

# Religion and Faith

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Religion may be viewed as set of beliefs of a person, a group of people, or even a whole society concerning the existence (or non-existence) and characteristics of some force or forces greater than human beings. This view therefore includes the belief that there is no such higher force, as in the religion of Atheism. The force or forces can be spiritual, supernatural, or some “higher-being” collectively represented by the word “god” to encompass their variety as identified in the diverse religions of the world.

With extremely few exceptions, such as voodoo and devil worship, religious beliefs accept that higher forces (that is, God or gods) are not evil or seeking to do harm to humans and the World. The perceived god can be loving, benevolent, and forgiving, but also wrathful and demanding of its believers.

In general, religion fosters ethical living and promotes some concept of being nice to other people. Therefore, I like that basis of religion because it is essentially good for human societies.

On the other hand, let us look at “faith.” Faith is “practiced religion.” Faiths or practiced religions (plural) typically share the common basis (“goodness”) of religion described above. Within each group in isolation, uniformity of beliefs is the norm. But in their practices, individual faiths diverge on different paths, with groups preaching their particular flavor of beliefs. Differences between faiths (practiced religions) can be largely ignored as long as the religious groups are kept apart. But when there is contact and inevitable competing interests, the differences can become extremely important, even to the point of killing people. Even among Christians there are tremendous variations, with some groups mistrusting or even hating others. The same is true among Muslims. The resultant power struggles within the religious faiths are perhaps as great as the power struggles between them.

The various faiths (religions) represent power to their believers. Religion is clearly one of the five realms of power. The idea of being the chosen people of the gods (or of the one true God) is the ultimate claim of power. When a person believes that “God is on my side,” many deeds for good or evil are self-justified by the holdings of religious practice. History is overflowing with examples ranging from the personal level up to the conflicts of nations.

America and the World are again faced with conditions in which the one true God has apparently selected more than one different society as the chosen people at the same time. That is generally what fundamentalist faiths (e.g., *fundamentalist Christians*) would have us believe, rejecting all else but their part of the story. Each society “knows” they are right because God has told them so. Clearly, religion and its expressions as faiths are important for America’s future.

## **America's Ethical Core:**

Let's address the issues of religious faiths and power struggles in the context of what they mean to the future of America.

I greatly appreciate religion because it favors predictable behavior that is usually good for society and supported by laws and teachings. You generally know where you stand, even if you are a base sinner or intentionally speeding in your car. America was founded upon beliefs in ethical living and that people should be good and fair to one another. This logically includes the teaching of such values to each generation. In this aspect, the American concepts of "church and state" are united, not separated. America (the state) has never ceded to religious groups (the church) the tasks associated with maintaining an ethical and caring nation. These government tasks include lawful enforcement of decent behavior and the transmission of these reasonable standards to the entire population, reminding adults what they supposedly learned in childhood, and supporting the continuation of such teachings of propriety in public schools.

The Constitution prohibits the teaching of **specific** faith-based beliefs in public schools and public places, but does not prohibit the instruction of the core values of ethical and proper living in America. BOTH the governmental "state" and the religious "church" accept (and must accept) the responsibility to keep ethical living central to American citizenry with people caring for the well-being of one another. To ignore the continuation of our core values is to invite anarchy and immorality to overwhelm us. There is no choosing between goodness and freedom. America is founded upon both, and both must be defended with appropriate vigor.

Even with the great diversity of Christian and non-Christian faiths in America, the vast majority of Americans essentially agree on the core of what is ethical and proper. We even have a legal concept called the "reasonable person standard." Granted, there are extremists in all faiths and at both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum, and they are often the loudest voices. But they are a small component "of the people, by the people, and for the people...." The majority sets the laws.

Nearly all anti-church atheists do not advocate murder, theft, and total immorality. The Judeo-Christian "Ten Commandments" are nine statements of moral living and only one statement of the preference of one religion over others. (Some faiths have an eight-and-two split; see Wikipedia). Similar statements from the world's other great religions also merit public display and in-school instruction. Does a moral statement by Gandhi constitute a Hindu incursion on our society? Are Buddhist or Islamic teachings of goodness to be ignored because of their origins? Clearly not.

Then why are they not on display? Because nobody bothered to put them up, knowing that the displays and teachings most understood and accepted in America are those of the Judeo-Christian tradition. So, let us display additional ones while not taking down traditional ones that remain good and useful. Reminding people of their core values is important to maintain America on the track of proper and decent living. Reminding adults and teaching children about America's core values are as important for American morals as singing the National Anthem and saying the Pledge of Allegiance are for patriotism. Patriotism, decent morals, and a sense of fair play are not policies or laws; they are the bases upon which the American people should create their policies and laws.

Two brief examples: "Thou shalt not kill" does not resolve the legal question concerning the point at which a fertilized egg or fetus constitutes human life. And "Thou shalt not steal" does not cover all aspects of how people with corporate and personal greed can take advantage of other people but escape consequences via loopholes and astute lawyers. But killing and stealing

are inherently wrong and we should instruct our next generations about decent and important core values. In a democracy, laws are (or should be) based on the core values of the people, and if those values are weak or absent, the society will suffer accordingly, even leading to disastrous decline.

## **The Judeo-Christian-Muslim Traditions**

America is by far a Judeo-Christian country by historical traditions and current practices. I once thought that the “Judeo-” word referred to the modern-day Jewish community in America. [The Jewish population is an important segment of America noted for their financial success and political influence, but is only two-percent of the American population.] No, “Judeo-“ really refers to the historical background of Christians before Jesus, as in the Old Testament part of the Bible. That is an important link if Christians are to believe that they are the chosen people of God. The link to God is via Adam and Eve to Abraham and his son Isaac to Jacob and the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and onward to King David and his descendents Mary and Joseph and to Jesus, the starting point of the Christian half of the name “Judeo-Christian.”

Many Americans also know but have forgotten that Islam also traces its roots back to the Garden of Eden. Abraham actually had two sons. The Bible tells us about Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar. The Islamic link back to God is via Ishmael, the first-born son of Abraham, instead of via Isaac. So, quite literally the Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all really brothers and sisters in *one* family under their *one* true God.

In my youth I fought with my brothers and sisters. Some were real tussles that Mom and Dad had to break up. I did not fight nearly as much with my classmates at school, not even the ones who were far worse than my siblings. Why? Because proximity creates conflicts. Not just the physical proximity of sharing the same television set, but cultural proximity of competing for parental attention.

And so it is with religions, especially those that branch off from the same roots and trunk. The old faith versus the new faith is a classic tale. Always the new faith accepts the basics of the old faith (otherwise the new would have cut off its own roots). And the new faith always claims that it has something more, something better, and something closer to the deities. But the keepers of the old faith describe the new folks with words like heretic and blasphemer and misguided soul. The resultant troubles can include killings and holy wars. Such problems flare up occasionally, depending on proximity, fire-brand leaders, changes in population percentages, challenges to territorial influence, and some bad luck.

So Catholics and Protestants kill each other in Northern Ireland; Sunnis and Shiites hate each other in the Middle East; Hindus and Muslims clash in the India/Pakistan region; and Jews and Muslims fight military battles and conduct terrorism around Israel. All of those conflicts are within recent years, and many persist to this very day. Go back a few decades or centuries and we find the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, the Islamic invasion of Europe up to Vienna, the persecutions of Sikhs and Baha’i and Mormons, Branch Davidians, and other “Holy Interventions.” And the ancient civilizations of Romans, Assyrians, Mongols, Aztecs, *etc.* fought as believers in their gods, with a hearty mix of political empire building to stoke the fires.

And EACH OF THEM said that gods or God was on their side.

To that I say “impossible!” I could not maintain my belief in God if I thought God was so fickle as to play with his various “chosen people” as can be seen in history.

I can believe (and I want to believe) in a supernatural power greater than anything human because I want life to be better for myself and all other people. That belief helps me remain

sane, even when the world societies around me seem so insanely and narrowly mal-focused about hurting each other or not caring about others. I will repeat that in different words: There are outwardly religious people in America (and elsewhere) who are proclaiming their faiths but who do not show true sincere caring for other people, even those close to them.

What does this discussion have to do with Building a Better America and a Better World? Everything! America cannot avoid its probable decline unless it alters its attitudes and actions. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, to indicate that America is any more or less chosen by God than is or was any other nation or society today or throughout history.

So, whether or not you believe that America is favored by God, if America wants to avoid its impending decline, we citizens must act now to do a better job at being nice people at home and in the World. We need other nations to genuinely like us and even love us. And surely your God, however you define him/her/it, would want you to help make that happen.

## **The Currency of Religion and Faith is Prayers and Beliefs**

Prayers and beliefs (and we can include miracles) are of extremely high value, but only to the believers. That currency has little or no value to others. As an analogy, consider a “money exchange” office that accepts only one type of money (such as dollars or Euros or yen) and has no exchange rate with other currencies. Literally, there would be no transactions. And so it is with the currencies (prayers, *etc.*) of different religions. Therefore, the currencies of religions and faiths are traded within the confines of each religion itself. Do not count on the highly intangible faith-based currencies of religion to alter the balances among the Five Realms of Power.

However, religion has an established history of impacting the other Realms of Power by utilizing its influence with the other four currencies:

Economics: some faiths have immense amounts of money and physical assets.

Governance: religion can “bring out the vote” when requested, including placing religious leaders into key positions.

Religion: great power among the faithful believers, but little power among the non-believers.

Justice: the dominant religion frequently impacts the laws of the land, even to instances where Biblical Law or Islamic Law or theocracy (governance by god) has absolute legal powers.

Love: churches can deliver enormous amounts of service, including the non-sectarian services of fund raising, preferences of political candidates, promotion of patriotism, advocacy of ethical/moral living according to the laws, and “love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Ironically, religion can have sufficient impact via *non-faith* currencies to alter the course of history, even to prevent the decline of great nations. How religion impacts the prospects for Capitalism<sup>21</sup> and the future of America remains to be seen.

## **Some Concluding Thoughts**

1. Your faith is special to you, but not necessarily to others.

1.A. (Mainly for radical Christians and the far right wing): Stop injecting your “holiness” into the lives of others. It is downright irritating and can reveal your hypocrisy. Too frequently, you force your religious values as if you were the “owners” of ethical and proper conduct, thereby bringing the church into such domains as our public classrooms, which is unlawful. Instead, ethical and proper conduct and decency are AMERICAN values (meaning

they are “state” values) that you can actively advocate for our schools (without trying to make this a religious or faith-based issue).

1.B. (Mainly for Atheists and the far left wing): Stop preaching your standards of “modern” (as in “weak”) morality and hiding behind some warped sense of “freedom” that you manipulate to promote your form of “faith.” Lead your lives as you choose, but do not advocate your “holiness” into the lives of others.

1.C. (All the rest of you): Yes, this does apply to you and me. Stand up for decency and order and justice as American ethical values, but without the trappings of religions. Some of us need to start or strengthen those values inside our own homes and neighborhoods. And if association with churches and genuinely good people will help you, seek them soon.

2. LIVE your faith. I mean the good life-style part, not the preachy part. Others might see your good deeds, but you do not need to tell them or make a show of your goodness. Just do it. Encourage others to help.

3. Direct the resources of your faith toward the betterment of life for others. What community uses exist for that nice church building or property? How much of your donations and offerings to your faith are doing good for others and good for America? Be sure to exclude the expenditures for “preaching the faith” and for self-serving property (buildings, buses, land, fuel, utilities, *etc.*) and social functions. How much are you doing with your church resources to help build a better America and a better World?

4. Actually reach out to members of other faiths and seriously be their friends, not just be near them to preach the benefits of joining your congregation. Honestly try to understand their faith or lack of faith. You might learn something about your own faith in the process and, who knows, some people very different from you might join (and alter?) your congregation.

5. And do all of the above internationally as well as in America. Earnestly direct significant resources to those impoverished overseas areas irrespective of their beliefs.

Please do not mistake these thoughts as “church bashing.” Not in the least. In fact, you and I might attend the same church every week. And, like you, I want America to continually re-examine and strengthen its course in finding shared peace at home and with the World. I do not give up hope, because

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A believer in goodness