



Religion: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Clay Nelson © 25 July 2021

Religion is often singled out for the evil it is responsible for in the world, from the Crusades to 9/11. Jonathan Mason has used his opportunity from winning the Service Auction item to select the following sermon topic: Considering religions' responsibility for wars and intolerance, explain the positive elements of world religion and spirituality. He and I have a friendly repartee about a variety of subjects so I'm not sure if he is trying to hoist me on my own petard or he sincerely wants to know, so he is asking someone who is on a first name basis with the devil we know as religion, after my 40-plus years in the business.

It is a challenging question for at least two reasons: I have only about fifteen minutes to cover a topic that fills entire wings of libraries and, second, what the hell is religion about anyway? So, I'm not quite sure how to thank you, Jonathan.

To answer difficult questions, it sometimes helps to go back to the beginning. Mesopotamia is considered the "cradle of civilisation". It is where we find the first recorded information about what we now call religion. Certainly, what we think of as religion, in modern times, existed earlier, but we are ignorant of its prehistory. What we have from 5600 years ago is our forebears' belief that human beings were co-workers with the gods and laboured with them, and for them, to hold back the forces of chaos which had been checked by the supreme deities at the beginning of time. Order was created out of chaos by the gods and out of order the world was created. But despite the gods' apparent victory, there was no guarantee that the forces of chaos might not recover their strength and overturn the orderly creation of the gods. Gods and humans alike were involved in a perpetual struggle to restrain the powers of chaos, and they each had their own role to play in this cosmic battle. This thread has run through all religions no matter the culture, location or historical period. It remains strong today and will continue to be so as long as we feel out of control of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse: war, famine, pestilence and death.

Yet while religion was thought to create or preserve order, it does seem to be allied with the forces of chaos, in particular war, more than is statistically probable.

There are many common misconceptions about religion that are often taken as unquestioned facts, such as the idea that religious people are inherently anti-science, an idea put to the lie by the likes of Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton, all of whom were religious; that a literal reading of holy texts is the "true" religious stance, that faith is incompatible with reason, and that all religions claim to possess sole and absolute truth.

While all these ideas are true for a minority of the population, they do not describe normative religious beliefs and practices for the majority of believers. It is understandable that these misconceptions persist, though, because they come from the loudest voices on the extremes, and like other polarising positions in politics and culture are simplistic ideas that promote easy "us vs them" thinking. But there is one common misconception about religion that is voiced often and consistently as an obvious truth — often by educated, thoughtful people — that is just not factually true: The idea that religion has been the cause of most wars. But what about the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and 9/11? you ask.

Well, yes, while clearly there were wars that had religion as the prime cause, an objective look at history reveals that those killed in the name of religion have, in fact, been a tiny fraction in the bloody history of human conflict. In their book, *Encyclopaedia of Wars*, authors Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod document the history of recorded warfare, and from their list of 1763 wars only 123 have been classified to involve a religious cause, accounting for less than seven percent of all wars and less than two percent of all people killed in warfare. While, for example, approximately one to three million people were tragically killed in the Crusades, and perhaps 3,000 in the Inquisition, nearly 35 million soldiers and civilians died in the senseless, and secular, slaughter of World War I alone.

History simply does not support the hypothesis that religion is the major cause of conflict. The wars of the ancient world were rarely, if ever, based on religion. These wars were for territorial conquest, to control borders, secure trade routes, or respond to an internal challenge to political authority. In fact, the ancient conquerors, whether Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or Roman, openly welcomed the religious beliefs of those they conquered, and often added the new gods to their own pantheon.

Mediaeval and Renaissance wars were also typically about control and wealth as city-states vied for power, often with the support, but rarely instigation, of the Church. And the Mongol Asian rampage, which is thought to have killed nearly 30 million people, had no religious component whatsoever.

Most modern wars, including the Napoleonic Campaign, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the New Zealand wars, the American Civil War, World War I, the Russian Revolution, World War II, and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, were not religious in nature or cause. While religious groups have been specifically targeted (most notably in World War II), to claim that religion was the cause is to blame the victim and to misunderstand the perpetrators' motives, which were nationalistic and ethnic, not religious.

But what about religious tolerance? My faculty mentor at seminary once told me the shortest book in the library was *Examples of Religious Tolerance*, and it was mostly blank. He had a point. I grew up in a country that prided itself on religious tolerance. On paper, it was mostly true. In reality it was mostly myth. Here is one example:

In the storybook version I learned in school, the Pilgrims came to America aboard the *Mayflower* in search of religious freedom in 1620. The Puritans soon followed, for the same reason. Ever since these religious dissidents arrived at their shining "city upon a hill," as their governor John Winthrop called it, millions from around the world have done the same, coming to an America where they found a welcome melting pot in which everyone was free to practise their own faith.

The real story of religion in America's past is an often awkward, frequently embarrassing and occasionally bloody tale that most high-school texts paper over or ignore entirely.

From the earliest arrival of Europeans on America's shores, religion has often been a cudgel, used to discriminate, suppress and even kill the foreign, the "heretic" and the "unbeliever" — including the "heathen" natives already there. Moreover, while it is true that the vast majority of early-generation colonial Americans were Christian, the pitched battles between various Protestant sects and, more explosively, between Protestants and Catholics, presented an unavoidable contradiction to the widely held notion that America is a "Christian nation."

In an overlooked bit of inconvenient history: the initial encounter between Europeans in the future United States came with the establishment of a French Huguenot colony in 1564 at Fort Caroline (near modern Jacksonville, Florida). More than half a century before the *Mayflower* set sail, French pilgrims had come to America in search of religious freedom.

The Spanish had other ideas. In 1565, they established a forward operating base at St. Augustine and proceeded to wipe out the Fort Caroline colony. The Spanish commander wrote to the Spanish King Philip II that he had "hanged all those we had found in [Fort Caroline] because...they were scattering the odious Lutheran doctrine in these Provinces."

Thanks to the likes of Unitarian John Adams and Unitarian-friendly Thomas Jefferson, religious freedom eventually, over strong objection, made it into the Constitution, but unfortunately not into American behaviour. Poor Joseph Smith, founder of the Latter Day Saints, was hounded out of Western New York, tarred and feathered in Missouri and murdered in his Illinois jail cell with his brother. Of course, this isn't just an American phenomenon. The religious "other", in modern times at least, has always had a target on their back. Ask any Muslim in any "civilised" western country, including New Zealand.

It is my supposition that religion is not the cause of war or intolerance as it creates chaos. Obviously, it is, has been, and no doubt will continue to be corrupted from its original purpose to create order. But in a world with billions of people who are self-defined as religious, those who believe that violence is the will of their god and that the murder of those who believe differently is a holy act are a small, hate-filled minority.

Peace, justice and freedom are the highest aspirations for all religions. The Hebrew prophets spoke for them all. Amos sought a world that “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”. Isaiah foretold a time when “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” While some of the religious have often fallen well short of this utopian vision, we must recognise that greed, unbalanced power, and causeless hatred — not religion — are the instigators of most wars and intolerance. Eliminating these is our religious focus.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

What makes your life feel chaotic?

How does your Unitarian faith help you cope?