

Does Religion Cause Violence?

Is God a Moral Monster? - part 8

June 2018

Some atheists claim that religion is violent by its very nature. In the book Terror in the Mind of God, Mark Juergensmeyer makes this very claim.

He uses the imagery of cosmic war to claim that even religions whose end is peaceful can only get there by cosmic war.

DAY 1: DO WE JUST NEED ENLIGHTENMENT VALUES?

1. Secular atheists believe that we should adopt what they consider the values of the Enlightenment values of “rationality and fair play.”

2. Regina Schwartz wrote the book *The Curse of Cain*. In it she claims that monotheism instigates violence by its very nature. (She lumps Christianity and Judaism in with Islam). Because these three religions have absolute truth claims, she argues that this automatically sets up a “we vs. them” dilemma. For “us” to survive means “they” must not.

3. As a historian, I find this argument laughable. One of my projects in European History was to argue the case for the necessity of Robespierre to unleash his reign of terror during the French Revolution, overcoming the royals of King Louis XVI. The three “values” that drove the French Revolution were “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” (Enlightenment “values”) which turned out to require inhumanity and years of cruelty and the guillotine!

4. The term “religion” is a broad generalization that critics love to throw around, and use it whenever any religious nut does something cruel. All religions and all people of faith are condemned for the excesses of a few.

a. Just because someone claims to do something evil in the name of God does not mean that God or Christians condone what was done. That kind of broad brush sweep is radically unfair. The opposite would be equating all atheists with Joseph Stalin.

b. The most effusive critics of Christianity steadfastly refuse to acknowledge or even admit to all the good that has been done through Christians, either on the personal level of service, or the institutional level like the explosion of Christian hospitals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It may be a surprise to some biblical critics to learn that the bible is not in hot pursuit of diversity, in ways that these critics might never imagine. Early in book of Genesis we see God’s ideal is to bless all nations, not just “God’s chosen people.” There are many examples of God reaching out to “gentiles,” like evil Babylon, Pharaoh, and for hundreds of years, the Canaanites, who steadfastly refused to respond to God, at their own peril.

Galatians 3:27 ...for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

²⁸ *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

DAY 2: THE RIGHTS OF SELF-EXCLUSION

1. Critics of the God of the bible cherry-pick actions of God with which they disagree, while virtually ignoring the major attributes of God. Of course, this has the intended result of trying to sway the reader in one direction, as if this critic is a reputable theologian or student of the bible. This is intellectual dishonesty.

2. Somehow, the Trinity rarely makes it into these discussions. God the Father, Son and Spirit are the opposites of exclusionary. The whole purpose of creation was to make creatures who could **enjoy** what they already enjoy—joy, goodness, and real life. It is **shared life with all His creatures that God is after**. Unfortunately, the reverse is often not true.

3. They don't see God as coming to humble Himself, or serving recalcitrant people.

Matthew 5:45 (RSV) ...so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

⁴⁶ *For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

⁴⁷ *And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

⁴⁸ *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

4. “Well, why then does God ‘send’ people hell?” The question is framed in such a way that God is the guilty party for appearing to do so, and that people are the innocent party because hell isn't something they deserved.

a. In the final analysis, every person will either choose to put God first in their life or not.

b. Their preference to not live for Him in this life would be incoherent with them to live for Him in the next world. Nor, would they want too.

c. Not even God can force someone's will to choose Him.

d. Recalcitrant sinners who refuse to repent, to admit their sin, and who refuse to take their sin seriously cannot be forced against their will to choose heaven.

e. To allow those who have perpetrated evil on others, and then for that evil to be just wiped away **without** any repentance would be injustice. To see this fact more clearly, think about a sexual predator who refuses to admit his guilt. Would it be right to his victims to allow him to live in heaven?

5. In the final analysis, hell is the final choice of self-exclusion from God, the final act of self-assertion against God, and control of one's life.

6. If people would rather not come to God on His terms, He allows them to live by their terms, eternally without Him.

DAY 3: Exclusion (continued)

2 Thessalonians 1:9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ...

1. C.S. Lewis wrote, “I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully ‘all will be saved.’ But my reason retorts, ‘Without their will, or with it?’ If I say ‘Without their will’ I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say ‘With their will,’ my reason replies ‘How if they will not give in?’”

2. The purpose of God in human history has been to call out to everyone, in every nation, every tribe, every ethnicity, and every person. Whether or not they respond? The ball is in their court.

Romans 5:6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

⁷ *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.*

⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

⁹ *Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!*

¹⁰ *For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*

¹¹ *Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

3. What things has God done to bring all mankind to Himself?

Ephesians 2:14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

¹⁵ *by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,*

¹⁶ *and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

¹⁷ *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

4. What do you learn about God’s eternal purposes in these verses?

DAY 4: What about the Crusades?

1. One of the criticisms from atheists is that religions are the chief cause of wars. The Crusades are one example. The question is complex and is not answered with simple answers.
2. Clearly, some of what was done should not have been done. Some of what was done was the defense of their homeland and nation. And some we can say was short-sighted, believing that the city of Jerusalem was worth capturing.
3. Part of what muddles this question is our general lack of knowledge about world history.
4. Let's bore down into the broad accusation that "religion" causes wars.

Q1: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RELIGION?

Every one of them? Baha'i? Christian Science? JW's?

Q2: Is war and violence "part and parcel" of a religion, or is it utterly inconsistent with the purposes of that religion?

5. Some critics see no difference between Crusade and Islamic jihad. This is a broad brush accusation that we will explore in detail.

"Jihad" has a root meaning of "struggle." Its usage can mean inner, intellectual and moral struggle. It also means militant, violent struggle. Traditional Islamic understanding of Jihad is the violent kind that has been the dominant theme in Islam's history.

Let's do a comparative study of the Crusades and Islamic jihad.

Crusades	Jihad in Islam
--Lasted about 200 years (1095-1291)	--Ongoing for thirteen hundred years
--Criticized as the beginning of imperialism expeditions	--Muhammad's imperialistic jihad more than five hundred years prior to the Crusades.
--Began as an attempt to recapture from Muslims	--Began with the intent to take zed l Christianized lands, to establish the umma (Islamic community).
--Jesus, in whom the Crusades were fought, did not teach or exemplify violence	Muhammad not only taught violence against non-believers but practiced it. Over sixty military campaigns.
--Earliest followers of Jesus, and NT writers did not advocate violence. In its earliest centuries Christianity was politically powerless And expanded through love	The Qur'an includes many militant, aggressive texts. After Muhammad's death, Islam extended far and wide through violence.

DAY 5: Are God's wars in the OT just like Islamic Jihad?

1. If you want more information on this topic, check last week's message, which you can see from our website.
2. This doesn't mean there aren't peaceful loving Muslims.
3. Let's do a comparison of the Hebrew nation taking the Promised Land versus Islamic Jihad.
4. In terms of geography:
 - Israel's war was limited to the Promised Land.
 - For Jihad, there is no geographical border. The non-Muslim world is considered "the abode of war."
5. Historical length of war:
 - For Israel the war was essentially limited to one generation.
 - For Jihad, there have never been an historical limitation.
6. Objects of war:
 - War was meant to punish and demolish a hopelessly degenerate culture. Punishment and judgment came after a period of mercy for four hundred years.
 - For Jihad, war is directed at non-Muslims, including Christians and Jews.
7. Objects of God's love:
 - The God of the bible loves those who are enemies of Him. His desire is for former enemies to become His children and enjoy Him in heaven forever.
 - For Jihad, God only loves those who love and obey him.
8. Standard of morality:
 - God's compassion and gracious nature is the source of His commands.
 - The Qur'an stresses God as sheer will (not morally good nature)
9. Fulfilling God's plan:
 - God Messianic kingdom will be characterized by peace.
 - For Jihad, military aggression is normative and the way to domination.

Conclusion: Does religion cause violence?

- a. The question is a crass generalization. There are all kinds of religions. Only a few call for violence.
- b. You should ask if militant texts in their writings are normative and permanent or unique and non-repeatable.
- c. The question does not allow for crackpots to abuse Christianity. The baby is not thrown out with the bathwater.
- d. The question should be asked, "What is truth?"
- e. Do say that religion causes violence because it is exclusive or has claims for absolute truth is silly. Any truth claim, by its definition will be exclusive.