

*Gooding and Lennox are exemplary
guides to the deepest questions of life.*

– Justin Brierley

Christianity
Opium
or
Truth?

*Answering thoughtful objections
to the Christian faith*

David Gooding John Lennox



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE

Christianity

Opium or Truth?

Myrtlefield Encounters

Myrtlefield Encounters are complementary studies of biblical literature, Christian teaching and apologetics. The books in this series engage the minds of believers and sceptics. They show how God has spoken in the Bible to address the realities of life and its questions, problems, beauty and potential.

Books in this series:

Key Bible Concepts: Defining the Basic Terms of the
Christian Faith

Christianity: Opium or Truth?: Answering Thoughtful
Objections to the Christian Faith

The Definition of Christianity: Exploring the Original
Meaning of the Christian Faith

The Bible and Ethics: Finding the Moral Foundations of
the Christian Faith

Christianity Opium or Truth?

Answering Thoughtful Objections
to the Christian Faith

David Gooding

John Lennox

Myrtlefield Encounters

David Gooding and John Lennox have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Authors of this work.

Copyright © Myrtlefield Trust, 1992, 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying. In the UK such licenses are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd., Barnard's Inn, 86 Fetter Lane, London, EC4A 1EN.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design: Matthew Craig

First published 1992. Originally published as a series of articles in the Russian newspaper, *Uchitelskaya Gazeta*. Chapter 7 was previously published in *The Bible and Ethics*.

Second English edition, revised and enlarged, 2014.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216, Belfast, BT1 9YR.

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

ISBN: 978-1-874584-53-7 (pbk.)

ISBN: 978-1-874584-54-4 (PDF)

ISBN: 978-1-874584-55-1 (Kindle)

ISBN: 978-1-874584-56-8 (EPUB without DRM)

24 23 22 21 20 19

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Contents

1. Christianity: Opium of the People?	1
2. The Bible: Myth or Truth?	6
3. But Hasn't Science Made Belief in God Impossible?	32
4. But Don't All Religions Lead to God?	45
5. But If There Is a God, Why Do so Many People Suffer?	60
6. The Problem of Pain	77
7. The Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ	105
8. The Search for Spiritual Satisfaction	138
Bibliography	159
Scripture Index	161
General Index	165
Other books by David Gooding and John Lennox	169
The Quest for Reality and Significance	170
Sample: Why We Need a Worldview	171
About the Authors	184

1 CHAPTER

Christianity: opium of the people?

It was undoubtedly genuine compassion for the poor that led Karl Marx to declare: 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.' In so saying Marx was not merely criticizing false religion. The Bible itself is no less rigorous than Marx in denouncing false religion that connives at heartless capitalists who oppress their workers (see, e.g. Jas 2:6-7; 5:1-6). Marx was indicting all religion on the ground that the workers took it like an opiate which dulled their pain with delusory promises of heaven and so made them passively tolerate injustice instead of actively struggling against it. Although Marxism has largely gone out of fashion among theoreticians of economic thought, and even more so in economic practice, it is worth considering its criticisms of religion. For many today would still agree with its basic diagnosis—that religion is a

Christianity: Opium or Truth?

kind of disease, a debilitating condition that keeps humanity' from reaching its full potential.

The Marxist cure was first to jettison all religion and then, starting with man as man in the spirit of true humanism, to set about the formation of a 'new man'. In 1961, the Communist Party of the USSR stated:

The moulding of the new man is a long and complicated process. . . . Communist education presupposes the emancipation of the mind from the religious prejudices and superstitions that still prevent some Soviet people from displaying their creative ability to the full. A more effective system of scientific atheist propaganda is needed, one that will embrace all sections and groups of the population, and will prevent the dissemination of religious views, especially among children and adolescents. Nor must it be forgotten that the survivals of capitalism in the minds of people have to be overcome and a new man educated under conditions of a fierce ideological struggle.²

Interestingly enough the New Testament agrees with Marxism, in this particular at least, that religious rituals and disciplines and moral effort are all insufficient: nothing avails except the creation of a 'new man' (see 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:8–10; 4:22–24). Of course, Marxism and Christianity will disagree over what is wrong with the 'old man', over what kind of 'new man' is desirable, and over the means of

1 In this book we use the terms 'humanity' and 'man' interchangeably to denote the entire human race.

2 *Documents of 22nd Congress of the CPSU*, 1:176–78.

introducing the 'new man'. But more of that later. For the moment let us return to the question of opium.

If it is true that in some centuries and in some countries religion has acted like a sedative, it is also true that in this century and the last humanistic philosophies, both of the right and of the left, have acted like powerful stimulants. Their promises of a future utopia have galvanized people's innate sense of right and wrong into heroic action and sacrifice to help bring about the promised utopia. In this cause during the last century millions have died. But the promised utopia was not achieved. It seems further off than before. As far as these millions of dead people are concerned, the hopes raised in them by these humanistic philosophies, for which they gave or were robbed of their lives, have proved to be delusions.

What then shall we say about this instinctive sense of right and wrong which all of us have, which makes us feel that we have a right to justice, and which drives many people to struggle to obtain it? Obviously it was not implanted in human beings by religion, for atheists have it as keenly as believers in God. Where then does it come from? And how valid a guide is it for expecting that justice will one day triumph?

The Bible says that it has been implanted in us by God our Creator. All his divine authority stands behind it. And though in us and in our world it is often suppressed, distorted, frustrated and cheated as a result of humanity's sin and rebellion against God, it will one day be vindicated. God is going to judge this world in righteousness through Jesus Christ, and there will also be a final judgment. Justice will be done for all who have ever

Christianity: Opium or Truth?

lived on this earth (Acts 17:31; Rev 20:11-15). Here, then, is tremendous assurance. It is worthwhile striving for justice and standing against sin, evil and every kind of corruption. Our sense of right and wrong is valid: it is not an illusion.

'But no,' says humanism, 'our sense of right and wrong is not as significant as that: it is simply the product of evolutionary development.' Then there can be no guarantee that it will be satisfied in the case of any particular individual or of any particular generation! And since there is no God, and since there will be no final judgment, the millions who suffered unjustly on earth in the past, will not find justice even in the life to come, for there is no life to come. Moreover, for millions still living, the hope of justice in this life or the next will likewise prove a mocking delusion. What kind of an incentive is that for struggling for justice now, or even for some future utopia which like all those promised through history might never come anyway? It is not a stimulant. It is not even a sedative. It is a depressant.

But let us now consider the proposition that nothing avails except the formation of a 'new man'. Here the Bible would whole-heartedly agree with Marx against many forms of popular religion. The Bible teaches that man is basically evil. His heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick (Jer 17:9). Nothing, not even the best of religious rituals or disciplines, nor even man's honest moral endeavour, can cure man's evil heart and make man acceptable to God or a fit citizen of any utopia. Nothing, that is, except the removal of man's evil heart and its replacement by a new heart, by a new spirit; in other words nothing but the creation of a new man through personal repentance

and faith in the crucified and risen Son of God leading to reconciliation with God, forgiveness and a new life (Ezek 36:26; Titus 3:1-7; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:8-10).

Marxism, by contrast has taught that man is not basically evil, only as yet imperfect, distorted and alienated by capitalist oppression. Remove the oppression, and man will save himself and his society by his own work. But once again bitter experience has proved that this hope too is a delusion. In all centuries and right up to the present day, the very best of political and economic schemes have been, and continue to be, wrecked by man's continuing selfishness, envy, jealousy, greed, lust, drunkenness, theft, lying, cruelty, and murdering. History shows that man is, as the Bible says he is, basically sinful and evil.

How then can he be saved? Certainly not by independence of God: that is the cause of his trouble, not the cure. Nor even by religious rituals and good works. Speaking to a man who was already very religious Christ put it this way: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." (John 3:6-7).

You may feed, groom and train a dog, but you will never by those means turn it into a human being. To become a man, it would have to be born again. The only way of turning a fallen, sinful human being into a child of God is regeneration by the Spirit of God. Hopes of doing it by any other means are delusions.