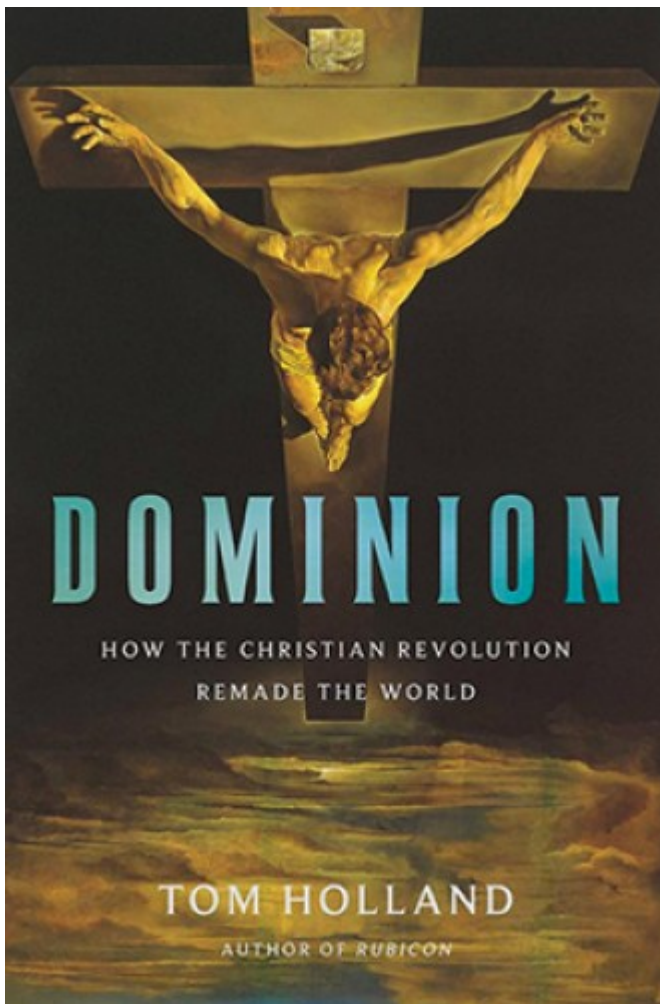


A non-Christian's argument for Christianity's positive influence

Tom Holland doesn't shout that secularists have no clothes. He whispers that they bear a Christian label.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Dominion

How the Christian Revolution Remade the World

By Tom Holland

Basic Books

Tom Holland has a grand thesis. He explores it with energy, advances it with panache, and pulls it off with a flourish. His lively and absorbing project is at once a serviceable church history, a studied engagement with Christianity's finest and darkest hours, and a compelling argument.

The argument goes as follows: Christianity brought something new and unique into the world; that quality in its various manifestations—notably deep respect for the weak, the suffering, and the vulnerable and a sense of the validity of every human life—remains deeply imbued in Western culture; and it is expressed as powerfully today by those who claim to have rejected Christian truth claims as by Christians themselves.

For all its conventional narrative shape, the book is history told backward. What fascinates Holland is the paradox that Christianity so saturated Western culture that it has become the water drunk by secularists and atheists, by self-styled iconoclasts advocating science, and by proponents of human rights or comparative religion—just as much as by the church. He's interested in the strands that led to where we are. He leaves other strands of church history alone.

When, after 500 pages, Holland finally reaches the present day, he's in a position to articulate some rewarding conclusions. Christianity has come to need no "actual Christians for its assumptions still to flourish," because the retreat of Christian belief did not involve the evaporation of Christian values. "The trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people's morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed even to detect their presence." Holland portrays bitter opponents as cut from the same cloth:

That the great battles in America's culture war were being fought between Christians and those who had emancipated themselves from Christianity was a conceit that both sides had an interest in promoting. . . . America's culture wars were less a war against Christianity than a civil war between Christian factions.

Even the #MeToo movement displays the truth that “any condemnation of Christianity as patriarchal and repressive derived from a framework of values that was itself utterly Christian.”

It’s hardly a new or original thesis. But it’s seldom been furnished with such a cloud of witnesses or supported with such rich historical examples. And the surprise is that its author is not himself a Christian. He writes to the secularists, the humanists, and the atheists (old and new) from within their own camp, not to shout that they have no clothes but to whisper that they’re finely adorned—and their adornments all bear a Christian label.

Holland’s facility with narrative, his acute sense of irony, and his deceptively thorough scholarship coincide quite enjoyably. For instance, he explains that the term *secularism* was first coined in England in 1846 and was assumed to mean neutrality. But secularism was anything but neutral: “the very word came trailing incense clouds of meaning that were irrevocably and venerably Christian.” It dates back to Pope Gregory VII’s distinction between the secular (laity) and the religious (clergy and monks), both of whom were Christian. The French term *laïcité*, coined in 1842, had a similar pedigree: the laity were the people of God. Before that, the concept belonged to Augustine, whose sense of the transient world contrasted with the eternal City of God.

In similar fashion, Holland deconstructs the notion of religion as a generic concept by showing how it was put to work to make India more comprehensible to the British colonizers. For Protestants, religion involved the inner relationship of the believer to the divine. Faith was personal and thus existed in a different sphere from the public rites of government, law, or trade, which were by their nature secular.

Confident with this unquestioned assumption, the British sought to render Indian culture along the same lines. Thus, they created Hinduism as a recognizable religion. As a result, the ancient practice of sati, immolating a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, could be banned on the grounds that it was a purely secular tradition. And so Hinduism became “perhaps the most successful of all British imports to India”—for when India became independent, it did so as a secular nation.

Protestantism pervades Holland’s story. The English Civil War, for instance, reveals two distinct dimensions of the same impulse: an understanding of the nation’s proper relationship to God (the firm foundation of all power) and an emphasis on a

person's private relationship with the workings of the Spirit. Some said there was only one true religion; others believed that all should practice their religion freely. The English Civil War was fought on the territory of the former, but its outcome was the triumph of the latter—unless you were a Catholic.

In the French Revolution, Protestantism appears in a different guise. The revolutionaries told a story that for 15 centuries priests had carried pride and barbarism in their feudal souls. They looked back to the classical era as a season of toleration and gentleness. Holland points out that this was also the Protestant story. For Luther, the early church was the pure strand and the period from end of the Roman Empire to the Reformation was the maudlin Middle Ages.

All of these insights come together in the emergence of the American republic. "The genius of the authors of the United States Constitution was to garb in the clothes of the Enlightenment the radical Protestantism that was the prime religious inheritance of their fledgling nation." Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were not self-evident truths. They came from the scriptural conviction that all people were created in God's image. "The truest and ultimate seedbed of the American republic," Holland writes, "was the book of Genesis."

The cutting edge of Holland's thesis sharpens as we reach the present day. At Christmas in 1984, responding to a journalist's report of a "famine of biblical proportions" in Ethiopia, a group of rock stars recorded the single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" In a passage that epitomizes the book, Holland delights to point out that David Livingstone might well have asked such a question, but by the 1980s any idea that white Westerners knew better than Africans was an embarrassment.

In truth, by 1984 there were 250 million Christians in Africa. Meanwhile Ethiopia had been a Christian country for 1,700 years. So yes, they did know it was Christmas. The idea that they might not reveals a paternalistic spirit that would challenge even the most entitled 19th-century missionary. Even more significantly, while the confidence of superiority held by colonialists was derived from Christianity, it was also Christianity that gave voice to the resistance of the colonized and enslaved.

Holland also tells a plausible story of how the Islamic State distorted Islam by removing the beauty, subtlety, and sophistication of the tradition and its compassion and mercy, creating in its place a fundamentalism that was unmistakably Protestant. This turn of events was, perhaps, "the most gruesome irony in the whole history of

Protestantism.”

Such is a flavor of the feast that Holland provides. His thesis is often evident but never overplayed. The shrewdness and diversity of his examples create not a tiresome catalogue but a dazzling array. Above all, Holland portrays a legacy and a history boundlessly enjoyable and consistently provocative. There’s plenty to drive Christian readers to their knees in repentance for the church’s persistent parodies of the gospel. But if irony and reversal are the key tools of the Spirit, they have seldom been put to better use than here. The beat may come from an agnostic drum, but the result is music to Christian ears.