

Sermon: Christian History...

If you tell a really big lie and repeat it often enough, people will believe you. So said Adolf Hitler in his Nazi manifesto *Mein Kampf*. For at least the last two hundred years there has been a systematic programme of lies about the Christian faith and about what Christians have done in the history of Europe. This programme amounts to the falsification of history by secularists who are now the Establishment throughout the continent. These enemies of the faith used to think that Christianity would simply die out with the progress of modernity. When they discovered that in fact the faith shows remarkable persistence, their lies and calumnies became ever more strident, vicious and preposterous.

Thank God we have some stout defenders of the faith. To mention just a few, there is Bishop Tom Wright of Durham who has produced the finest study of the Resurrection of Christ seen in a hundred years. Richard Swinburne and Alister McGrath are teaching the reasonableness of Christianity – a claim that goes back to the great medieval theologians Anselm and Aquinas, and beyond them to the Fathers of the first four centuries. David Martin, who has preached here several times, is the world's most prominent sociologist of religion. David has demonstrated that, far from withering on the vine, the Christian faith is thriving and prospering on four continents. Particularly, the Pentecostal revival in Central and South America and in sub-Saharan Africa is raising millions of people out of the morass of crime, drugs and prostitution. Christ is achieving what Bono and Bob Geldof cannot do. And it is the Christian doctrine of marriage which offers the only effective antidote to the ravages of AIDS

The organisation *Anglican Mainstream*, which represents 40 million traditional Anglicans worldwide, is to hold a day conference in Westminster Hall which will renew Christians' dedication to prayer and mission. A principal speaker at this event will be Bishop Michael Nazir Ali who also has preached at St Michael's. The conference is on 6th July and you can get a ticket and go if you're interested in what the sane wing of the Church is up to. In our own small corner, I have this week published my own riposte to the militant secularists in my book *The Secular Terrorist*. In this I describe the origins and ascent of secularism and expose some of its false ideas and its dishonest method.

But this morning I'd like to draw your attention to a mighty book *Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart. This book especially catalogues and counters the historical lies about Christianity, that falsification of history which is the hallmark of all totalitarians and bigots.

First, Hart disposes of the lie that Christians in the so called Dark Ages destroyed all the classical and pagan manuscripts, including the science of ancient Greece. *In fact we possess largely intact Greek texts of all of Aristotle's extant works thanks largely to the Christian scholars of the Byzantine East. Early in the 6th century Boethius undertook to shore up such fragments as he*

could against the ruin of the West by producing translations of all of Plato and Aristotle and preparing manuals of music, mathematics, geometry and astronomy.

It was Syriac-speaking Christians who provided an invaluable caste of scholars and physicians and through them the achievements of Greek and Roman antiquity passed into Islamic culture. After the Caliphate was moved to Baghdad in AD 762 a grand library and academy called the House of Wisdom was established and administered principally by Syrian Christians.

Not only did medieval Christians not burn pagan texts, the literary remains of Rome were hoarded and jealously guarded in monastic libraries even as the western Roman world was disintegrating.

The last flowering of classical literary culture in the 4th and 5th centuries was for the most part the work of the Church Fathers who provided the period with its greatest rhetoricians, its most sophisticated metaphysicians and its most innovative stylists.

The enemies of our faith not only make up history in their own image but their minds are not anywhere near the same grade as Christian thinkers. They are content to paddle about in the shallows and they are reluctant to do real philosophical and historical work. Hart mentions:

*Richard Dawkins, the zoologist and tireless tractarian who – despite his embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning – never fails to entrance his readers with his rhetorical recklessness. The journalist Christopher Hitchens whose talent for intellectual caricature somewhat exceeds his mastery of consecutive logic has just issued a book *God Is Not Great* which raises the wild non sequitur almost to the level of a dialectical method. One need hardly mention Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*, surely the most lucrative novel ever written by a borderline illiterate.*

There is an urgent need for us to face down the enemies of the faith, along with the equal obligation to inform ourselves about Christian history and Christian philosophy and not to receive these precious things through the distorting lens of those who hate all we stand for.

David Hart speaks lovingly and with profound knowledge of Christian origins and he denounces the achievements of modern culture as *a massive retreat from reason to superstition and the gestation of especially pitiless forms of nihilism.*

Contrast these things with the achievements of Christianity which brought *an enormous transformation of thought, sensibility, culture, morality and spiritual imagination; the liberation it offered from fatalism, cosmic despair and the terror of occult agencies. At a particular moment in history something happened to Western humanity that changed it at the deepest levels of consciousness and at the highest levels of culture. Christianity has been the single most creative cultural, aesthetic, social, political, spiritual force in the history of the West. But it has*

also been a profoundly destructive force, and one should praise it as much for the latter attribute as the former: for there are many things worthy of destruction.

Hart identifies the spirit of secular modernity as nihilism in which the only good is the absolute freedom to choose – to choose anything. So it ends up in the Beckettesque hell hole of absurdism or on the roof with Jean Paul Sartre at the conclusion of his *Age of Reason* trilogy – wantonly mowing people down with a machine gun. This false freedom has led us to a culture *devoted to acquisition, celebrity, distraction and therapy. Free from absolute constraints, natural or moral, we are being led also towards monstrosity.*

And he ends with a sublime evocation of what our God-given faculty of choice is really for:

We are free not merely because we can choose but only when we have chosen well. For to choose poorly, through folly or malice, in a way that thwarts our nature and distorts our proper form, is to enslave ourselves to the transitory, the irrational, the purposeless, the subhuman.

The more we choose well, the more we become emancipated from illusion and caprice, the more perfect our vision becomes... We see and we act in one unified movement of our nature towards God or the Good and as we progress, we find that to turn away from that light is ever more manifestly a defect of mind and will, and ever more difficult to do.

Remember, underpinning all this is the love of God, that is the love of him whose service is perfect freedom