

All These Shootings Make Us Ask: Is Religion the Problem?

Long before his name was printed in news publications worldwide, John T. Earnest attended a modest-sized Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California. He was 19, introverted but “charming.” While not involved in the youth group, he went to church regularly, and his father, John Sr., is a highly regarded elder in the church. In most parishioners’ minds, Earnest was a stellar student, an accomplished pianist and an all-around “sweet and nice” Christian kid.

Of course, no one who knew Earnest was remotely prepared for his actions on April 27, 2019, when he walked into a Jewish synagogue on the final day of Passover and opened fire. Hours earlier, he had posted online a seven-page manifesto explaining his rationale behind the shooting: He blamed Jews for the death of Jesus, among other offenses, and cited his main influences as Brenton Tarrant (the shooter charged for the Christchurch mosque shooting in March), Adolf Hitler and Jesus Christ.

The Poway synagogue was just one of the many places of worship racked by violence in the last few months—the Christian churches in Sri Lanka, the Christchurch mosque and the synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Soberingly, in all of these instances, the people who committed these violent acts were motivated by some form of religious ideology.

What do people of faith do with this? As a Christian, my immediate instinct is to distance myself from someone like Earnest. After all, my faith has never compelled me to violence. However, when I look at the pattern of religious violence over the past few months, I feel challenged to recognize: It’s instances like these that people point to when

they say that religion is a force for evil. It's something worth grappling with, especially for people of faith.

"Is religion the problem?"

Many brilliant people throughout history would answer, unequivocally, yes. Voltaire, the French satirist, wrote over 400 years ago, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche asserted in 1888 that Christianity was "the one immortal blemish of mankind." In his 2006 book, *The God Delusion*, biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins specifies that, when looking at religious violence, "we should blame religion itself, not religious extremism—as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion." For many, the religious extremists cannot be separated from the religion, nor should they; the dangers of religion, they believe, are intrinsic.

And what are these dangers? Exclusivity, for one. Religions typically require a radical commitment to a comprehensive worldview, often to the exclusion of all other belief systems. This can breed what scholar Peter Jonkers defines as "religious intolerance." According to Jonkers, "religious intolerance" distinguishes itself from other forms of intolerance through its "conviction that the opinions and ways of life of others are not only wrong but have to be eradicated in the interest of the common good ..." In other words, those who don't believe in the "one true way" are sinners who need to be converted or cleansed. Without exclusivity, some argue, without the sincere conviction "that their faith is not only the truthful path to their own salvation, but to that of humankind as such," as Jonkers writes, we would never have had the Crusades or witch hunts or 9/11. Exclusivity begets violence.

Another danger, it's said, is the violence inherent to religious texts. God, as represented in the scriptures of the

major Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—often relies on violence. In the book of 1 Samuel, God (via his prophet) urges his people to attack the Amalekites and “put to death both man and woman, child and infant” (1 Sam. 15:3b). In the Qu’ran, Allah commands Muhammad to “slay the idolaters wherever ye find them.” Jews sacrificed animals to commune with Yahweh and atone for sins. In the Gospels, God allowed his own Son to be brutally crucified for the forgiveness of humanity. When it comes to religiously motivated violence, some argue, perhaps we should look no further than our holy books. “The violence of God becomes ... used to justify the violence of Christians,” Jeremy Young, a priest and therapist, asserts, “and this is a direct outcome of the contents of the biblical text.” The same has been suggested about nearly all major religions.

Those are two of the major arguments, and they are, admittedly, challenging. But is religion the problem?

I don’t think so.

For one thing, the notion that violence is or can be motivated solely by religious beliefs is highly contested. In his seminal book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, theologian William T. Cavanaugh indicates the flaw in the distinguishing religion from “secular” modes of life like politics or economics: “What counts as religion and what does not in any given context ... depends on who has the power and authority to define [it],” he writes.

Is capitalism a religion? What about democracy? Or environmentalism? Or atheism? These are all belief systems that have, at times, motivated violence and caused harm. Yet they’re considered “secular,” not religious. Why? Because people in power say so. There is no such thing as “religious violence,” Cavanaugh argues; there are just violent human beings with complex sets of motivations—political, psychological, socioeconomic, cultural, religious and so on.

If anything, the reason for so much religious violence is not religion itself, but poor interpretations of it. One of the most terrifying things about the Bible is how easily it can be employed to support any claim, from the exact date of the end of the world to genocide and slavery. But I don't blame the Bible for these atrocities. I blame the readers. With any book, a reader brings their own presuppositions and experiences. It's why many literary critics argue that there is no one "objective" meaning to a text: "Since you cannot interpret absolutely, you can interpret forever," suggests John Dominic Crossan. But too often, when engaging a holy text like the Bible, readers will neglect the cultural context and the narrative complexity and instead read into the text meanings that were never intended. John T. Earnest found scriptural justification for his anti-Semitism, not because there is any, but because of the subjective nature of reading. Religion isn't inherently destructive, but his reading of it certainly was.

The recent acts of religiously-motivated violence, in Poway, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere, are the result of profound misinterpretations and complex motivations, not the natural byproduct of faith. Richard Dawkins is wrong. There's a difference between religion and religious extremism.

That said, as a Christian, I feel deeply challenged to consider how my own tradition feeds into this kind of evil and destruction. In a recent interview with *The Washington Post*, Rev. Mika Edmondson, a pastor in the OPC denomination, insisted that the church "can't pretend as though we didn't have some responsibility for [Earnest]—he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church." Clearly, some soul-searching, for all people of faith, is necessary.

Can this kind of violence be prevented by religious communities? I don't know. I hope so. If there is a hope, I think it lies in humility. Religion, at its best, should

remind us that we don't know everything. We are finite creatures with limited understanding, and our religions have always been a response to mystery. "We see through a glass, dimly," St. Paul reminds us. If we were to acknowledge that, to be humbled by mystery, then perhaps we could better extend grace to the beliefs systems of others.

Maybe the only way to curb religiously-motivated violence is to promote a sense of "interconfessional hospitality:" that is, "the willingness to subordinate one's idea of truth to that of justice, in particular, to the recognition that other people have an equal right to their religious identity" (Jonkers, *italics mine*). Meaning, believe in your capital-T truth, but also humbly acknowledge that others might know truth, too. It's a radical idea. But radical in the very best of ways, the way of Martin Luther King. Jr, Gandhi and Jesus Christ. It's the kind of radical religion the world needs, desperately and immediately.

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