

Book Review

John S. Dickerson.

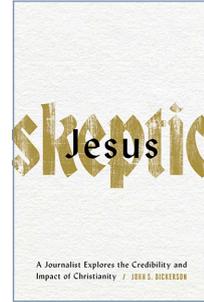
Jesus Skeptic:

A Journalist Explores

the Credibility and Impact of Christianity

Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2019. 978-0-8010-7808-8. 294 pp.

Reviewed by, Kenneth R. Marple, Director/ Founder of C2U Ministries



John S. Dickerson is an award-winning journalist, a millennial, and a bestselling author. His writing has appeared in the New York Times and USA Today, among others. Tom Brokaw (NBC News) and Christiane Amanpour (CNN and ABC News) have named him the winner of the Livingston Award for Young Journalists. Now convinced that Jesus launched the greatest movement for social good. John has given his life to join the cause. Today he serves as lead pastor at Connection Pointe Christian Church in Indianapolis.

Christian apologetics has had the primary focus of “proving” the existence of God to her interlocutors. This text, however, takes up the apologetic task using a pragmatic approach, namely how God shapes culture.

Specifically, *Jesus Skeptic* centers on the fecundity of Christianity or, more concretely, Jesus. The three main sections of the book are 1. The introduction, 2. The case and evidence, and 3. The apologetic section. Like any good prose, the author uses the first section to grab the reader’s attention by connecting through his skeptical attitude. This skeptical disposition is one that is common in the modern era.

Section two of the book takes the reader through all the positive contributions followers of Jesus have made in the world. Dickerson uses “primary evidence” to showcase how those who proclaimed to follow Jesus have changed

the world for the better. He contends there is little evidence to suggest that without these historical Christians, the world would have acquired these benefits. For example, Christians have improved society by founding hospitals, launching the scientific revolution, establishing public education, advocating for fair and equal treatment of all peoples, and generally influencing society with the teachings of Jesus. As a matter of fact, westerners often forget the Christian worldview and teachings of Jesus spurred on the development of the West in general and this is a point the author tends to highlight repeatedly.

Dickerson uses the final section of the book to defend the basis for Christian belief and its accomplishments. He surveys questions such as: did Jesus exist, what was Jesus’ impact, Jesus’ influence, etc. The author presents evidence (not just an expert opinion) from the time of Jesus by citing sources from the first century. However, the author uses modern research to provide an empirical gauge to measure or validate the impact of Jesus and his followers. This empirical gauge is based upon the influence and change made by followers of Jesus. To more accurately describe this “gauge” would be to call it an experientially and empirically measuring Jesus’ claims and influence.

Nothing presented in the book is difficult to follow, nor is it intended to be. Nevertheless, the author took pains to cite his sources as demonstrated by a substantive endnotes section. The author encourages the reader to examine

these notes for further personal investigation. In one respect, apologetics has needed a text like this. Many criticisms of Christianity, such as those from the New Atheists, have contended that religion including Christianity, has harmed human flourishing. The text provides excellent evidence to refute that accusation. As stated above, there is strong evidence (provided by Dickerson) showing the positive effect of Christianity throughout time since its inception. The evidence provides a basis to say even though bad things are done in the name of God, that is the exception and not the rule.

Though the text is well constructed and slightly verbose, it does seem to leave one wondering what the point is. As previously stated, it does well in showing the teachings of Jesus, and how those who have followed them have invariably added and advanced human society. However, from a philosophical standpoint, the utility of a thing does not automatically make that thing true. From an apologetics perspective, the text offers something that is missing within the community. However, it lacks the philosophical punch needed. One thing possessing some apologetic force is the author shows, through historical evidence, that the existence of Jesus is an undisputed fact of history or it can be reasonably asserted, similar to any other historical figure. Providing strong evidence that Jesus existed, had a following, was known to teach and do miracles, was arrested and crucified, and believed by his followers to have raised from the dead does well to dispel the current virtual trend of not accepting these as historical.

The apologetics section did not adequately address the question of whether the world would be in its current state if Christianity did not exist. The issue here is not the claim because the author provides historical evidence

to show that the modern Western world has been shaped in significant ways by Christianity. However, there is little evidence provided to answer the objection, mainly that humankind would have eventually developed these things (e.g., hospitals, public education, ending slavery, etc.). Missing this is no small point. Any reader would ask the opposite of what the author presents as the point in fact. The author does make a small case, referencing what little evidence there is in non-Christian influenced societies towards general improvements mentioned throughout the text. But it fails to substantially deal with this one area. The one benefit in favor of Dickerson is the opposition is stating a positive claim (i.e. mankind would have developed these advancements without Christianity) so the burden of proof is placed securely on their laps. With that said, Dickerson is not required to provide any substantive case but it would help round out the information and give the reader the security in knowing the author has covered all his bases.

Jesus Skeptic is a well-researched book that offers an extensive endnotes section with virtual resources as well. It is tailored towards a high school educated or above audience. Given the stated thesis as showing the fecundity and effect of Christianity and Jesus, the book hits its mark. Some apologetic value can be gleaned since a point of dissension for those outside the faith is the conduct of Christians. The text makes it a point to shine the light on how people living in the West have forgotten the foundational beginnings of our culture. This book would be a valued resource for any owner.