

The Good Report

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Is Religion to Blame for Violence?

There are many common misconceptions about religion that are often taken as unquestioned facts, such as the idea that religion has been the cause of most wars. Although there have been wars that had religion as the prime cause, an objective look at history reveals that those killed in the name of religion have been a tiny fraction in the bloody history of human conflict. According to the 'Encyclopedia of Wars' (authors: Charles Phillips & Alan Axelrod), less than 7% of wars are driven by religious causes, representing less than 2% of all people killed in warfare. This is drastically marginal compared to the senseless history of violence fuelled by secular and nihilistic philosophy. This does not, however, erase the violence done in the name of religion. While this is said, the question needs to be clarified.

It is a common misconception that religions are much the same and therefore can be grouped together to give an account for the same things. Not all religions are the same. They are vastly different, different in how each identifies and defines God, different in defining life's purpose and how we should live; at best, they are superficially similar and **fundamentally** different. So it would be an error to group all religions as one as if they can give an account for the same things. Religion is an all-encompassing term, stretching from ISIS to the Amish, and from pagan child sacrifice to Buddhist meditation. We must evaluate each religion and differentiate between them as we would between Marxism and Libertarianism. We must be more specific.

To know whether a worldview is to blame for violence you must address what that worldview promotes. Rejection of violence dripped from Jesus's lips. He taught his disciples that *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."* And when those same disciples tried to resist his unlawful arrest with swords, Jesus rebuked them and healed their victim. His radical commandment *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* flipped the script that flows from human nature. Jesus's words then sprang to life as Roman soldiers tortured and nailed him to the cross, only to find him praying for their forgiveness.

When Jesus knew that his death was imminent, that his hour had come, he spoke to his followers saying, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Christ determined that the character of a Christian is in his or her decision to love. We have seen the incredible impact healthy Christian communities can have on their surrounding areas, inspired by this command.

Journalist Matthew Parris writes in The Times commending the fruit, and I quote, *"of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa; sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects, and international aid efforts... In Africa, Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings spiritual transformation."* After saying this, Parris arrived at the shocking conclusion and I quote again, *"As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God."* The former president of the American academy of religion, a philosopher who does not claim to be religious at all, reminds us that many of the greatest social victories of the last two centuries, including the abolishment of

slavery, women's suffrage and the civil rights victories of the 1960s, would not have been possible without the help of Christian citizens acting in ways motivated by their Christian convictions. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and human rights activist Nicholas Kristof wrote: *"Go to the front lines, at home or abroad, in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison rape, human trafficking or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians (or conservative Catholics) who truly live their faith."* Albert Einstein, who is widely acknowledged to be one of the greatest physicists of all time made the statement that *"Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing truth. I never had any special interest in the Church before, but now I feel a great affection and admiration because the Church alone has had the courage and persistence to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom. I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly."*

Christianity in particular has served as a fertilizer for democracy, a motivation for justice, and a mandate for healing. If we think the world would be less violent without it, we may need to check our facts.

Yet what do we have to say about the crusades of religious wars where so-called Christians slaughtered people? Much of what is offered on Christian television leaves not only the sceptic bemused but also many Christians embarrassed as some use the name of Christ for personal gain, often taking advantage of those in vulnerable situations. Gandhi said, *"Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians - you're not like him."*

Evidently Christianity has had a powerful impact on the world, and where there is power, there is often opportunity; opportunity which has been used by man for both good and bad.

The shoe fits the other foot

Yet if recent history taught us anything, it taught us that removing religion from society is *not* the answer. The twentieth century was the most murderous century of history and the worst of those murderers: Hitler, Stalin, Lenin, Mussolini and Mao turned to atheistic philosophies for their justification and no wonder, in the atheistic worldview humans are merely the result of a random spattering of molecules which, by happen-chance, eventually resulted in our current physical states. There was no mindful intention, only the handiwork of chance and a blind nature.

So how does objective morality enter into this chaotic mix? **It doesn't.** There is no real independent moral law upon reality; the assumption of an objective standard for good or evil doesn't exist in a purposeless universe. This allows the atheist to devise one's own standard for morality. While that may initially seem like a liberating proposition, it gives birth to a chaotic society. For if morality is subjective, or simply determined by each subject (person), then who then determines whose standard is the right one when there is no real standard at all? Is it the person with the most power, or the general agreement on a political standard? Nazi Germany in this case, completely justified themselves. In the denial of God there is no standard for a true good or evil, and in that case anyone can justify any action or lifestyle no matter how that may feel to you or me.

Now I'm not suggesting that atheism equals evil, nor that all atheists are evil, certainly not, much good has been done by atheists also. I'm saying that any violence can be logically justified from atheism, an animalistic view that we are in essence meaningless animals, as Darwin taught *"red in tooth and claw."* Now where atheism has been the reigning view, blood has flown without restraint: look at the history of Communist China, Russia and Nazi Germany. Yet where Christianity has picked up the sword, hated upon people or ridden the political horse in triumph, it has only turned away from the path that Christ laid for his followers. Jesus never supported the devaluing of people or the philosophy of violence. The abuse of Christianity is in contradiction to the very message of the

gospel; it reveals not the gospel for what it is but the heart of man. This is where the issue lies and it's precisely this where atheism falls short to justify.

Whose coat are they wearing?

There is a story of an evangelist who went to share the gospel in a nearby town, he was quickly confronted by a man telling the dreadful history of the church in his area. A history of plundering, abusing, and harming people, *"my own nephew was killed by them"* he said, *"they wore those elaborate coats and capes and crosses, signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore."* The evangelist took into consideration what was said and responded with this illustration: *"suppose I were to steal your coat, wear it and rob a bank. Suppose I was caught in sight running in the distance and the police recognized that the coat I was wearing belonged to you, and they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank? What would you say?"* Now the man responded, *"I would deny it, although it was my coat, it was not me."* In the same way, although some wear the name of Christ, this does not mean they are of Christ. We cannot assume that everyone who identifies as a Christian authentically is one, particularly in societies where claiming to follow Jesus is not a ticket to martyrdom but a path to power. This man eventually gave his life to God realizing that the personhood of Jesus was very different from those who miss represented him.

You see we often allow someone or some poor experience to alter our own opinion of Christianity, rather than going to the person of Christ himself, the author and finisher of our faith. Look at who he is and who he claims to be and you will see the one who wears his father's coat very well. Pilate said, *"I found **no fault** in this man."* The thief on the cross by Jesus's side said, *"I deserve to be here for my crimes, but this man has done **no wrong**."* Jesus faced those who hated him most and said, *"Which of you can prove me guilty of sin?"* A statement no religious prophet, founder or leader has been able to make because the sinfulness of each of them is undeniable. Christ taught us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute and mock us, to turn the other cheek to those who hit us, to value and care for those who are neglected by society, just as he did. When his disciple raised a weapon in the name of religion, Christ said, *"Put the sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by it."* Jesus, while being tortured, his body beaten and sliced all over, hanging by nails from a cross, looked down at his accusers, those most opposed to him, persecuting and mocking him and yet spoke *"father, forgive them."* Right at the centre of Christianity is a claim that even when someone is your enemy, we are to love, to value and to forgive.

So is Christianity to blame for violence? Well religion has at times had violent consequences but what all authentic Christians follow first and foremost is not a religion, or an institution, or even a rule book, but Jesus himself, *"the way, the truth and the life."* That he came to reveal the heart of man, to reveal our purpose, our identity and our destiny. Christianity does not only have an absolute basis for speaking against violence and injustice, it tackles the very source of it: the human heart. Our most fundamental problem is not lack of education or democracy or opportunity but the gruesome reality the bible calls sin - the deceit and evil in our hearts. This is where violence must be addressed, at its source. The heart needs true and meaningful love, and this love, the absolute love of God, is the foundation of the Christian faith.

What's your foundation?

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