

FAITH MATTERS

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RELIGION: THE CAUSE OF ALL THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS?

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DEAR FATHER JOE, MY FRIENDS SAY RELIGION IS THE CAUSE OF ALL THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS. WHAT DO I SAY TO THEM?

It's great to get an opportunity to answer this question. It pops up a lot in various forms and has often become a throw-away response, given without thought as to whether or not it's true.

With that in mind, I want to offer a brief look at some statistics (*stick with me!*) on war, and then dive right into what I feel may very well be the problem. Why are we starting with war? Because, in my opinion, it's the best example of why the statement, "Religion is the cause of all the world's problems" doesn't hold up when we take a deeper look. War is the biggest scourge on our

planet, and it's often what I find people are talking about when they make the statement that religion is the world's biggest problem.

With that in mind, let's look to *The Encyclopedia of Wars*, a massive set of reference books concerning war throughout human history. According to this source, there have been 1,763 wars on record. Of them, 123 are classified as having a religious cause. This accounts for a touch less than 7 percent of all wars in our history being religious in nature. So, how does it happen that "Religion is the cause" becomes such an acceptable lie to propagate? Because it's



simple and quick. We are too concerned with quick summaries than actual knowledge. It's a sweeping and fast statement that most don't know how to argue.

If you have the opportunity, go to your local church and ask what they are doing to help people and I think you'll be shocked. You'll probably find that your church feeds a lot of people, helps folks who stop in and need things, takes care of children in trouble, visits folks in prison or the hospital – all sorts of things that are simply good. Now, consider the fact that, in most towns, villages and cities, this is happening all because of religion.

This isn't to state that religion and religious institutes aren't, at times, a problem or downright sinful in their decisions: not at all. I write these things to offer a perspective that you may not often hear outside of religion.

I'd suggest that the biggest blessing of religion is also its biggest problem: humans. I have shared many times with many people, "If you want a perfect Church, you have to leave it." You and I are flawed. We are sinful. We drop the ball. Put enough of us together in a pack and you've got a real problem sometimes. In my opinion, that means the root of the problems in the perception of religion is us.

Changing our thought process

from blaming religion to blaming ourselves can be painful and challenging, but it is vital to helping us move beyond "Those people need to change" into actually solving the problem.

So, what can we do? How can we as religious people be instruments of positive change? How can we offer unbelievers a chance to re-evaluate the value of religion?

No surprise, I'm sure, but I've got a few ideas.

We need to slow down. As soon as anyone makes a move or any event of significance unfolds in our society, the "agenda people" jump on us and tell us to be afraid or be angry. We quickly run about our social circle or social media and tell people why we were right, how they were wrong, why we should be afraid, why we should be angry – ugh. What if we paused? What if, before we condemn that person or use that situation as a prop, we paused and prayed? What if we responded instead of reacted? I think that would help us gain credibility.

We need to prayerfully give our anger or fear to God. The more we give in to our anger and fear, the stronger they become – until they consume us. I have observed first-hand the tragedy of pointing anger and/or fear in a spiritual direction and calling it "conversion," and there are few things more

dangerous than that. Each day, each moment, we should be giving our anger and fear over to the Lord and not allow those emotions to feed anger and fear.

We need to speak and share words of love and peace. Remember Jesus' words, "Blessed are the meek"? To be meek means to refuse to do harm to others. We need to embrace meekness and very carefully monitor and measure our words so that we bring the light and life of Jesus to others.

Where appropriate, we need to enter the worlds that we are afraid of or angry at. Are you a Republican who is angry at your Democrat friends? Are you a Democrat who is angry at your Republican friends? Engage them, not in order to change them, but to understand where they are coming from. Sit

with them, eat with them, see how they love their families, their friends. See how they want what is best for our country. In the end, you may or may not agree with them about how to get there, but I think you'll see that they want to get to the same space you do. It's hard to hate people you know.

These are obviously just a few ideas, not a complete list of them. Pray and see where God wants you to go in order to be an effective witness to the goodness of religion.

God wants us to shine. He wants us to bring his love and joy everywhere we go. We need to work hard and cooperate with his grace so as to drive out the fear and anger in our hearts and show the world through our love, sacrifice and kindness the power of a life given to God. Enjoy another day in God's presence.

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