

Question and Answer Session

It has been asked whether non-Christians were in agreement with Schaeffer's view on the influence of Christianity on the West and on the United States in particular. Certainly Schaeffer was hammered by many evangelicals. Os Guinness says, in terms of his work on the Williamsburg Charter, that he had many non-Christians working with him on that who were quite happy to recognize that the history of the United States cannot be understood without seeing the influence of Christianity on it. And the fact that that has now been adopted by several states for their whole educational curriculum in the public schools means there must be recognition out there of the influence of Christianity. But I think in any serious study on the development of the New England states, for example, it would be impossible for it to be accurate historically without speaking about the influence of Christian understanding.

I remember reading a little book on the New England colony by a Marxist historian. He just took it for granted that it was impossible to understand the history of the New England colonies without seeing that Christian foundation. Now, he did not agree with the Christian position. But just as an historian, he recognized its influence. I think what you have to remember is that we have gone through a period of 20 or 30 years when, as part of the reaction to Christianity, people in every discipline have tried to either malign or deemphasize the influence of Christianity on the development of the United States or of Western Europe. But I think if you read almost any history book from before 30 or 40 years ago, you would find it to simply take it for granted that this was simply the reality. This was true of both those who were Christians and those who were not. It would be the same in the history of science. It is very widely acknowledged that modern science as we know it has arisen within the context of a Christian understanding of reality. Now I think we have had a sort of hiatus of 30 years or so of denying this influence of Christianity. And many of the younger evangelical historians who have attacked Schaeffer were trained during that period. Hopefully in the future there will be a return to a more balanced position in terms of acknowledging the past, because, as I said the other day, you do not need to say that everyone was a Christian, you do not need to say everyone who had a shaping influence on America was individually a Christian. But what we are talking about is a Christian consensus in the historical moment in which they lived.

It is really such a foolish thing to say that Christianity has had no influence. It would be like looking at Saudi Arabia and saying Islam has had no influence there. No one would say such a thing. It is very evident that the worldview of a people shapes its institutions. It is a very modern idea that religion and reality have nothing to do with each other. That is something that in the past, until a very short time ago, no one would have recognized as even a plausible idea. Thus this is not a strange thing to say; it simply appears to be strange at this moment in history where faith and life are put into completely separate compartments. I think if you read Weber and Tony on the history of capitalism, both of them acknowledge very clearly the influence of Christianity, apart from anything else, on the development of the whole economic system. And those are foundational books.

I think the question is how many people in the secular, academic world recognize the importance of Schaeffer or would be prepared to say he had any influence, positive or otherwise? I cannot really answer that question. I think you will find there are a growing number of studies on his influence both in the Christian community and outside of it. But again, you have to remember the moment in which we live. Our culture has moved so strongly in the direction of separating religion from every other aspect of reality that this is not a natural source of study at the present time. Perhaps that will begin to change a little. I think it will be interesting to see over the next 20 years how many studies will be done both within the evangelical community and outside. I regularly get telephone calls and letters from people

who are doing doctoral studies and M.A. thesis on Francis Schaeffer. Many of them are not at Christian institutions but at public universities. And for them to do that there must be some recognition from their professors that this is worth studying.

The question is whether it is possible that, thinking about the influence of Christianity on the economic system of capitalism in the West, Christianity is misused sometimes as an ideology for practical purposes? Yes, it certainly is. Of course, that was Karl Marx's basic approach, to say that religion, and particularly Christianity in Western Europe and the United States, was what he called "the opium of the people." He said that it was ruthlessly used as an ideology by those in economic power to keep ordinary working people working hard, holding before them a fear of judgment and an ordered view of the universe in which they had to keep their place on the bottom of the pile, just to prevent them from rebelling against the system. That has, if you like, been a piece of Marxist's dogma from Marx right up to the present time, for a period of 150 years.

Now, of course there is an element of truth in that. There are always politicians and people in power who are prepared to use the convictions of people for their own purposes, whether it is to be elected, to stay in power, or whatever. President Nixon, for example, constantly appealed to people's Christianity at the end of his speeches. Now, where exactly he stands, I do not know. But I personally as a non-American had a problem with that, with hearing him do that. This was because on the one hand he was known for doing things that were clearly illegal, and yet at the same time he was appealing to people's Christian commitment. Thus there was a kind of double message there. He was doing illegal and dishonest things, or at least having other people do them, and yet appealing to Christianity. Thus of course Christianity can be misused as an ideology to maintain order in a society or to maintain a certain economic situation. There is a funny little prayer in England that expresses this: "God bless the squire and his relations, and may he keep us in our stations." That prayer was a humorous response by ordinary English people to the way the church was sometimes seen as the preserver of the status quo, and just keeping people where they were. That will always be a reality. You can see in the Muslim world at the present time, how religious fervor or religious conviction can be appealed to by those in power. That can be true in any context, whether in a context where Christianity is the consensus, or Islam, or whatever.

But I think we have to examine the question a little more deeply. Notice that I said "appealing to the convictions of people." You could only really appeal to a religious view, even if you are only doing it for pragmatic and ideological purposes, if it really is the view of some of the people. You can distort it and misrepresent it in order to keep things as they are, to suppress any kind of change. But you can do this only by appealing to the fact that people do have these convictions about who God is and who they are before God and that His Word is to be obeyed. Thus even that argument recognizes that the consensus of opinion was a Christian one. Otherwise, even the unscrupulous politician would not have been making that kind of appeal.

But over against that view, I would say this: again, as you look back at the history of Western Europe and the United States, Christianity has been a major force for change. While it can be used by those who want to keep things the way they are, it has actually been a major force for change. We can see some examples from Britain. In the nineteenth century, it was Christian convictions that were the major force behind almost all of the major social changes. This was true of the abolition of slavery, the changing of labor conditions in the factories, the improvement of prison conditions, the beginning of what we might call modern nursing, and many other issues. It was Christians who were on the forefront of change because of their Christian convictions. It is a really false reading of history to see Christianity as always something used by unscrupulous politicians to keep things the way they are. Of course you can find examples of that. But if you look back at the civil war in England in the seventeenth century, there is no

way you can understand that without seeing the way Cromwell and the parliamentarians were completely shaped by their understanding of Scripture, which brought about radical changes in British society. The whole of the British future is completely indebted to Cromwell for his putting restraints on the power of the monarchy and introducing a parliamentary form of government. And those people did that because of their Christian convictions. You do not have to approve of everything Cromwell did (for example, with regard to the Irish, where I certainly would not approve of what he did) to recognize the fact that British history owes him an enormous debt. And you do not have to be a Christian to recognize that. I think most British historians or historians of Britain would recognize that his work had an enormous impact on the development of Britain and its whole understanding of the nature of law, of the nature of power, of restraints on those in power, and those kinds of issues. That was at the very time that the Westminster Assembly was meeting to produce the Westminster Confession. Those people who were involved in that revolution were the people who were the most strongly committed to the Reformed faith.

Jeremy Rifkin, as a non-Christian, acknowledges that the major social changes in the United States were because of Christianity. But, in fact, Christianity has not been a major source of conservatism, in the sense of keeping things at the status quo. I think at the moment we are in a rather different position. Christians at the moment are seen as a force of conservatism because of the stand Christians are taking on moral issues like abortion, the family, and pornography. And those are seen as “conservative” issues at the moment. And, of course, in one sense they are, because they seek to conserve the view of the family, human life, and sexuality that has been taken for granted in this culture for several hundred years. And that appears to be very conservative at the moment. But if you look at it in another way, it is a very radical position, a kind of revolutionary position, because it is exactly the opposite of what the dominant culture is saying at the present time.

But I think there is very little evidence to simply explain the influence of Christianity historically as something used by unscrupulous forces in power. I think the lie to Marx’s whole approach is the economic debacle you see in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union right now, compared with the situation in the United States. Certainly the situation here is one where you can find many examples of injustice and poverty and suffering. But to look at this society and say that here capitalism in relationship to Christianity has been a tool for keeping people down, keeping people enslaved, and keeping people in poverty—that is clearly not the case. It is clearly not the case. I think you can demonstrate that it is only where people are given some feeling of economic significance because they have some significance before God—the two are fundamentally related—that our lives and the choices we make matter, that we are accountable for what we do, that we have the possibility of changing our situation, only then will you have both social change and economic advancement.

You see, Christianity is the very opposite of a conservative force in that sense. Christianity comes to the individual and promises liberation. It promises a new relationship with God. It calls to a new kind of obedience that will transform their life. And while it may seem, on a superficial level, to be conservative because it requires a respect for authority, fundamentally it is a source of the most dramatic social change. And you can predict that, in any country where there is any kind of genuine Christian revival, it will transform the whole society over time. This is because it changes the way people see each other. It immediately changes, for example, the relationship between master and servant or employer and employee. As soon as someone begins to see that it is not power that matters, it is not money that matters, it is not privilege that matters, it is not what strata of society you are born into that matters, it is who you are before God that matters, that is a profound instrument of social change, because it enables people to see themselves differently. If you take India for example, with its caste system, I think we would have to say that if there were a genuine Christian revival in that society and masses of people

converted, over time the caste system would have to go. It is so intimately related to Hinduism, it is so completely alien to Christianity, that in Christ there is no caste, we might say, using that context. Thus Christianity would be bound to produce changes in India, as it led to the abolition of slavery, for example, in Britain or later in the United States.

Do I see the possibility of capitalism changing because of a revival? Carefully note what I am saying. I am not saying that capitalism itself is Christian, or that the form in which capitalism is practiced at the present time or at any point in the past is faithfully obedient to the Gospel. That is not the point I am making. What I am saying is that there are some fundamental elements in Christian teaching and doctrine that transform the way we see ourselves and the way we see society, and over time this makes people productive. Os Guinness speaks about calling, the Christian doctrine of calling (fundamental to the Reformation) that Calvin taught. Calvin most strongly, and Luther as well, but Calvin especially, taught that every human person has dignity before God and that every calling, whether I am a baker, or a butcher, or a farmer, or a merchant, or a nurse, or a teacher—whatever I am—is to serve God in everything. There is no place of service that is beneath the dignity of the believer. My calling, then, is to devote myself, to set myself and what I do in my workplace and everywhere else, to the service of God. That transforms the way you see yourself. And one may say that there are elements of capitalism that are profoundly related to a Christian understanding of the human person and human responsibility.

Now, we have to acknowledge as well that there are other elements of capitalism as it is practiced that are more closely related to human sin. If you look at most of the corporate takeovers taking place right now in the United States, I heard the chancellor of Denver University one day saying on the radio that 98 percent of all corporate takeovers have no concern whatsoever for the company that is taken over, but simply for the power and wealth of the individual who takes them over. Or you can think of the Harvard Business School at the present time being so distressed by the total breakdown of ethics within the stockbroker community. It has put millions of dollars into a foundation to try to find a basis to teach ethics to business men and women. We are really in a serious situation right now. This is because, for the non-Christian in our culture, the primary moral value for people is, as Schaeffer said, personal peace and affluence. And for many Christians, there is a view of life where God's Word does not touch my business life because it is secular, it is not part of my sacred calling. Christians have not been salt and light in this area, though there are a few notable exceptions. Therefore we are in a situation where there is a radical breakdown within the business community. What you have is capitalism in that situation that simply gives in to human sin, to greed, to power, to privilege, etc. It is no longer restrained by a sense of responsibility to the society or a sense of obligation.

Let me give you an illustration from England. Just before I came to the United States, I heard the heads of one of our major stockbrokers in Britain say, "I am looking for young men and women who are ruthless, greedy, and aggressive." He said this on television. "Those are the people I want to work for me." Now, obviously, if you are looking for people like that, that amount of corruption in the business community, the amount of what might be called the unacceptable face of capitalism such as untrammelled greed, will increase more and more.

What Christianity brings to capitalism is several things. First, it brings this sense of individual responsibility and accountability before God and a sense of the freedom an individual has before God, so I can really make something of my life. I do not have to stay doing the same thing my family has done for generations. I have the possibility of really going out and exploring, understanding, and exercising dominion over the world. Many pagan religions do not allow people to affect their environment at all, because the environment itself is seen to be dominated by spirits. You cannot change anything. I have a friend who works in Africa, in Kenya, where the very impoverished tribe of people

has plenty of resources to make their lives less impoverished, but their religious views keep them in captivity to their situation. They would offend the spirits of their ancestors and the spirits of the land in which they live if they were to change anything, if they were to have a more efficient agriculture. Well, Christianity comes into such a situation with a tremendously liberating message. You are not bound by such things. You exist before God, you were called by God to have dominion over your environment, to set back the bounds of the Fall. That is a very dramatic message. And what that will create in any situation is what we might call the beginnings of a capitalist economy.

Christianity also contributes some other things that are equally important. The first is a sense of moral accountability to God. Thus my, let us say, use of the environment and my employment of other people are ruled by God's standards of justice and righteousness. Thus as Paul says to the masters, you will have to give an account one day to God for what you are doing. That is another fundamental element Christianity contributes to this discussion. A third contribution is a sense of stewardship. Thus with regard, let us say, to the environment, the Christian will not simply abuse and dominate the environment or exploit it. One has a sense of responsibility for future generations and ultimately before God. This is spelled out very clearly in Old Testament law where you have the element of dominion—here God gives Israel land that has gold and copper in the hills that can be dug out, a land that is fertile, a land where they can irrigate their pastures, etc. They will change their environment. That is what dominion means. But at the same time, they are given this land in trust by God for future generations. They are required to take care of it. And the whole system of agriculture as it is laid out in the Old Testament requires care for the land. The fields themselves are given a sabbatical break. The modern farmer now knows that is actually necessary for the land itself to be replenished. And where there is return to what is called sustainable agriculture today, there is a recognition that letting land lie fallow is essential if you want to make it productive forever. Thus there is this third element, which is a sense of stewardship before God. This is His land that He has given us in trust. It is not simply mine to make money off of, but it must be passed down to the next generation so that they can make their living from it, too. You can also think of the Jubilee laws of the Old Testament. That is a third element.

A fourth element is what Schaeffer used to call a “compassionate use of accumulated wealth” when he was talking about the bounds Christianity sets on capitalism. But we might just call it mercy. This is fundamental to the Old Testament law. The business person, who in that context was a farmer, is required to be merciful to the poor and share what he or she has with the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. In other words, the Christian does not see the money I have, the money I have produced by my hard work, is mine completely. We are right before God to earn money, and the idea of personal property is not wrong. The hardworking farmer deserves a share of the crops. It is a thoroughly biblical principle that if I put something in, I expect something back. That is the way God has created the world. But the Christian does not then say, “What I have is mine; it is mine completely.” That would be like the rich man who said, “You have built your barns; take your ease and be satisfied.” Christians see themselves before God as having a responsibility to care for the needs of their fellow human beings. Thus that right sense of productivity, of profit from my labor, is tempered by a sense of obligation to my fellow human beings who may have less than I do. And, again, wherever you see Christianity really being lived out in practice, it has that effect.

I would say there are still some elements of that in American society as a whole, even though it has moved so far from Christianity. The reason so many of these charities can gain vast amounts of money is because there is still what Solzenitzen called “vast reserves of mercy and sacrifice.” This is still seen as a fundamental part of humanity in this culture, even by people who most of the time think about themselves only. But there is still something there to appeal to; there is still a memory of that calling to show compassion for the needs of one's fellow human beings. Thus whenever you have one of these

telephone campaigns to raise money for people, they will raise money—vast amounts of it, whether it is for a famine in some other part of the world, or whatever it is. People are responsive. Part of that is because of the memory of the Christian Gospel, which calls people to give, as God has given to us.

Thus there are all sorts of ways in which we might say capitalism is restrained by Christian doctrine. Another element I would want to add is this: I have mentioned this already, but I want to express it more carefully. I do not think a Christian can ever be for what is called *laissez-faire* capitalism, that is, capitalism that is completely uncontrolled. If you look in the Old Testament law again, you see that business is never left alone, because God recognizes that people are sinful. And therefore there are standards of justice that God applies to the business community and that the government has the calling to apply today. If you say, “We will have no restraints whatsoever on the market,” in a sinful world you guarantee there will be exploitation and oppression, unless every individual is a really devout believer. Well, every individual is not. And believers also need the restraints of the law, sadly. It ought not to be like that, but they do. You know, Paul says to the Christians in Romans 13, “Obey the laws not just out of fear, but for conscience’s sake.” But often in our situation there has been so little teaching about conscience in the business community and in our churches that you have Christian business people obeying the law out of fear rather than for conscience’s sake. That is terrible, and we should not be able to say that. But that can be a reality. Thus there do need to be restraints. There are restraints in every area by the law of God because of the recognition of human sin.

Now, is there a real alternative, either to capitalism or to socialism? Is there a third alternative? Is there a real alternative? Capitalism seems so bound up with money or profit being the end, whereas the heart of Christianity is the worship of God and the enjoyment of Him as the end. I think again, though, we have to ask the question in what context did capitalism arise historically? It arose within a context where the chief end was God. You see, capitalism is simply a description, if we want to get it down to its basics, of a view of society in economic terms where people are free to work and to benefit from the work they do. They are able to make their own choices in the market place rather than having central government legislate for them what they should do. That is how capitalism arose historically. Now, capitalism may have become in the modern, materialistic West something that for many people has as its end as simply profit. But the point I am trying to make is that that is not fundamental to the development of the idea itself. What is fundamental to it on a much deeper level is a view of who we are before God, that we are made with a possibility to develop our own lives, of using the gifts God has given us and exercising dominion over the world in which He set up. That is fundamental.

You see, in some societies, nothing like capitalism could conceivably develop, because you have this set of beliefs that place people in total subjection to their environment, to spirits, to whatever. But by coming and declaring freedom to people, freedom before God to develop their own lives, you are immediately creating the possibility for what we have called capitalism. There are all sorts of other things that go along with this, for example, a sense of hard work, that it is actually worth working. To work hard, you have to believe it is worth working, that you can make a difference for your own life and the life of your family and that it is right to benefit from your work. Again, that is something that is fundamental to capitalism. But living for money or for profit alone is not fundamental to capitalism. It certainly is an essential part of describing what it has become, but it is not fundamental to capitalism.

Our calling as Christians in this moment of history is to rescue those biblical ideas that are at the heart of capitalism. There is a very helpful book written by Michael Novak, a Catholic theologian, called *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. This deals with some of these issues. It has some very remarkable things. Novak is asking the question in particular, as an historian of economics, why Catholicism did not produce something different in Latin America and why Protestantism did produce something different in

North America and in Western Europe. He says it is a matter of being faithful to fundamental biblical doctrines. It was as Calvin and others like him taught God's Word really clearly and plainly that economic realities began to be transformed, whereas Christianity is seen as a sort of preservation of the status quo, which it has been in most countries where there has been a state church. Where the state and the church have been bound together, the church has become so corrupted by that that it has been simply a force for ideological conservatism. Where it is set free from that and where there is a real proclamation of the Word of God, there you have a tremendous force for change in the economic situation or in any other aspect of the society.

But I would say I am not interested in defending capitalism as such, and particularly as it is practiced at the moment. I think what you have to recognize is this: if you look at the development of capitalism as we know it, up to the time of Adam Smith and after Adam Smith, it is really quite different. Up until the time of Adam Smith, you have an understanding of economic reality that is constrained first by a sense of obligation to God and accountability to God, second by human possibilities and responsibilities, and third by a recognition of human sin and thus the need for restraints. But with the rise of Deism, you can look at Adam Smith and Thomas Payne, for example, and see that their understanding of capitalism is rather different. For them, economic freedom itself becomes the primary goal. They do not have a sufficiently deep view, I would say, either of the complexity of this fallen world or of the reality of human sin to see that there need to be judicial restraints on economic exercise, on employment, and so forth. You have those in the Old Testament. You have laws about employment, laws about justice in relationships, laws about loans and interest. You have all kinds of laws that set limits on what you might call the free market. But with Adam Smith and from that point onward, you have an understanding of capitalism that has no sense whatsoever of human sin and the need for restraint. And once you forget that human beings are sinful, then you open the door for freedom economically being a goal of its own. And as the Christian view disappears, the sense of stewardship of the environment disappears, and the sense of accountability disappears, what you end up with is a system that can become for many people a kind of idolatry. It can become just a worship of profit for its own sake or of power for its own sake. You have then, really, something that has been set loose from its roots. Thus I would say the problem is not with capitalism itself. The problem is with what it has become as a non-Christian understanding has shaped its development more and more.