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## Religion: Good or Bad?

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# Religion: Good or Bad?

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Religion is a very complicated concept for many people, but religion can be seen in every corner of the world and its effects come in many different shapes and sizes. One word that can be seen as an effect or that is simply associated often with religion is violence. Violence like religion comes in many different forms and can be seen very easily in the world around us. Many people have written on the concepts of religion and violence and how they are connected with each other. But it is very important to ask questions about their connection and relationship with each other, if there even is one to be discussed."



*Emalie Ratt*

## **Religion: Good or Bad?**

### *Introduction*

Religion is a very complicated concept for many people, but religion can be seen in every corner of the world and its effects come in many different shapes and sizes. One word that can be seen as an effect or that is simply associated often with religion is violence. Violence like religion comes in many different forms and can be seen very easily in the world around us. Many people have written on the concepts of religion and violence and how they are connected with each other. But it is very important to ask questions about their connection and relationship with each other, if there even is one to be discussed.

### *1. Is religion inherently violent? Why or why not?*

This is a very important question that we need to ask ourselves if we are to better understand our world; and religion more specifically. Many different authors have researched and studied these two concepts and how they relate to one another. One such author is Wolfgang Huber. In his article *Religion and Violence in a Globalized World*, he provides some interesting insight on the subject, which may help answer our question: is religion inherently violent? In this article Huber discusses how religion and violence very often interact with each

other in today's society. Violence is a big problem in the world today because it is a troubling cycle of hatred that is being justified with religious reasons. These reasons may be defending one's own religion or putting down another. This may be true in such cases but Huber says that this does not mean that religion is necessarily the main reason for the violence. There are many other problems that arise and cause aggressive behavior which then leads to violence. This aggressive behavior stems from or is so "inherent" to humans that it should not be strictly associated with religion. The author does acknowledge that there is still a strong connection between religion and violence. This connection becomes more prominent: "... when people are convinced of the superiority of their own belief system they tend to devalue those of a different faith" (Huber 40). This simply means that when a religion is disrespectful, or sees itself as better than other religions, it may lead to violence. A more specific example that Huber presents is the one of monotheistic religions. The exclusivity of these religions gives them a higher tendency to be violent. Religions develop their own identity and have a specific set of rules that they are expected to comply with. This may be hard to do, but they must try and stay true to this identity or they could be pulled into this "... seemingly never-ending cycle of violence and counter violence" (Huber 45). All of these examples, as well as others he discusses within his article, help us to answer our initial question. Huber's view is not that religion is inherently violent but that violence is simply one of many qualities that has been acquired and ascribed to religion over time.

Nadia Delicata is another author who discusses the complex relationship that exists between religion and violence. Though in some ways her thoughts are similar to Huber's, she discusses these concepts in a different way, while also providing her views to the question on

whether religion is inherently violent or not. In her article *Religion and Violence: The Paradox of Human Tragedy*, her findings show that religion is in fact not inherently violent. She even discusses how it may be the answer to some of the violence in today's world. Even though we long for peace, we cannot achieve it with the shadow of violence, which is such a big part of humans and our reality. The author states that "human intelligence appears to be too frail to counteract the futility of human violence" and claims religion may hold the key to this (Delicata 21). She believes that the trust in a divine power of "absolute goodness" is not maimed by the violence we see in the world, which shows that it could not be inherently violent. Even though this violence does leak into religion, religion still can lead to a transformation of our views and attitudes towards violence. Religion is not inherently violent according to Nadia Delicata, but it is the hope of religion that can help counteract violence in the world.

Delicata believes that religion could be the answer to violence in the world, instead of religion actually being violent. But many other authors view the relationship of violence and religion in a completely different way. Purzycki, in his article *Religion and Violence: An anthropological study on Religious Belief and Violent Behavior*, has a different view on whether religion is inherently violent or not. His view on things is that we have to look at the nature of the relationship in order to decide the answer to this question. In order to answer this question the author believes that we must ask ourselves: "Does religion really cause violence? (Purzycki 22). Some may think that there is a causal relationship between religion and violence, when really there is only a correlation between the two. He draws out one of the more common examples one might think of relating to religion and violence. He tries to emphasize that religion should not be seen as the same as secular extremism. Religious differences which may

cause violence—for example suicide bombers—are used as reasons and may be used to manipulate followers of a religion to commit violent actions. One way the author tries to explain this is by saying that “...violence causes religion to become part of one’s perceived essential identity and this leads to more violence, arguably the reverse of the claim under question” (Purzycki 25). When religion is so closely linked to one’s identity one may defend it at any cost, thus leading to violence. The author summarizes his view of things in these lines:

Like any tool, religion can be used for ends of all kinds. It is maximally effective at organizing and mobilizing collective action but has little success when it comes to explaining the way the universe operates. There are plenty of compelling arguments why religion should have as little influence on our lives as possible, but the idea that it causes violence has yet to be ranked among them.

(Purzycki 27).

The author does not believe that religion is inherently violent, or that it is the cause of violence; rather that religion can be related to violence and may be only part of the reason for it.

Many authors agree that religion is not inherently violent; but one author who says that the answer to our question is yes, is Rami Mani. In his article, *Cure or Curse? The Role of Religion* Mani presents his views on the matter. He claims that even though religion has “...inherent peacebuilding potential, religions have a strong nexus with violence” (Mani 154). His point of view is that religion may be inherently violent, but it also has a strong desire for peace and nonviolence. Religions are violent because of the way many of them tend to separate and discriminate groups. For example, the discrimination of untouchables in Hinduism, gender based discrimination based on scriptures that are strictly interpreted, and the condemnation of homosexuality by many religions. Mani’s claim is that each religion will “... find ways to institute and validate them while ignoring the resultant suffering” (Mani 155).

Because religion is human practice, humans will find ways to distort it because of their personal flaws; greed, jealousy, desire, malice etc. This violence is even seen as necessary in some cases, and it is the “unquestioned belief” in their superiority that leads to more violence (Mani 157). This arrogance that some religious people have causes the problems and makes religion inherently violent according to the author.

Pamela J. Power is another author who views the relationship between violence and religion in an interesting way. While previous authors claimed that it was the humans that made things violent, Power states something quite different. Power says that humans are “fascinated and frightened” by the concept of violence, they are repulsed by it and do a lot to try and reduce or even eliminate it (416). Religion is inherently violent for this author because it seems to be an aspect of religion that is necessary. Though the religious instinct that some people have can counter violence it also is a creator of this violence as well. The hope that humans can live in peace or even be tolerant of others is unreasonable because of the violence overflowing in our world. Violence may not be an explicit aspect of religion according to Power, but it certainly is a “shadow aspect” of it (430). Religion is inherently violent according to Power and even the desire for peace and tolerance is not enough to counteract it.

## *2. In what ways is religion either essentially good or flawed?*

The author of *Violence and Religious Instinct*, Pamela Power, has some interesting insight as to whether religion as a whole is good or flawed. According to Power religion is flawed because of the paradox that exists within it. There is such a strong desire to prevent violence yet there is the instinct to commit and instigate violent behavior. This struggle within religion is one of its biggest flaws. Though Power does believe that religion is flawed, she also

shows how religion can have some good parts as well. If a religion is willing to change or adapt, then it can be good. A specific example she provides relates to primal religions, specifically those with human sacrifice. Human sacrifice is no longer practiced and those religions or forms of those religions are still around because they changed and were not afraid to do so. Religion can be bad because of the desire to commit violence, but religion can be good if it is willing to adapt and slightly conform to general societal rules—such as the idea that human sacrifice is inhumane and unacceptable. Sometimes societal rules may approve of something that brings harm to people but a question that should be addressed is if religion should conform to these rules as well.

Rami Mani has some very interesting viewpoints on the relationship of violence and religion but also has intriguing insight, as to whether religion is good or flawed. One of the major flaws of religion is the “rivalry between and within religions” that causes major conflict (Mani 150). People want to stand strong behind their views and beliefs. This is one of religion’s flaws, but one of the most important good aspects is that, in theory, all religions have scriptures which stress the importance of peace and justice (even though in practice this may not be entirely true). This peacebuilding desire is inherent in almost all religions. This desire fails when there is unquestioned or unchecked belief that personal beliefs are superior, which may lead to conflict and violence. Mani believes in both the flaws and goodness of religion and one point he tries to stress comes at the end of his article. According to the author, religions are good because they connect humans to themselves, and connect humans to other humans “through bonds of compassion,” and they link humans to some divine power (Mani 162). These strong



bonds are good for humans and society. These are just some of the ways that Mani believes that religion is good and flawed.

Nadia Delicata's beliefs are similar to those of Mani, in that religion is good and flawed at the same time. But the author chooses to focus on one of its biggest flaws. The flaw she chooses to focus on is that religion is a contradictory concept. Humans hope to achieve everlasting life, yet they do not cherish it, in the case of violence and death; religion "cannot but be marred by death," because it is a part of human character (Delicata 14). There is an inherent desire to transcend this world and life, but humans have an underlying desire to violate and destroy life. These contradictions within religion are the reason why religion has goodness, but it is flawed because it contradicts itself in many ways.

Wolfgang Huber in his article, while discussing the relationship of religion and violence, also points out many things which can tell us whether religion is good or flawed. Like the previous author, Delicata, Huber discusses how religion can be quite contradictory, as well as maintain a sense of superiority. These similar flaws act not only at eliciting violence from people, but they also increase a person's "readiness" to use this violence against others (Huber 40). They use this violence because they believe themselves superior and think others less valuable than themselves and their religion. Huber also points out several contradictions often seen in religion which are one reason for its flaws. He notes that "...internal contradictions in which they (people of religion) become entangled. Mercy and power, love and violence, charity and profit, sustainability and self-interest..." all make the concepts and values of religion cloudy (Huber 44). There are good parts to religion according to Huber, but it is the sense of superiority and the internal contradictions which show how flawed religion really is.

Though most of Purzycki's article is focused on the specific relationship between religion and violence, he provides some important points on whether religion is good or flawed. For example, his view on things is that religion is flawed because "only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people" (Purzycki 23). People have such a strong connection with their religion or divine power that they could be convinced to do nearly anything. Another key point made above that could also be considered a flaw is that there is such a strong correlation between religion and violence, that it even gives the word religion negative connotations. Though these are some key flaws to religion the author also takes some time to talk about the good parts of religion. The main thing that he tries to stress is that religion is a strong unifying agent for varying groups of people, like sports teams but on a larger scale; and religion also provides a strong bond to some supernatural force which is not verified but is seen as "unchangeable" (Purzycki 26). This is why Purzycki thinks that religion is both good and flawed depending on how one looks at it.

### *Conclusion*

I found all of these views on violence and religion to be very interesting, and I agreed with most of what the authors quoted said, but I also thought some other things on the matter. I think that religion is not inherently violent, because violence is a human characteristic and cannot be ascribed to society. But religion can be a reason people feel the need to be violent. They believe themselves superior or even need to defend it. Religion is a good thing, but has flaws simply because as humans we are flawed.

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