

UNIMAGINABLE

WHAT OUR WORLD WOULD BE LIKE
WITHOUT CHRISTIANITY

JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON



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For my friend Cary Summers,
President of the Museum of the Bible,
whose life exemplifies the impact and difference
faith makes in the world.

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FOREWORD

Just before the turn of this century, the editors of *Life* magazine published a ranking of what they called the “100 Most Important Events and People of the Past 1,000 Years.” Their top ten included things like Galileo’s telescope, the Declaration of Independence, Columbus’s voyage, and, at number nine, “Hitler comes to power.” Calling that event *important* doesn’t feel right; *impactful* seems better. Still, the number one event of the last millennium according to *Life* magazine was “Gutenberg prints the Bible.” Good choice.

Of all the books printed on a Gutenberg press, the Bible was by far the most important and most influential. And it continues to benefit the world immensely.

Some will argue we would be better off without the Bible or Christianity. I couldn’t disagree more. The fact is, there will always be conflict between differing worldviews, just as there will always be political differences and conflicts. The question is, on which worldview should we build our society? Every society is built on one. Imagine for a moment if the founders of America had a Hindu worldview; our nation would look very different. What about a Muslim worldview or an atheistic worldview? All you have to do is look at societies that are primarily

influenced by those worldviews to get an idea of what our country might look like.

Our founders, for the most part, had a biblical worldview. That's not to say that all of them were Christians (most were), but the Bible had an undeniable effect on them. It also isn't to say that they got it all right. This nation has never been perfect and it never will be. But what they built became one of the freest, most powerful and wealthy nations on earth.

The intent of the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., is to show how the Bible has had an impact on every area of life. Our education efforts only scratch the surface, as no building, not even a state-of-the-art eight-floor, 430,000-square-foot museum, can contain the whole of its story. On the Impact floor, we show the Bible's influence on everything from the most powerful nation on earth down to an individual life. With billions of people touched by the Bible, the whole museum could be filled with just those stories.

In this fascinating book, Dr. Jeremiah J. Johnston takes us on a tour around the world and throughout history as he considers the impact the Bible and the Christian faith have had on humanity. What would our world be like without Christianity? Quite simply, *unimaginable*.

Of course, many people in today's increasingly secular society think the Bible is obsolete and that Christianity is out-of-date. These beliefs are not new. Today's so-called "New Atheism" is rooted in the nineteenth century when a number of bad ideas were advanced, but it goes even farther back than that. People of all ages need to know this information. And this is why I am thrilled by the appearance of Dr. Johnston's stimulating and well-written book.

Dr. Johnston first shows what the world was like before Jesus and the Christian movement arrived on the scene. It was not a pretty place. Poverty, slavery, prostitution, and the abuse of women and children were

commonplace. It was a world of suffering and a world of fear. Racism and gross inequities were widespread and human life was cheap.

What changed that world? The evidence, says Dr. Johnston, is clear: Jesus and his movement set the world in a new direction that led to an enormous improvement in the quality of life. But before he highlights the many benefits of Christianity, he presents six important chapters that in graphic and disturbing terms show us what has happened in modern times when Christianity is shoved to the side to make room for a new worldview, one that is based on atheism and its many social and scientific corollaries. Again and again, Dr. Johnston digs down into the original sources of the “new” ideas of the nineteenth century and shows how almost always they were based on the pre-Christian ideas and practices of late antiquity. Far from representing advances in science and enlightenment, these bad ideas reflect the warped and evil thinking of a bygone era.

The depravity of men like Friedrich Nietzsche laid the foundation for the Nazi and Communist regimes of the twentieth century. These regimes, inspired by anti-Christian ethics and policies, were responsible for the deaths of almost 150 million people. For all their talk of science and education, if the New Atheists have their way they will take us back to a dark time. A return to the philosophies, ideologies, and bogus science of the nineteenth century will not be progress but a tragic regression.

The third part of this important book outlines the benefits that Jesus and the Christian movement have brought to humanity. Dr. Johnston shows how revolutionary the preaching and ministry of Jesus was from the norms of his day. The Roman world simply couldn’t resist the life-changing message of Jesus, and within three centuries, this nonviolent movement had swept the Roman Empire. Doctrines of racism were laid aside, crucifixions and the cruel gladiator games of the arenas

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were ended, the dignity of life was taken to new levels, the seeds of the emancipation of slaves were planted, and the groundwork of modern science was laid. It was the beginning of countless blessings bestowed on the world by the Christian church. Why would anyone want to see that end?

I am impressed by the depth and breadth of the scholarship throughout this book. Dr. Johnston is tackling complex, important topics. Behind the claims and conclusions lie careful research, as evidenced by the first editions, original-language editions, and other technical sources cited in the notes section. Reading this great book took me back to school for further education. What a treat!

Dr. Johnston writes like a leader—a leader for the church and the academy. He communicates as a statesman, speaking directly and effectively to the challenges of our time. Under his leadership, the Christian Thinkers Society has formed strategic partnerships and opened doors for fruitful and effective ministry. *Unimaginable* is a book for our time; it is a book that is urgently needed.

Steve Green
President, Hobby Lobby
Chairman, Museum of the Bible

INTRODUCTION

It was our second day in Turkey, and we were driving on a highway that had seen better days, when it hit me: *I don't see any crosses.*

Two thousand years ago, present-day Turkey was the cradle of Christianity. It was at Antioch (known now as Antakya) where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The Nicene Creed, the foundational statement of the Christian faith, was adopted in northwestern Turkey in AD 325. This is the country where all seven churches addressed in Revelation were founded along the Aegean coast, not to mention some of the earliest places of worship dating to the book of Acts. But during my visit, I was hard-pressed to spot any vestiges of Turkey's once thriving Christian community. It has been pushed out by conflicts, warfare, genocide, and Islamic jihad.

On another trip, this time to Cuba, I witnessed a place where the distribution of Bibles was banned for more than forty years. Only recently has the government lifted the restriction as part of an "experimental program." I had flown to Cuba with other scholars and leaders to celebrate the opening of a traveling exhibit of the Museum of the Bible. For five weeks, Cubans had unprecedented freedom to see biblical artifacts and rare manuscripts, including the first complete Bible in Spanish. The

exhibit's inauguration included a public performance by Cuban singers, dancers, and actors paying tribute to the narrative of the Bible. We sat among the Cuban people as they cheered, some overwhelmed with emotion. It was a stunning reminder of the impact Christianity has on society, especially on individuals.

Mark Zuckerberg, the billionaire founder of Facebook and one-time self-described atheist, shocked many of his followers on a recent Christmas Day when he changed his Facebook status to “celebrating Christmas” and wrote that he now believes “religion is very important.” Five months later, as Harvard’s commencement speaker, Zuckerberg (a Harvard dropout) talked about the importance of prayer and even quoted a Jewish prayer, “Mi Shebeirach,” which he says whenever he faces major challenges and also when he puts his daughter to bed.¹

In North America, we still have freedom of religion, worshiping in our preferred manner and where we desire. Bibles are still found in some hotel rooms in nightstands. At this point, churches still seem to be the bedrock of many communities. But frighteningly, there is growing, undeniable hostility toward Christianity and its followers. Analogous to the 9/11 attackers who were determined to crack the foundation of America’s security, we see the undermining of the Judeo-Christian ethic in our nation. There are innumerable expressions of this, from Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, a three-million-copy bestselling book, and Bill Maher’s *Real Time* on HBO, to countless lawsuits to remove Nativity scenes or Christian symbols from government buildings, trying to erase our nation’s heritage. In public schools, “Christmas” has been replaced by “winter holiday.” It is all reminiscent of Malcolm Muggeridge’s parable of a frog in a kettle that is gradually heated to boiling—most seem unaware of what is happening.

The seeds of this book were planted as my wife, Audrey, and I enjoyed one of our favorite pastimes: binge-watching television shows.

Amazon Prime's *The Man in the High Castle* is a disturbing dystopian series set in 1960s America. It envisions what the country and everyday life would be like if the Axis powers, primarily Japan and Germany, had won World War II and ruled over the United States. Certain plot twists in the series brought to my mind the various ways Jesus and the Christian movement have radically changed the world and civilization. Audrey made a striking statement after one of our exchanges. "Jeremiah, most people—Christian or not—have very little idea about this. People need to know about the Jesus factor in our world."

The trouble is, it seems more and more people just want Christianity to go away. They say it has no place in modern life. You're probably familiar with the saying "You might get what you want, but you might not want what you get." Prominent atheist Richard Dawkins might even agree with that. Dawkins, who wrote *The God Delusion*, said in a 2010 interview with *The Times* of London: "There are no Christians, as far as I know, blowing up buildings. I am not aware of any Christian suicide bombers. I am not aware of any major Christian denomination that believes the penalty for apostasy is death." Then Dawkins admitted, "I have mixed feelings about the decline of Christianity, insofar as Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse."²

I believe the "Jesus factor" is much more than a bulwark against dangerous distortions of theism, such as we see in Islamic violence and extremism. Christianity and a life lived according to the Bible shields us against a host of negative things. The very standard of life we enjoy in the West likely would disappear if Christianity vanished. Without Christians, Christian ethics, and a Christian worldview, how much longer would freedom, liberty, and morality last? Even the concept of truth and absolutes is disappearing in today's highly subjective, postmodern, post-Christian society. Christianity, as expressed in the Old and New

Testaments, is necessary for freedom to flourish. Yet, not until the dawn of the Bible did ideas of universal freedom—that is, freedom as a right for all people—begin to take hold.

Of course, many would probably assert that Christianity—though not nearly as toxic as radical Islam—impedes progress, and that the many positive developments witnessed in history since the rise of the Christian church would simply continue and, indeed, probably accelerate. Assertions like this, however, do not reflect the facts of history and why it is that pagan, primitive, violent Europe was transformed in the early centuries of the Common Era and leapt ahead of the cultures of the East in education, technology, science, and human rights. These beliefs also fail to acknowledge what happened in Germany and Russia, for example, when aggressive anti-Christian leaders gained power and went to work dismantling Christian culture. We actually don't have to imagine the horror of what fills the cultural vacuum when Christianity collapses. There are sobering examples.

Unfortunately, one of the long-term effects of social media is that we are now living in a society that prefers sound bites over substance, which leads to ample confusion and usually a rush to judgment. All this can leave the casual observer feeling overwhelmed or lulled into silence, yet the scales of truth tip in our favor.



In recent years there has been fascination with what is called counterfactual, or alternative, history. That is, attempts to understand how the past and the present would be if a certain event in history had turned out differently. A number of books have explored these possibilities, including an intriguing volume titled *What If?* It features essays from military historians. They explore, for example, the consequences of the defeat of the Greeks at the hands of the Persians in 480 BC, instead of

a Greek victory, or the premature death of Alexander the Great, which likely would have meant no dismantling of the Persian Empire and no spread of the Greek language and culture in late antiquity.³ These two “what ifs” alone would have had huge consequences for the West. It is reasonable to assume that the rise of democracy and the pursuit of science and literacy in the West simply would not have taken place.

Another essay in the book *What If?* raises the question of what might have happened in 1242 if the Mongol invaders of Europe had finished off the last of the Christian armies and reduced the continent to shambles.⁴ In actuality, just before the battle for Vienna, the leader of the Mongols, Genghis Khan’s son Ogadai, died, and Mongol custom required their fighting men to return home for the election of the new khan. They withdrew from Europe and never returned.

Adolf Hitler ponders counterfactuals in his book *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*).⁵ In one case, the future *fürher* wonders if Germany might have achieved great power without resorting to the Great War (World War I) launched in 1914 if Kaiser Wilhelm II had made different decisions.⁶ In another case, after observing how poorly the German government promoted the war effort, Hitler becomes convinced that if he had been in charge of propaganda, Germany may well have won the war.⁷



This book explores what the world would be like had Christianity not emerged and what will happen if Christianity collapses. Some will say this cannot be known; it would require a parallel universe. But I think we can at least get a pretty good idea of a world without Christianity. After all, until Jesus Christ began his ministry in the late twenties of the first century of the Common Era, there was no such thing as Christianity. We can study that world. Also, there are places around the globe today where Christianity has little visible effect. In his famous Sermon

on the Mount, Jesus said, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”⁸ I will also magnify how Christianity has blessed the world to the degree that even if you are a person of no faith, the everyday conveniences and most of the rights you now enjoy would not exist without God working in the world through the faith of his children.

I already mentioned my recent trip to both Santiago and Havana, Cuba, an experience that was both exhilarating and haunting all at once. Outside of a few Catholic cathedrals, Cuba is a modern example of what happens when society pushes God away. The most recent World Watch List from Open Doors USA documents the persecution of more than 215 million Christians living in fifty countries where either Christianity is illegal or Christians are persecuted, attacked, or marginalized.⁹ What are those places like? And, of course, there are other examples that serve as stark reminders. We can look at Hitler’s Germany and the Communist states of the last century or so, where atheism is or had been the official worldview and Christianity was driven to the margins.

In 2007, the late Christopher Hitchens came out with the book *God Is Not Great*. If his worldview wasn’t clear by the title, the book’s subtitle left no doubt: *How Religion Poisons Everything*.¹⁰ Many people believe this and, in fact, appeal to this claim as justification for their atheism. But I contend evidence shows that belief in God, specifically as understood in Judeo-Christian theology, has in fact benefited humanity greatly. In fact, this book will show the exceptional Judeo-Christian worldview, which has blessed civilization with inherent values and God-given opportunities for all people.

The poison to which Hitchens refers is not sourced in belief in God but comes from human sin. It is sin that poisons everything, including religion. This is the tragedy of the human condition. The fallen nature of humanity means that love, art, society, politics, education, sports,

food, and drink—everything we do and produce—can be and often is corrupted, or poisoned, to one degree or another. But most tragically of all, human sin results in theological corruption, in gross misrepresentation of God, both in reference to his being and nature, as well as in reference to his will for humanity.¹¹

After speaking in churches, conferences, and numerous events across North America and the United Kingdom (not to mention my own experiences teaching in a university), what is troubling to me is that in the whole history of the church, the twenty-first century has some of the best-educated people ever to sit in its pews, while also being the most disengaged and biblically illiterate.

When I read Judges 2:10, it is difficult not to be challenged when I think of the unthinking faith represented by so many Christians today: “And there arose another generation after them, who did not know the LORD or the work which he had done for Israel.” This passage immediately follows the death of Joshua and the historic miracles of Israel’s exodus and inheritance of the promised land. Within just one generation, spiritual decline led Israel and the people of God into complacency, and complacency led to apostasy and eventually rebellion against God. This should cause us to pause and ask, “Where are we in the story? Have we forgotten the works of God? Or are we simply unaware?”

As a professor, I can speak from experience about the modern university classroom. More and more professors are atheists, even *nihilists* (believing that religion is worthless), teaching that life itself is meaningless. Have we so quickly forgotten the message of Jesus from John’s gospel? “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”¹²

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It is this sense of an abundant life that we will unlock within the pages of this book. Notice that Jesus did not come that we might simply exist in an ordinary life, but rather we might have an *extraordinary* life. My prayer is that *Unimaginable* will remind us all of the Jesus factor in our world: the way Jesus through his Holy Spirit has worked through his followers to make the world a better place.

Let the evidence speak. Judge for yourself. Are we not better off because Jesus came to earth, died to save us from our sins, and rose from the dead, founding a movement that changed the world?



PART I

THE WORLD **BEFORE**
CHRISTIANITY

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CHAPTER 1

Our Sense of the Divine

The ancient letter begins on the sweetest of notes.

Hilarion to his sister Alis very many greetings; likewise to my lady Berous and Apollonarion.

Hilarion, the writer of the letter, is a migrant worker in the year 1 BC. He has just addressed his wife, Alis, as *sister*, an expression of endearment suggesting that Hilarion truly loved Alis.¹ (Marriages in antiquity were often arranged and did not always result in love between the spouses.) The “lady Berous” could be Alis’s mother or sister, while Apollonarion may be Berous’s husband.²

Hilarion and others in his work party are in Alexandria, Egypt, about two hundred miles north of his home in Oxyrhynchus. He wants to assure his wife, who is pregnant, that she should not worry about his well-being.

Know that we are still in Alexandria. Do not be anxious when they return and I remain in Alexandria.

At the time, Oxyrhynchus was a prosperous farming community situated adjacent to a canal west of the Nile River. Back then, if you wanted to compose a letter, you hired a scribe, and judging by this letter's unremarkable penmanship, Hilarion likely enlisted a writer who was not highly trained, someone a migrant worker could afford. So Hilarion is not a poor man, but he is not wealthy either, and has taken the opportunity to earn more money on the coast of the Mediterranean.³

I ask and entreat you, take care of the child, and as soon as we receive our wages I will send them up to you.

In all probability, Alis was several months pregnant when Hilarion left Oxyrhynchus for work up north in Alexandria. Because of his decision to remain in Alexandria longer than originally planned, he realizes his wife could give birth before his return.

If—may you have good luck!⁴—you should give birth; if it is a boy, keep it; if it is a girl, throw it out.

Throw it out?! Hilarion's shocking command to his wife, to throw out the newborn if a girl, reflected a common practice of infanticide among Greeks and Romans. Girls, as well as boys, did go to work at young ages and help the family get by. Still, unwanted girls and infants with birth defects and deformities were routinely cast out to die of exposure either to the elements or to wild animals. (In the face of great danger, though, we know that early Christians roamed the streets at night to rescue abandoned children before wild dogs or other animals got to them. More about this later.) In some cases, unwanted children were later sold into slavery or prostitution. The most probable reason for Hilarion's command is that the family could not afford the dowry that would be expected when

his daughter was given in marriage. Yet in the first-century Roman world (the world in which Jesus was born), killing an unwanted child was no big deal. Seneca, a philosopher and contemporary of Jesus, described infanticide in his own terms: “Unnatural progeny we destroy; we drown even children who at birth are weak or abnormal.” Seneca’s Latin is more cryptic (*portentosos fetus exstinguimus . . . debiles, monstrosique*) where children deemed strange or monstrous were terminated.⁵ Cicero (106–143 BC) appeals to what The Laws of the Twelve Tables decreed more than three hundred years earlier: “Quickly killed, as The Twelve Tables ordain that a dreadfully deformed child shall be killed.”⁶

After all this, Hilarion’s letter to Alis closes on a tender note, acknowledging a message evidently conveyed to him by a neighbor or friend.

You have said to Aphrodisias, “Do not forget me.” How can I forget you? I beg you then not to be anxious.

There was indeed much to be anxious about in the ancient world. By today’s standards, it was hell on earth. Poverty, sickness, premature death, domestic violence, economic injustice, slavery, and political corruption were the givens of life. Absent were any ideas of justice, equality, mercy, democracy (as we know it today), education, and protection of the weak and marginalized. All this started to change when people began living with a sense of the divine, a sense of God’s presence.

Spirit World: The Spark That Ignited Civilization

It’s a chicken-or-the-egg type question. What came first, civilization or religion?

Anthropologists and historians have long maintained the view that civilization gave birth to religion. The hypothesis is that civilization

inevitably led to social hierarchy, whose leadership at the highest level justified its power and affluence by playing a priestly, intercessory role between humanity below and the gods above. Acting as an intercessor, the priest or priest-king could justify the collection of taxes and demands for other forms of support from his subjects. In return, the priest or priest-king provided his subjects with assurance that thanks to his ministrations, the gods were satisfied and would act on behalf of the people.

Organized religion, including a belief in divine power, the argument continues, was nothing more than a by-product of the emergence of civilization many years ago. Once religion had taken hold, it remained a part of human civilization, even as civilization advanced socially and technologically. Its place in the hierarchy of human society was so deeply ingrained it could not be dislodged until relatively modern times.⁷

A discovery in southeastern Turkey, however, has raised serious questions about this long-held view. In a place called Göbekli Tepe, archaeologists uncovered a temple that apparently dates to about 10,000 BC, which is about the time it is believed human civilization began. What has impressed archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians is that there is no evidence that this temple sprang up as a by-product of civilization. In fact, the evidence suggests the reverse. That is, it was the building of the temple that drew people together and in effect sparked civilization. In other words, belief in God or gods preceded the building of the temple, which in turn preceded the emergence of cities and civilization.⁸ Belief in God or gods generated a felt need to build the temple as a way to connect with the divine. To build the temple required socialization and cooperation well beyond the demands of farming, herding livestock, and hunting. The building of the temple took human society to a new level and created what today we define as civilization. Religion is not a by-product of primitive society. Rather, religion gave birth to civilization and brought people together.

Most societies in late antiquity, including the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians, were polytheistic; they believed in more than one god. What is not as well-known is that evidence suggests that in great antiquity—at the very beginning of human civilization—most humans were monotheists and worshiped one God. Polytheism came next, and represents a corruption of monotheism. Even the Jewish people, known throughout their long history for their monotheistic faith, often moved toward polytheism (or at least a form of henotheism, whereby they regarded the Lord as their *principal* god, but not necessarily their *only* god). Again and again, the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament summoned the Jewish people back to their monotheistic faith.⁹

Archaeological work everywhere, in every corner of the world, finds temples in every ancient city. In fact, one can safely say that there was no city or civilization in human history that did not have at least one temple or building whose primary purpose was a religious one.

Today, we may differ as to how to address, understand, and experience this deep sense of the divine, but it's clear that through the years humans have invested a great deal of time and resources into the quest for better understanding and closer connection.

Moral World: What Gave Rise to Law

Humanity's sense of divine reality not only served as an impetus to create civilization but also seems to have led to the creation and articulation of law. And *law* is comprised of morals and ethics.

Law can be understood in purely utilitarian terms in that it is good for us, it protects and promotes justice and fairness. And no doubt utility was a major factor in the creation of law. But law invariably transcends mere utility. Time and again we find in ancient law the belief that law, along with morality, is based in divine truth or divine will. This is why human

law and ethics speak of what people *should* do, quite apart from utilitarian factors. We speak of moral obligations, even if the benefit of these obligations, either for ourselves or for others, is not obvious. Why is this so?

The best known and one of the earliest articulations of law is the famous Code of Hammurabi.¹⁰ Hammurabi and his law code are dated to the eighteenth century BC. The code begins with a lengthy preamble, in which it is made clear that the law is rooted in the gods, and expresses their will for humanity. Hammurabi states that he has been ordered by Marduk (one of ancient Babylon's principal deities) to establish law and to rule. Nearly three hundred laws follow the preamble. Many of these laws parallel the better known and somewhat later law of Moses found in the Bible. At the end of his law code, Hammurabi states: "By the command of Shamash, the great judge of heaven and earth, let righteousness go forth in the land."¹¹

The law of Moses, part of the covenant that God made with Israel, is also rooted in the divine will, but the preamble in this case is much shorter. In fact, it comprises a single verse. At the foot of Mount Sinai, the God of Israel says to Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."¹² The well-known Ten Commandments immediately follow.

The point I want to make here is that human civilization, which by its very nature requires law, is not only founded on belief in the divine but was also generated by this belief. Without a sense of the divine, would humans have created civilization? Without a sense of the divine, would humans have created codes of law that give expression to morality and ethics, codes that go beyond mere utilitarian benefits?

These questions are hotly debated today. A number of philosophers and ethicists have pointed out, with good reason in my view, that moral obligations upon which law ultimately rests are "unintelligible apart from the idea of God."¹³ I suggest that the ancients understood this very

well. Moral laws were not “discovered” and “agreed upon” through discussion. They were not derived democratically. Rather they reflected the divine will. All humans sensed what was right and wrong—whether or not it advanced one’s personal interests.

Our sense of divine drove us toward civilization, law, morality, and ethics. But without the impact of Jesus and the church he founded, this sense of the divine could take humanity only so far.