

Interview with Alvin J. Schmidt

How Christianity Changed the World (ISBN 0310264499)

Zondervan: How was the early Christian church's view of human life different from that of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture?

Schmidt: The Christian view of human life differed from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture in that Christians saw every human being created in the image of God and had a redeemable body and soul. Every human being was the handiwork of God. These concepts were foreign to the pagan Greco-Romans. In light of this Christian position it therefore opposed abortion, infanticide, child abandonment, gladiatorial contests, and even suicide. To the Romans, in particular, human life was cheap and expendable.

Zondervan: Could you name some institutions that were started because of Jesus and his followers?

Schmidt: Numerous institutions were started by the followers of Jesus Christ. Hospitals, first originated in the 4th century under Christian influence. Institutions for the blind, for the deaf, and for the mentally ill are some other institutions started by Christians. The Red Cross is still another major institution that came about as a result of Christian influence. The profession of nursing is another one.

Zondervan: Aren't you giving Christianity more credit than it's due? What about Christianity's negative influence on Western culture?

Schmidt: What about the "negative influence" of Christianity? Although there have been certain individuals (often so-called Christian leaders in government), who have done harmful things in the name of Christianity, Christianity itself has not had any negative or harmful influence on the world. It is the failure to distinguish between the Christian and those purportedly representing Christianity that is often found in history books and thus leaves many students with the wrong impression of what Christianity has really done, namely, advanced the level of civilization as no other religion has ever done. Geroge Sarton, a historian of science, once said, "The birth of Christianity changed forever the face of the Western world." As far as I know, Sarton had no love for Christianity. He merely said what history revealed to him. Another historian, for instance, has said, "The birth of Jesus Christ was the turning point in the history of women." No, I am not overstating the case for Christianity's positive influence on the world. It has been far understated in history books, and that is why I wrote this book.

Zondervan: What are some distinctly Christian ideas that nearly everyone subscribes to, even unconsciously, today?

Schmidt: Some distinctly Christian ideas that numerous people (even its enemies) ascribe to are as follows: a) The value and dignity of human life. b) The freedom of speech and expression which Christianity bequeathed to much of the world. c) The abolition of slavery, for Christianity was the first to outlaw slavery. One need only ask: Where was slavery first outlawed, where Christianity had a lot presence or little or no presence? The answer lies in the former part of my question. d) The freedom and dignity of women is another example. Here too one might ask: Where do women have the greatest amount of freedom and dignity, where Christianity has had a lot of presence or little or no presence? Again, the answer lies in the former part of the question. e) That charity is good and commendable; this too comes from Christianity, for the ancient world did not really practice charity, as I document in the book. W.E.H. Lecky, no friend of Christianity, once said: "The active, habitual, and detailed charity of private persons, which is such a conspicuous feature in all Christian societies, was scarcely known in antiquity." Still another historian, Gerhard Uhlhorn, has stated: "The idea of humanity was wanting in the old world." f) Yet another example of Christian influence that is accepted even by secularists is the fact that child labor laws are good and necessary, a phenomenon that arose in England with individuals

such as Lord Shaftsbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, and others. g) That no one is above the law. This concept first appeared in A.D. 390 when Bishop Ambrose told the Emperor that he had to repent for slaughtering 7,000 innocent people. In effect, he told him that even as emperor he was not above the law. Then in 1215 the signing of the Magna Carta, greatly shaped by its Christian formulators, is another example of no one, not even the king, is above the law.