

# towards ► belief

## Religious Violence

### WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Does religion and the Christian faith in particular, cause or condone violence? Christopher Hitchens and many other 'new atheists' claim that religion is the root of all evil and violence. They claim that to believe in God (or gods) turns many good people into violent people. In Christianity's case they point to some of the terrible events in church history to show how great evils have been done in Christ's name. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is attacked as an ancient text that occasionally encourages and regularly condones violent practices. Is this the case?

How do we answer people who suggest that Christianity promotes violence?

### WATCH THE DVD

### ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

Q1. Are there examples of 'so-called' Christians encouraging war and violence?

*I would say it's undeniable that religion is often associated with war and with violent activity. Since most human beings over history have been religious it would be weird if it wasn't associated with war in some way. But the idea that it's caused (war), that's a little bit more difficult to establish. Often religion is a pretext for galvanizing a country behind a certain agenda that a politician or a King might have. Or it might be that we as a group of people want to establish our identity against the other nations and so we use religion in order to do that dirty work really. (Michael Jensen)*

*I feel ashamed. I own up to the fact that Christians have done terrible things and they've done them in the name of Christ. There's no avoiding that. (John Dickson)*

**However** 'The late Christopher Hitchens wrote a book called 'God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything'. And yet this flies in the face of the 20th century where between three men and three nations – Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao-Tse Tung – 100 million people lost their lives, and they were not motivated by religion.' (Karl Faase)

### THE OLD TESTAMENT AND VIOLENCE

**Deuteronomy 7:1-6; 1 Samuel 15:1-11**

Q1. Why does God command the extermination of all the Canaanites & Amalekites?

There are a few passages in the OT, like those above, that seem to give divine sanction to the extermination of some other nations who lived near Israel. Why?

- i. In earlier times these nations had behaved wickedly, including engaging in child-sacrifices, oppression of the poor, violence for power and corruption (see for e.g. Amos' condemnation of Israel's neighbours Amos 1:3-2:5). **They'd been warned.** As with the city of Sodom - their punishment was just.
- ii. The 'purity' of Israel was at stake. If these pagan nations were not removed and they mixed with Israel then their evil practices would increasingly influence the people of God. Instead of being a 'holy nation' and 'kingdom of priests' to the surrounding nations, shining God's light, the Israelites would find themselves becoming more and more like these pagan nations. This was potentially undermining God's good reputation. See e.g. Amos 2:6-8 'they profane my holy name'
- iii. A case can be made that the few examples of extreme violence were at 'critical' moments in Israel's history and were the 'exception' rather than the rule. Therefore these events are **historically specific**

and are not-to-be-repeated moments in Israel's history. Most often in the OT violence is descriptive not prescriptive: the writers describe what happened but don't condone or encourage it.

- iv. It should be noted that God knew Israel would fail to remove all the Canaanites from the land and gave instructions on how they were to live together with the Canaanites.

*The first thing is that not everything recorded by the Bible is approved of by the Bible. For example when the Bible is being written and a rape is recorded, people look at that and say, 'Look at this violent, horrible book.' Well, the Bible is not condoning rape in that context. This is a historical document which is recording what happened. (Amy Orr-Ewing)*

## **GOD CARES**

**Leviticus 19:9-10, 32-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Psalm 146:5-9; Isaiah 1:14-17**

Q2. What 'feel' do these passages give about God's attitude to all people and to violence?

*Now if he (Christopher Hitchens) is going to come back and say, 'Well belief in God poisons everything,' I would want to take him to visit Mother Teresa in Calcutta and see what belief in God has motivated a woman like that to do. Or introduce him to a historical figure like Wilberforce who, motivated by what he read in the Bible, was inspired to see an end to slavery, the buying and selling of human beings. Or we could come up with countless other examples like Martin Luther King, motivated by what he read in the Bible, to pursue a Civil Rights agenda. So in the face of that I think it's quite hard to argue that belief in the Christian God poisons everything. It doesn't poison everything. It might poison some people. (Amy Orr-Ewing)*

## **JESUS DECLARES HIS VIEW OF VIOLENCE**

**Matthew 5:43-47; 26:51-54. Luke 9:51-56**

Q3. How would you describe Jesus' attitude to violence?

*I think if you ask me directly of what I feel about (violence in Christ's name), the first thing I'd want to say to you I'm utterly ashamed of it, utterly ashamed that the name of Christ was ever associated with religious violence. But I think it's very important to explain why I'm ashamed of it. Because people who take up weapons, whatever they are, to defend Christ or his message are not following or obeying him. They're disobeying him. (John Lennox)*

## **JESUS DECLARES HIS MISSION AGENDA**

**Luke 4:16-21 Matthew 5:1-12; 11:28-29;**

Q4. What is Jesus' attitude to all people, especially those facing violence or enmity?

*And then if you start to think about the history of charity in the Western world, no responsible historian could deny that the West enjoys widespread charitable services and enjoys the spirit of charity and care for the poor entirely because of the influence of Jesus on Western culture. These things did not exist in ancient Rome or ancient Greece. They were gifts of early Christianity to Western culture. And now, thank God, atheists can do just as good things as Christians. That's fantastic! (John Dickson)*

**NB** When Jesus died on the cross He actually absorbed all the violence, injustice, evil and sin in His own body. He was the recipient of dreadful violence so that violence would not ultimately win. His way is reconciliation and peace between humans and God and among humans themselves. While God's wrath is powerful and arose because of human sin it was turned aside at the Cross. Every knee will bow to Jesus, not by Him being violent, but by His authority as the risen Lord.

## **VIOLENCE IS NOT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE**

**Isaiah 60:15-18; Jeremiah 22:3 (see again Matthew 5:43-47)**

Q5. What is God's call to his people in these passages?

*'The church caters for sinners as well as for saints and there are many within the fold of the church who have inadequately understood or inadequately reacted to the foundation teaching of Jesus on this matter.'*  
(Richard Swinbourne)

Q6. Is 'religion' to blame in violent places today? What usually causes wars?

*There was a religious element to it (the Northern Ireland conflict). The problem was that you have two extreme groups who by their behaviour show they hadn't a clue what Christianity is about but they used religion as a very convenient way of stirring up the temperature of the trouble.* (John Lennox)

### **WHAT TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO BLAMES CHRISTIANS FOR WARS AND VIOLENCE?**

- i. There have been a few followers of Christ who have caused wars and violence. But they haven't really understood the real, non-violent message of Jesus – to love even one's enemies.
- ii. There seems to be good reasons for the rare divinely sanctioned 'wars' in the OT.
- iii. Overwhelmingly the Bible reveals that God is a god of peace, justice, reconciliation who loves all.
- iv. Jesus' followers are to be non-violent 'peace-makers' whenever possible.

### **SHARE & PRAYER**