

Christianity and Violence

The September 11, 2001, tragedy and other acts of “religious extremist terrorism” have brought up the discussion of religious fundamentalism and violence. Would we be better off without religions such as Christianity? Does Christianity promote violence as some skeptics imply?

In order to answer these questions, let’s consider three other questions:

1. Are those who commit violence really Christians?

What is a Christian?

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV).

A Christian has a new character. He has turned away from the sinful way of life in order to follow Christ.

Jesus Christ, the living definition of a Christian, told his disciples this:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire (Matthew 5:21-22 NKJV).

Did Jesus promote Violence?

This passage and other references in the New Testament show us that Christ did not promote violence of any kind. Many quote Matthew 10:34, which seems to promote violence:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword (NKJV).

But the passage then continues, saying this:

For I have come to “set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”; and “a man’s enemies will be those of

his own household." He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it (Matthew 10:35-39 NKJV).

In these verses, we see that being a Christian is not always easy and sometimes involves difficult choices. Jesus was talking about the situations where we feel lonelier in our own families than we do with friends who have the same interests and values. Jesus was commenting on this state of affairs, speaking of a metaphorical sword that divides people, "for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Jesus admonishes His followers to stand strong despite the loneliness and friction that sometimes arises when we are alone in our commitment to Christ. When friends or family mock us or pressure us to not be so "religious," Jesus wants us to not give up. We are reminded in these verses that He is worth the persecution we may have to experience for His sake.

Are those practicing violence in Christ's name really Christians?

John's answer is crystal clear:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:14-15 NKJV).

True followers of Jesus are not violent terrorists. Killing others does not show a new character, or a life of love. In Luke 3:14 John the Baptist told Roman soldiers, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely."

Take for example Chiang Kai-shek, a powerful military leader in 20th-century China. Chiang sought to unify his divided nation. He was called "China's Christian Warrior," but in Time Asia, he is reported as saying "To my mind the reason we should believe in Jesus is that He was the leader of a national revolution."i Once again, even those who are called "Christian" must be judged by the Word of God. Jesus was not the "leader of a national revolution," nor did he advocate violence as a means of solving political problems.

The Inquisition

The Inquisition is a time remembered for the torturing and killing millions of innocent people in the name of "Christianity."

The Great Controversy summarizes the terrors inflicted upon believers in those dark days:

The history of God's people during the ages of darkness that followed upon Rome's supremacy is written in heaven, but they have little place in human records. Few traces of their existence can be found, except in the accusations of their persecutors. It was the policy of Rome to obliterate every trace of dissent from her doctrines or decrees. Everything heretical, whether persons or writings, she sought to destroy. Expressions of doubt, or questions as to the authority of papal dogmas, were enough to forfeit the life of rich or poor, high or low Rome endeavored also to destroy every record of her cruelty toward dissenters. Papal councils decreed that books and writings containing such records should be committed to the flames. Before the invention of printing, books were few in number, and in a form not favorable for preservation; therefore there was little to prevent the Romanists from carrying out their purpose (The Great Controversy, 61-62).

The Inquisition occurred during a superstitious and barbarous time. Real Christianity was in short supply, and a non-Christian fascism enslaved most of Europe. Today it is easy and common to downplay the Inquisition and its role in these violent times, especially because there was very little evidence recorded about these atrocities. James Given wrote this revealing statement in his book *Inquisition and Medieval Society*:

By the mid-thirteenth century the creation of various fantasies and their projection onto certain out-groups, such as the widespread belief that Jews indulged in ritual murder, had become an integral feature of western European culture. The inquisitors had devised methods of using power and coercion to give such fantasies a legally validated and socially accepted reality.ⁱⁱ

Catholic Inquisitors thought they were doing God's will by using force to convert people to their faith. But Jesus warned, "yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me" (John 16:2-3).

It is abundantly clear that the Roman Church was not acting on the instructions of Jesus when they instituted the Inquisition.

2. Are non-Christians less violent than Christians?

Violence in Europe

At the end of the 19th century, the works of Friedrich Nietzsche had created a strong anti-Christian attitude throughout Europe. In his book *The Atheist Delusion*, PhD Phil Fernandes points this out:

The history of the twentieth century has proven Nietzsche's basic thesis correct. Western culture's abandonment of the Christian world view has led to a denial of both universal truth and absolute moral values...The death of God is not a step forward for man; it is a step backward—a dangerous step backward. If God is dead, then man is dead as well.ⁱⁱⁱ

The French Revolution and the Communist Soviet Union both prided themselves on atheistic foundations. Both also slaughtered countless individuals who did not agree with their philosophies.

At the height of the French Reign of Terror, humanistic thought did not prevent mass executions by guillotine. The Encarta online encyclopedia states this:

About 250,000 people were arrested; 17,000 were tried and guillotined, many with little if any means to defend themselves; another 12,000 were executed without trial; and thousands more died in jail. Clergy and nobles composed only 15 percent of the Reign of Terror's approximately 40,000 victims. The rest were peasants and bourgeois who had fought against the Revolution or had said or done something to offend the new order.^{iv}

In the 20th century, Joseph Stalin “purged” the Communist Party of all supposed anti-government factions. The Encarta online encyclopedia describes the purge:

The assault on the Communist Party resulted in the deaths of 98 of the 139 members of the Central Committee and 90 percent of the members of republican and regional central committees. In all, more than 1 million party members were arrested and at least half perished. Meanwhile, mass police operations against the general population were launched in the summer of 1937...Upwards of 5 million purge victims ended up in Soviet labor camps, where conditions were so deplorable that many eventually died. Whereas earlier purges of the party had been restricted to expulsions without criminal punishment, Stalin had decided in this case that terror was necessary to ensure his absolute power.^v

Violence in Asia

In the book “China's Bloody Century: Genocide and Mass Murder Since 1900” by Rudolph J. Rummel, the violence of the Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-Lai against their own countrymen is portrayed in the following words:

When a much-respected top party man like Chou En-Lai is quoted...as admitting to 830,000 “enemies of the people” being destroyed in only a little over three years, he should be heard. And of course, so should the supreme ruler of China, Mao Tse-tung, when he admits to killing tens of thousands of scholars, or to executing at least

800,000 landlords alone in the early 1950s...the heads of four of six administrative regions together report executing 1,176,000 people in only one year. Some other officials admit to killing 2,000,000.^{vi}

The Communists in China have killed millions of their own people, but we see examples of human evil everywhere. Vietnam has recently been the site for “ ethnic cleansing.” Within the blueprint for ethnic cleansing promoted in Vietnam, we find extrajudicial killings, imprisonment and torture, transmigration and confiscation of ancestral land, deforestation and environmental destruction, religious persecution of Christians, sterilizations, fines, coercion, abuse of family planning, and refugee persecution. All of this cruel and unthinkable violence is documented online.

The thesis of the book *Death by Government* is that humanistic governments systematically kill their own people, even during peacetime. R. J. Rummel states the following:

In total, during the first eighty-eight years of this [20th] century, almost 170 million men, women, and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed, or worked to death; buried alive, drowned, hung, bombed, or killed in any other of the myriad ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed, helpless citizens and foreigners. The dead could conceivably be nearly 360 million people. It is as though our species has been devastated by a modern Black Plague. And indeed it has, but a plague of Power, not germs.^{vii}

3. What legacy does Christianity leave in terms of violence or non-violence?

All over the world, Christian hospitals, hospices, shelters, and prison ministries speak volumes of the non-violent, selfless contributions of Christians. Consider the following list of results from Christianity in action:

- The end of the slave trade—largely the work of William Wilberforce and his evangelistic Christian friends.^{ix}
- George Muller and his faith-based orphanages that changed the lives of many abandoned children.^x
- The Church’s commitment to education. Apologist Dinesh D’ Souza says this:

the churches began to build schools, first at the elementary and then at the secondary level. Eventually these became more advanced until, in the twelfth century, the first universities were founded in Bologna and Paris....many of America’s earliest colleges and universities—Harvard, the College of William and Mary, Yale, Northwestern, Princeton, Dartmouth, Brown—began as Christian institutions.^{xi}

- The modern scientific method, resulting from an understanding of Intelligent Design. Dinesh D' Souza notes this:

We often hear that science was founded in the seventeenth century in revolt against religious dogma. In reality, science was founded between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries through a dispute between two kinds of religious dogma.^{xii}

- Organizations such as Youth With A Mission mobilizing youth to serve as missionaries bringing medicine and education to nations around the world.^{xiii}
- Organizations such as Adventist Development and Relief Agency who are often first to answer the call for help in disaster zones around the world.^{xiv}
- William Booth's Salvation Army—the only army in the world that does not carry guns!^{xv}
- The missionary movement that has crossed the oceans to bring hope to many poor and superstitious people living in destitution.

The list could go on. Doesn't this legacy of mercy and love show that Christianity, when it is properly working out the will of its divine Founder, is the greatest force for good that this troubled world has ever known?

Sources:

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- iii. Phil Fernandes, *The Atheist Delusion—a Christian Response To Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins* (Xulon Press, 2009): 178.
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- vi. R. Rummel, *China's bloody century: genocide and mass murder since 1900* (Transaction Publishers, 1991): 208.
- vii. R. Rummel, *Death by Government sixth edition* (Transaction Publishers, 1997): 9
- viii. Preview Wilberforce' s book *Real Christianity* online
- ix. Access online resources on George Muller
- x. Dinesh D' Souza, *What' s So Great About Christianity* (Regnery Publishing, 2007).
- xi. Ibid. Access a list of Christian scientific thinkers
- xii. Visit the YWAM website
- xiii. Visit ADRA' s website
- xiv. Visit the Salvation Army's website