

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WEST

Expanded Edition



How Christianity Has Shaped Our Values

Nick Spencer

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First published in Great Britain in 2016
by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

Expanded edition
Published in the United States of America in 2018
by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Sharon Adams
Cover design by Mark Abrams

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Spencer, Nick, 1973- author.

Title: Evolution of the West / Nick Spencer.

Description: Expanded edition. | Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
| Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017049190 (print) | LCCN 2017051149 (ebook) | ISBN
9781611648560 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664263836 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Values--Religious aspects. | Church and the world. |
Christian ethics. | Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR115.W6 (ebook) | LCC BR115.W6 S58 2018 (print) | DDC 270--dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017049190>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Introduction

1

For the last ten years I have worked for Theos, a Christian think tank based in Westminster. Theos was launched in November 2006, which, by some quirk of divine humor, was a month after Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* was published. The so-called New Atheists were sweeping all before them, as the world reeled from the sometimes impertinent, sometimes horrific intrusion of religious commitment into public life, and in consequence temperatures rose and for a time the ordinary habits of civility stood aside and sinister metaphors and cardboard caricatures spread through discourse like a virus, or maybe a meme.

We understand that the faithful live in an inspissated [it means “thickened” or “congealed,” apparently] gloaming of incense and obfuscation, through the swirls of which it is hard to see anything clearly, so a simple lesson in semantics might help to clear the air for them on the meanings of “secular,” “humanist” and “atheist.”

So wrote A. C. Grayling, a New Atheist understudy, in an essay that greeted the launch of Theos with less than complete joy.

The general foot-stamping continued for a while, reaching a high or perhaps low point with a notorious atheist bus campaign that inspiringly entreated people to “stop worrying and start enjoying your life,” to which Theos made a small contribution in the naïve hope that it would at least encourage people to think about the meaning of life. Even at that time, however, in the early days of this new movement, we heard from atheists who were disquieted by the noisiness of their compatriots and who, while agreeing wholeheartedly with their rejection of all things divine, quietly wished they would avoid sounding quite so sophomoric and self-righteous when doing so.

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Silent disquiet rumbled on but eventually more and more atheists were prepared to say “Not in my name.” The editor of *New Humanist*, the magazine of the Rationalist Association in Britain, wrote an editorial observing that Dawkins provided “a case study in how not to do it,” pointing out that blanket condemnations of religious groups were morally dubious (as well as counterproductive); that religious believers were in fact no less intelligent than non-believers; and that secularism did not mean excluding religious believers from public life. The writer Alain de Botton published a book titled *Religion for Atheists*, which suggested atheists were better stealing from religion than mocking it. Atheist churches opened up in North London, complete with sermons and singing. The atheist analytic philosopher, Thomas Nagel, ventured to suggest that the “materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature” failed to explain the origins of life, human consciousness, intentionality, meaning and value, and was “almost certainly false.” John Gray, a disarmingly honest British atheist philosopher, repeatedly demolished self-satisfied humanistic atheism with aplomb, attacking it with precisely the same Darwinian weapons that it had used on God: “Atheism and humanism . . . seem to be conjoined when in fact they are at odds . . . a type of atheism that refused to revere humanity would be a genuine advance.”

At some point, the New Atheism storm finally seemed to pass over the horizon, and the more reflective, self-critical, and realistic voices were again heard in atheist thought. Writing ten years after Theos’s launch, it feels a little easier to say you are a Christian in public without others instantly claiming that that clearly means you are the unwitting host for virus more dangerous than smallpox.

Storms often leave a trail of destruction, scattering debris in their wake, and although this one may have passed, or at least have lessened in intensity and extent, it has left a lingering sense that Christianity was more or less tolerable. At a personal level, it advocated certain practices that appeared to help foster psychological well-being. Communally, it helped feed, clothe, and support many people in need, as well as providing a focus point for much community activity. Creatively, it clearly lay somewhere behind many of the greatest artistic achievements of European civilization. In as far as its allegedly innately violent tendencies could be defused, and providing it was kept in the

leisure category of our lives and prevented from bothering the adults as they got on with the business of running the world, Christianity was sufferable.

Such an approach necessitated a certain historic logic that could sometimes border on outright amnesia. According to this narrative, modern people lived by Enlightenment values that were developed in the Enlightenment period by Enlightenment philosophers who not only had no discernible intellectual connection with those who went before them, but who worked in the teeth of opposition from obscurantist and often violent churchmen. The more generous treatments of the same theme extended the historic borders, back to the Renaissance when human dignity and nobility were first discovered, and forward to the post-war period when human rights were established and welfare states set up. And the most generous treatments would acknowledge the presence of the odd, usually dissenting, Christian thinker or activist in this mix. Nonetheless, the central narrative was the same: that of slow but steady secular emancipation.

One doesn't need to go quite as far as Christopher Hitchens's claim that religion poisons everything to witness such amnesia. Jonathan Israel, a supremely erudite historian of the Enlightenment, is quoted making a comparably sweeping and dismissive statement in chapter 1 below. "What has 'theology' ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody?" asked Richard Dawkins rhetorically, seemingly unaware of the early Church's debates about personhood and what it meant for human nature and dignity, a quality that underlies almost everything else. "The Church of England switched only recently from being the Tory party at prayer to being stoutly leftwing," according to newspaper columnist Simon Jenkins, a statement that is both wrong (Church of England congregations are disproportionately right-of-center) and wrong again (the Church of England hierarchy made an oddly unified move to the left around the turn of the nineteenth century). The list could go on but the point should be clear: sometimes subtly, sometimes accidentally, sometimes egregiously the role of Christianity in forming Western values that we hold dear is rewritten or forgotten.

Amnesia of this nature is not simply a cause of concern to Christians. Indeed, if anything it is a bigger issue for historians as it illustrates how we can lose the ability of hearing the music of the past in its own key.

The past, at least in Europe, was Christian—a statement that has no hidden implications as to whether the present is or the future will be. People thought in Christian and spoke in Christian and reasoned in Christian, even as the public square became ever more plural. Belief was ubiquitous, shaping even the minority who did not believe. In the words of the historian turned Conservative politician, John Redwood:

Whenever a man took up his pen and attempted to write about the weather, the seasons, the structure of the earth, the constitution of the heavens, the nature of political society, the organization of the Church, social morality or ethics he was by definition taking up his pen to write about God.

Redwood is here writing of early modern Europe but the sentiments, albeit increasingly diluted, apply well into the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. In the words of Samuel Moyn, whose book on human rights is explored in chapter 9, “the trouble . . . is not so much that Christianity accounts for nothing, as that it accounts for everything.” Secular moderns often have a tin ear when it comes to the religiosity of history, and it matters.

2

This book comprises a collection of essays, reviews, and lectures written and/or delivered in ten years at Theos, although subsequently revisited and revised substantially, alongside a number of essays that appear here for the first time. I have decided to dispense with foot/endnotes for the most part as the essays are not intended to be scholarly pieces. Together, they are an attempt to hear the past in its own key, rather than instinctively transposing it into one with which we are familiar, and comfortable, today. However, the book is more than simply a collection that shows how Christian Europe’s past was, a fact that may be discerned from the list of topics covered—dignity, nationhood, law, democracy, humanism, atheism, science, secularism, ethics, rights, welfare, capitalism—none of which is exactly irrelevant to where we are today. *The Evolution of the West* hopes to speak as much to present concerns as to past ones.

There is a significant danger in doing this, which may be illustrated with reference to the BBC comedy show *Goodness Gracious Me*. A

recurring sketch in this sees a young British Indian in vexed conversation with his bombastic father. In one scene the young man sits on the sofa in the front room watching *Trooping the Colour* on TV. His father sits behind a magazine paying no attention to the program. The young man sighs admiringly. “The Queen looks nice doesn’t she?”

“Nice? Of course nice,” his father puts down the magazine. “Because she’s Indian.”

“What? The Queen?” the son asks, incredulous. It’s too late to stop the father, however. He’s off.

“All of them. The whole Royal Family—INDIAN! Think about it,” he tries to persuade his skeptical son.

Descended from Queen Victoria, Empress of India, so Indian. Look at them. They all live in the same family house together—INDIAN! All work in the family business—INDIAN! All have arranged marriages—INDIAN! They all have sons, daughters no good—INDIAN! Children live with their parents until they are married—INDIAN! What more do you want? You want them to put on turban and charm snakes out of baskets?

This is a temptation for those Christians writing about what the modern world owes to Christianity. “Rights—CHRISTIAN! Read 1 Corinthians 9:4. Science—CHRISTIAN! Read 1 Kings 4:33. Ethics—CHRISTIAN! Read Psalm 14:1. Law—CHRISTIAN! Read Deuteronomy 4:1.” There is no end of cheap proof-texting that can show how the West owes everything to Christianity—or rather everything it currently holds dear. It’s an exercise not only scripturally and theologically shallow but every bit as historically tone deaf as any New Atheist polemic. If Christians of the present think Christians of the past unanimously spent their time campaigning volubly for democracy, welfare, rights, and the Scientific Revolution, they should spend some time reading the Christians of the past.

Samuel Moyn makes this point well when writing of the origins of human rights. “The truth is,” he observes, “that Europe and therefore the modern world drew nearly everything from Christianity in the long term.” “Without Christianity, our commitment to the moral equality of human beings is unlikely to have come about.” But this by itself, he goes on to remark, “had no bearing on most forms of

political equality—whether between Christians and Jews, whites and blacks, civilized or savage, or men and women.” Moreover, “it would be fictitious retrospectively to edit the long and tumultuous history of Europe, as if everything we liked about the outcomes were due to its hegemonic religion, while the rest was an unfortunate accident or someone else’s fault.” In other words, Christianity has played a big role in this show—indeed it has played the lead for much of the last 1,500 years—but the play has been no mere soliloquy, and the lead has had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the overall plotline.

That this is the argument of this collection should be signalled both by some of its contents—rarely, for example, are “atheism” or the “secular self” counted among Christianity’s great, intended gifts to the West—and by its title. “Evolution” is popularly understood as a smooth, linear, even intentional progress line from the simple to the complex, from *Homo habilis* on the left to *Homo sapiens*, dignified and usually carrying a spear, on the right. In reality, it is nothing of the kind, being more akin to a circuitous path marked by circumstance and accident rather than a smooth, gradual parabola; a tree whose branches reach out in many different directions rather than a flagpole whose only way is up.

Although one should always be careful about pushing metaphors—not least evolutionary ones—too far, or on to schemes where they have limited place, it is not stretching evidence or credibility to breaking point to see the intellectual development of the European mind and values, and the Christian influence thereon, in this way. There has been continuity and progress. Yesterday did turn into today, and today is clearly different from yesterday. But the transition from one to the other is complex, convoluted, and full of dead ends, accidents, coincidences, and unintended consequences. The tree of Western values did grow in Christian soil but it would be a mistake to imagine that soil had some precise blueprint for what the tree would eventually look like.

3

This invites one further but important question. The debate over how random evolution is has been a long-standing and intemperate one. Accordingly, using the metaphor of evolution to describe the

development of European values, and Christianity's role in that, might be taken to imply that the process under discussion has been entirely arbitrary. Were we to rewind the clock 2,000 or so years and run history again, we would find that, even were Christianity to have established itself as the dominant intellectual and cultural "imaginary" of the continent, everything would have "evolved" differently: no human dignity, no humanism, no rule of law, no concept of rights, no scientific revolution—a wholly different ethical, social, and political world.

Such might be the conclusion were the idea of unrepeatable randomness well established in evolutionary circles. That is certainly how some, such as the late Stephen Jay Gould, thought of it. "If you could rewind the tape of life," he once remarked, in a more analog age, "erasing what actually happened and let it run again, you'd get a different [result] each time."

And yet there is another way of looking at the process, which shows it to be rather less haphazard and perhaps even opens up a strangely apt theological angle on the subject. This way lies in the seeming ubiquity of convergence—"the recurrent tendency of biological organization to arrive at the same 'solution' to a particular need." Biologically, this is now widely recognized: eyes (both camera and compound), wings, legs, claws, teeth, brains, tool-use, agriculture, and much else besides have evolved time and time and time again. Given the initial conditions in which life on earth evolves, there are, it seems, only so many ways of feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproducing. For all the randomness involved in the process, there are certain inherent invisible conditions and constraints and contours that shape it toward ends that, if not predictable, are certainly probable. In the words of evolutionary paleobiologist Simon Conway Morris, whose book *Life's Solution* illustrates this principle with admirable force and clarity, "the evolutionary routes are many, but the destinations are limited."

Perhaps that is a fruitful way of looking at the evolution of Western values. Given the Christian "constraints"—the ideas, convictions, commitments, "imaginaries" (a term we shall return to when discussing Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* in chapter 10)—within which Western culture developed, certain paths, directions, and even

possibly destinations became if not predictable, certainly possible, and maybe probable. From the understanding of human nature, identity, community, and destiny inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and by the reflections and practices of his early followers, certain further commitments to human dignity, “humanism,” the rule and significance of law, nationhood, and “political” authority were generated. The innumerable political vicissitudes in the afterlife of the Western Roman empire took these commitments in different directions, as did the various Renaissances—Carolingian, Aristotelian, Italian—that followed them, and these various combinations of Christian commitments and historical circumstances in their turn generated still further ideas that, in time, germinated political and religious actions and reactions—such as atheism and secularism—that came to reshape early modern Europe. From one perspective it all looks rather a bit like Joseph Heller’s rubbish-bag of random coincidences blown open by the wind, but on closer inspection the bag had certain specific contents and the wind was blowing in a particular direction.

This is not a tale of inevitability, any more than the evolution of the lesser spotted woodpecker was inevitable. The very fact that Christianity in eastern Europe inspired different political, social, and intellectual values, and that Christianity in east Asia died out almost entirely is testimony to that. We should not underestimate the potential impact of historical circumstance. Nevertheless, one might conclude that, to borrow Stephen Jay Gould’s analog metaphor, were we to re-run the tape of Western history, erasing what actually happened and letting it run again, we might, assuming the same deep Christian conditions and commitments, end up with a set of values that, while superficially different, bore a striking resemblance to those we recognize today.

St. Paul hints at a theological angle on this idea in what we know as his second letter to the church at Corinth. Humans, he tells his readers, are jars of clay—weak, fragile, and often rather chipped and dirty—but they are jars that contain a great treasure that somehow persists and works to the common good, even when we do not. As he puts it elsewhere, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness.”

Introduction

So it is with the influence of Christianity in the West. Christianity, or rather Christians, have been the vessel into which God has poured himself, but they hold that treasure badly: they leak, they spill, they contaminate. And yet, somehow, what they carry persists and preserves and heals and hopes. However many wrong turns Christians take—and the essays in this volume show that Christians have had a profoundly ambiguous relationship with some of the demonstrable human goods we now take for granted—the treasure that they purport to bear remains.

In *A Secular Age*, discussed in chapter 10, Charles Taylor remarks that “our past is sedimented in our present.” So it is. The first hope of this book is to draw out some of the ways that our Christian past is sedimented in our increasingly amnesiac present. But the second is to gesture toward how fragments of the good work of God himself remain sedimented in the mess and error and confusion that is ordinary human life.