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Christianity on Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry

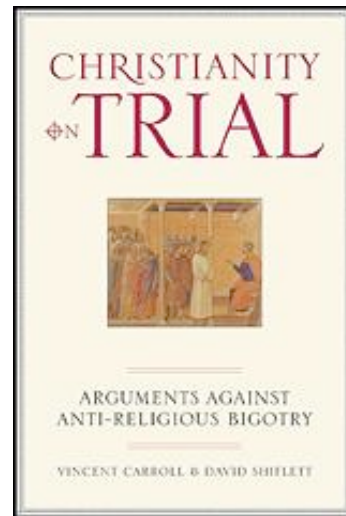
Encounter Books

Review by [Ryan McMaken](#)

Those things which are God's are not subject to the imperial power.

~ Ambrose of Milan

Any liberal arts student knows the story: Christianity, an enemy of science, a catalyst of war, and an enslaver of men has brought mankind nothing but misery since it rose to prominence in the Roman empire and destroyed that gentle and enlightened civilization. At least, this is the story you will encounter in virtually every literature, history, or political science course that one might endure. Both inside and outside the academy, however, most of the clichés about the inhumanity of Christianity generally amount to little more than vague references to various events that the New York Times has decided are unforgivable sins committed by Christians throughout history.



With the publication of *Christianity on Trial*, authors Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett attempt to shed some light on the historical record. The book, a collection of chapters each dealing with Christianity's record on specific issues from slavery to science to the Third Reich is a kind of historical Christian apologetic. Unlike an ordinary apologetic, the book makes no attempts to engage theological questions or to prove the veracity of the Christian religion. It is instead an examination of historical events involving ordinary Christians, the Catholic Church as an organization and, after the Reformation, the Protestant churches as well. For Carroll and Shiflett, the prevailing belief among smug non-Christians, a belief that Western history is the history of brave "free-thinkers" working against the tyranny of Christianity, is little more than self-satisfaction based on historical ignorance.

The book begins by juxtaposing pre-Christian Roman civilization with

Christian civilization. The story of the Roman Empire at the time of the birth of Christ is one of a society with no concept of the human being as a sovereign individual with claims against state and society. It is a time of disposable children, disposable women, and widespread human slavery. For example, in the empire of the 1st century, it was not unusual for a pregnant woman to receive a note from her husband instructing her that when she gave birth: "if it is a boy keep it, if a girl discard it." "Discarding" a baby usually consisted of leaving it on the nearest dungheap. The baby would usually die of exposure within a few hours, or possibly be eaten by wolves. If the baby was fortunate it would be found by a member of one of the local Christian communities that often kept an eye on places where babies were dumped in order to adopt them. The discarded babies were usually girls, but deformed male babies could suffer the same fate, and the practice was so widespread that in many parts of the empire, men outnumbered women by 30 percent or more.

Once grown, pagan women could rarely expect better treatment than they had been afforded when they had been infants. Compared to Christian women, pagan women married younger, had less choice in whom they married, and were expected to endure frequent adultery from their spouses since Saint Paul's admonition to men to remain faithful was hardly the prevailing attitude among pagan men. The Christian ideal that men and women must be held to identical systems of ethics and were equals in the eyes of God was, to say the least, a novelty in pagan Rome. Ironically, according to the authors, Saint Paul, the man villainized by non-Christians as the leading misogynist of the bible was quite possibly the most prominent proponent of "sexual equality" in the Empire.

Carroll and Shiflett go on to describe a myriad of other revolutions that the Christians brought to the pagan world. The restriction of sexual behavior to marriage was certainly an affront to Roman noblemen who kept young boys imprisoned in their private chambers for their sexual pleasure, and the idea that the poor, the helpless, and the weak should be treated with kindness and mercy struck many pagans as ridiculous considering their pagan ideals of strength, heroism, and conquest. The medieval knight's oath to protect orphans and widows would have struck a Roman centurion as pointless and absurd.

This first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book which presents Christians and their leaders as often the brake against war, slavery, the domination of the weak by the strong, and the excesses of the State in general.

As slavery returned to the Christian world through the New World, it was Jesuits and Popes in the Spanish world and Methodists and Quakers in the British world that fought against slavery and eventually forced its end. Drawing upon Paul's directive to slaveowners that they "do not threaten [the

slaves], since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him." The Methodist John Wesley and his followers concluded that if slaves are equal to their masters in heaven, why must things be different on earth? Indeed, the Catholic Church came to the same conclusion and condemned slavery repeatedly in 1462, 1741, 1815, and 1839. Unfortunately, all too often, slave traders paid little attention. For Carroll and Shiflett, the story of the abolition of slavery is a veritable who's who list of Protestant and Catholic leaders. Ironically, it was the non-Christian philosophers like David Hume and Thomas Jefferson who spent their time constructing pseudo-scientific justifications for slavery. While David Hume was comparing slaves to parrots, Christians like the Quaker activist George Fox would have none of it: "Christ died for all, for the Taiwanese, and for the blacks, as for you that are called whites."

But what of the Christian record on science? Every pundit in America knows that Christianity has crippled science and supported ignorance among the Western world. One word is all that need be said: Galileo! Carroll and Shiflett dispose of this stereotype with ease. After all, it is not just a coincidence that the most technologically advanced civilization on earth emerged not from the Far East or from the Americas, but from Christian Europe. Unlike the centralized bureaucracies of China that stymied novelty and innovation, heavily decentralized Europe did not contain a bureaucratic class powerful enough to stop innovation, and thus new technologies were introduced, spread about Europe and contributed to the birth of a technological society. The Christian monasteries maintained libraries, copied ancient manuscripts, employed astronomers and preserved the knowledge accumulated through the centuries of western civilization. The Franciscan monk Roger Bacon wrote in the eleventh century that "it is the intention of [natural] philosophy to work out the natures and philosophies of things." He encouraged his fellow scientists to adopt empirical methods using controlled experiments and observation. These experiments would come to be carried out in the Christian universities, the main centers of science and philosophy in Europe. Christians were the finest astronomers in the world with the most accurate calendars and the most accurate instruments. Carroll and Shiflett give one of the best short explanations of the Galileo affair available today and they point out that Galileo, that patron saint of modern Christian bashers was never disciplined for any crime against theology, but was censured for disobedience to the Catholic authorities. No official proclamation was made drawing conclusions on his observations from a theological perspective, and even if such a proclamation had been made, it would not have mattered since Christian philosophers, monks, and Catholic Cardinals went right on supporting and performing scientific experiments using the knowledge of Galileo, Copernicus, and countless other Christian scientists.

Of course, no book entitled *Christianity on Trial* would be complete without a discussion of the role of Christianity in the rise of the Third Reich.

Naturally, Carroll and Shiflett illustrate that if Christian organizations had any role in the rise of Nazism, it was one of resistance. The most popular myth of Christians and the Third Reich batted around today is the story of Pope Pius XII as Nazi collaborator. How this myth got started is interesting since Pius was almost universally accepted as an anti-Nazi hero following the war. Pius had given Jews shelter inside the walls of the Vatican and had even taken part in a plot to depose Hitler in 1939. This approving attitude toward Pope Pius changed in 1960 with the play *The Deputy* by Rolf Hochhuth. Since then, the image of Pope as Nazi collaborator has never been allowed to die thanks to the publication of books like 1999's *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*. Regardless of the wild accusations, Pius worked closely with bishops like the vehemently anti-Nazi Cardinal Konrad von Preysing and often ordered his bishops to intercede with secular leaders to bring to an end some of the more brutal policies being carried out by Nazis and Communists alike.

Protestant Christians were also hard at work in pre-war Germany trying to prevent Hitler's de-Christianization of the German people. Hitler, an occultist and a supporter of a neo-pagan religion based on the idea of a sacred German nation of conquering heroes made great pains to drain Christianity from German culture and took numerous steps like requiring the use of the word "Yuletide" in place of "Christmas" and prohibiting any public displays of Christian ceremonial activities. It was in response to this subjugation of the Christian churches to the Nazi State that Martin Niemoller formed the "Confessing Church" which would become the primary Protestant resistance to Hitler's regime. In 1934, Niemoller took a delegation to see Hitler about his attempts to take over the churches. Niemoller personally admonished Hitler and declared, "you told us that you would take care of the German people. But as Christians and men of the church, we too have a responsibility to the German people, laid upon us by God. Neither you nor anyone else can take that away from us." Not surprisingly, Niemoller was later tried on trumped up charges and spent the duration of the war in Dachau where he was later joined by thousands of fellow ministers, monks, nuns, and priests, many of whom would not survive.

For the last twenty centuries, Christians have been ubiquitous in Western history, and Carroll and Shiflett bring the controversies over slavery, science, the role of government, the Third Reich and many other subjects to the reader in an accessible and engaging work intended for all audiences. The book is most certainly about Christians, but is not necessarily intended just for Christians. In other words, it is a genuine attempt to set the historical record straight and is not simply a feel-good book for Christians. The book also stays out of interdenominational conflicts and makes no attempts to benefit Protestants at the expense of Catholics or the other way around. Credit is simply given where credit is due. Above all, it seems that the authors want their readers to understand that human history is a

complex thing, and the attempt to oversimplify matters is often the cause of much anti-Christian bigotry since it is often easier to simply repeat widely accepted mantras about the sins of Christians rather than to engage in serious historical inquiry. Nevertheless, these mantras are repeated time and time again in newspapers, classrooms, and coffee houses.

Usually at this point in a book review, it would be apropos to sum up the arguments made by the authors and attest to their veracity, or lack thereof. I have had to conclude, however, that this book does not really offer any theory, per se. This is not necessarily a problem since the criticisms of Christianity that the authors are addressing contain no theory either but are simply tired clichés that have been repeated until people believed them. Carroll and Shiflett do not claim to be historians, but have contented themselves with condensing many interesting and valuable bits of information on the history of Christianity into a single volume. Obviously, the authors have concluded that Christians receive a bum rap based on anti-Christian misinformation, but they leave most of the theory up to the historians whom they aggressively quote in this book while presenting manageable breakdowns of complex subjects. Carroll and Shiflett's work is a recognition of the fact that as long as Christians are held up as the villains of the past, they will continue to be regarded as the villains of the present. This is an astute observation, and one that George Orwell endorsed when he observed that those who control the present control the past, and that those who control the past control the future.

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