

Ashland Culture of Peace Commission: Religion's role in violence and peace

By Steve Scholl / Ashland Culture of Peace Commission

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Religion is a tricky thing. Is it a good thing or does it just cause problems? Is it at the root of the fighting going on around the world? Well, it's complicated.

There are a lot of religions in the world with conflicting beliefs alongside many shared beliefs. All religions proclaim the importance of the Golden Rule: We should treat others as we wish to be treated. All religions proclaim that love should be at the center of human relations. But then some holy texts claim that other religions and their ideas are in error, or an inferior path.

The sense that "my religion is better than yours" is similar to the tribal feeling that "my country is better than yours." This belief becomes the basis for pride and prejudice, and then the next, short step toward conflict and war. Some believe that religion is a dangerous aspect of human culture. Here's how Richard Dawkins, an acclaimed scientist, author, and atheist puts it: "I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."

British scholar Keith Ward responded in "Is Religion Dangerous?" that the problem of war and violence is deeper than Dawkins' rant against religion. "What makes beliefs evil is not religion, but hatred, ignorance, the will to power, and indifference to others."

There is also the claim that religion is at the heart of most fighting and conflict. Just look at the fighting in the Middle East, with Islam being portrayed as an especially violent faith, or Christians persecuting homosexuals in Uganda, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the greatest killing done in the 20th century was for territory and power. And the most prolific killing fields were by atheist regimes: Stalin in Russia, Mao in China, Pol Pot in Cambodia.

Studies on human violence provide us with some insights into the source of the problem. Anthropologists, theoretical biologists and archeologists are digging up evidence that there are deep evolutionary roots to human violence. Jane Goodall's study showing how chimpanzees engaged in lethal raids against other chimpanzees due to "resource competition" are especially illuminating because this behavior relates directly to what we humans do: For the defense of our group, we attack those in "out-groups" for coveted resources.

Evolutionary biologist Luke Glowacki notes that, "Today the basis for out-groups can take any form, including nationality, religious sect, ethnic background or political affiliation" So, there are strong evolutionary and biological drives that give us humans a propensity to commit violent acts.

That said, Glowacki and others have noted that human cooperation has evolutionary roots as deep as those that push us towards conflict. There are strong, intrinsic incentives for different groups to cooperate as seen through intermarriage, trade and cultural exchange. Studies also show that compassion is biologically rooted in human behavior. Indeed, religion has served throughout the ages to advance humanity's better instincts.

What we see today is that ideologies are gaining ground due to environmental pressures and resource scarcity. More and more, we are seeing environmental refugees displaced by climate change, with wars taking place in order to secure scarce resources. The United Nations foresees more than 50 million environmental refugees around the world by 2020 due to flooding and drought brought on by climate change. Often groups fighting over scarce resources belong to different religions and turn to religious language to define their quarrel with their neighbors. For example, the battles between Jews and Muslims in Israel and Palestine are at root over control of scarce resources, not religious views.

So what can be done? How can people of faith be part of the solution and not part of the problem? Recently Andrew Harvey visited Ashland and urged all of us to do our unique work for peace. Harvey gave this brilliant advice: Examine your heart and see what makes it break and ache the most, then use that to guide your sacred activism. Whether it is war refugees, the environment, homeless issues, poverty, racism, or whatever cause claims your conscience, follow your heart and

work for peace. Take the lead, along with the Ashland Culture of Peace, to help transform our culture into one that replaces competition and conflict with cooperation and compassion.

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