



"Religion causes Wars"

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The British zoologist Richard Dawkins says that, 'Religion causes wars by generating certainty.' And the news that constantly beams into our homes and cars reminds us that the most violent and seemingly intractable contemporary conflicts (9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Bosnia, Sri Lanka) have taken place across lines of religious difference. What is more worrying and relevant is that these conflicts have often been fed, in more or less direct ways, by appeals to religion. Then there have been the explicit appeals to religion in the formation of anti-Western revolutionary ideologies. And the videos of suicide bombers giving their overtly religious justifications only fans Dawkins' fire. More broadly, our concern has grown over the role of religion in the shaping of civilizations, and in its responsibility for crystallising hostility between and among different civilizations. The suggestion that, 'Belief leads to intolerance and ultimately to conflict' is one of the most popular ideas around, but is it true? Is it a naive urban myth? Is it sophisticated enough? And what can Christian believers who want to stay true to the Biblical portrait of a certain hope in a certain saviour through a certain gospel say in reply?

What could a Christian say in response to this kind of challenge?

§ It's too simple to say that religion causes war and violence. As an explanation for what we see on the news it is inadequate.

§ Sometimes it's pretty clear that corrupt establishments or organizations use religion to justify crooked agendas.

§ The imperialistic bloodlusts of the crusades were not so much a product of the 'Christian' invaders bible, but rather their own agendas.

§ Much of the conflict and war in the 20th century was the result of atheist ideologues. Religion gets the blame but history tells us quite a different story. The critic of religion needs to be able to offer an explanation for why the greatest butchers of the last 100 years turned to atheism and secularism for their justifications. Hitler leaned[1] on the work of atheist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche and Stalin leaned on Karl Marx for support.

§ The Secular or atheistic beliefs, such as those of Stalin or Mao Tse-tung, who handed out the biggest share of destruction and pain in the 20th century need to be challenged every bit as much as the religious outlook.

§ To avoid being too simplistic we must look to the essential teaching of what a religion is. We should look at its abuses, but we should also look at its core principles. Is taking up the sword in the name of Jesus to promote Christianity consistent with what Jesus affirmed? We could ask the same of Islam or Hinduism. Do the core beliefs of the religion actually advocate violent means as a way of dealing with others?

§ It is not *religion* that perpetrates violence, but people. And specifically a certain mindset that seeks to use an ideology or a religious justification to control people's thinking and restrain the most fundamental freedoms.

§ When freedom of conscience, religious freedom, women's rights or other important rights are being abused, all of us must reject this as wrong. Sometimes this may mean challenging those who claim the same religious affiliation as we do. For example, where were the people who should have been standing up for these basic rights and condemning Ayatollah Khomeini's when he expressed a death wish (*fatwah*) upon Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses*?

§ It is a self-defeating statement as well as a contravention of human rights[2] to refuse to allow a person to believe what they choose to believe, with certainty or not. And perhaps to refuse to allow others to believe in certainty requires a *stronger* ideological commitment to the *not-certainty* perspective.

§ We are waking up to the fact that what Jesus said was absolutely right. How you think affects how you behave. Recognising that belief plays a role in affecting what we do, is a necessary

realignment with the thinking of Christ.

§ Just because a person is part of a church doesn't necessarily mean he or she is a follower of Jesus. Some people are *cultural* Christians but not *authentic* Christians. Isn't that a convenient bit of 21st century revisionism? No, it goes right back to Jesus himself (Matthew 7:21-23).

§ Dostoevsky said that, 'There is a war between heaven and hell and the battleground is the hearts of men.' And Dallas Willard says, 'The greatest need you and I have, the greatest need of humanity in general, is renovation of our heart.'

§ 'The very nature of the way God made humans was with the ability to have free choices. The bad side of this is that we can choose to take up arms against God, which is what Adam did. The good side of this is that we can actually love God. Love is a cheapened word in our culture... We sprinkle it in our loves songs, we talk about it in our movies, but we rarely have the true import of the meaning of that word... God takes the risk for us to have free will and decided to take the bad side of it if we chose to resist him. In giving us freedom, he took upon himself the Cross. The Cross is where love is best played out, a dramatic masterpiece of the high courtesy of heaven: giving His life for ours.[3] The cross is where the war against God, that we re-enact in our wars with each other, is faced and overcome.

Notes

[1] Hitler wasn't a big fan of atheism itself (<http://www.nobeliefs.com/hitler-myths.htm#myth4>) but as J. Bradford DeLong, University of California at Berkeley writes, 'His [Hitler's] very words. "Lords of the Earth" is a familiar expression in *Mein Kampf*. That in the end Hitler considered himself the superman of Nietzsche's prophecy cannot be doubted.' (<http://www.j-bradford-delong.net/TCEH/Nietzsche.html>). And Victor Frankl writes, 'I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin, but rather at the desks and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers', *The Doctor and the Soul*.

[2] Article 18-19, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>)

[3] Dale Fincher, online chat transcript (http://www.rzim.org/publications/essay_arttext.php?id=17)