

InterQuesters,

When discussing religion I have frequently come across a striking claim. Paraphrased, the thought goes like this; “Many wars have been committed in the name of god and religion.” You may have encountered that thought in the real world.. Usually it is part of a criticism of religion. Singer songwriter Bob Dylan expressed the thought in his song "With God on Our Side" (1964). I think this claim is worth considering for a bit.

It is certainly true that wars have historically been promoted and justified by reference to religion. So far as I can tell, every major religious tradition (Egyptian, Taoist, Hindu, Judaic, Christian, Islamic) has been used as a factor in wars. Buddhism is possibly the least of these, but there are instances of Buddhist wars, see for instance “Buddhist Warfare” (2009) by Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer.

What, though, is the significance of the fact that wars are often carried out by pious religious people? I’m not sure that the correlation of war and faith really give us a basis to denounce religion. Wars are very complex activities. They require immense social organization and resources. They are advanced with a complex set of related factors, such as territory, wealth, patriotism, national identity, economics, historical grievances, social status, and much more. A war is an activity among highly organized social entities, usually nations, and a war requires involvement of the society at almost every level. It would be surprising if the religious life of a society was not involved in a war effort. So, the fact that war and religion are correlated does not demonstrate that religion causes war. To do that we need some instance of a war that was fought only (or primarily) out of religious motives. That will be hard to find. More concrete factors, such as economics, are always involved.

To me it seems that an important point is that the presence of religion is not sufficient to prevent war. Religion is supposed traditionally cited as a basis for morality and justice in a society. If any force should cause us to re-think our march to a war, religion should provide it. It does not seem to, though. Wars, just and unjust, happen all the same with religion in its full influence. So the question for the advocates of religion must be: if religiosity of a society is not capable of preventing massively organized violence in which countless innocents suffer and perish, then what is religion for? If we had a really good instance where a nation backed off from a needless war because of a general societal religious reflection, then we would be able to evidence the moral value of religion. If both religious and non-religious people are equally prone to excessive violence and destruction, then the role of religion drops out of the equation. It is not obvious to me that religion is a key causal factor in war generally, but I don’t see it as a strong moderating influence for peace either. I realize that instances of both can be produced, but whether those instances add up to a general character seems doubtful.

Well, I sense that there are strong responses to both sets of observations that I have given. I really do have these questions and I don’t have the answers. I am aware that some religious sub-groups do oppose war on spiritual grounds. Quakers, Amish, some Taoists, Buddhists, and Islamic pacifists ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism\\_in\\_Islam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism_in_Islam)), among others take strong religious positions against war. Moreover, religious traditions have been employed very

purposely and effectively in non-violence movements. The 1960's civil rights movement in the USA, associated with Martin Luther King (whose birthday is this month) and the India Independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, are instances of religious thought providing effective alternatives to violent revolution.

I'll be very interested to read any expansions on these topics. If you do so, please post them to the "My Philosophy" dialogue in the Blackboard site of our course.

In good spirit,

Jon