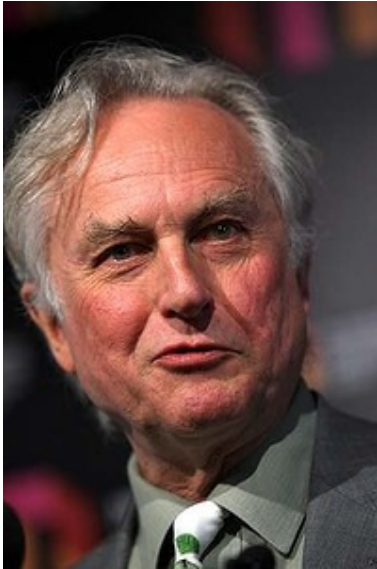


## Secular world has a Christian foundation

The Melbourne Age, April 15, 2012



Richard Dawkins ... claimed that Christians were missing in action in the fight against slavery. Photo: Ken Irwin

The contemporary atheist movement has a scorched earth strategy - chop down Christianity, root and branch. I don't believe in God either, but this strategy is entirely counterproductive.

Not satisfied to point out that elements of Christian belief are historically implausible, or that religion is scientifically unsubstantiated, the New Atheist movement wants to prove something more. That Christianity has been a force for bad, that there is something fundamental about religious belief that holds back progress, approves of oppression, and stokes hatred.

Yet, virtually all the secular ideas that non-believers value, have Christian origins. To pretend otherwise is to toss the substance of those ideas away. It was theologians and religiously minded philosophers who developed the concepts of individual and human rights. Same with progress, reason, and equality before the law: it is fantasy to suggest these values emerged out of thin air once people started questioning God.

"Christian Commonwealth" ... John Locke.



Take the separation of church and state - a foundation of the modern secular world, and a core of the political philosophy that atheists should favour above all else. It was, simply, a Christian idea.

Early Christian philosophers thought seriously about what Jesus's words, "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," meant for the formation of political society.

St Augustine, writing as Rome fell, saw the City of Man and the City of God as clearly separate. For Augustine, the religious and secular worlds were distinct. The long conflict between the papacy and medieval European kings over the ensuing centuries reinforced this division.

When the father of liberalism, John Locke, argued for religious liberty, he noted there was no such thing in the gospels as a "Christian Commonwealth". The Bible insisted on states "with which the law of Christ hath not at all meddled".

So, by the time Thomas Jefferson devised the formula of a "wall of separation between church and state", he was drawing on 1500 years of Christian thought. The basic philosophy of modern secular democracy - that religious belief is a matter of individual conscience, not government - is a Christian idea. Even more central to our modern identity is the idea that all individuals have human rights, that simply by virtue of being human we have basic liberties that must be protected by law. This idea too has a deep theological origin. Such mediaeval philosophers as Thomas Aquinas and his follower Francisco de Vitoria married biblical study with classical philosophy.

By doing so, they developed the concept of rights as we understand it today. For these Christian thinkers, "natural" rights originated from God. Humans formed societies in order to defend those rights.

Yet many modern human rights activists seem to believe that human rights sprang forth, full-bodied and with a virgin birth, in United Nations treaties in the mid-20th century.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea of human rights was founded centuries ago on Christian assumptions, advanced by Biblical argument, and advocated by theologians. Modern supporters of human rights have merely picked up a set of well-refined ethical and moral arguments.

Of course, it could not be otherwise. The modern world is shaped by 3000 years of philosophical evolution. And for half that time the dominant moral philosophy in the Western world has been a Christian one. For most of our history, all the great thinkers have been religious. So our secular liberalism will inevitably owe a huge amount to its Christian origins.

Ideas do not exist in a vacuum. If we imagine they were invented yesterday, they will be easy to discard tomorrow. So why are modern atheist agitators so eager to shed Western civilisation's Christian legacy? Their reasoning - that atheism is attractive not only because it's accurate but because religion is morally bad - ironically resembles the simplistic good-versus-evil propaganda of history's most dangerous religious

fanatics. Yet many Christians defend their faith by simply citing the good works of their co-religionists.

Not only does this prove little (of course, some people are good, and some people are bad) it almost always ends in the tit-for-tat, your-team-killed-more-than-my-team debate. Was Adolf Hitler a Christian? Would an answer be at all meaningful? Both sides do this. Richard Dawkins claimed on ABC's Q&A last Monday that Christians were missing in action in the fight against slavery. This is clearly wrong. Has he not heard of the Christian abolitionist movement or William Wilberforce? But it's a revealing error.

Surely, to argue for atheism, there is no logical need to denigrate past Christian accomplishment.

The anti-slavery argument that all humans were of equal moral worth won the day, and this was, to all concerned, a Christian argument. To acknowledge the religious heritage of the modern world is to say nothing about religious "truth". But while our age may be secular, it is, at the same time, still a deeply Christian one. If atheists feel they must rip up everything that came before them, they will destroy the very foundations of that secularism.

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