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Christianity exists because it was spread by force. This can't be altogether denied. Even the Church of England fined people for not attending once!

The so-called Christian centuries stretch back almost 1700 years to the Emperor Constantine. During them force has been applied on occasion to whole groups of people, like the South American Indians, to welcome baptism.

By contrast the Founder of Christianity and many of his followers in the first four centuries held their beliefs despite being *themselves* victims of brute force.

It just isn't true from what is known about Christian origins that force came much into play in the centuries before Constantine's Edict of Milan in 312AD finally tolerating Christianity. This edict came about as Christian faith grew up through violent persecution to touch the heart of Rome's Emperor. *The blood of martyrs became the seed of the church* which grew up to be accepted by the world.

Accepted? You could say somewhat taken over! There is a big distinction between church life before and after 312AD!

Christianity exists because it was spread by force. In answering this criticism we have to distinguish the first spread of Christianity from any forced allegiance of later centuries. Look in the Acts of the Apostles, we could say. See how a discredited teacher, himself arrested by force and crucified, became the centre of a religious revival among Jews which spread to non-Jews with amazing speed and vitality. If Christianity exists today it exists in consequence of that dynamic flowing from the extraordinary person of Jesus who died and is claimed to be risen from the dead and to be pouring out the Holy Spirit to this day!

To object to Christianity because of its history as part of a powerful establishment in Europe is a separate question. People have a right to disagree with Christians as much as Christians obtained their own right to be tolerated 17 centuries ago.

In Christian countries there's been legislation against abortion, divorce and homosexual acts. The common good of the nation has been identified with the honouring of Christian teaching. It's easily understandable that the imposition of Christianity by legislation has bred resentment among non-believers and those who follow other faiths or philosophies.

Christianity exists because it was spread by force. True Christianity? You don't change hearts to welcome Jesus Christ by force! The miracle is that so much experience of Christ seems to have been carried down through the so-called Christian centuries! There's no doubt that the Christian cause is damaged when Christian teaching is imposed. On the other hand freedom to

worship in countries with a Christian tradition is guaranteed by laws protecting the rights of individuals you don't find in some other cultures.

Colonisation of South America brought forced conversions but this cruelty was challenged at the time by Christians like Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566). Las Casas and others had a concern for the dignity of the indigenous people they worked with. Their Christian humanism had an ongoing appeal. South America is about the most Christian continent today. There are many Christians working there for justice for the poor and their liberation from unjust structures.

Africans have shaken off colonial rule but their Christianity goes from strength to strength. You can't explain this by power politics, only by something more profound.

In his spiritual blockbuster *The Heavenly Man* Brother Yun tells a remarkable tale of the growth of the church in China. 'The gospel grows through hardship and will spread throughout the world' he says. 'The truth will enter everyone's heart. Truth is always truth. Nothing and no one can change that. It will always conquer'. This uncompromising word of faith gives evidence that it is not force but the Christian response to force in obedience to truth that counts.

In Brother Yun's book the motivation of the new church leaders came from a generation of self-sacrificing missionaries who served in China a century ago but are well remembered for their generous passion.

Christianity exists because it was spread by force. This conflicts with Pascal who wrote that "holiness is the church's greatest influence" – *holiness*, not force.

Is Christianity spread by force? The exact opposite seems to be the case. It's spread by being on the receiving end of forceful persecution!

Vibrant Christianity withers when it's in control and thrives when it's oppressed!

Self-sacrifice seems to be Christianity's best-selling element because it's the mark of Jesus.

Total 764 words - just over 4.5 minutes to read

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