

Marshall vs. Carrier: Did Christianity Spread by the Sword?

About a year ago, a young atheist (and philosopher) who read my book, The Truth Behind the New Atheism, challenged me to read and respond to the work of Richard Carrier. He felt Carrier, editor-in-chief of the “Internet infidels,” who recently obtained a doctorate from Columbia in Roman history, offers a more substantial atheist critique of Christianity than the likes of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. I bought a copy of Carrier’s book, Sense & Goodness Without God, and began reading, and also contacted Carrier about a possible debate – another suggestion of my atheist friend.

A month ago I posted a mostly critical, but courteous, review on Amazon. I pointed out fourteen errors in Sense & Goodness, some of the most important of which were Carrier’s “glib” discussion of the origin of life, his blatantly false claim that no early historians refer to the resurrection of Jesus, his dubious claim to reject miracles for empirical rather than ideological reasons, and his claim that Christianity usually “spread by the sword,” only thrived when it could wipe out other religions by force, and was (with Islam) the bloodiest and most intolerant religion known to man.

Carrier responded with pique, calling me a “liar,” among other things. (The accusation only slightly surprised me, since he had told me in a personal e-mail that his debate partners generally turned out to be dishonest.)

After arguing back and forth several rounds, Carrier posted an attack on me on his web site, focusing on the issue of biogenesis.

Several other people joined the conversation at times, including three philosophers, who had been taking part in the Amazon discussion already, and two scientists, who weighed in (at my request) on the state of the evidence on the origin of life.

While the tone of Carrier’s attacks is often discreditable, his claims are popular enough that they merit response. It’s also interesting to observe this edgy NEW “new atheism” evolve, as younger and better-informed infidels (Carrier knows the relevant literature far better than, say, Richard Dawkins) go “mainstream,” get books published, and take up the mantle from the likes of Dawkins and Hitchens.

For now, I'll post our arguments (already long enough!) on just two issues we wound up arguing at relative depth: (1) The Origin of Life, and (2) Whether or not Christianity mostly "Spread by the Sword." The first issue is especially long; you may want to skim parts; but don't skip the last round! I may add our discussion on some of the other issues later.

II. Did Christianity Spread by the Sword? Has Christianity only been successful when it has suppressed other religions by force?

Round One

Richard Carrier, from *Sense & Goodness Without God*: "Most people in ancient times believed it was proper to respect the gods of other peoples. This changed on a global scale when Christianity was spread, quite literally, by the sword. Those who attempted to assert their religious differences were harassed, tortured, robbed of their land and belongings, even killed. Before it achieved political power, Christianity was a small sect, a heresy against the Jewish faith, that had to accept equality among all the other religions of the Roman Empire. Yet it was the first religion to openly attack the religions of other people as false (the Jews, at least, were a little more tactful). Needless to say, Christianity only truly flourished when it had the ability to eliminate the competition – when it had the full support of Rome's Emperors after 313 A.D., and when, in 395 A. D., every religion other than Christianity was actually outlawed. Through force and decree Christianity as immersed in the cultural surroundings of lands near and far, and in an environment where it was widely accepted, it not the only thing accepted, it spread and planted itself among subjugated peoples. As kids grew up taking Christian ideas for granted, they often did not realize that only a few generations ago those ideas were entirely alien."

"Colonization of the world, more often than not by robbery and warfare, spread Christianity into the Americas and other corners of the earth, just as Islam was spread throughout Asia and Africa. It is not a coincidence that the two most widespread religions in the world today are the most warlike and intolerant religions in history. Before the rise of Christianity, religious tolerance, including a large degree of religious freedom, was not only

custom but in many ways law under the Roman and Persian empires . . . Indeed, Christians were persecuted for denying that the popular gods existed – not for following a different religion. In other words, Christians were persecuted for being *intolerant*." (264)

David Marshall, expert from review on Amazon.com:

Finally, from another section of the book, there's this jumbled thicket of confused revisionism:

"Christianity was spread, quite literally, by the sword . . . Christianity only truly flourished when it had the ability to eliminate the competition . . . the two most widespread religions in the world today are the most warlike and intolerant religions in history. Before the rise of Christianity, religious tolerance . . . was not only custom but in many ways law under the Roman and Persian empires . . . Christians were persecuted for denying that the popular gods existed . . . for being intolerant." (264)

(10) To begin at the end, if it is "intolerant" to deny that popular gods exist, what is Richard Carrier? He denies not only the Greco-Roman gods, but Christian, Muslim, Confucian, Aussie, and every other vision of God as well!

(11) In fact Christianity mostly did NOT spread by the sword. Constantine adopted the faith because it had already become the strongest spiritual force in Roman society already -- by caring for the sick, treating women well, and showing courage in the face of death, as Rodney Stark shows in *The Rise of Christianity*. Richard Fletcher's *The Barbarian Conversion* tells the rest of the story for Europe, others for the rest of the world -- force was the exception, not the rule.

(12) Christianity has always been strongest in a free market of faiths -- as in modern America, Korea, and even modern China. Here Carrier badly needs to read Stark's other studies.

(13) To say even Islam is the most intolerant or warlike religion in history reveals gross ignorance. Has he never heard of the Aztecs? The Tai Pings? Yanomamo shamanism? Jim Jones? Or (to stretch the term "religion"

slightly) Vladimir Lenin? Adolf Hitler?

(14) The tolerance of the Greco-Romans was punctuated by episodes of persecution, bigotry, witch-hunting, and murder. Elsewhere in the same book, Carrier admits that one sect began their rituals with the shout, "Away with the Epicureans! Away with the Christians! . . . this hostility could come to slander and violence. Challenging a popular legend might start a riot, even get you killed."

In fact you didn't even have to go that far -- Socrates was not the only one to get officially killed for unorthodoxy.

Round 2

(Note: Here I quote only Carrier's response to points (11) and (12), which are the issues I will reply to below. For the rest of that part of our conversation, see the discussion under my review of his book on Amazon.com.)

"Did Christianity Spread by the Sword?"

Carrier: As I show in *Not the Impossible Faith* (chapter 18), Marshall is misusing Rodney Stark in his attempt to claim that Christianity became the dominant religion peacefully. Stark argues (as do all other modern experts) that Christianity was still a small minority religion even in the time of Constantine. And beginning with his conversion, force was used to support it: already in his reign pagan temples were robbed of their wealth by force, being given to Christian churches instead, while by the end of the same century paganism was actually outlawed, and over subsequent centuries gruesome displays of force were used to terrify the disobedient into compliance (see *Not the Impossible Faith* pp. 21-23). Likewise, no one reading the history of the Christianization of the Americas can possibly believe "force was the exception, not the rule." The history of the European Middle Ages is likewise just as bloody (simply read *The Carolingian Chronicles* for the Christians' own account of what they did). Indeed, actual force was often not necessary precisely because the threat of it was enough

(as I discuss on p. 265 of *Sense and Goodness without God*). Since I cite abundant scholarship confirming everything I say (pp. 267-68), again, Marshall is the revisionist here.

Marshall: What did Carrier mean by saying that Christianity "spread by the sword?"

The comment is rather ambiguous. From the context, in which Carrier talks first about the spread of Christianity in ancient Rome, then in the world in general, it is clear he is referring to the overall history of Christianity. And given the rest of his comments, it is clear he is, at minimum, referring to the most normal method of proselytism. He is not saying that Christianity has **SOMETIMES** employed force, but at the least, that it has **USUALLY** (if not **ALWAYS**) employed force.

What does "by the sword" mean? I will not require that it mean most converts had actual metal pressed against their throats (though the adverb "literally" is, as often, misused here.) I take "by the sword" to refer to bringing people to faith under military or police compulsion.

I do insist, however, that conversion involve direct physical violence, or the threat of violence, against the potential convert, to count in favor of Carrier's claim. It cannot even mean that mob violence was occasionally employed, or even that Christians occasionally persecuted people of other religions. This for the simple reason that Carrier is comparing "intolerant" Christianity with "tolerant" paganism in this passage. ("It was the first religion to openly attack the religions of other people.") Yet he admits there was persecution of Christians (and other sects) in pagan Rome, along with mob violence against them. Clearly the phrase "spread by the sword" must mean something above and beyond what Christians experienced at the hands of the pagans, to justify the contrast Carrier is drawing.

Finally, what might Carrier mean by "spread?" Should it refer to transmission of faith to new lands, cultures, or individuals?

We can probably rule geography out. It would be unreasonable to count the spread of faith among Eskimos in Alaska as more significant than among some tribe in Rwanda, just because more territory is involved.

Spread to individuals seems more likely at first. If this is what Carrier meant, however, his claim may be too obviously absurd. The vast majority of Christians have accepted faith from parents or teachers, through education, not the threat of death. Furthermore, most Christians have probably lived over the past 200 years. (By my back of the envelope calculation, about 40% of all people who have lived in the last 2000 years, have lived in the last 200. Towards the beginning of that period, the percent of Christians in world population increased dramatically.) Over the past 200 years, only a tiny minority of believers converted on pain of death. Neither, of course, did most Christians in the Middle Ages.

So the only plausible meaning of "spread," and the meaning most likely intended, is "transmitted into a new politico-cultural sphere, so as to be adopted by a significant portion of the populace."

Now we can analyze the accuracy of Carrier's claims about the history of Christianity.

I'll look at twelve great population groups, to which the vast majority of Christians belong. I'll begin from the first days of Christianity.

(1) Roman-European Christians, 33-600 AD According to Rodney Stark, by the time of Constantine's conversion and the Edict of Milan in 313, proclaiming religious tolerance, about 10% of the entire Roman empire had become Christian. Obviously, before this time Christianity was NOT spread by military compulsion. In fact, it spread in the face of often severe persecution. Furthermore, according to Stark, Christianity was growing by about 40% per decade at this time. By that natural growth rate (similar to that later traced by Mormons), Stark argues, the success of Christianity was already a fate accompli:

"In fact, Constantine's conversion was, in part, the response of a politically astute man to what was soon to be an accomplished fact - the exponential wave of Christian growth had gathered immense height and weight by the time Constantine contended for the throne (One True God, 61)."

Capturing 10% of the "market" shows that a religion has "arrived." We know that before this time, Christianity had spread to almost all of the empire by this time - without force of any kind, but in the face of force.

By the natural growth pattern it had already established, even without state support, one could expect Christianity to surpass 50% of the population in

the latter half of the 4th Century.

While Christians did take matters into their own hands by forcibly destroying temples at times, for the most part conversion to Christianity during the 4th Century was by free will, not compulsion. (Read Augustine's Confessions, for example - St. Augustine converted as late as 386, in apparent freedom, having freely chosen among contemporary beliefs.) Occasional mob violence or state sanction do not constitute "conversion by the sword" on Carrier's own terms, as we have seen that he praises the ancient Romans, who engaged in both, for being quite different than and superior to Christians.

Theodosius I established "Catholic" Christianity as the state religion in 380. In the 5th Century, the conformity of all, apart from Jews, was mandated and enforced. As we will see when I address Carrier's second claim, Stark and I agree that the vital impulse of Christianity largely died in this period.

Several of the most prominent 4th Century Christians were born into a Christian family: Ambrose, Gregory Nazianzus, (his father was converted not by the sword, but by his wife), Basil the Great and his many siblings, Jerome. This is consistent with Stark's thesis that like Mormons today, much of the Christian increase came through larger families and better health care.

Others, like Augustine, came from a partially pagan background, and were converted after dallying with pagan philosophies: Theodore the Interpreter and John Chrysostom were both educated under the pagan Libanius and then chose the Christian faith -- again, not at the point of a sword. Nor do their biographies seem to involve anyone who converted that way, as far as I know.

Sketchy as this is, this empirical evidence, from various parts of the empire, tells against the claim that the great numerical increase in Christians over the 4th Century came about primarily through military force. It agrees fully, however, with Stark's arguments.

In any case, what happened in the 4th Century is best described as "consolidation," not "spread" as we defined it. Christianity did not win the Roman Empire primarily by force, but by persuasion. As I pointed out, "spread" must refer to the transmission of a religion to a new politico-cultural entity, not to individual conversions, or consolidation. If we count individual conversions, then the early Christians will count for very little, compared to the billions of Christians in the modern world, and Carrier's argument will be rendered even less plausible!

(2) North African, West Asian Christians, 600-2009 In the first centuries

after Christ, as in European Rome, Christianity spread through missions, voluntarily. Some consolidating force was employed late in the Imperial era. After the Islamic conquest, for the next 1400 years, Christianity in the Middle East was mostly transmitted from parents to children, rather than by military force. Thousands of Muslims become Christians today (especially in Algeria, Iran, Egypt), not only of their own free will, but in the face of often strong persecution.

(3) Chinese Christians, 624-2009 Christianity spread to China in four main waves, and one or two smaller ones - all without military or police compulsion on anyone to convert. Nestorian Christianity spread peacefully, with some minor support at first, and some persecution later, from Chinese emperors. Catholicism spread peacefully, with some persecution from the government, in the 16th and 17th Centuries, until there were about 300,000 Catholics in China. In this case, European meddling and Chinese strong-arm tactics combined to undermine Christianity, keeping it from growing much after the "Rites Controversy" erupted in 1705.

In the 19th Century, Protestants entered China as a correlate of European imperialistic action against a weak Qing government. Missionaries did not, however, use force; in fact imperialism was a strong disincentive to conversion, making "yang jiao" or "foreign religion" very unpopular. It was in the face of persecution (ie, the Boxers, who killed tens of thousands of Christians in 1900, but all through the 19th Century) that Christianity spread.

In the 20th Century, both under the Nationalists, and far more under the Communists, Christianity was officially discouraged. It has been under persecution that the number of Christians in China has grown to some 70 million not "gua ming" or nominal Christians, but largely highly committed believers - the second largest number of any country, after the US.

(4) European Christians, 600-1800 The grassroots missions impulse having mostly died within Latin Christianity, the faith did however spread to northern Europe, and was then consolidated as the official religion. (And later, as dueling Catholic and Protestant official religions.) Mass forcible conversions did occur during this period, including of the Saxons under Charlemagne, in the 8th Century. Joseph Fletcher, Professor of History at the University of York, notes however in *The Barbarian Conversion*, "It is a striking feature of the spread of Christianity to barbarian Europe that it was, before Saxony, so tranquil a process." Force was also employed on later occasions, among some Norse, Slavs, Finnish, and Baltic peoples. Other methods of transmission that seem to have been more important, however, were evangelism (St. Patrick, to the Irish) and the export of Christian wives to pagan kings.

Of course the history of the Middle Ages was bloody, as Carrier remarks - as are all histories. But the spread of Christianity in Europe can't be reduced to Charlemagne's religio-political campaigns. As Fletcher shows, the most common pattern was for a king to marry a Christian bride; the kingdom generally following his lead.

It's true that there often was an element of compulsion in the subsequent conversion of nobles and laity (also later, with the spread of Protestantism, and the Catholic reaction.) But it would be simplistic to say Christianity was mainly spread "by the sword" to Northern Europe - sometimes it was, more often it doesn't seem to have been.

Still, this period is probably the second-best case for Carrier's claim.

(5) Latin American Christo-Catholics, 1492-1900 This is probably Carrier's best argument for the "spread by the sword" hypothesis. The conquest of South and Central America by the Spanish and Portuguese was, beginning with Christopher Columbus himself, a bloody and terrible affair. What spread most quickly, though, was germs, wiping out much of the Indian population before they had the chance to be subjugated by Rome.

I am not a Latin expert, but it also seems a complex history of conversion. Conquistadors did make Christianity a tool of oppression and conquest. Colonists sometimes attacked the Jesuits, though, for defending Indians against their depredations. Slaves were sometimes baptized, perhaps against their will; at other times prevented from voluntarily becoming Christians voluntarily.

Whether or not Christianity (as opposed to colonialism) spread primarily by the sword over this region during this period, would require closer study than I have done. But Latin America seems like the best case for Carrier's claim, as clearly it sometimes did.

(6) European Christians, 1800-2009 Ours has been an era of consolidation, revival, and a neo-pagan and secularist ("Enlightenment") backlash. Christianity spread, to the extent it did, almost entirely by voluntary conversion. In Eastern Europe, Christianity spread in the face of communist suppression - most successfully in Poland, but also in other countries. (See, for example, the works of Richard Wurmbrand, George Weigel, James Felak, and Sergei Kourdakov's *The Persecutor*.) Solzhenitsyn's story of conversion was in some ways typical of the era - and was, of course, of his own free will.

(7) North American Christians, 1620-2009 Christianity spread to North

America primarily through immigration, education, and voluntary evangelism. There may have been rare instances of force (mostly in the earliest years of this period, among small groups, and through schools in 20th Century Canada), but choice has been the overwhelming pattern. In fact, predominately Christian American and Canada have allowed far more freedom of conscience than did pagan Rome. Given that the US has had more Christians than any other country in the world over the past century and a half (probably some 900 million self-declared Christians altogether), the history of his own society should have given Carrier pause.

(8) African Christians, 1800-2009 In 1900, there were only about 9 million Christians in Africa, including Copts and other small minorities in Muslim countries. Today there are over 400 million at least nominal Christians. (For a total approaching perhaps a billion over the past century.) The vast majority have come to faith of their own free will, in response to missions. (Sometimes in the face of persecution, as in Uganda under Idi Amin, Ethiopia, and in some tribes.)

(9) Latin Protestants, 1900-2009 The number of Evangelical Christians grew from negligible in 1900, to some 60 million by 1997. (First Things, Pedro Morena, June / July 1997)

Few converts seem to have been zealous Catholics; most seem to have been religiously apathetic, or Christo-pagans. Few, if any, came to Christ "at the point of the sword," or any other weapon.

(10) Indian Christians, 33 AD-2009 Aside from the case of Goa, where Catholic inquisitors forced the population to adopt Christianity, the vast majority of converts to Christianity in India came to faith of their free will. Even during British rule, compulsion to Christian faith was seldom if ever used; some were even persecuted for belief. Today, there are between 25 and 50 million Christians in India. The free spread of Christianity has worried some "Hindutva" fanatics to the point of persecution and other pressure on Indians to abandon Christianity.

(11) Korean Christians, 1900-2009 Again, Korean converts adopted Christianity freely, not under compulsion. Much of the conversion went on in the face of communist or Japanese oppression. Some 30% of South Koreans are Christian today, often extremely zealous.

(12) Tribal Christians, 1900-2009 Taiwan: About 12 tribes (Ami the largest) converted to Christianity, under no compulsion. China: Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Jingpo, some Yi, Miao, Bouyi, small groups of Dai, all converted freely, or in the face of anti-Christian persecution. Southeast Asia: Karen, Kachin, Lisu,

Lahu, Wa, Hmong, all converted freely. India: Naga, Mizo, other tribes in eastern states, Santal, Kholli mountain tribes, also converted freely. New Guinea: millions of Christians among the Dani, Yali, and other tribes, became Christians without being forced to it. Polynesians also adopted Christianity because they wanted to, not because missionaries threatened to kill them if they didn't.

Tribes in North America have generally either adopted Christianity of their own free will, or not at all. Some exceptions may be found among Indian children who were forced to go to Christian schools during the mid-20th Century.

In summary, Carrier is clearly mistaken. As I said, use of force was clearly the exception than the rule in the spread of Christianity. Only in some parts of Latin America, and in some cases in Northern Europe, did Christianity spread to new people groups primarily by force. In the vast majority of cases, peoples adopted Christianity because they wanted to.

The same is even more clearly true if we look at individual conversion, rather than the conversion of groups.

Furthermore, both of the periods in which force WAS an important means of "converting" people, occurred (1) long after the initial and defining spread of Christianity; and (2) after Christianity had become institutionally corrupt, in part for reasons I will now explore.

Does Christianity only thrive by violently suppressing other faiths?

Carrier: "Marshall falsely claims `Christianity has always been strongest in a free market of faiths -- as in modern America, Korea, and even modern China.' Yet it is not "strong" in China or Korea (it is a minority in both countries), and even in America it claims only about 80% of the population. Compare that to a rate of 95% and more in much of medieval Europe and all of early Spanish-controlled America, when one had to be Christian under pain of death or prison or dispossession or exile, then you'll understand the difference I am talking about: Christianity was strongest then, not now. Allowed to compete fairly in a free market, Christianity slowly washes out into a minority religion, or else must change radically to accommodate popular desires (which is why Catholicism is a minority now and losing

ground in America, while most Christians are merely nominal, unable even to name the four Gospels, with nearly half now claiming Christianity is not the only path to eternal life, while secularism and other minority religions are growing, as they have done in Europe--slowly reversing the after-effects of an ages-long era of force and intimidation that really only ended in America with the demise of the McCarthy witch-hunts barely fifty years ago)."

Marshall: Carrier's arguments here are not just wrong, they are poorly informed and often bizarre. Senator Joe McCarthy's career marked the end point of Christian "force and intimidation" in America? Can he be serious? Carrier seems to be conflating "Christians" with "everyone I don't like."

As Stark shows in "Secularization, RIP," citing a great deal of primary and quality secondary data, Medieval Europe was by nothing like "95 % Christian" in the sense Carrier defines the term here. ("Most Christians are merely nominal, unable even to name the four Gospels.")

Compare that to Christians, and even the CLERGY, during the Middle Ages:

"In 1551 the Bishop of Gloucester systematically tested his DIOCESAN CLERGY. Of 311 PASTORS, 171 could not repeat the Ten Commandments, and 27 did not know the author of the Lord's Prayer." (my emphasis - DM)

"During the middle ages and during the Renaissance, the masses rarely entered a church, and their private worship was directed toward an array of spirits and supernatural agencies, only some of them recognizably Christian."

"In 1800, only 12 percent of the British population belonged to specific religious congregation. This rose to 17 percent in 1850 and then stabilized - the same percentage belonged in 1990."

"French Catholics today participate more willingly and frequently, with far greater comprehension of what they are doing, than was the case 200 years ago."

(All from Stark, "Secularization, RIP")

So by Carrier's own criteria, it is balderdash to claim that "95%" of Europeans were Christian before the Enlightenment, in some more significant sense than Americans are Christian today. Not even most MONKS could pass a simple test for biblical literacy in the Middle Ages, let alone ordinary folks! Church attendance was often quite nominal, with only a tiny fraction of the populace coming to church even once a year.

In fact, the percent of Americans who belong to a church, and who go to church, is far higher today than it was in the late 18th Century.

I live in one of the most secularized corner of the United States. Washington State has had the lowest church attendance rates in the country, and Seattle is worse. Yet I know some two dozen "mega-churches," vibrant, evangelical Christian churches with 1800 or more attendees a week, in the Seattle area. And only a fraction of evangelicals go to mega-churches. And there are other kinds of Christians in the Seattle area, too, of course - Catholics, Orthodox, liberal Protestants.

To call Christianity "weak" in America is a secularist pipe-dream. And to say that about South Korea, where thousands meet for fervent prayer in the morning, or retreat to pray on mountains for days at a time, and has produced single churches numbering in the hundreds of thousands of worshippers, defies the imagination.

Christianity is thriving in huge swaths of the world today. Under no compulsion, tens of millions of Africans and Latin Americans will engage in fervent worship this coming Sunday. Millions more will meet throughout China, praying with fervency, singing and bringing friends. Christians will meet in huge mega-churches in Singapore, and then go out to eat in outdoor food courts, side-by-side with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and "free-thinkers," as they call them there.

The freer the market, the better Christianity does. In fact, the problem with Europe is its state religions.

As Stark, one of the world's leading sociologists of religions, has demonstrated through decades of empirical research, monopoly religions

lose their fervency:

"Christianity might have been far better served had Constantine's faith been pretended. For, in doing his best to serve Christianity, Constantine destroyed its most vital aspect: its dependence on mass volunteerism." (*One True God*, 61)

"From a popular mass movement, supported by member donations and run by amateurs and poorly paid clergy, under Constantine Christianity was transformed into an elite organization, lavishly funded by the state, and bestowing wealth and power on the clergy. Thereupon, church offices became highly sought by well-connected men, whose appointments greatly reduced the average Christian leader's level of dedication."

"The Christianity that triumphed over Rome was a mass social movement in a highly competitive environment. The Christianity that subsequently left most of Europe only nominally converted, at best, was an established, subsidized, state church that sought to extend itself, not through missionizing the population, but by baptizing kings . . . corruption and sloth as well as power struggles and enforced conformity, became prominent features of the Christian movement . . . Most of the evils associated with European Christianity since the middle of the 4th Century can be traced to establishment."

Stark traces that trend through the history of Europe to the modern day. (In my interview, he suggested that it is precisely the beginnings of competition in Europe that offers the most hope that Christianity will revive there.)

The atrophy of grass-roots fervor, and the corruption of the clergy by money and wealth, sent European Christianity into a long decline. There were still faithful Christians, but they were always a minority. And they tended to come from the margins of society, like Francis of Assisi, or of the clergy, like Martin Luther. Most Medieval "Christians" also could not read, the Bible was prohibited them, and they knew little about their supposed faith.

Carrier is simply displaying ignorance. His claim that Christianity has "only truly flourished when it had the ability to eliminate the competition" is fine nonsense, and the near opposite of the truth.

In fact, Christianity thrives best in a free environment, with an open market of ideas. (Or even under some persecution.) That's how it arose, and that is how it spread in many cases. It is no coincidence that the persecuting church was also a corrupt church, a "Christianity" that had left its moorings behind.