

Vinod Shah compares and contrasts the Christian and secular visions



DOES BEING A CHRISTIAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

key points

- Christians follow a person, not an ideology.
- The Christian vision is about a grand narrative, allowing God himself to set the agenda.
- The genius of God can use your suffering and redeem any situation.
- We use knowledge for service not self-aggrandisement.

Douglas Johnson, founder of CMF, once asked this question: 'Does being a Christian make no difference?'¹ This is the question

I am hoping to answer here. I think there are major differences between the Christian and secular worldviews. The most important difference is that the Christian vision is about following a person, not an ideology. Truth is a person because Jesus said 'I am the way, the truth and the life.'²

When Jesus called his disciples he never said, 'Come, let's bring about justice' or 'Let's reduce the disease burden in Judaea and Samaria.' It was not about ideology or any activity. The call was simply to follow him. When he called Matthew he said, 'Follow me.' When he called Peter and Andrew he said 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.'³ So the key question is: Does it make any practical difference in real life if you follow an ideology rather than a person?

Let's consider some examples from history to illustrate the difference between following an ideology and following a person. Maximillian Robespierre (1758-1794) was one of the best-known and most influential figures of the French

Revolution. He was hard-working, had a great concern for the poor and early on was known as 'the incorruptible one'. He gave a lot of his resources to the poor, but he became a bloodthirsty dictator. Why? The reason is he was committed to an ideology and not to a person. When he encountered resistance to his ideology he became paranoid. He began implicating people without evidence and eventually even without a trial. Late in life he tried to make himself a god – the head of a new religious order. He became so incorrigible that they had to behead him.⁴ This is not an isolated story. Most of the mass-murderers in history had great ideologies: Stalin, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot started out trying to help the poor, but ended up as disasters. The Christian understanding is that any idealism that transcends God is likely to be deadly.

The Christian contrast: following a person

In contrast we have the life of Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). He lived in troubled times: the post-Reformation period in Europe. He was a soldier who, after being seriously wounded in the Battle of Pamplona (1521), was converted on his hospital

bed. His life was transformed and he founded the Society of Jesus, popularly known as the Jesuits. In the early days the Jesuits were hit by a scandal and people asked, 'What will you do if the Pope closes down the Society?' Ignatius replied, 'I'll pray for 15 minutes, then I'll forget about it.' His calling was to a person, not an ideology. He was a soldier but he had a lot of resources at his disposal. He could easily have challenged the Pope and made a lot of trouble, but he said, 'I am not about an ideology, I'm about a person.' Because of that approach the Society of Jesus ranks as one of the most enduring NGOs in history. So then, the Christian vision is about following a person; the secular vision is about following an ideology.

Another dimension for understanding this is to look more at the meaning of 'vision'. There are three kinds of vision. When your vision is merely about yourself, I call that narrative. When the world dictates your agenda, that is better than being self-centred – that is *metanarrative*. But again, that is not enough. The Christian vision is about *grand narrative*, allowing God himself to set the agenda. It's not about the metanarrative – what's needed in the world. It's about what God really wants you to do.

Understanding suffering

The other big difference concerns how we understand suffering. In the Jain religion, suffering is seen as punishment for past sins, either in this life or a former life. This doesn't help very much when you are suffering. The secular understanding is that suffering is meaningless. In his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, the German philosopher, cultural critic and poet Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1910) wrote, 'What is best of all is beyond your reach. Not to be born, not to be, to be nothing.' He wrote this when terminally ill. He said human suffering is so great that it would be better not to be born; but he says that since you can't control suffering the next best thing is to die quickly. This sets the platform for euthanasia. In contrast, the Christian understanding of suffering is that it's redemptive. It is neither a punishment nor meaningless. It has a positive connotation. The genius of God can use your suffering and redeem any situation. 'In all things God works for the good of those who love him'.⁵ For Christians, God is with us in our suffering. Understanding this equips us for our work as doctors; it enables us to engage with the suffering we see in our patients. I know of no secular approach that can adequately address the problem of suffering.

Is it important that we accept suffering positively? Does it make a difference to real life? Elie Wiesel was a Jew who was interned in Auschwitz. All his relatives died there. He wrote a book, *Night*. There came a time in the camp when they celebrated Jewish New Year. Part of it was giving thanks to God. He wrote, "Blessed be God's name" – Why? Why should I bless him? Every fibre in me rebelled because he caused thousands of children to burn in these mass graves, because he kept six crematoria working day and night including Sabbath and holy

days. 'We have the story of another person who suffered in a concentration camp, Corrie Ten Boom. She hid Jews in her home, was discovered and sent to a camp where her father, sister and nephew died. While Wiesel could not say, 'Blessed be your name', she says 'However deep the pit, God's love is deeper still.' She was one of the greatest evangelists of the 20th century.

So how can we suffer well? On this Nietzsche had a point. He wrote, 'He who has a "why" [a goal] can suffer well'. Christian Reger, another survivor of a concentration camp, was a pastor who spent four years in Dachau for preaching against the Nazi doctrine of euthanasia of the old and weak. He was betrayed by his church organist. Reger said if you know the 'who' in your life, you can survive any 'how'. So we want our patients to know a person so they can suffer well. We need to tell this world is that you need to be connected, and that is what health is all about.

Attitudes to knowledge

The next huge difference between the Christian and secular attitudes is attitudes to knowledge. Paul says knowledge puffs up but love edifies.⁶ He says love never fails, but knowledge will cease.⁷ A secular attitude is to use knowledge for power. In India we have Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge – students worship her before exams. In the early Christian centuries the Gnostic heretics believed in salvation through knowledge. So do the Hindus. One of the most challenging and controversial plays written in Elizabethan times is Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604). Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for power and knowledge and brings disaster on himself. Paul says if you use knowledge for power it will puff you up. If you use knowledge as a service tool then you'll be edified. We use knowledge for service.

The Christian vision is about relevance, not just exotic things. Faith needs to be relevant to people's need. Dr Paul Brand of Vellore came to India during World War 2. He was asked to develop a department of orthopaedics, but he started to see the needs of lepers. Vellore was the leprosy capital of the world. There were a million lepers living in the area. He saw their clawed hands; he saw their poverty. He said 'I want to do something about this problem. If I can straighten hands lepers could do useful work.' He discovered that by doing a tendon transplant he could reverse clawing. Thousands of lives were transformed.

So, back to the original question: does being a Christian make a difference? It makes all the difference. There can be no marriage between the Christian and the secular vision. And there will always be a great chasm between the two.

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Vinod Shah delivering the Rendle Short lecture

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5. Romans 8:28
6. 1 Corinthians 8:1
7. 1 Corinthians 13:8