

It seems that bashing religion is in vogue. Perhaps this has emerged as a reaction to a world where terrorists proclaim a holy war, or jihad, in the name of Allah and fly jets into buildings, killing thousands of innocent people. Or maybe it is a reaction to fundamentalists within our own country who apply religious overtones to a dangerous "us against them" mentality. I have repeatedly heard comedian Bill Mahr imply that religion is the root of all despicable behavior today and the source of every abominable act perpetrated throughout history. Mr. Marr is wrong. He is confusing the principles of faith with the acts of evil, greedy, selfish, or power-hungry men who try to co-opt religion for their own personal agenda.

My faith emerges from the Christian tradition. The first and foremost tenet of the Judeo-Christian tradition is to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus goes on to teach that all of humanity is to be included in the definition of neighbor. This sentiment is found in one form or another in every major religion. In my church, it has led dozens of youth to surrender a part of their summer to rehabilitate housing for the poor. Other members stock a food bank or participate in a food delivery program for housebound people. The sick are visited when hospitalized and given hope. On a personal level, my faith has led me to start a mentoring program for at-risk inner city youth. Traveling into the city, I see churches propping up their surrounding community with after-school programs and vocational training. Faithful people of every religion replicate acts such as these throughout the world, but I guess this quiet, humble service does not interest the media or those whose prime motive seems to be demeaning faith.

Christianity clearly teaches us to not pass judgment on others. In every religion, you can find self-righteous people who feel the need to pass judgment and exclude those that they perceive as less holy, but that is clearly not a Christian principle. Jesus rebelled against every social convention that tried to separate people into worthy and unworthy. In fact, there is a clear social justice message throughout Jesus' teachings that expects us to reach out to those who are disenfranchised and those who have lost their way. Our faith inspires us to reach out to those in need, to become other-directed instead of self-centered.

Mercy and compassion are foundational in every religion. God's compassion and mercy are mentioned 192 times in the Koran, as opposed to 17 references to his wrath and vengeance. There is not a single instance in the Hebrew or Christian scripture where God fails to provide mercy to those who repent and ask for it. Principles of forgiveness are manifest in all religions. There are times I lack grace, times when feelings of revenge and anger triumph over forgiveness, but this does not come from God or Christianity.

No word inflames Western prejudice more than Jihad. Yet the word Jihad literally means "effort, exertion, or struggle". It is only in the warped minds of Islamic radicals that it translates into a holy war involving terrorism. Islam itself promotes religious tolerance and the greatest historical example of Jews, Muslims, and Christians living prosperously side-by-side is Moorish Spain (Southern Spain 711-1492). I cannot blame Islam for the distorted lunacy of terrorists.

Religious institutions, just like other institutions managed by flawed humans, have been responsible for some of history's greatest tragedies. The Crusades and Inquisition immediately come to mind, as does the failure of the "Church" in more recent times regarding Nazism and slavery. Once again, you cannot attribute these failures to religion, but rather to those who lacked sufficient, authentic faith to apply religious principles as they were intended. We must differentiate between heinous acts committed in the name of Jesus Christ

from the actual teachings of Jesus. Renowned theologian William Sloane Coffin remarks, "Professors judge poetry, novels, and music by their very best works. Why then do so many judge religion by the worst examples of it? I used to ask professors, 'Tell me about the God you don't believe in.' I knew that 99 chances out of 100 I wouldn't believe in their kind of God either." Lest we forget, religious institutions have been deeply involved in helping the poor and disadvantaged. Ram Cnaan, a professor of social work at the University of Pennsylvania estimated, in monetary terms, the contribution of money, time, and resources given by the average congregation to its community. This amounted to \$140,000. For the city of Philadelphia, that adds up to \$250 million.<sup>3</sup> As Lee Strobel reminds us in *The Case For Faith*, "Losing all of the missionary work, all the hospitals, all the homeless shelters, all the rehabilitation programs, all the orphanages, all of the relief organizations, all the selfless feeding of the hungry and clothing of the poor and encouraging of the sick that have been provided through religious institutions would be unthinkable." Also, let us not forget the "gruesome price for the awful experiments in deliberate atheism of Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung." After reviewing life under deliberate atheism, it is evident that life without God is often devoid of true compassion.

The perception of religion as destructive partly emanates from a disconnect between the agenda of Christian fundamentalists and the ministry of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. Jesus clearly was inclusive. Christian fundamentalists, more often than not, are divisive. Jesus' first impulse was to embrace those who lost their way, whereas Christian fundamentalists' first impulse is to judge and condemn. It is ironic that the incidence of "scandalous" behavior among Christian fundamentalists is no lower, and sometimes higher, than the general population. Dave Burchett, author of *When Bad Christians Happen to Good People*, lists the sins that judgmental Christians rail against:

- drugs
- drinking
- smoking
- premarital sex
- extramarital sex
- pornography
- cursing
- homosexuality
- immodest dress

He then proceeds to list sins that we should care about, but usually don't because they "hit too close to home".

- gossip
- greed
- selfishness
- materialism
- anger
- bitterness
- pride

- unforgiveness
- racism
- envy
- lust
- sexism
- classism
- indifference
- homophobia

The authentic countenance of Christianity will surface when the world sees us addressing this second list. In the meantime, people need to remember that when we are impatient, mean spirited, unkind, or judgmental, it is certainly our failure, not that of our religion. Leo Tolstoy captures this well in one of his personal letters:

Attack me, I do this myself, but attack me rather than the path I follow and which I point out to anyone who asks me where I think it lies. If I know the way home and I am walking along it drunkenly, is it any less the right way because I am staggering from side to side! If it is not the right way, then show me another way; but if I stagger and lose the way, you must help me, you must keep me on the true path, just as I am ready to support you. Do not mislead me, do not be glad that I have got lost, do not shout out joyfully: 'Look at him! He said he was going home, but there he is crawling into a bog!' No, do not gloat, but give me your help and support.

In many ways, Leo Tolstoy attempted to emulate Jesus. He freed his serfs, gave away his copyrights, and disposed of much of his wealth. He joined the peasants working in his fields and found a greater faith among them than the elite. His philosophy of nonviolence, acquired from the teachings of Jesus, influenced both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He set up makeshift hospitals and cared for the destitute. On the other hand, he often ignored the needs of his own wife and children. He created moralistic rules for perfect behavior and then proceeded to break those rules with regularity. His critics called him a hypocrite, an accusation often hurled at Christians today. I honestly aspire to be a disciple of Jesus. Too often this is not reflected in my behavior. Call me a hypocrite if you like but don't denigrate the teachings of Jesus because of my failures. I still claim that I am a better person today because of my faith. Christianity directs my perspective away from self-interest and toward the larger community.

Our faith infuses us with love, joy, hope, and charity. It should reduce our quest for reputation and possessions. Our faith provides us with a sense of overwhelming abundance and a desire to share that with others. For me, and millions like me, it provides a purpose and direction that has a profound, positive impact on relationships with family, friends, and

community. Perhaps instead of bashing religion, we all ought to remind ourselves of the true nature of authentic religious principles such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance. Our ability to live in harmony in a diverse world depends on it.