

Chapter Seven

How Has Jesus Changed the World?

"Then there's Papa, who once said (Jesus is) God's Son all right, and that he survived the crucifixion just fine, but that the two-thousand year old funeral service His cockeyed followers call Christianity probably made Him sorry He did."¹ David James Duncan

"My father was deported from Bessarabia by the Russians. We never had enough to eat. I was beaten in school, then put in jail for running away and joining the Iron Guard. I'd never met a single good, truthful, loving person. I said to myself, 'It's just a legend about Christ. There isn't anyone in the world like that today and I don't believe there ever was.' But when I'd been in prison a few months I had to say that I was wrong. I met sick men who gave away their last crust. I shared a cell with a bishop who had such goodness that you felt the touch of his robe would heal."² Gafescu

The mid-day sun beat on the little party as it passed through the desert. One of the group suggested a stop, and they settled in the grudging shade of a row of stubby cypress trees. The leader of the band thought back to the shouts, dust, and blood of a day a few weeks before, as they dragged one of the cult's ringleaders out of town. The "elder" kept his cool to the end. "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," blaspheming until his body hit the turf.

The leader stared moodily at an old snag. Isaiah wrote of a man who cut down a tree and used half of it for firewood, and carved the other half into an idol. Come, now, he mentally cross-examined the body. It had taken a thousand years to purge idolatry from our culture. Why are you so willing to throw away our heritage, everything that makes Israel stand out from idolatrous nations around us, for the pretensions of this Galilean magician? Was it any better to make an idol of a woodworker rather than the wood? "Let's be off!" he said. Picking up a rock, he gave a grunt as he took a strip of bark

¹ *But is He a Christian? Books and Culture*, Sept.-Oct. 1997, p. 32

² Richard Wurmbrand,

off the snag. "We're expected in Damascus. Better not keep the heretics waiting!"

Saul was no casual convert to the Christian faith. He was a living representative of Palestine's Moral Majority: "a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the Law, a lay preacher, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." (Philippians 3:5-6) Saul was a fanatic, a fundamentalist in the worst sense of the word, empowered by the Ayatollahs of the day to cut a swath of holy terror through the ranks of the infidels.

Humanists of the old school used to tell us that what a person is, results from his genetic makeup and early childhood training. "The basic motivations which determine our values," Frederick Edwards wrote in *Humanist Magazine*, "are ultimately rooted in our biology and early experiences." One can build a good case for this interpretation from the failed attempts governments have made to reform criminals and drug addicts.

What role then does religion play in the development of morality? An even more depressing view, expressed by Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, is that it socializes otherwise well-adjusted and talented men and women, like the young Saul, to mistreat those who fall outside boundaries set by their sect. "With or without religion," he said in debate, "you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."³

One can build a case for this theory, too, from the biographies of many ideological zealots ancient and modern, and the slow corruption bad ideas bring to eager young students like Mao Zedong. Faith in God taught Saul to murder. There is nothing new about that. The urge to kill is a universal part of human nature, and so it seems is the urge to sacrifice to gods, even if we call them History or Humanity. Yet what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus is also an oft-repeated part of the human story. What Saul met in the desert was not an ideology, a moral hypothesis, or a stone tablet, but a man. A few years later, we find this hate criminal, name now changed to Paul, facing drowning,

³ *Why Are We Here? The Great Debate*, from *International Herald Tribune*, April 26, 1999

stoning, snakes, whips, clubs, wild animals, and wilder men to preach the Gospel he once tried to destroy. The new passion within him expressed itself in a poem about love that two thousand years later I often heard on pop radio on the Buddhist island of Taiwan, set to a Chinese melody:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. . . Love does not delight in evil but always with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. . . Love will never fail." (I Corinthians 13)

Like most westerners, I grew up in an atmosphere of intense cynicism about the church.

Christ's teachings are good, most people agreed. Maybe even the most balanced and ideal the world has seen. Yet like the outcast in the Romanian prison, many wonder where the power is behind the law. When I meet Western Buddhists and Taoists, I often ask how they became interested in eastern religion. I've heard the words, "well, I grew up in the Catholic church. . . ." so often I begin to suspect these words must be part of the new catechism. Having endured rather than enjoyed years of Christian indoctrination, many had come to believe the story of Jesus must be a legend, and the love the church preached nothing more than pious rhetoric. When I ask non-Christians what they think of Christianity, many give such replies as, "hypocritical: they preach love and acceptance, then view non-Christians as somehow less in the eyes of God," or "good ideals, but practiced with hypocrisy."

Many sensitive Christians, feeling with shame the failure of the church to live up to its calling, are willing to concede a great deal on this point. Philip Yancey and Paul Brand wrote:

"We who are His body have stained God's reputation by galloping off on bloody crusades, cracking bones and joints on torture racks, christening a slave ship The Good Ship Jesus, furthering racism in His name. God in Christ in human form is one thing; God in us is quite another."⁴

⁴ *In His Image*, p.138. In their desire to be fair, or for rhetorical effect, Yancey and Brand

I won't say these arguments have no merit. How could I? I don't need to look further than my own actions and thoughts the past twenty four hours to throw doubt on God's plan to reveal His love through believers. But nevertheless, looking with due humility at church history, and at my own life as well, I have to insist (however timidly at first, but with growing boldness) that this is the lesser story.⁵

A power surge of some sort flooded into Saul that day. Some say it was the sun. Others say the Son. But an energy of some nature rewired his spiritual circuitry, redirecting his gifts and passion from hatred to love.

The world is full of people like Saul, changed by encounters with Jesus. Over the past two thousand years, those encounters, along with Jesus' example and teachings, have changed life on this planet more than anything else. Gafescu found Christ in a Romanian dungeon. The light of Christ is often easiest to see in dark places -- like the Walled City of Hong Kong.

The Walled City of Hong Kong

I lived in Hong Kong with young men and women from all parts of the globe who had come to the then-English colony to serve Christ and for cross-cultural excitement. Among the hundred or so students and staff in the abandoned hospital on the hill above Central and Wanchai, the friendly smiles of a couple young Chinese men stood out, and I often greeted them in the halls. They'd been drug addicts who had become Christians through the ministry of an English woman named Jackie Pullinger.

When Jackie first came to Hong Kong in the late 1960s, she was drawn to a district under the flight path to Kai Tak airport (anyone who landed at that old airport, especially at night, or like I did once, in a typhoon, will remember it well). Shaded by tall, skinny skyscrapers which defied all building codes, the Walled City housed thirty thousand people in a few acres. With only two public toilets, the place was literally a cesspool. Also, for historical reasons,

are conceding a great deal here about who is a part of "his body."

⁵ Also, to literally give the devil his due, much of what is usually laid at the church was not the work of actual Christians. See Appendix B.

metaphorically: exempt from law enforcement as from building codes, the district had become a sanctuary for prostitution, organized crime, gambling, and drug addiction.

Were a person merely a product of his environment, there wouldn't seem to be much hope for drug addicts of the Walled City. Born as often as not to petty gangsters and prostitutes themselves addicted to heroin or opium, neither heredity nor nurture seemed to favor them. Should some wild idea of making oneself productive break through the fog of addiction, an addict's will was badly trained to discipline. Government-run rehabilitation centers, in which counselors made use of scientific methods and medicines, showed a recidivism rate of ninety to ninety-five percent.

Pullinger couldn't even speak Cantonese when she first came, and had no background in crime rehabilitation or treatment of addicts. But drawn to Hong Kong through a series of dreams and visions, she began haltingly talking to heroin addicts, murderers, and gang leaders about the love of God. One told her, "You have a power which I don't have. If my brothers get hooked on drugs I have them beaten up. I don't want them on heroin and I've found I can't make them quit. But I've watched you. And I believe Jesus can."⁶ In her biography, *Chasing the Dragon*, Jackie told about a Triad leader named Ah Kei who became a Christian and went to visit relatives in China. At the border security guards recognized him. When he explained he was no longer involved in crime, they refused to believe him, since as Jackie put it, "The Chinese opium wars have proven that no one can escape from addiction." The entire family became Christians as a result of this change. Ah Kei's father celebrated with an exquisite feast (as only Cantonese prepare). He rose and gave a succinct reply to Weinburg's complaint that religion allows good people to do evil, "Once I was young and now I am old, but never before have I seen a bad man become a good man."⁷

I had the chance to meet such people in other contexts also. Men who had known violence, rejection, and deception since birth, and been addicted to drugs for years. Men with a past who, for the first time, had a future. The

⁶ Jackie Pullinger, *Chasing the Dragon*, p.113

⁷ Ibid. p. 152

best word I can think to describe them is "cheerful." Like the hero in *Beauty and the Beast*, they'd learned to love, and it even made them *look* different.

While an attractive woman, Jackie did not claim it was her own beauty which changed these young men. Nor did she see herself as some sort of hypnotist. She argued,

"Those who explained this extraordinary spiritual happening as an example of 'mind over matter' had to be ignorant of the facts. A drug addict facing withdrawal has a mind already half dead through continual drug abuse and is deeply fearful of pain. Most of our boys only begin to understand Jesus with their minds after they had already experienced Him in their lives and bodies."⁸

Jackie Pullinger was not the only Christian I met in Asia involved in helping drug addicts get their lives back together. Chinese Christians have a long history of successfully relying on prayer and discipleship to help addicts build new lives, from the ministry of a Pastor Xu in northern China at the turn of the last century, to a string of drug rehab centers throughout Southeast Asia run by the rugged characters of an organization called Operation Dawn. I often stayed with an American and Chinese couple on the beautiful east coast of Taiwan who disciplined fifty drug addicts and prostitutes at a time in the Christian faith. I visited a center near the American military bases in the Philippines that helped one hundred and fifty women leave prostitution every year. I found that some of the most successful Christian evangelists in Asia were once drug addicts and criminals. It dawned on me, as I met such characters, that in Asia, at any rate, Jesus was changing lives, not through ecclesiastical powers-that-be, but through powers that are not: simple, weak men and women whom God had called, like Saul on the road to Damascus.⁹

⁸ Ibid. p.160

⁹ I could have found the same closer to home in American inner city neighborhoods. In a review of a colleague's book, Princeton professor and activist John Dilutio argued that believers were virtually "the only people' who were really making a positive difference among the urban poor. "Although I doubt that any other card-carrying social scientist would even think to fault the authors for such a sin of omission, the most important missing endnote to *America in Black and White* is a reference to the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John." *Books and Culture*, June 14, 1999, Tim Stafford, *The*

What Could Another God Do For India?

In the fall of 1984 some of us took a trip to Thailand and India, ostensibly for preaching Christianity, but probably as much to learn about the world as to teach it anything. India came as a shock to me: rats as big as cats wandered into the library where I was reading my Bible to coolly look me over; and crippled beggars wheeled themselves laterally into traffic on skateboards to ask for a rupee. We even encountered what almost amounted to a religious civil war during our visit. I also met front-line troops in what appeared to be a small and disorderly army of Christians from around the world who felt called to an astonishing variety of service to the poor and outcaste. Mother Theresa is famous; but there are hundreds or thousands of Mother Thesas in India. I visited a center her order founded in Bombay, and talked with a man from the Brahmin class who had been rejected twice in his life: first, by his family, for embracing Marxism, and second, by his Marxist comrades, for developing asthma. He seemed overwhelmed by the love he experienced from the nuns who had picked him off the street, and wanted to know Jesus.

Bimal was a leper in Calcutta, a man whom passersby might have wondered what he had done in past lives to account for such an evil karma. His story may be the kind of thing radical Hindus have in mind when they accuse Christians of "bribing" the poor to convert. Taken under wing by an Assembly of God missionary and escorted to a leper colony, Bimal tried to work up his courage to throw himself under the wheels of the train. The missionary, however, kept watch all night through half-closed eyes. At the colony, Bimal became desperate, and began to pray to the God of lepers the missionary had told him about:

"Help me, Jesus. Help me, Jesus. You are the Son of God. You are the Son of God. Help me!"

"Bimal was suddenly overwhelmed. . . To this day he weeps when he

describes the sensation. . . 'Leprosy suddenly meant nothing to me. In that moment, I felt stronger than leprosy. When days came that I weakened and became discouraged, I would pray again and that strength always came back to me."¹⁰

In many south Asian countries, lepers were among the first to become Christians. Why? Jesus gave his followers the example of one who reached out and touched lepers. Books like *Ten Fingers for God* and *City of Joy* chronicle the patient work of pioneer missionary doctors and scientists, and the gradual infusion of hope into leper sub-cultures through the efforts of those who followed the example of their Lord.

Rodney Stark suggests that the early church conquered Rome not only through the power of its courageous martyrdoms but also through equally courageous medicine. When the citizens of the capital fled the plague, and thus spread it, and when in their panic a philosophy of "abandon the sick and save yourself" began to grip the city, Christians risked their lives to feed, give drink and care for the sick. "Something distinctive did come into the world with the development of Judeo-Christian thought," he summarized, "the linking of a highly social ethical code with religion." "Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in substantially higher survival rates."¹¹ Stark noted that the anti-Christian emperor Julian complained that the "impious Galileans" took care of "not only their poor, but ours as well."¹²

Building hospitals has been seen as a pious thing to do in many religions: the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, for example, constructed hospitals around India. The rise of modern hospitals in most parts of the world, however, can be traced less to the Enlightenment or the rise of Deism in the 18th Century, but rather to "back to the Bible" revivals of the 19th Century. Read the Gospels, and it is obvious why a renewed zeal for Scripture has always led to compassionate medicine.

¹⁰ Mark Buntain, *The Compassionate Touch*

¹¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Harper San Francisco, 1997, p.74

¹² *Ibid.* , p. 84

"Jesus went among all the towns and the villages teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every illness. But as he looked at the multitudes He was filled with pity over them because they were like shepherdless sheep that are wearied and helpless. Then He said to his disciples, 'The harvest is indeed abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest that He may send out workers into His harvest.'"

(Mat. 9: 35-38)

Jesus himself was the prototype of the "missionary doctor." Some think it more tolerant to do healing "without strings attached," with no effort to "convert" the patients. A Western disciple of an Indian guru who holds to this philosophy told me recently, "I view most missionary work with much disdain . . . to trade medical supplies in return for spiritual genocide (is) less than altruistic. . . My Master does much health and welfare work and neither our path nor our philosophy are ever mentioned. It is purely altruistic." One can find many secular organizations, such as Medicine Without Frontiers, the Peace Corps, and others, who bring tremendous physical aid to those in need around the world on these terms. Hats off to all those who do good out of sincere compassion. Yet how can they not get discouraged, fixing only that which is sure to break in the end? Jesus set an example of holistic medicine: not a spoonful of "chicken soup" platitudes for the soul to go with surgery on the body, but radical hope for the spirit as well. Bimal's body was not cured, though the progress of the *mycobacterium leprae* on his nerve tissues may have been checked by medicine, and he probably learned techniques to avoid flare-ups. But what good does it do to cure a patient's body if he has no hope? And what good is the hope if it is not based, ultimately, on reality? If Christ has not risen, Paul wrote, Christians are of all men most to be pitied.

Many Western doctors, who avoid getting too obsessed with work by recuperating on the greens of country clubs and the slopes of ski resorts, are not sure what to make of this crowd. Admiration might be granted, but after that, pity, or envy? When I travel to poverty-stricken corners of Asia, again and

again I find Christian doctors and nurses who are not only bringing physical aid to the poor and minorities, but also showing the love of God in the tangible and infectious ways.

Christian compassion is based on the reality of the other, while Buddhist and Hindu compassion is based, in theory, on the denial of any distinction between self and others. However it is conceived in theory, the "field" (as Jesus described it) of the needy is "white to the harvest." The Japanese Zen Master Susuki noted once that Buddhists have "much to learn" from Christians about love; and learn they have. In recent years, Humanists, Buddhists like the Ci Ji foundation in Taiwan, and followers of Indian gurus, have spread out into the harvest field to apply modern medicine to the needy also. In a sense the compassionate, healing touch of Jesus is not limited, but multiplied, through such competition in good works.

The Fish That Made the Whale Vomit

As a boy, growing up in an America fighting a war in Southeast Asia against the Viet Cong, I felt a strange curiosity about the lands behind the "Iron Curtain." I began studying Russian in high school, and read the works of Marx and his followers in college. If the Soviet Union was, as Churchill put it, a "riddle inside a mystery within an enigma," the network of prison cells and work camps that made up the Gulag piqued my curiosity even more. So I read books written in communist prisons and labor camps. One elderly prisoner described how whenever he turned to God, he felt renewal pouring into his whole being. Like Pullinger, he considered the psychological explanation and rejected it, feeling that this power came from outside of himself.

Modern psychology is ready to grant that faith may trigger what is called the "placebo effect" or the "power of positive thinking," allowing the mind to tap reservoirs of strength of which the individual is not consciously aware. When I have leaned on God in prayer, I also sometimes felt power from "outside of myself." And often I had objective reasons for thinking it did, which I will relate in a later chapter. Hindu sadhus who lie on beds of nails, Buddhist monks who burn themselves to death to protest injustice, or Jains who

show mastery over the body by self-starvation, show an amazing power in the mind, which faith can release, to overcome suffering. The question is to what ends this power is channeled.

In China, I met older men and women who had been imprisoned for Christ. They seemed both humble and cautious; they had suffered a lot. Yet I noted fire in their eyes. And I sometimes got the impression the government was actually afraid of these poor and frail old people.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great historian and one-time citizen of the Soviet Gulag, who as a Red Army captain had considered himself an atheist and a Marxist, found a special power in the lives of many believers he met in prison. He was not naive about the historical Russian church; he understood that much of it had been corrupt, xenophobic, and superstitious. But he found the power that changed a murderer into a minstrel of love on the road to Damascus was alive in the Gulag, where the guiding rule of life for nearly everyone else was "survival of the fittest."

"Christians went off to camp to face tortures and death -- only so as not to denounce their faith! They were the only ones, perhaps, to whom the camp philosophy did not stick. . . There were a multitude of Christians: prison transports and graveyards. Prison transports and graveyards. Who will count those millions? They died unknown, casting only in their immediate vicinity a light like a candle."¹³

Richard Wurmbrand, a Jewish convert to Christianity in Romania who spent many years in isolation cells and prison camps, tells about the extraordinary heroism of many of those Christians in first-hand detail.¹⁴ When I worked on a Russian fishing ship as a translator for a couple of months during the Cold War, I had the chance to verify some of the details of another story I read in my childhood. It was the autobiography of a naval cadet and KGB part-timer Sergei Kourdakov who tortured Christians in raids on

¹³ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

¹⁴ His most popular book is *Tortured For Christ*, but many of his other books are also thought-provoking and full of unexpected insights. He is a philosopher with passion who has seen, prayed, and experienced a great deal.

underground churches. Confused by their gentle courage, his own complicity in murder, and an instance of apparent divine intervention, his book *The Persecutor* tells how he jumped ship off British Columbia and swam to Canada in a gale. The captain of the ship I worked on had often eaten with him, but now called him a "traitor."

The church is scorned, in Western Europe and America, as a den of hypocrites, haven of bigots, and a cradle of cold tradition. Perhaps Jesus would say the same to some churches, as indeed he does in *Revelation*. But candles can't be seen well until the sun goes down. Before the revolution, the Russian church, like ours, seemed divided between Pharisaical right and apostate left. War and tyranny, by bringing out the worst in human nature, gave opportunity for heroism. It also make simple virtue of the kind that in times of peace is mimicked by social politeness and smirked at by the avant-garde, glow with a beauty nothing else could match.¹⁵ Christian morality has never been a flower that grows best in a hothouse. Jesus warned his followers they would be persecuted. (John 15:20) The 20th Century revealed a persecuted church of a beauty that should make any skeptic stop in their tracks. Solzhenitsyn, despite torture, Central Asian winters, beatings, starvation and cancer, saw that beauty and cried, "Thank you, prison, for having been in my life." Most people base belief on personal rather than communal experience, and any life, closely examined, can provide ammunition to a cynic. But after a century which has produced so many Christians of such a caliber, I will not join my voice to those who deride the church of Christ.

Jesus Comes to America

Christ also set a pattern that has been deeply influential in the social movements of the affluent Western world. This effect, however, has not always come directly, and usually not from top down. Henry Ward Beecher bemoaned the official Christianity of pre-Civil War America, which he said justified the oppression of Indians and slavery:

¹⁵ This may also have been much of the charm of Confucius' humble platitudes during the Warring States period in China, that so bewilders Westerners with a taste for exotic spiritualities.

"The pulpit has been so prostituted, and so utterly apostatized from the very root and substance of Christianity, that it teaches the most heathen notions of liberty; and why should you expect that the great masses of men would be better informed on this subject than they are? Do you believe that George Washington, were he living, would now be able to live one day in the city of Charleston, if he uttered the sentiments that he used to hold? He would be. . . swung up on the nearest lamp-post."¹⁶

Jesus treated the weak, foreigners, women, and children with a kindness which often scandalized sensitive religious observers, and did indeed get "swung up on the nearest lamp-post." His example and teachings eventually had a powerful, though never unchallenged, effect on Western society. This relationship is sometimes more visible from the outside. After an article entitled "*Two Thousand Years of Jesus*," a Singapore Chinese wrote to *Newsweek Magazine*:

"Your article emphasized the historical aspect of Christianity. Living in an Asian culture, I would like to add another perspective. Imagine a society where man is not made in the image of God and the dignity of the individual depends on his power and wealth. Imagine truth belongs only to powerful and influential people. Imagine a society where forgiveness is a weakness. These are still the conditions in many countries. What the United States and Europe have become are results of living out the very basic doctrines of Christianity. Don't shrug off Christianity and elope with secularism. It is your religion's greatness that has been slowly influencing the world for better."¹⁷

Most often these changes have not originated from the benevolent throne of ecclesiastical authority, but from simple men and women who wanted to

¹⁶ *American Sermons*, Henry Ward Beecher, *Peace Be Still* p.659

¹⁷ George Chua, *Newsweek Magazine*, May 5, 1999

follow Jesus.

Rudy Bridges was six years old, her parents illiterate farmers in the Deep South. The story of Jack and Jill was a tough enough nut to crack; the statutes of the Civil Rights Act might as well have been written in classical Sanskrit, as far as Rudy's ability to understand them went. Yet it was these documents that sent her, as the first black student, to a local elementary school, which previously had been all-white. No other students joined her in the classroom: the white kids stayed home. But every morning, crowds of adults gathered outside the gate of her school. As she walked in the door, escorted by federal marshals, they cursed and threatened her. Every afternoon when she returned home, a gauntlet of persecutors sent the little girl home with their jeers.

One day a young psychiatrist who was visiting New Orleans happened on the scene. Robert Coles, later professor of medical humanities and psychiatry at Harvard University and America's best-known child psychiatrist, was struck by the brutality and heroism of the respective sides of the mismatched confrontation. He began to visit Rudy at home, with her parent's cautious permission, to see how she was holding up under the strain. It was clear little Rudy felt helpless and fearful. Yet Dr. Coles also found, to his amazement, that by and large his young patient was doing well: eating, sleeping, playing, and learning to read, without any severe problem or complaint. "Now, how do you explain that?" he asked himself. "And I did not know how to explain that." He talked it over with his wife. Had he been in Rudy's position, they decided, he would hire a lawyer. He would write learned articles dissecting the pathologies of his enemies in the acidly analytical categories of social science. At least he would turn on them and given them an eloquent piece of his mind. But Rudy could do none of these things. She had no such defenses, yet appeared almost free of the ordinary stress of such a situation. Dr. Coles was mystified, until he found a clue in the girl's religious training, a simple approach to injustice that had never occurred to him in his years of psychological training.

In church Rudy's pastor talked about Jesus' crucifixion. On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." Dr. Coles explained, "and now little Rudy was saying this in the 1960's, about the people in the streets of New Orleans." She prayed for her persecutors

"because they needed praying for," and forgave them, like Jesus. And with that, hatred and fear slid off her like water off a duck's back. God not only "prepared a banquet in the presence of her enemies," but gave her stomach to enjoy it.¹⁸

What role has such forgiveness, modeled on the teachings and even more example of Jesus, played in the slow and incomplete reconciliation of races in America? Philip Yancey, who admits "I grew up a racist," and attended a church in Georgia which propounded a "twisted theological basis" for racism, described in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace* the heroic forgiveness of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers, and how it eventually conquered his heart. "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking the cup of bitterness and hatred," King preached.¹⁹

What saved South Africa from large-scale interracial violence during the transition from apartheid? It once seemed everyone expected a bloodbath. In part, it was the statesmanship of De Klerk, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. But even more, Yancey argues, and others have also pointed out, mutual forgiveness on a personal level prepared the way for national reconciliation.

True, the concepts of forgiveness and equality before God can be found in other religions as well. Mahatma Gandhi, after discovering the power of forgiveness in the *Sermon on the Mount*, (but less in the "Christian" South Africa of his day), poured over the Hindu Scriptures, and there found teachings close enough in spirit that he was able to draw upon native sources in his struggle for unity and freedom for the Indian people. But Hinduism is not *about* reconciliation. The *Bhagavad Gita*, which Gandhi chose (in his Christ-taught humanity) to integrate within his philosophy of ascetic non-violence, was *overtly* a call to accept caste responsibility to wage war. "If you are killed, you win heaven; if you triumph, you enjoy the earth; therefore, Arjuna, stand up and resolve to fight the battle!"²⁰ Buddha's teachings and example cut across caste lines, emphasize non-violence, and in did show a willingness to forgive sins. Theravada nun Ayya Khema, a Jew who discovered Buddhism after her

¹⁸ Robert Cole, *The Inexplicable Prayers of Rudy Bridges*, in Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard*, Zondervan, 1996, p. 38

¹⁹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, Zondervan, 1997, p. 133

²⁰ *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, Bantam Bookss, 1986, p. 34

family had been murdered by the Nazis, explained why she did not allow herself to be consumed by hatred by quoting Buddha: "No fire burns like greed; no grip grips tighter than hatred. . . ." ²¹ But by denying boundaries in theory, in practice Buddhism was less active in breaking down social and political boundaries. If all the reconciliation that needed to happen had already occurred in one's heart, overt acts of forgiveness and reconciliation may seem less vital. Malcolm X spoke of a tremendous liberation he felt in arriving in Saudi Arabia and feeling the reality of the Islamic teaching that "all men are brothers." Equality under God was certainly a step forward for the Arabia of the 6th Century, and will be for any nation whom class or race divide. But when wrong has been done, where do we find forgiveness? Or do we harbor bitterness forever, and pretend that the evil of our enemies does not already have some place in our hearts, too? This was the need which faced Malcolm X on return to a divided America, for which Martin Luther King Jr. and others found a solution in the cross.

Germany

Many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust feel, quite naturally, that it is impossible to forgive evil of such a magnitude. Christian literature is full of examples to the contrary, arguing that as Saul found the power to overcome his bigotry, even under the most terrible circumstances, God can provide power to forgive *anyone*. A communist party official in China murdered two men, father and son. When his own son became critically ill, the Christian wife and mother of the murdered men nursed him back to health. The two sons of a pastor in Korea were murdered by rebellious communist students. After U.N. troops returned to the area, the pastor snatched one of the guilty students from the firing squad and raised him as his own son. In East Asian culture in particular, these stories are almost unbelievable. In *The Hiding Place*, a survivor of the Ravensbruck concentration camp, Corrie ten Boom, who lost her father and sister in the German prisons, told how, after the war, she once met a brutal prison

²¹ Ayya Khema, *I Give You My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist Nun*, Shambhala, 1998, p. 140

guard she recalled from the camp. Having become a Christian, he had a request. "Fraulein," he said, "Would you forgive me?" She had just been speaking about forgiveness, but now, recalling her sister's death, she felt no power to practice what she preached. She asked God for help.

"Woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. 'I forgive you!' I cried, 'With all my heart.'"

Ten Boom summarized, "I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I knew it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power."²²

Jesus said that unless we forgive those who wrong us, we cannot be forgiven by God. But the New Testament also says, "we love, because God first loved us." The doctrine of the universal sinfulness of man has this practical application: it allows us to realize not only that we are sometimes our own worst enemies, but that our enemy is also like us. Even a Nazi puts his pants on one leg at a time. I suspect this truth may work subconsciously on all of us in different ways, depending on whether or not we embrace our own guilt. The lazy, unfeeling, or selfish acts of co-workers, spouses or children may seem more irritating because they remind us of our own unacknowledged shortcomings. In the recess of our souls, we know when we do not forgive, we condemn ourselves. Perhaps this is why Jesus' challenge to the men about to stone the woman caught in adultery, "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" silenced the crowd so completely.

Such anecdotes do not, by themselves, prove Christianity true. I am not denying that there are scoundrels among believers, nor suggesting that the church has a monopoly on heroes. It is also true that religious conversion of almost any kind can effect a dramatic change in a person's life, often for the better, and we can find many noble examples among other religions. But as much as

²² Corrie Ten Boom with Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord*, Fleming Ravell, 1977, p. 55

the hypocrisy of the church has been used as an argument against Christianity, it seems to me, the true force of the argument flows strongly in the opposite direction. If a person could not find Christ in the 20th Century, he was not looking very hard.

Jesus in History

It is a commonplace among skeptics, and even among the general population, that the church has been "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." The *Humanist Manifesto* argued that the Christian emphasis on "eternal life" drew the focus of humankind away from the practical work of improving life in this world.

"Promises of immortal salvation and fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices."

To which it is only natural to reply, paraphrasing Confucius: "If you see and understand so little of this world, how can you presume to tell us what is illusory and what is real about the next?"

The ancient world was full of "social injustices" which no one dreamed of rectifying, even in relative outposts of civilization like the Roman Empire, until Jesus proclaimed the news of the Kingdom. Of six hundred upper-class families studied at an archeological site in pre-Christian Delphi, "only half a dozen raised more than one daughter," while the rest were killed at birth.²³ Before Christ, Stark stated with a touch of hyperbole, "conquerors butchered for the hell of it." Pouring over Scripture and human history as well as Roman law, Augustine developed "just-war" principles which at least planted the idea of military restraint in the minds of Western warriors.

Will Durant says the world "never had seen such a dispensation of alms" as was organized by the Roman church. She "helped widows, orphans, the sick or infirm, prisoners, victims of natural catastrophes; and she frequently intervened

²³ Newsweek, April 5, 1999, Kenneth Woodward, *2000 Years of Jesus*

to protect the lower orders from unusual exploitation or excessive taxation."²⁴ As we have seen, Stark argues it was precisely the "promise of immortal salvation" that caused Christians to care for those sick from the plague. And how else can one explain the actions of the monk who ended the gladiator fights by jumping onto the floor of the Roman Coliseum and being torn to shreds? Apart from eternity, how do you explain the return of St. Patrick to the island of his sufferings? He was one of the first cross-cultural missionaries, and Thomas Cahill claims he was also "the first human being in the history of the world to speak out unequivocally against slavery."²⁵ Cahill argues (with perhaps a touch of patriotic exaggeration) that Patrick's Irish converts almost single-handedly preserved Western scholarship and humanist traditions after the fall of Rome, providing a bridge for civilization to the modern era. What effect would Mother Theresa have had on the modern conscience if she had followed the model of social change given by the great humanist thinkers of our day? Had Alexander Solzhenitsyn continued in his earlier belief, expressed so well in the *Humanist Manifesto*, that the end of life is "self-actualization," would he have changed the world as he did?

Albert Camus wrote a dark novel about a plague in the North African town of Oran, which the town's priest said was a curse from God, while the town rationalist, a medical doctor, tried to combat with science. No doubt religious authority is by nature conservative and benefits from popular superstition; this will be the case no matter what the religion involved, even a secular faith. But if we turn from literature to history, again, we find that many of the scientists who brought the benefits of modern medicine to humanity were strong Christians. Seven of the ten founding members of what became the Royal Society have been specifically identified as Puritans. To men like Kepler, Pascal, Newton, Lister, and Faraday, science meant "thinking God's thoughts after Him."²⁶ Charles Thaxton, a chemist and historian of science, notes that modern science arose in Europe after the introduction of printing made the Bible

²⁴ For Durant's summary of this period, see *The Age of Faith*, p.72-78

²⁵ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Doubleday, 1995, p. 114

²⁶ See *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?* By James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, the chapter entitled *Thinking God's Thoughts After Him*, for details. The authors are prone to hyperbole, and some of their arguments are simplistic, but the evidence they give cannot I think be easily dismissed.

generally available.²⁷ He argued that the Biblical doctrine of Creation allowed Western thinkers to escape from idealist Aristotilian (we could add, Buddhist or Hindu) assumptions that stifled science. "People could discover for themselves that both the Old and New Testament regarded the material world as substantial, real, and good." Francis Bacon said the Greeks were wrong in their approach to nature because they didn't see it as created. Thaxton noted that many historians of science have described science as a "legacy" or even "child" of Christianity.²⁸

Heavenly-minded William Wilberforce finished the work of St. Patrick by leading the fight to ban slavery in the British Empire. Few men in 18th Century England tried harder to "distract" the English people with heaven as did the preacher John Wesley; he also opened England's first free medical dispensary. It was the "general next to God," William Booth, whose troops literally beat the drum in England, and then in Japan, to end forced prostitution.

Richard Nixon's "hatchet man," Charles Colson, had opportunity to effect reform through political sweat and arm-twisting, and with his office a door from the president's, he had a strong arm. After the Nixon presidency fell, thieves and swindlers were his new neighbors in prison. Upon release, Colson founded an organization, Prison Fellowship, that specialized in offering prisoners "promises of immortal salvation." Comparing his two careers, Colson felt he got more done in the Big House than in the White House, shaking the hands of car thieves rather than of prime ministers. Studying church history, he generalized the lesson: "The great reforms of history came about not so much because of political institutions, but as a result of God's power flowing through righteous and obedient people."

Colson's own autobiography might be taken as an example of the quixotic paths redemptive history sometimes takes. A political prisoner in the Philippines, a young opponent of dictator Ferdinand Marcos named Benigno Aquino, was given a copy of Colson's best-selling story, *Born Again*. Aquino experienced

²⁷ For that matter, Gutenberg invented the printing press so that more people could read the Bible. It is interesting that the person named the most influential person of the second millennia, became so because he wanted people to read the words of the most influential person of the first millennia.

²⁸ Charles Thaxton, *Christianity and the Scientific Enterprise*, in Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard*, Zondervan, 1996

spiritual revival. Reprieved and exiled to America, after a few years Aquino felt a call to return to his homeland. "The Filipino is worth dying for," he explained, reading Scriptures to his family over the phone as he prepared to arrive in Manila.

Aquino was gunned down at the airport. Within a year, an angry nation, led by a Catholic archbishop and a vast throng of praying Christians, cast Marcos out of office and put Senator Aquino's widow in his place. Dramatic scenes of the "People Power" revolution were broadcast around the globe. Mass movements for democracy erupted in Burma and China, where they were brutally suppressed. But in Eastern Europe, copy-cat uprisings brought an end to communism.

On the last page of *People of the Lie*, M. Scott Peck quotes an "old priest" who says that "the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being." Peck argued: "A willing sacrifice is required. . . there is a mysterious alchemy whereby the victim becomes the victor." In an earlier book, Peck applied the same logic to his own practice, noting, "as I look back on every successful case I have had I can see that at some point or points I had to lay myself on the line."²⁹

God may not play dice with the universe, as Einstein said, but He does seem to play dominoes. The heroic self-sacrifice of an individual who chooses to "lose his life" to gain it, sometimes knocks down systems of oppression across history like so many dominoes. Reform can I think be traced more often to prayer than to political or philosophical manifestos. In recent years, a Western church that still keeps one eye, from time to time, on eternity, has helped birth such movements as hospices for the dying, Alcoholics Anonymous, civil rights, Habitat For Humanity, homes for unwed mothers, and the struggle against abortion. But the most dynamic and revolutionary social changes in world history may have come in the 19th and early 20th Century when the church remembered its Master's call to lend the rest of the world some of the light.

Missions and Social Justice

²⁹ Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, Simon & Schuster, 1978, p. 149

Few events during my first year in Asia affected me more than my visit to the hill tribes of northern Thailand. As we drove into the Lahu village of Nong Kaew, I fell in love with the tidy bamboo huts, ears of corn hung from windows to dry, stalks standing twelve feet beside the road, stars twinkling between mahogany branches above. But peace was precarious. Each village was subject to what amounted to an ideological guerilla war among competing world views: the drug armies of the Golden Triangle, an alliance of Buddhism with Thai nationalism, Marxist revolutionaries, KMT Chinese nationalists, and a few scattered Christians. In this contest, a dollar could be as deadly as a bullet.

In Nong Kaew, children were educated in a building with a cross over the roof. The quaint Lisu village down the road was less tidy, and visitors needed to step carefully to avoid pig feces. At night they would be offered opium, a place to stay, and for a dollar or two, one of the girls. Earlier visitors received a less-commercial reception. But some tourists were happy to find natives uninhibited by western hang-ups about sex, and that a buck goes a long ways in the hills. Trekkers, mostly Westerners fascinated by native cultures unsullied by the West and indignant at missionaries for "ruining" native cultures, often had a hardening effect on village culture. By the time the Thai government began an aggressive campaign to halt the spread of AIDS, it was probably too late for those girls.

Missionaries made many mistakes in places like Nong Kaew, paying too little respect to native traditions and acting paternalistically in many cases. But the rest of the world has been far crueller. Isobel Kuhn wrote of her experiences in China and Thailand, "All the years I have been a missionary I have never known anyone to go to the tribes to help them except these two classes -- Christ's missionary and the communist idealist."

In many ways communists were kinder to native tribes than western democrats. Anthropologists came to study native cultures, but didn't often "interfere" by teaching people how to better feed or clothe themselves. Tourists came to take pictures, among other things. Businessmen came to wrest oil, opium, emeralds or timber from the savages, allying sometimes with the national government, as in Indonesia, where in recent years Sawi tribesmen were forced

to cut down their own trees as slave labor for Japanese timber companies. Soldiers came to tame them, then policemen to keep them tamed.

Christian missionaries, meanwhile, saved some tribes from extinction. They gave them medicine, empowered them by creating written languages, taught them better ways of raising crops, and showed them how to cope with modern technologies and temptations. Missionaries risked their lives to end blood feuds, cannibalism, and slavery to capricious spirits.

The contributions of Christian missions to the great literate non-Christian civilizations of Asia were almost as tremendous. Lyon Sharmon wrote a biography of the "George Washington of China," Sun Yat-sen, who like a high percentage of early Chinese nationalists, was a Christian. Though inclined to be critical of Christianity, she acknowledged,

"The missionaries fostered scientific knowledge and translated scientific books. It was they who developed the humanitarian knowledge of healing and sanitation, and relief in famine and plague. One may safely say that there was nothing that might be done to stimulate intellectual progress or social betterment that some missionary somewhere did not undertake -- from the better tanning of leather to the creation of a university. History may little care how many converts Christian missions have made in China, but it will never cease to reckon with the diffusion of western ideas, which seems now to have been only a by-product of the missionary penetration."³⁰

I don't entirely agree with Sharmon. I think history will care how many converts missionaries made in China, just as they care about the converts Paul made. And the social values they "diffused" were not "western ideas," but that part of the Gospel that had been internalized by Western culture. She was right in saying social change was not the primary goal of most missionaries, however. The mission community tried to turn the world upside down only so it could see Heaven more clearly. I don't think secular history has even begun to come to grips with the impact missions had, both directly and by spurring

³⁰ Lyon Sharmon, Sun Yat-Sen

indigenous religion into competition in good works.

Christian missionaries gave India over 1200 hospitals and dispensaries, and eighty-six leprosariums. Followers of Jesus gave tribal peoples in East India the education and morale to adjust to the modern world without losing their sense of identity or control over their own institutions.³¹

The second and third waves of nationalists in many Asian countries, faced with a western mission network which tended to baby the new church and protected by Western gunboats, often became understandably suspicious of the "foreign" faith. Many regarded local converts as traitors to the traditions of their civilization, and interpreted mission work in cynical, sometimes paranoid terms. The missionaries were up to no good. Certainly they are acting as agents for their respective governments. Probably they were front-men for the forces of global imperialism. Perhaps they were even cutting up children in orphanages and using body parts for black magic.³² As Asian nations have gained a broader perspective that comes with independence, some Asian scholars have become more objective about the work of missionaries in their countries than modern western analysts. The Shanghai historian Gu Weimin, for example, describes in detail how Christian missionaries not only introduced modern medicine, science, and education, but also a sea change in attitudes towards the poor and needy, hungry peasants in remote regions, addicts, children, and women. In an earlier chapter I noted how Hu She, one of China's greatest modern reformers and scholars, credited missionaries with teaching China to "look at women as human beings."

For all their earthly accomplishments these remarkable men and women often earn nothing but contempt from the world, which continues to crucify them as it crucified their Lord. The James Michener picture of narrow, uptight

³¹ For a poignantly ironic version of the conversion of one tribe in British India told from the standpoint of the tribesmen, see *Beyond the Next Mountain*, by Worldwide Pictures – also some nice scenery. The tribal hero gives a remarkable reply to common accusations that missionaries were imperialists and destroyed native cultures. See also *Wind Through the Bamboos* by Donna Strom, and *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Don Richardson, for more details about the remarkable process by which many tribes in that part of the world accepted Christianity.

³² These stories resemble the malicious rumors spread about the Jews during the European Middle Ages. In both cases the general population, under external threat (Islam, the West) reacted against alien cultures within almost like a body reacts against an implanted organ.

missionaries who, if they see fun happening anywhere, think they have God's mandate to stop it, or the psychotic missionary in the Harrison Ford star vehicle *Mosquito Coast*, is perhaps even more popular with the public today than the fat but helpless missionary in the cannibal's pot to an earlier generation. And no doubt there were, and are, bad eggs, and, as with all human peerages, a peculiar class blindness. (Though many of the most successful missionaries have been extreme individualists, showing an aptitude unusual in any circle to think for themselves. One might even use the word "pig-headed.") When I think of their mistakes, I also think of a church I saw in Bombay during my first year in Asia. All along two walls of the old colonial, western-style church were rows of Victorian memorials. "Beloved little Susan, age 5," one would read. "My dear wife Anabelle, age 25," another would record. In many countries of West Africa and South Asia, almost every member of the first wave of missionaries died of tropical diseases within a year or two of arriving in the field to bring the news of the Gospel. That did not stop a second, a third, and then a fourth wave of believers from casting their lives away upon the same soil. Unlike everyone else, they didn't come to take, but to give. Rather than casting stones at them for their foibles and sins, I wish I could sit at their feet and learn. In many of their faces, I see a reflection of their Master.

Perhaps it is as well that the world has not chosen its heroes from among this remarkable tribe. Were their often hair-raising stories written in the early Hollywood hagiographic style, as indeed some of them have been by overly pious biographers, we might get the impression that "God is looking for a few good men." The heroes of the Old Testament, on the contrary, look like they've come off a Puritan wanted list: a playboy, a man who tried to ditch his wife to save his own skin, another "hero" who gave away state secrets to hookers, and most famous of all, a king who had an affair and then covered it up by murdering the husband. Jesus' followers, too, put their pants on one leg at a time, and not in a phone booth. Peter, cocky and timid by turns, sheathed a real courage in a kind of romantic, half-cocked buffoonery. John the "beloved" was quick-tempered and ambitious. Saul began his career as an inquisitor, as we have seen, and ended it depressed, in prison.

Such is the cast of characters who "turned the world upside down." If

you've been on the mission field, you may recognize a few of them.

In that sense, a recent hatchet job on Mother Theresa, in which the author proved to his visible gratification that the Catholic saint is "not heaven's agent on earth" but full of human flaws, only confirms Christian theology. If the world thought saints were people who were without sin, the man did the world a service. Jesus said all along there is a sinner in every saint, and true saints are the last to deny it.³³

Christians should never forget the inquisitions, crusades, or tortures inflicted on slaves and Indians by "Christian" Americans. We have no right to avert our eyes from abuses perpetrated within our own churches, or pretend they have nothing to do with us. Yet at the same time, it would be dishonest to go along with the cynics. The church of Christ -- that fellowship of sinners who love Jesus and try to follow him -- appears even now dressed not for a funeral, as the cynic said in the quote at the head of this chapter, but for a wedding. The light still shines in the darkness, even that most opaque and oily of darkneses called prosperity, and still the darkness does not quite overcome it.

One might reply that Christianity has resulted in the conversion of many to a better way of life, but the same can be said of other religions as well. Buddhism brought a flowering of debate, scholarship, and learning to the deserts and mountain plateaus of Central Asia, culminating in a brilliant Tibetan culture. Japanese civilization practically began with the journey of the first pilgrim, Kukai, to China for Buddhist Scriptures. The Mormons built a society in the Utah desert which embodied the best American virtues of self-reliance, mutual aid, and social improvement. Millions of Marxists heroically gave their lives for the future of humanity. The Nation of Islam, flaky though it might be, taught Malcolm X to give up a life of petty crime, be faithful to one woman, love books, and become spokesman for the aspirations of his people. Even the People's Temple used religious commitment to help heroin addicts overcome their addictions in the early days.

³³ The Bible tells us that even people who think they are destroying the work of God are often actually doing his work for Him, after all. But one does wonder about a person who takes glee in attacking an old lady who spent her life comforting the dying, and the squeals of delight (relief?) with which some people greeted the publication of that book -- the jeering title of which does not merit mentioning.

I agree completely. Can man be good without God? If we define "good" in the usual sense of the term, my answer would be a qualified "yes." I have lived three years in Japan, where Christians make up less than one percent of the population, yet good citizens, kind neighbors, and loving families, are probably closer to the rule than in the United States. If you ask, "can positive change in people's lives result from faith in persons who ultimately prove less than worthy of that faith?" Again, I think the answer is "yes."

However, any honest historian would, I think, admit that if we look for positive, life-enhancing effect on human history, no other man or woman comes close to the person Saul met on the road to Damascus. And no teachings have done as much to ennoble mankind than those of Jesus. John said that in Jesus the "*Tao* became flesh," and I think that love remains incarnate, first in his followers, and secondly in those he influences. Furthermore, while the good in Buddhism is seldom realized apart from "attachments" which cast doubt on the Buddha's central teachings, and while brotherhood within the Nation of Islam was only achieved by calling ninety percent of one's neighbors "devils," and while I doubt any German of the 19th Century rose in the morning and thanked God to have Karl Marx as neighbor, the teachings and life of Christ are good and elevating from the core of who he is. The more a person is like Christ, the more enhancing his or her acquaintance will be to our dignity, though undoubtedly challenging to our self-image. But I do not claim this by itself amounts to a sufficient reason to believe in Christianity. The character and power of Christ to change history could be just a fortunate delusion, or an inspiring part of some higher paradigm. And for those who have experienced something else, these historical facts may seem hollow.

We have seen, I think, that Jesus has adequate claim to be the Way. Let us apply two additional tests to Christian teachings, corresponding to his claims to be "Life" and "Truth:" the tests of happiness, and of reason.