



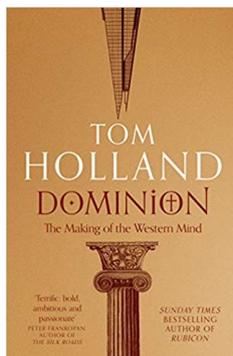
Overrating Christianity

Dominion: The Making of the Western World

Tom Holland • Little, Brown • 2019 • £25

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THE historian Tom Holland has received acclaim for his books on ancient Rome and Persia. Now, in his latest thick tome *Dominion* he addresses the more recent past and claims to have discovered that Christianity is the greatest revolutionary movement the western world has ever seen, establishing the values of love, peace, equality, freedom, shelter, sustenance and human rights, and paving the way for secularism, anti-racism and even the MeToo movement. Christianity, he suggests, has formed the western mind, not only in its moral conventions but also in its apparent opposites such as atheism and science.



I am not necessarily agreeing with Joseph Atwill who argues (*Caesar's Messiah: The Roman Conspiracy to Invent Jesus*) that Christianity was entirely a sophisticated Roman government plot designed to pacify the unruly Jews of the Empire. It probably had genuine beginnings but, after initial persecution, the Romans clearly adopted it for precisely the reason of keeping their subjects in order. People with power did not consistently practise the Christian virtues, but they made sure most of their subjects did. As Seneca, a part contemporary of Jesus, put it, "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful".

Here's what he says about non-belief: "Secularism owes its existence to the medieval papacy. Humanism derives ultimately from claims made in the Bible: that humans are made in God's image; that his son died equally for everyone; that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (p523). Wow! Everything that is good and beautiful and true in the western world owes its existence to Christianity, and the same is true of those who oppose it! Does this mean that without Christianity we would be even worse behaved than we are? Or that we would have actually wiped ourselves from the face of the earth? Even if Christianity has failed to save many individuals souls, perhaps it has saved the world.

How does a Humanist react to such a monumental distortion of history by a historian? How does he combat such a narrow and one-sided interpretation of the past – an interpretation which perpetuates the myth that religion, and here specifically Christianity, has a monopoly of morality. Well, if he studies the lives of Confucius and Buddha, to name only two, he will discover many of the same ideas of equality and rights that Holland finds in the Christian story. Thus Christianity in the west could be said to have derived from the East. Without them, it would not exist – to pursue Holland's *reductio ad absurdum*. Paul – often regarded as the real founder of Christianity – told slaves to obey their masters with respect and said that he would not suffer a woman to teach. Does this mean that Christianity invented slavery and patriarchy? Of course not. Like the positive values, they existed before it.

The vague equality that Jesus preached was to be achieved in the next world, not this one. Hardly a call to revolution. Rather a plea to submit to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. The message seemed to be that the poor should be content with their state, for their reward would come in the next life: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3). The essence of the Sermon on the Mount is that the poor, the hungry and the wretched should accept the status quo because they will receive justice eventually in a spiritual dimension beyond this world. As such, the political philosophy of Jesus is a profoundly reactionary message which fails to provide any practical scheme for the good of society. To tell people to 'trust in god', to disregard the world, to have no thought for tomorrow, to welcome poverty, to neglect their home and families, to let evil happen is really to compel them to opt out of the human struggle in favour of an escape into an unreal mental world. Jesus is in effect implying that religion is a drug. In his teachings he thus confirms the words of Karl Marx that religion is the opium of the people.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, there was a dark age of a thousand years in which equality and rights were denied to anyone who did not accept the official Church and the spirit of inquiry was stifled. Christianity was, in fact, the enemy of freedom of thought, social and gender equality and unconventional sexuality.

A Humanist knows that it was sceptics and freethinkers like Spinoza, Hume, Diderot and Voltaire who led the way to secularism in the teeth of opposition from the majority of Christian churches. If Christianity believed in civil rights, why did it persecute heretics for most of the last 2,000 years? If Christianity promoted equality, why did it similarly sanction slavery? It needed no lessons in cruelty from the ancients.

When early Christianity was persecuted, it claimed toleration on the ground that religious belief is voluntary and cannot be enforced, but when it became the official state religion of the Roman Empire it abandoned toleration in favour of coercion. It was a 'Christian' duty to impose the only true doctrine and save souls from damnation. According to St Augustine, persecution was necessary to 'compel them to come in'. It was the same wherever Christianity achieved dominance. There was no equality or rights for non-believers or those of other faiths. The values that Holland ascribes to Christianity only grew in the west when the power of religion weakened.

Humanism is older and more universal than Christianity. It is found in the Eastern thinkers cited and in the spirit of scientific inquiry of the ancient Greeks. The teachings of Confucius are summed up in the word 'jen', which means love, humanity or goodness. Central to his ethic was the so-called Golden Rule, which he expressed as: "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself". Virtue, according to Confucius, 'is to love humanity' and wisdom is 'to understand humanity'. Pacifism was outlined by Lao Tzu or an unknown Chinaman: "Recompense to none evil for evil; repay evil with good". The pacifist code of the Tao is clear and consistent. For the Buddha self-enlightenment lay in forgiveness of enemies and non-violence.

As well as overrating Christianity, Holland clouds his thesis in rambling and interminable anecdotes. Chapter 20, for example, ranges from the Beatles recording *All You Need is Love* in 1967 to Islamic State in 2014. He admits that Lennon also recorded *Imagine*, but lets himself off the hook by saying that it is religious through and through. So that's it, then: God is everywhere, even when you sing to him to go away. □