

ch took word & placed whole new content into it --a love where you love someone bec you choose to.

--a love not based on other's worthiness/ what deserve.

based on my choice to love them, to do good for them.

it's a love where don't love someone for what they are (friend, family, attractive).

but love someone in spite of what they are an unconditional love.

the apostles again & again say this agape-love summarizes whole law.

Romans 13:9, Gal 5:14, James 2:8

(every time Bible is translated into new lang , translators never find word already meaning agape-love.)

fifth pt shows huge diff betw Chrnty faith & other faiths.

all humans make mistakes. harm others & ourselves.

& we do it not just bec ignorant or clumsy.

sometimes willful choice to do wrong.

Christianity is diff from every other relig in how describes God responding to sinners like us.

5. We, sinners, receive grace and love from God (eg. Romans 5:7-8, 1 John 4:9,19), giving us internal motivation to love others

Romans 5:7-8 NLT *Now, no one is likely to die for a good person, though someone might be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

1 John 4:9 NLT *God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.*

1 John 4:19 NLT *We love each other as a result of his loving us first.*

w every relig teacher but J , when I have done wrong/ harmed others or myself, have to try to make up for that sin by doing all kinds of good works. to try outweigh.

but w J , I can confess, & he in grace renews & uplifts me.

and that works wonders within us. the love we discover coming from Christ fills us w love that can then spill out to others.

being-loved is tremendous boost toward showing love.

(if someone smiles at you, feel more like smiling at next person.)

At the end of bk *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis demonstrates how the major religions agree on certain moral absolutes.

(Chrns find that in today's culture wars, they often are on the same side w believing Jews, Muslims, and Hindus.)

But when we ask, "Why be moral?" the other systems say, "In order to find God." Christianity says, "[be moral] Because God has found you." Christian morality is a response to grace.

J dies to save us even when we were sinners.
if that ever really "sinks in", it overwhelms us.
we want to serve & obey him / want to please him.

huge diff betw that and obeying out of fear of hell / duty:
one external motiv . one - internal!
in Chrntiy , people are often serving God out of full heart / authenticity. --w an intensity-that-only-the-redeemed-can-know.
"from the heart" not just " motions."

(none of us here will claim - complete. still know the sin within us.
but have found ourselves inspired by love of Lord & Sp of the Lord to greater & greater degrees as walk...)

said close w 2 "amazing instances" of Chrntiy helping persons "be good neighbors ..."

first is from England.

John Wesley (1703-1791) and England

begin 20 miles across the channel in France.
the French culture of the early 1700's was in the process of decay.
then France was ripped apart by the French Revolution at end of century.

England had the same rot. historians have described at length the moral corruption of the English culture.
yet England did not go through a revolution.
what spared it?

(all historical analysis is subjective), but historians insist was spared bec of a Chrnt revival sparked by Jn Wesley.

Wesley spent a lifetime preaching Christ all over England.
100s of 1000s of people came to Christ through Wesley's open air meetings.
was not content w merely winning converts -- knew J's call was for ds. so organized his converts in weekly home meetings where they went through methodical disciplines in Chrnt faith and living. (Hence, became known as Methodists.)

the Methodist movement, w its huge numbers of trained ds of J Christ, spread through England like salt and delivered the nation from a revol .

it helped people of England cooperate/ be in peace rather than rather than degenerate into fighting/anarchy.

now this testimony from China.

The Chinese church after fifty years of repression and persecution is thriving. When the Communists took control of China five decades ago there were an estimated four million Christians in China.
the *Leader* ran article Fri on evang gearing up to be at Olympics.
had little graphic showing num of Chrns in China:
in 1970 - 1 million. 2000 - 85 million. 2005 - 110 million.

in 2002 David Aikman, formerly of *Time* magazine, spent 3 mos researching the state of Christianity in China. wrote a bk :

David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (2003)

not only describes incredible growth of the Chinese ch . also impact the faith is having on the elite & intelligentsia in Chinese society.
most startling instance of this was Chinese President Jiang Zemin's response when asked what one thing he wished he could secure for China's future.
responded: that Chrntiy would become the dominant religion in China!
Aikman cautions this does not mn the president is himself a Chrnt .
rather Jiang is saying this on purely utilitarian grounds: that he believes that Chrns make good citizens, and so a country of Chrns would make a great country. ...

has been a major movement toward Chrntiy among Chinese intellectuals. looking to the Chrnt faith as the answer to the fut of China.
Aikman says a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, the top think-tank of the Beijing government, expressed the following opinion:

One of things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubts about this. --David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (2003) p.5

it sure looks like Chrnt faith builds persons and societies who can live and work together in peace.

this cannot be bec we Chrns have such wisdom and goodness.
I believe it is bec our Creator-God in mercy chose to guide us.

next Sun we will look at an even more powerful advantage humanity receives from Chrntiy .

a short (but significant) philosophical (but faith-filled) postscript:

suppose a friend bought Toyota Prius, one of those "hybrid cars" that can run on gasoline engine, on batteries, or on combination of both.

& suppose are several websites on how to maintain hybrid car. say lot of same things, but some major differences.

each claim "inside track" w/ manuf / to really understand these cars.

how decide which really-did get info from manuf ?

here's one way:

- find bunch of people who follow one site. bunch who use another.
- watch . compare how their cars perform. and last.
- if those following one site - signific better, conclude indeed do have "inside track."

suppose there are several bks on how high school students should prepare to take SAT exam.

each claims contact w/ grp that makes SAT. but give diff advice.

how decide which book really does reflect SAT creators?

here's one way:

- identify bunch of students who use one manual, & bunch another.
- compare their SAT scores.
- if those following one bk rank signif better, have reason to assume this bk truly got its info from test-makers.

our Chrn faith claims to have received revelation from spiritual realm / to have "inside track" on ultimate-reality & how-life-is-to-be-lived.

if the Chrn B really is delivered down to us from Creator-God Himself, then its descrip of life should "work."

it indeed appears to me that Chrntiy is worldview that has more chance of producing good life than any other vv.

nobody gives right answers like Chrntiy .

humanity's own true good and deepest well-being comes as we try to follow this way.

I believe Chrntiy indeed does have pipeline of revelation from Creator-God.