

# Conversations with a Skeptic: Christianity Is Toxic To Humanity

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[ 0 : 00 ] We, as I was mentioning earlier, we, over the, starting last week and for the next several weeks, we are in a series, what we're calling Conversations Between a Christian and a Skeptic.

Now, the purpose of the series is that we want to be a people who are free to engage some of the tough questions.

And these are questions that are not just relevant for non-Christians who are considering Christianity, they're relevant for all of us, they're relevant for Christians as well.

And so we want to be able to engage them honestly and clearly. Now, Aaron and I, this is Aaron Roberts, say hello Aaron.

Hello everybody. Very good. Aaron and I are going to have a conversation. And the conversation that we're going to have is about whether or not, how did you put it?

[ 1 : 00 ] How was it put? That Christianity has had a toxic influence on humanity. So that's the accusation I'm going to level at Jim. Now, it's important that everybody know that Aaron and I are both Christians.

We're both on staff here at the church. It would be a bit odd if Aaron wasn't a Christian and he was on staff at the church. So just, you know, full disclosure here.

But Aaron's job is going to try to be to articulate the question as clearly as possible. And my job is to, as much as possible, to give something of the Christian response or the response that Jesus, how does Jesus give us clarity on the question?

So we're going to do that. We're not going to put each of these weeks, we're not putting these questions to rest, but we're opening up a conversation. So that said, shall I start?

Shall I? Go for it, man. Jim? Yes. Nice to see you. How are you? It's very good to be seen. How are you? Good. Wife? Children? Okay. Fantastic.

[ 2 : 09 ] Very natural. Isn't it a very natural conversation? I think a very reasonable accusation that could be leveled at Christianity is that, on balance, Christianity has had a toxic effect on humanity.

And this is how I think people would couch it. I would think they would say something along these lines. That there's some nice Christians that have done some cool charity stuff and nice buildings, good for the arts and stuff.

However, that on balance, Christianity has had a negative impact on humanity.

And right now, that religious sort of fanaticism or just fundamentalism is a huge problem for the world and a great danger for the free-thinking world.

And I want to quote to you from a book by a guy called Richard Hitchens, who's a very famous... I think it's Christopher Hitchens. Christopher Hitchens, sorry. Who am I thinking? Richard Dawkins.

[ 3 : 19 ] That's who I'm thinking of, isn't it? He's an individual, too. Yeah. This is a different individual. Richard Hitchens, who's the cousin of this very famous atheist, but also wrote a scandalously identical book to him called God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything.

So let me quote to you from the introduction here. As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are, in their different ways, planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all hard-won human attainments.

Is that it? Yeah. Okay. Yeah. That's an awkward quote. Yeah. It's a good one. I remember... Perhaps an awkward silence. I've read that book.

I remember... I don't think I've read all of it, to be honest, but I've read most of it. And I do remember coming across that quote. I think that's in the introductions, right towards the beginning.

Yeah. Yeah. It's right at the start. And I think people reading that would say, yeah, you know, religious people wanting to take over the world and it being really dangerous, you know, like...

[ 4 : 34 ] Some people might say, oh, but that's just sort of, you know, an extremist Islamic gig, you know, and, you know, Christians aren't like that. However, historically, Christians have a lot to answer for.

In terms of violence in the world. And in the present day as well. But historically, with the Crusades, you know, anywhere between a million and 10 million people died. They don't really know, but it was millions of people died.

Including Crusades of children. Like, you know, children gathering together and going off in the name of God and just getting slaughtered, you know. You know, so we've got a history of Christians fighting people of other faiths and or Christians gathering against people that isn't like, like the Salem witch hunts, for example.

But Christians against other Christians who are a bit different. You know, like in Ireland, the Protestants are the Catholics. Rwanda, the genocide. These are supposedly Christians, you know, killing each other.

I mean, you could go on, but it just seems to me that Christianity does have a significant amount to answer for. In terms of violence.

[ 5 : 41 ] Just violence. Well, I think right off the bat, you'd have to say that there is, there's no question, there's no question, but that there is a lot of dirty laundry in Christianity's past.

But to kind of flesh out the question a little bit here, would you say or do you think people would say that there is something intrinsically in either Christianity or religion generally that would drive them towards violence?

Yeah, yeah. I mean, yeah, yeah, I think so. I think, I mean, some people might say, well, what we're talking about here is great swaths of kind of the uneducated poor who are easily sort of swayed.

And even if that's the case, it's still manipulating great populations of people and getting them to do very bad things.

You know, it seems to me like it radicalizes people's pre-existing prejudices, you know. And so you've got, you know, whole groups of people who all of a sudden, because of their faith, view the world in very simplistic terms of goodies and baddies.

[ 6 : 58 ] So let's, you know, let's get rid of the baddies, you know. And you add sort of an extreme faith to that and it radicalizes everything.

And when you've got people who are already sort of semi-prejudiced against something or want to do something, you add God into that mix and they'll just do crazy stuff. You know, like 9-11 is probably the most sort of cliché example of that.

I think there's a couple things. First of all, what I just said, that there's no question that if you look at religion generally and if you look at Christianity specifically, there's no question that people have done terrible, terrible things in the name of religion.

Right. So I'm winning so far. Is that what you're saying? So far, fair enough. Yeah. It's not a competition. Good. Good. But I'm winning. There you go. Yeah. It's not a competition. I'm winning. But I think at the same time, you've got to realize, and you've got to look at the fact that violence is an equal opportunity employer.

Okay? You don't have to be religious to end up being violent, right? In the 20th century, for the first time in the history of humanity, you had whole regimes, whole political systems that were set up explicitly atheistic, right?

[ 8 : 14 ]     Particularly the communists, right? And the interesting thing is you look at, for the first time in history, you have political regimes that are explicitly anti-religion, explicitly irreligious.

And yet, even though they're irreligious, certainly not Christian, they end up being some of the most repressive and violent regimes in history.

So you've got the Khmer Rouge. You've got Stalinist Russia. You've got Maoist China. And so when you look at that, that's not to say that atheism necessarily leads to violence or that religion necessarily leads to violence.

It's that both of them can be used for terrible, terrible things. And, you know, just so you know, I mean, I think most of us here are fairly friendly, fairly benign.

But anyways, you're going to come back to me. Is that right? I think. I mean, no one here is shooting people, obviously. But. That's good.

[ 9 : 25 ]     Yeah. So let's say you may have a reasonable case in terms of just the really acute violence, right? Let's just say that.

However, you could still argue, and I think you could still argue really well, powerfully, that Christianity does do a lot of emotional and intellectual violence to people.

And let me give you a few examples. So in terms of emotional violence, you have, I mean, I've just met Christians who are very fragile people, who just feel so awful about themselves.

Because the faith puts these incredibly unrealistic moral expectations on people, which they invariably never live up to.

And so you've got a whole bunch of people who either are really acutely and observably depressed or anxious, because they can't live up to these expectations, or they hide it really well.

[ 10 : 29 ]     So you've got these people who are really sort of broken and feel terrible about themselves, or you've got, you know, hypocrites. And so you're doing emotional damage to people, I think, would be a fair case to make.

You could also say Christianity does intellectual violence to people, just in terms of, you know, the hierarchy of the church. Like, you're the minister. You preach. You tell people what to think.

And you've got to do what you say. You know, people could argue, listen, there's no room for freedom here. I want to jump up and ask questions. I want to disagree. But, you know, we've got to stay the boat.

We've got to, you know. So I think you could say that Christianity, it can create violence. It can be used to manipulate people.

And it can be used to cause great emotional damage. And it can stifle kind of people's intellect.

[ 11 : 26 ] I think there would be a couple things to say. First of all, which is not directly to your point, but I think it's important just for intellectual honesty that we get it out in the open.

And that is that down through history, religion has done, particularly Christianity, has done lots of fantastic things. I mean, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Wilberforce, all of them did remarkably important, great things for their societies.

And they did it because they were Christians. The second thing, though, with regard to the question about kind of intellectual violence, you know, coercing people and things like that, undoubtedly that's possible.

I would hope the fact that we're actually having this conversation right now, the fact that we are actively inviting people to ask their hardest questions, would be an indication that we are not being coercive.

I mean, one of the differences between propaganda and education, right, is propaganda gives information but doesn't allow any questions. Education gives information and allows challenge and other opinions and other perspectives and things like that.

[ 12 : 41 ] And so I would hope, and I would want to stay right here, that the mere fact that we're having this conversation should be an invitation, a wide invitation for us to bring up the hardest questions that we can muster. And so in that regard, I hope we are not being coercive, and I don't think we are.

Thirdly, this is a little bit more subtle. This would get to the issue around whether or not religion, and particularly Christianity, can lead and can be the cause of terrible, terrible things.

I would argue that the problem is not so much at the level of Christianity per se. It's at the level of the human heart. Now, I say that for a couple of reasons.

One is what I already mentioned. You can be religious and violent, and you can be irreligious and violent. There's something that causes people to be violent that is deeper than either religion or irreligion.

Okay? You can use, let me put it differently. Imagine the best ideology that you can think of. An example might be democracy.

[ 13 : 52 ] I hope that we all here agree that democracy is a good thing, that as an ideology it's helped the world. Even democracy can be used imperialistically, right?

There are countries who are democracies and who have democratically decided to go to war against other, smaller, less powerful...

Oil rich. Powerful... Oh, sorry. Did I say oil rich? I said oil rich, but I don't know where that came from. Yeah. That democratically decided to go to war against other, you might say, oil rich countries, and impose their style of government on those countries.

Now, I'm not making any political comments right now. Iraq. But... But... Now, what's in this? But the point is, even a good ideology can be used for wicked ends.

And the thing is, the issue is in the human heart. The human heart has a unique ability to take really good things and use them for selfish ends.

[ 15 : 04 ] We sometimes... We oftentimes, we take some of the best things in life, whether it be morality or power or money or sex or whatever else. We take the best things in life and we use them for ourselves and against other people.

And that's, ultimately, what leads us to use anything on offer to become hypocritical or manipulative or even violent. So, any ideology can be used for ill gain.

And the problem is deep, deep within the human heart. And you can't... The problem is us. And you can't escape that. And you're saying you can't escape that by being religious or non-religious.

Yeah, I mean, moral systems do not address the problem of the human heart. The problem of our deep selfishness. The scriptures call that sin.

Our deep selfishness that puts ourselves at the head of everything else. The best moral system in the world isn't going to address that deep heart issue. Yes, but isn't this just, like, incredibly depressing, though?

[ 16 : 06 ] Like, you just... I mean, Oprah Winfrey, for all who... I want to think... Oprah Winfrey says... I mean, for all her wackiness, you know. Yeah.

I mean, she's campaigning for kind of like, you know, let's have... Let's be free from intellectual and emotional oppression. Let's have good... Let's have good mental health. Right. Let's, you know, let's be nice to each other because we believe that human beings are good.

And, you know, if we band it together, if we pay it forward, if we do all that stuff. I mean, at least she's kind of like, has some hope for humanity. And it's...

At least she's got a bit of self-belief in humanity. Like, you know, we can pull out of this, you know. But it just... All you've said so far is... Sounds like you have very little faith in people.

And it's just very depressing. Okay. It could be pessimistic. It could be pessimistic. If there wasn't a solution. The first question that you've got to ask is not, is it pessimistic?

[ 17 : 11 ] Is it optimistic? The first question that you need to ask is, is it true? Is the human heart wired in such a way that we take good things and use them for ourselves and oftentimes against other people? Because if that's true, even what Oprah Winfrey gives us is nothing more than just another morality.

Another morality that... It's a different set of moral systems than historic Christianity. But it's... You mentioned it. You know, pay it forward. Whatever. Believe in yourself.

Do all these sorts of things. And you'll get a good end. If it is true that the problem is actually in our hearts, that we are deeply selfish, if that's the problem, then any optimistic morality that Oprah Winfrey or anyone else might give us isn't going to solve that deep issue.

And like I said, it would be pessimistic if there wasn't a solution. But the whole point of Christianity, the whole point of Jesus, is that Jesus comes and he does two things.

He forgives the selfishness and the sin that is deep, deep within us. Even we use the best things in life. We use them for ourselves and against other people. He forgives us for the wickedness that that has driven us to perpetrate.

[ 18 : 23 ] And the second thing he does is he actually gives us a new heart. He reorders our heart. He doesn't just give us a new morality. He reorders our heart in such a way that we're able to love other people freely.

I mean, if I was visiting this church today and I was really in touch with my heart, you know, and I went along with a lot of the stuff you've been saying, like I sort of go, okay, being non-religious or religious, it doesn't matter.

There's still a problem in our hearts. And if, you know, if somebody was visiting this and they're really in touch with themselves and they thought, yeah, you know what, I don't always live as I should and I'm not, you know, I don't always live up to my own expectations, etc., etc., etc.

They might have tracked with you all the way until you started talking about Jesus transforming us and saving us and all that. Because I think as soon as you say that kind of stuff, I imagine there are people here who go, that sounds silly.

It just sounds like a fairy tale. You know, you're talking about Jesus dying for us and he's changing my heart. I mean, it just sounds like a bad Hallmark card, you know. It sounds like, and they could sort of intellectualize it.

[ 19 : 35 ] And that is pretty bad. I mean, they could intellectualize it and go, you know, this is an old myth that has become institutionalized and supported by buildings and money and hierarchy and stuff.

But essentially, it is fantasy. Yeah. I think you see the reality of it in Changed Lives.

You see the reality of it because for the past 2,000 years, literally billions of people have found in Jesus not just another moral system, not just another moral teacher who tells you, do this, don't do this, they already knew that before they came to Jesus.

For billions of people down through history, they have found in Jesus someone who could give them forgiveness that they could never achieve anywhere else and could reorder their hearts in such a way that they were free to love in a way that they never had been before.

I mean, you could ask the people that were baptized tonight, you could ask any number of people that are living right now in the very, very real world. And that's where you'll see whether or not it's real or not.

[ 20 : 52 ] Yeah, but for all the people that you say, this has changed their lives, you know, I have examples of people who it hasn't changed their lives.

This is not something we talked about, I thought I'd save it. My first youth leader became a drug dealer. You know, he left the faith, was selling...

Was that because you were so hard? No, I'm sorry. This is the only way out. Stop calling me Aaron. These other gods you could try, leave me alone.

No, he just sort of like, just, you know, he just sort of, he just left. He just left one day and he needed money and just started selling drugs.

Other friends might have left the faith and just done disastrous things with their lives. Or who have left the faith because people have done terrible things to them. You know, the church hurt me.

[ 21 : 48 ] The church disappointed me. They weren't kind to me. Whatever. So for these stories, you go, yes, it changes people's lives. Sure, there's fantastic examples.

I know lots of them. But I also know examples of people where it seems to have really terribly affected them. And it hasn't changed their lives. And it hasn't gone the distance with them.

Right. The thing I would say to that is, quite simply, you know, the remarkable thing, one of the remarkable things about Jesus is that he explains both phenomena.

Jesus explains why it is that you have some people who come to him and their lives are radically transformed. And he also explains why it is that when you look at the church and you look at institutionalized Christianity, you also see terribly, terribly disappointing people and terribly, terribly disappointing events.

Jesus himself, when you understand him, he explains why it is that religion can fail us and does fail us time and time again.

[ 23 : 02 ] But he also offers us something unique, something that is different than institutionalized religion, something that it can use, institutionalized religion, but it's something that is qualitatively different. And that is a transformation and deep, deep forgiveness.

And the remarkable thing is even the people who within the church have done the most wicked things, even to them, Jesus still stands as a solution.

Even to them, Jesus still stands as one who says, come to me, come to me with all of your sin and your wickedness and the way you've used even me.

You know, Jesus says to the person, even the way you've used my name for terrible, terrible things, come to me and I give you a path of forgiveness and I give you a path of transformation.

And I don't know anybody else or any other system that gives that. And that's why I will cling to Jesus irrespective of the disappointments and the terrible, terrible things that people have done even in the name of Jesus himself.

[ 24 : 11 ] Good. Good. Okay. We're going to pick up another conversation next week. What's the conversation we're looking at next week? Next week is why are Christians so obsessed about sex?

So why does it seem to come up as a topic so often and why does it seem to be kind of a topic that Christians seem to get really excited about being against? You know? Yeah. So, I mean, we should probably give a slight warning against it.

Like, it'll be pretty real. Like, it's going to be quite a real conversation. Yeah. So I'd say it's probably PG. If it was a movie... If sex freaks you out, don't come. Yeah. Yeah.

I would say if it was a movie, it would be PG-ish. Yeah. Well, we'll see what happens. But if you... Yeah. If it makes you squeamish, or if you have little kids, you may not...

Oh, yeah. Don't bring children. Okay. Yeah. Good. Okay. Okay. Everybody, turn in your... Thanks, Aaron. Norris. Turn in your service sheets to page four.

[ 25 : 15 ] I want to... There's a reading there at the bottom from the book of 1 John, chapter four. I want to read it. And I want to point something out that we began to cover a little bit in the conversation, but we didn't really get to that much.

And that is this. Jesus... If you're going to understand Jesus, you've got to understand that Jesus does not simply bring us another moral system. He doesn't just give... tack another moral system alongside all the other moral systems and religious philosophies that have gone down through the ages.

Jesus actually comes and he takes religion and morality as it is popularly conceived, and he turns it on its head. Let me show you.

Look at 1 John 4, verse 9. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world, that we might live through him.

In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

[ 26 : 31 ] No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. Okay. I want you to think just briefly about religion and morality the way they are popularly conceived.

Typically, it goes something like this. This is a gross overgeneralization, but just kind of go with me, see if it fits. Generally speaking, in most moral systems or religions, what you say is something like this.

Behave well, according to whatever moral system is set up, and you will win the approval of God. Behave well, and you will earn the approval of the people around you.

Other people will need to respect you. God will need to approve of you as long as you follow these rules and do things like that. Now, it usually goes something like that, and what happens is that quite often when we follow a moral system or a religious system like this, we deeply desire the approval of God, and we deeply desire the approval and the affirmation of people around us, and so we expend an enormous amount of energy really trying to be good.

There's a book by Nick Hornby called *How to Be Good*, and the whole book is a... He's not a Christian or anything.

[ 28 : 02 ] It's a good novel. The whole book is a long story of how the attempt to be good always fails. We put an enormous amount of energy into being good so that God will approve of us, an enormous amount of energy into being good so that people around us will respect us or affirm us or give their approval to us, and yet, inevitably, it ends up not working very well, and because we are desperate, you know, our standards are here, whatever they may be, some set of rules, and we're missing the mark, and so in our desperation, we end up hypocrites because we want to present ourselves as better than we really are to the people around us.

We end up oftentimes being manipulative because we desperately want people around us to affirm us and like us and tell us we're okay, and so we orchestrate events and we try to control the relationships that we have so that they will.

Or thirdly, sometimes we even become aggressive. We even become violent in some regard because we are so deeply threatened by people who differ with us that they might challenge us and challenge the whole basis on which we give ourselves worth.

And so the irony of most moral systems and most religions, even if their moral system is very, very good and all this kind of stuff, is that they create a system in which we just, so often, we either can't meet the standard or in meeting the standard, we end up becoming hypocrites and manipulative and sometimes even aggressive and violent.

Now, what I want to show you is that this passage says that Jesus takes that whole system and turns it on its head. Let me show you. Look at verse 10. It says, In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us.

[ 29 : 57 ] Now, I know that's halfway through the sentence, but just stop there. If we take that verse seriously, the entire moral system and religious systems as they are popularly conceived is turned over.

Let me explain this. Morality and religion as they are popularly conceived usually tell us that God loves us when we are at our best, particularly morally.

When you are at your best, you can be sure that God loves you or likes you or approves of you or will bless you or whatever. This passage is saying the opposite.

this passage is saying that God never has or never will love you more than He did when you were at your worst.

Isn't that amazing? And you can see it according to this passage in the death of Jesus. Right when we were at our worst, right when we were not loving God, that's when God loved us verse 10 so much that He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

[ 31 : 09 ] He sent His Son to die for us. Now, the death of Jesus is just right at the center of Christianity. So if you're going to engage in Jesus and engage in Christianity at all, you've got to wrestle through the death of Jesus a little bit.

So let's just think about that for a second. In verse 10, there's that word propitiation. I know it's a weird word. When was the last time you used the word propitiation? Probably never. It means at least this.

It means, what John is saying is that Jesus died on our behalf. Think of it this way. When Jesus died upon the cross, He died representing all the victims of religious intolerance that have ever lived.

You realize that? Jesus Himself was the victim of religious intolerance. Jesus Himself was put on the cross by hypocrites who were manipulative and who were violent and who were religious leaders.

So right off the bat, if anybody should understand the potential danger of religion, it should be Christians because Jesus Himself was killed by the religious leaders of His day.



[ 32 : 20 ] So when He was on the cross, Jesus, you know, that was God in solidarity with all the victims of religious intolerance that have ever lived throughout the world. But it was more than that. And this is where it just gets amazing.

I mean, just either amazing, wonderful, or amazing, ridiculous. Jesus, when He was on the cross, also represented the perpetrators of religious intolerance.

Not just the victims, but the perpetrators. That's what propitiation means. propitiation means that Jesus died on behalf of the morally guilty. And as Jesus hung there upon the cross, He voluntarily was taking upon Himself the guilt, not guilt that He Himself incurred by His actions, but the guilt of the people who were killing Him, the guilt of all morally guilty people throughout all of history.

You realize as Jesus was dying upon the cross, He was looking out and He was looking right at His perpetrators, right at His murderers. And He was loving them.

Do you remember what Jesus said? When He was on the cross, He prayed and He said, Father, forgive them. And who was He talking about? He wasn't talking about the innocent people. He was talking about the people, the religious leaders that had put Him there.

[ 33 : 42 ] Forgive them. And see, the remarkable thing about the cross is that the cross opens up the door for God to forgive and therefore pour out His love on the worst sorts of people.

On people like Christian crusaders and Muslim jihadists and if them, also people like you and I. God loved us precisely when we were least lovable.

Now, do you see how that takes the whole religious system and moral systems as they are popularly conceived and turns them on their head because they say God will approve of us when we reach up and attain to His standards.

But Jesus says, no, it's not about that. It's about God reaching down to us in our utter, total inability to be morally worthwhile at all.

God reached down to us and loved us when we were unlovable. It completely takes the whole thing and turns it on in His head. And when you see that, it changes our hearts.

[ 34 : 51 ] Remember what I was saying before, that humans have hearts that tend to take really good things and use them for ourselves and against other people. We're selfish.

It's just another way of saying we're selfish. And Christians, the Bible calls it sin. Well, when you look at Jesus and you see the extent to which God has loved us, God loved us so much that He died for us, it changes you.

It changes you. It changes your heart. It takes our selfishness and turns it inside out so that instead of preeminently and above all supremely loving ourselves, we're free to begin to love other people in wonderful ways.

Ways like Jesus loves us. So instead of being hypocritical, we're able to be very, very open with our faults. Why? Because Jesus loved us.

God loved us precisely when we were at our worst. Instead of being manipulative and trying to control the people around us, we're able to love them selflessly, generously.

[ 35 : 57 ] Why? Because Jesus has loved us so selflessly and generously. It enables us to not be aggressive or violent and not be, it allows us not to be threatened anymore by people who differ with us.

Instead, we're able to be totally loving towards people who differ with us. Why? Because Jesus died for us precisely when we differed so greatly with Him. You see, what happens is Jesus takes religion and moral systems, turns it on its head, in such a way that when we see the extent of His love for us when we were unlovable, it's so unexpected, it's so remarkable, it changes us and it frees us.

Instead of an anxious attempt to gain God's approval and other people's approval, we are able to rest in what Jesus did and therefore we find and are satisfied with the approval of God.

So, if you're Christians tonight, I want to invite you to rehearse what it is that Jesus did for you because as you do that, you will find that your religion has to be more than that, it has to be a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and it will change you.

And if you're not a Christian, I invite you to consider this whole issue of what Jesus came to do, that He came to die for us upon the cross in order that we may undeservedly receive God's favor and be transformed into someone who loves like Jesus loves.

[ 37 : 35 ]    Alright, I'm done. Let's pray. Colin, will you pray for us?