Does religion cause war?

By Rex Morgan

One of the most common arguments atheists use to criticise people of faith is that religion is the main cause of wars. If it weren't for religion, they argue, the world would be a much more peaceful place.

For example, the recent brutal series of co-ordinated terrorist attacks in Paris that killed scores of innocent people were motivated by religious zeal, at the hands of the Islamic group ISIS. Similarly, the infamous 11 September 2001 attacks by al-Qaeda on the USA were clearly religious in motivation, part of a *jihad* (holy war) against the infidel Western societies.

Other religious conflicts always seem to be going on in places like the Middle East and Afghanistan. And it is not only Islam and Judaism that are involved in hostilities. Christianity is incriminated, too. It was behind the bloody Crusades in the 11th to 13th centuries. And the Irish 'Troubles' of the late 20th century were largely a struggle for supremacy between Catholics and Protestants.

Lucretius, a Roman poet of the 1st century BC opined: 'Religion can incite so much evil'.

Sir Elton John stated that religion 'turns people into hateful lemmings', and added: 'I would ban religion completely'.[1]

According to noted atheist Richard Dawkins: 'Only the wilfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today'.[2]

Another leading atheist, Sam Harris, labelled faith and religion as 'the most prolific source of violence in our history', and stated: 'For anyone with eyes to see, there can be no doubt that religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict'.[3]

The history of warfare

Let's put this to the test. Is it true that most wars are religiously motivated?

The objective way to settle this question is to consider each of the wars of history and analyse their causes.

The wars of the ancient world, involving the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, weren't launched out of religious scruples. They were for territorial conquest, to secure trade routes, control borders, and build empires.

The battles of the Middle Ages were generally contests over possession of feudal property, as city states vied for power. The barbarian invasions—the Mongols, Goths, Huns, Vikings and others—were in pursuit of land and livestock, not to impose or defend any gods.

The numerous wars of the 17th–19th centuries between the British, French, Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese colonial powers had very little if any religious component. Most modern wars, including the American, Russian, and French Revolutions; the American Civil War; World Wars I and II; and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam weren't religious, either.

Human history has also been blighted by horrific mass murders and genocides perpetrated by power-hungry dictators. Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin were each responsible for the deaths of over 40 million people, Adolf Hitler for 20 million, Leopold II of Belgium for 15 million, Vladimir Lenin and Hideki Tojo each for 5 million, Pol Pot for over 2 million—the list goes on and on. But none of these despots were motivated by religion.

Whether or not most wars are caused by religion is something that can be statistically measured. And when the figures are counted, it turns out that, contrary to commonly held opinion, very few wars are religious.

Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod researched the history of warfare for their recently published three-volume work, *The Encyclopedia of Wars*. Covering every major war, rebellion, and revolution from 3500 BC to the present, they listed 1763 wars and found that only 123 of these can be classified as involving a religious cause—less than seven percent of all wars. Of the religious conflicts, they claim that more than half were waged in the name of Islam.

Similarly, a five-volume work published in 2012, *The Encyclopedia of War*, edited by Gordon Martel, concluded that a mere six percent of the wars it listed could be labelled religious wars.

An independent international think-tank, the Institute for Economics and Peace, conducted a comprehensive study of all the wars that took place in 2013. It concluded frankly: 'Religion is not the main cause of conflicts today'. In fact it found that religious elements played no role at all in fourteen (40 percent) of the 35 armed conflicts in 2013. The report stated: 'It is notable that religion did not stand as a single cause in any conflict; however 14% did have religion and the establish-ment of an Islamic state as driving causes'. The report also noted that having less religion in a country doesn't make it more peaceful. For instance, 'North Korea and Russia, two of the ten least peaceful countries in the world, have two of the three highest levels of atheism in the world'.[4]

Some wars are religious

It is true that a number of wars currently plaguing the planet are religious in nature, notably those instigated by Muslim extremists.

The Muslim holy book, the *Qu'ran*, includes many passages appearing to sanction violence against non-believers. These are hotly debated, however, with Islamic apologists arguing that they relate to defensive warfare or are explained by historical context. Although most followers of Islam claim it to be a peaceful religion,

history does record that the founder of Islam, Muhammed, personally staged several aggressive acts of war in order to extend the reaches of Islam.

In his book, *The Gods of War*, Meic Pearse explains that 'Islam was from the beginning propagated by military conquest, or *jihad'*.[5] He goes on to quote Islam scholars Riddell and Cotterell: 'There can be no doubt that Islam was cradled in violence and that Muhammed himself, through the 26 or 27 raids in which he personally participated, came to serve for some Muslims as a role model for violence'.[6]

Muslim historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun stated: 'In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the Muslim mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force.'[7]

There is a significant difference between Islam and Christianity, in that while Muslim extremists can find ample encouragement for violence in the words of the *Qu'ran,* Christian extremists can't point to such incitements in the words of Jesus. The Christian scriptures prescribe the pursuing of peace to the extent that even enemies should be loved and prayed for.[8]

Muslim extremists have formed such terror groups as ISIS and al-Qaeda and openly declare that they are waging a religious war to conquer the West and set up an Islamic Caliphate with the aim of global domination.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq released a statement in which it explained the reasons for its terror campaign: 'We are not fighting to chase out the occupier or to save national unity and keep the borders outlined by the infidels intact...We are fighting because it is a religious duty to do it, just as it is a duty to take the Sharia (Islamic law) to the government and create an Islamic state'.[9]

But though it is evident that some wars have been caused by religion, the vast majority have not.

After cataloguing a series of the bloodiest wars of history, Meic Pearse concludes that 'most wars…owed little or nothing to religious causation'.[10] 'In sum, only a small proportion of the deadliest conflicts in human history can be traced principally to religious causation'.[11]

'Lives lost during religious conflicts pale in comparison to those experienced during the regimes who wanted nothing to do with the idea of God', sums up Robin Schumacher, in an article entitled *Does Religion Cause War?*[12]

Harking back to the 'old days' before Google came along, I have just pulled out my dusty old 1980 edition of the *World Book Encyclopaedia* and note that the three-page article on 'War', analysing the causes, history, and methods of warfare, doesn't make even *one* reference to religion or religious war.

The evidence is in. A study of the wars of history clearly shows that most wars aren't caused by religion. So if religion doesn't cause war, what does?
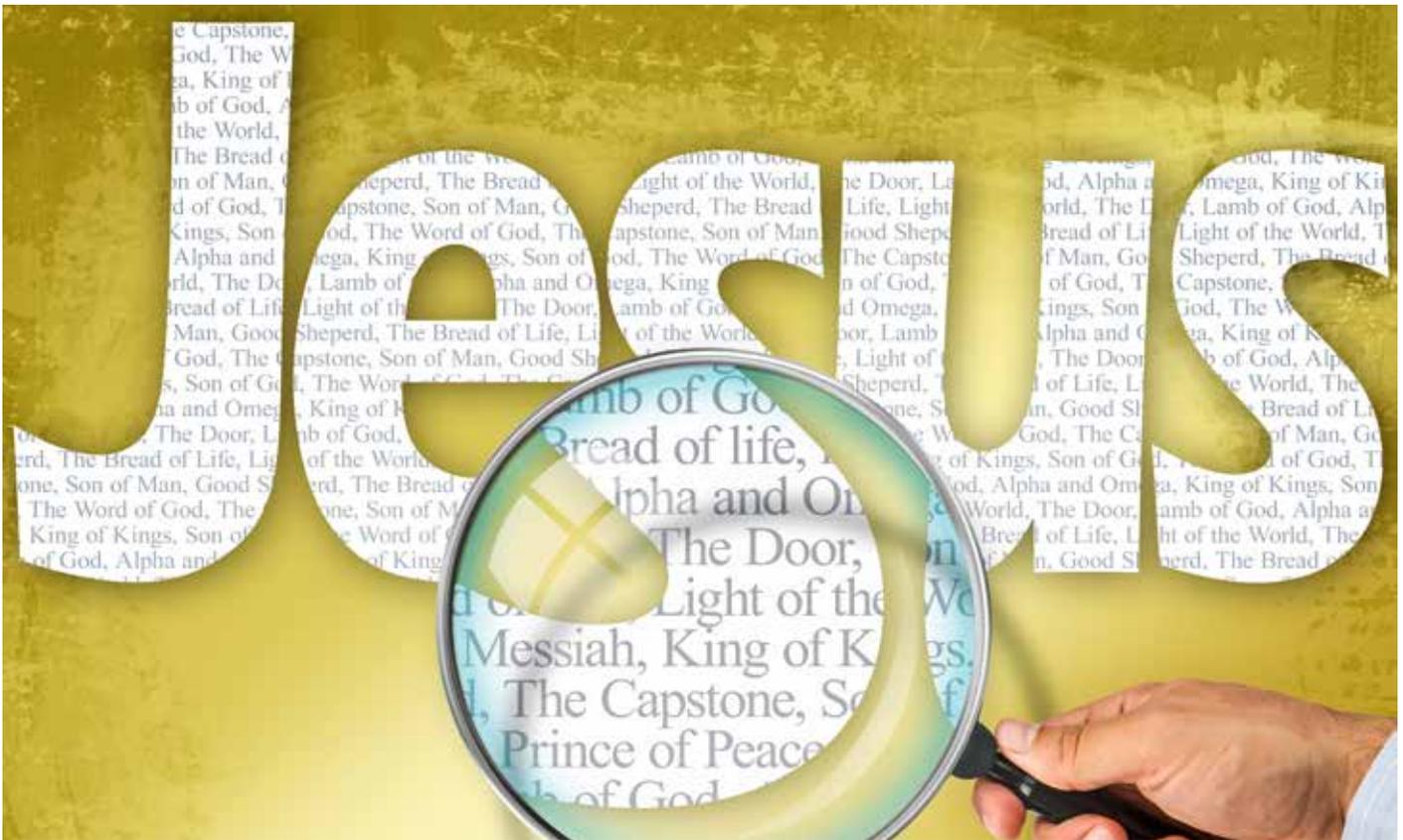
A multiplicity of causes

The causes of war are many and varied, with religious, political, and economic factors often intertwined in a way that makes it impossible to attribute any war to just one cause.

In *The Encyclopedia of Wars,* Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod wrote: 'Wars have always arisen, and arise today, from territorial disputes, military rivalries, conflicts of ethnicity and strivings for commercial and economic advantage, and they have always depended on and depend on today, pride, prejudice, coercion, envy, cupidity, competitiveness, and a sense of injustice'.[13]

In *Probing War and Warfare*, author J A Kahn also puts a finger on some of the causes of war: 'The fighting starts when a nation wants something so badly that it is willing to go to war to get it. Sometimes war results from a disagreement between two nations, and sometimes from a desire for conquest. Some basic causes may be a desire for more land, a desire for more wealth, a desire for more power, or a desire for security'.[14]

In the Introduction to his book surveying the conflicts of history, Meic Pearse succinctly sums up his findings: 'The two principal causes of human warfare are in fact culture and greed for territory, resources, or power. Since culture and greed often

clothe themselves in religion, wars fought for culture often appear to be fought for religion'.[15]

So we find that, as Meic Pearse puts it: 'Many wars in which religion seems to be the cause of the problem turn out, on closer inspection, to be more ambiguous in their origins. For religion was and is often used as a morally convenient cloak for nationalism, human greed or other mundane motives'.[16]

For instance, it is recognised by historians that the Northern Ireland conflict (the 'Troubles') was not a religious war. One historian notes: 'Although the Troubles in Northern Ireland are often portrayed as a religious conflict of a Catholic vs a Protestant faction, the more fundamental cause of the conflict was in fact ethnic or nationalistic rather than religious in nature. Since the native Irish were mostly Catholic and the later British-sponsored immigrants were mainly Protestant, the terms become shorthand for the two cultures, but it is inaccurate to describe the conflict as a religious one'.[17]

Another commentator writes: 'It should, I think, be apparent that the Northern Irish conflict is not a religious conflict...Although religion has a place—and indeed an important one—in the repertoire of conflict in Northern Ireland, the majority of participants see the situation as primarily concerned with matters of politics and nationalism, not religion. And there is no reason to disagree with them'.[18]

Interestingly, the question of the causes behind war was raised in the Bible, where a writer asked 2000 years ago: 'What causes fights and quarrels among you?' He went on to give the answer: 'Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight'.[19]

It's hard to argue with this analysis. It is remarkable how often the Bible hits problems right on the head, with incisive statements written thousands of years ago about many of mankind's chronic difficulties.

How sad it is that there have been so many wars in the course of history! The Swiss historian Jean Jacques Babel estimated that the 5500 years or so of recorded history have seen a meagre total of just 292 years of peace. The *World Book* article on 'War' points out a sad conundrum: 'Most people hate war, yet for hundreds of years war has been going on somewhere in the world nearly all the time. Earthquakes and floods *happen* to people, but people *make* war themselves'.[20]

The solution emerges

Try as we might, mankind seems unable to find the solution to war. 'The war to end all wars', a term used in connection with World War I, certainly hasn't yet occurred!

As a biblical writer put it, referring to society almost 3000 years ago: 'The way of peace they do not know'.[21] So what can be done to bring an end to the scourge of war?

Here the Bible comes to the fore again. It is unique in that it purports to be a revelation from God to mankind. As such, it should be able to point mankind in the right direction morally. And it doesn't fail in this respect. As well as illuminating the root cause of war, it clearly reveals the solution.

As he walked the dusty streets of Palestine, Jesus got to the core of the problem when he stated: 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder,

adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander'.[22] War proceeds from greed, and greed comes from our 'heart', referring to the thoughts and motivations deep inside us.

In other words, wars are caused by human nature. Even young children are motivated by an innate sense of competition and selfishness to fight each other for toys, and *every* young child is like this! All human beings tend much of the time to think of themselves first—it is just part of being human. As young children grow into adults, they retain this inherent self-centredness, but begin to use increasingly more sophisticated methods of getting their way, so the skirmishes of children develop into the full-blown warfare of adults and sadly, grow to involve entire nations.

The only way to end warfare, then, is to have a change in our hearts, a change in our human nature. But how is that possible?

Here the message of Jesus (by the way the Bible calls him 'the Prince of Peace') becomes sharply relevant. He came to show mankind that if we believe and put our trust in him, he will change us from the inside out, by living inside us, and bringing his values of love, kindness, mercy, and forgiveness into the core of our beings.

Christians follow Jesus, who clearly urged his disciples to renounce the natural inclination to competitive striving and instead seek after peace and love. He gave instructions such as 'love one another', 'overcome evil with good', 'always try to be kind to each other and to everyone', and 'I tell you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you'.[23]

So it turns out that far from being the *cause* of war, in fact Christianity is the only *answer* to war—it provides the definitive solution to war!

Isn't it ironic then that wars have been waged in the very name of the loving God who wants, and shows us, the way to peace? But it is not fair to judge Christianity on the behaviour of some of the misguided humans who say they follow it. Many professing Christians have acted totally contrary to what they claim to believe! Failing to internalise the principles of Jesus in their hearts, their actions show that they are not true followers of Christ.

On the other hand, countless good people have truly followed Jesus, actively living and sharing a life of gentleness, kindness, honesty, and love, making the world a better place for all around them. Multiple thousands of innocent Christians have been persecuted and have even died for their faith, and have responded to hatred in the same way that Jesus did, asking: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing'.[24]

So we have surveyed the evidence and seen that religion isn't the cause of wars, but indeed the very opposite. In fact, true religion will bring about the end of war, once and for all. The only cure for war is the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. At this time he is actively present in his people, guiding them in the way of peace. It isn't yet the time for him to act on a national or international scale to bring about the end to war. But that time is coming in the future. Jesus has promised to return to the earth, to establish peace for all mankind.

The Bible foretells this time in beautiful words: 'He will judge between the nations, and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore'.[25]

Notes

[1] 'When Elton met Jake', *The Observer*, Sunday November 16, 2006.

[2] ffrf.org/timely/dawkins.php .

[3] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 236–7.

[4] *Five Key Questions Answered on the Link between Peace and Religion*, www.economicsandpeace.org

[5] Meic Pearse, *The Gods of War*, IVP, 2007, p. 58.

[6] Peter G Riddell and Peter Cotterell, *Islam in Context* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003) p. 212.

[7] http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/ibn-khaldun-on-holy-war-as-religious-duty.

[8] Luke 6:27–36.

[9] *Iraq: We are Fighting for an Islamic State, Says Al-Qaeda in Iraq*, adnki.com, 18 October 2005.

[10] Meic Pearse, *The Gods of War*, IVP, 2007, p. 53.

[11] Meic Pearse, *The Gods of War*, IVP, 2007, p. 56

[12] https://carm.org/religion-cause-war .

[13] Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod, Encyclopedia of Wars, Facts on File, 2005, p. xxii

[14] J.S. Kahn, *Probing War and Warfare*, APH Publishing, 2005, p. 23.

[15] Meic Pearse, *The Gods of War*, IVP, 2007, p. 20.

[16] Meic Pearse, *The Gods of War*, IVP, 2007, p. 69.

[17] McGarry J, O'Leary B, 1995. *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images.* Oxford, Blackwell.

[18] Richard Jenkins (1997). *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*. SAGE Publications. p. 120.

[19] James 4:1-2, all scriptural references from *the New International Version.*

[20] *The World Book Encyclopedia,* 1980, vol. 21, p. 21

[21] Isaiah 59:8.

[22] Matthew 15:19.

[23] John 13:34; Romans 12:21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; Luke 6:27.

[24] Luke 23:34.

[25] Isaiah 2:4.

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