

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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### *Is Biblical Christianity Viable?*

Religion remains a powerful force in Western civilization, especially the United States. There is perhaps no greater evidence of the growing religious diversity of America than what is occurring in the 2012 presidential campaign: A very liberal Protestant president, a Mormon challenger and, until he dropped out, a conservative Roman Catholic, Rich Santorum, who has expressed both by words and actions a preference for the principles of the conservative Catholic group called Opus Dei. Also, religious activists, including Christian ones, are very active in Western culture (e.g., the “culture war” struggles). Yet, there is a significant decline in institutional religion in America and Western Europe. Church attendance in Europe is virtually non-existent in the major cities of Europe. Although 84% of the US population affirms a belief in God, the definition of God is radically changing. As I argued in a recent edition of *Issues in Perspective*, the God of many Americans, especially teens and emerging adults, is a moralistic therapeutic deistic God, not the God of the Bible. So, where does this leave us as a civilization? Is genuine, biblical Christianity viable in the United States?

A recent editorial essay by Nicholas Kristof gives perspective to these questions. Kristof is a writer for the *New York Times* and a self-identified liberal when it comes to politics. Yet, I have often admired his honesty and affirming observations about evangelical Christianity. In this recent essay, Kristof details an emerging respect for religion among intellectuals. Indeed, he notes a “grudging admiration for religion as an ethical and cohesive force.” For example, Kristof cites Alain de Botton, whose recent book, *Religion for Atheists*, argues that atheists have much to learn from religion: “One can be left cold by the doctrines of the Christian Trinity and the Buddhist Eightfold Path, and yet at the same time be interested in the ways in which religions deliver sermons, promote morality, engender a spirit of community, make use of art and architecture, inspire travels, train minds and encourage gratitude at the beauty of spring. . . The error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faiths remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed.” Remarkable! In addition, consider the recent work of socio-biologist, Edward O. Wilson, who sees a social role for faith: “Organized religion presides over the rites of passage, from birth to maturity, from marriage to death. . . Beliefs in immortality and ultimate divine justice give priceless comfort, and they steel resolution and bravery in difficult times. For millennia, organized religions have been the source of much of the best in the creative arts.” Finally, Jonathan Haidt, University of Virginia psychology professor, in his recent book, *The Righteous Mind*, presents the argument that “scientists have often misunderstood religion because they home in on individuals rather than on the way faith can bind a community.” Haidt cites research “showing that fear of God may make a society more ethical and harmonious. For example, one study found that people were less likely to cheat if they were first given a puzzle that prompted thoughts of God. Another study cited by Haidt found that of 200 communes founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only 6% of the secular

communes survived two decades, compared with 39% of the religious ones. Those that survived longest were those that demanded sacrifices of members, like fasting, daily prayer, abstaining from alcohol or tobacco, or adopting new forms of clothing or hairstyle.” Haidt concludes that “The very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship.” How encouraging for atheists to acknowledge the positive role that faith can play in the daily lives of people. As Kristof has noted before, it is evangelical Christians who lead ministries that care for the poor, work in prisons and seek to help those in war zones. The greatest legacy of the Christian faith remains the hospitals, schools, medical clinics and translation work—all done in the name of Jesus Christ. Even atheists are now taking note of this legacy. Religion, especially biblical Christianity, provides the ethical foundation for civilization and for a functioning society.

Yet, there is much confusion in Western civilization when it comes to religious values and ethical standards. The Postmodern world in which we now live has championed the core value of freedom. Freedom in this worldview means license, the right to do anything one wishes and in turn being answerable to no one for one’s choices. Being answerable only to self is defined as liberating by the postmodern world, especially in the area of sex. Sexual freedom has been the mantra of this culture. Individuals should be free to do whatever they want with whomever they want so long as all participants are consenting adults. That is freedom? As columnist Janie B. Cheaney has observed, “For hundreds of years, ‘free love’ advocates have told us that all the complications of sex—the jealousy, rivalry, heartbreak, miserable marriages, murderous rages, and actual murders—were due to repression. Something so powerful shouldn’t be bottled up into monogamy. Something so beautiful should be free to flower at will. But free love was always considered a crackpot idea until the early [1960s], when the Pill (majestic in its lack of modifiers) removed the practical obstacle to full enjoyment. Social upheaval removed the stigma. And 50 flowering years later, what do we find? Jealousy, rivalry, heartbreaks, miserable (though much shorter) marriages, murderous rages, and actual murder. Still crazy after all these years.” We now have decades of empirical evidence that the “free love” movement has been one of history’s most dismal failures. Yet, unbelievably our Postmodern culture still champions legalized abortion, a state-sanctioned remedy “for unintended consequences of a private act;” same-sex marriage, “an attempt to overturn all of human domestic experience and give official recognition to a private act;” and contraception, an issue presumably settled long ago but recently an issue because of the president’s health care law. Cheaney biting concludes that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that an obstacle to easy and free contraception constitutes a ‘war on women.’” In short, legalization of same-sex marriage, abortion on demand, and unlimited access to contraceptives are all advanced under a single overriding principle—individuals are autonomous and free! Despite all of the empirical evidence that that this “overriding principle” is indeed self-destructive, American civilization continues to pursue with passion sexual freedom and liberation! As Cheaney concludes, “Indulgence in sex undermines precisely the kind of discipline needed to think ahead, delay gratification, and create relationships that are mutually dependent instead of government-dependent.” Genuine, biblical Christianity has been championing another way to live for two-thousand years—sexual abstinence before marriage—and a marriage that is monogamous and heterosexual. Those ethical convictions are rooted in the Creation Ordinance of our Creator, not in the changing and evolving proclivities of culture and of the state.

Secularists may be reflecting their intellectual honesty when they observe the positive contributions that religion and religiously-based ethics provide for civilization. They have not yet done so when it comes to sexual ethics. Instead, one political party in America continues to champion a “bedroom politics” that views liberation as freedom from all restraints and all ethical obligations. When it comes to abortion, same-sex marriage or contraception, the United States government has never been more involved in dragging the bedroom into public policy than it is now. Genuine, biblical Christianity has no choice but to reject such “bedroom politics” as not only short-sighted and defiant of God’s clear standard, but also as destructive of organized civilization itself!

See Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* (10 April 2012) and Janie B. Cheaney, in *World* (21 April 2012), p. 22.