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Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion

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Why Do People Do Bad Things in the Name of Religion?

Richard E. Wentz

Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987

\$14.00 U.S.

Richard Wentz, a historian of religion, skillfully weaves together stories which show the reality of which he speaks and illustrate the points he is making. The question he deals with is one which I have often asked myself, and discussed with my people as I serve as their pastor. I see this book as a resource in helping people deal with the question from a sociological perspective.

"How is it possible for people to be so convinced of the righteousness of their causes that they justify murder and the burning and destruction of home and temple." Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, Hopis, Christians and others are engaged in religious strife. It is not all bloody but there is plenty of it.

Many people reject religion as such, but Wentz contends that it is not religion that is at fault. We are all religious in one way or another as we seek ideas that give order and meaning to life, engage in ritual action to express those ideas, and find belongingness that gives a sense of identity. "To be human is to be religious."

Some people in their "religious transcendence of their biological nature, are willing to live with moving horizons, knowing truth without certainty". Others cannot live with uncertainty, and this often leads them to defensive and hostile attitudes, even violence.

Wentz contends that religions exist because people do bad things. There is a gap between what is and what ought to be and a good religion enriches the lives of people who do bad things. People do not immediately cease doing bad things because they have become religious. Those who know the world is not as it should be tend to take their religion seriously.

Wentz distinguishes between the way of the masses and the way of discipleship. In India there have been riots between religious groups with resulting death, injury and starvation in the name of religion. The way of the masses led many Hindus into violent action.

In the Hindu tradition there is also a way of discipleship. Mahatma Ghandi was a Hindu who believed that God is the only reality, the only real truth. He had examined the literature and traditions of India's religions. He had investigated the way of the masses and found deep within it a way of discipleship. Following the way of discipleship opened up the possibility of a transformed existence. Ghandi discovered that he ceased to hate anyone and would do violence to no one. The inner violence that leads to violent action was gone.

The Demon of the Absolute sits on the shoulder of people who become fanatic crusaders or fundamentalists. He makes them nervous, so that they

sometimes do very bad things as a testimony to the absolute. They act as protectors of the absolute. The one absolute is that no one's understanding of the truth is the whole truth. The Demon is not willing to acknowledge that it is possible to know truth without calling into question the possibility that someone else may know it differently.

Every religion is both a way of the masses and a way of discipleship. The way of discipleship generally leads to transformed living that avoids violence. But the way of the masses is also essential because no people can exist outside a world of ultimate order and meaning.

Discovering the power of the Christian story may lead the disciple into the way of the transformed mind, wherein the disciple becomes involved in making things whole. Hence the disciple overcomes the natural inclination to do violence. Many bad things may be done in the name of religion even though the pilgrim is not a violent person. Gautama does not do bad things in the name of religion (he is a pilgrim), but some Buddhists do. Jesus does not do bad things in the name of religion, but some Christians do. Only the pilgrim knows what Martin Luther proclaimed, that we are simultaneously saints and sinners.

Wentz maintains that the way of the disciple is the way out of violence. As a pilgrim I become a person who has been touched by the truth of my own story, and am drawn to search for a more complete vision of that truth. As preachers we need to help people to see the significance of everyday events as part of the need to find order and meaning. If this does not happen it will do little good to recite words about salvation and reconciliation. Then people will be content with the order and meaning that their culture already shares with them, the way of the masses. The possibility of discipleship is opened up for those who, in coming to terms with their own stories, begin to see the relevance of the stories which are called religions.

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Liberation, The Jesus Mode: Reflections on the Gospels for the B-Cycle

Joseph G. Donders

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987

275 + xi pp., n.p.

These "reflections on Gospels" flow from the heart of a Catholic priest (ordained 1957) who was and remains a missionary. A member of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, he was for 15 years Professor in Philosophy