

Religion Matters . . . So Why the Reluctance to Talk About It?

In a country with freedom of religion, speech, and the press, why is it so hard for us to talk about religion's role in modern life? Until we can figure out how to talk about religion in ways that matter, we'll remain in a state of denial or ignorance, which is risky in a democracy.

In other areas of life, we understand that beliefs influence behavior. We know that one's political convictions get translated into party affiliation, votes at the polls, and public policy. So why do so many people miss the connection between *religious* belief and behavior? Why is there such reluctance to recognize the impact of religion in American life, when it has had such a strong and recurring influence in our past and present? I believe there are four main reasons:

1. Religious ignorance

According to Pew's recent [Religious Knowledge Survey](#), most Americans are simply uninformed about the core beliefs and practices of religions in America and around the world; and a significant number of believers lack basic knowledge about their own religion. Without such knowledge, it is impossible to make sense of the religious motivations behind the way people act.

2. Secular point of view

Other people may know quite a bit about religious beliefs and practices, but want to exclude them from public life. This secular perspective makes religion a private affair: "If you want to believe that, it's your business. Just don't try to force the rest of us to live according to your beliefs." In other words, religious people should keep their opinions to themselves; and religion should be kept out of the public square.

3. Political correctness

More recently, political correctness has made it difficult to ask hard questions about religion for fear of offending specific groups. The most glaring example is the inability or unwillingness of many national leaders to talk about the religious motivations of terrorists. Such reticence is baffling since extremists usually are eager to explain themselves: They are proud soldiers of Islam who are fighting for Allah. That is what *they* said, clearly, loudly, often, and without apologies.

Why is it so hard for some of us to believe them—or take their words seriously? The simple answer is that many people fear a backlash against our Muslim neighbors. Identifying the terrorists as Muslims may lead numbers of people to conclude that all Muslims are terrorists or that Islam as a whole is to blame. Certainly that would be a huge mistake. But is it really up to American politicians to absolve Muslims of all culpability when those perpetrating violence are claiming religious reasons for doing so?

4. Denying the obvious

Some observers thus refuse to recognize the obvious: Islam is a complicated religion that is deeply divided by historic, ethnic, and theological differences. There can be no

doubt that that growing numbers of Muslim extremists are using *jihad* ("struggle") to justify violence in the creation of a world-wide Islamic community under Shariah law. But it is also true that a fierce debate is raging *within* Islam over such views and how Muslims should relate to the modern world. Muslim extremists started killing other Muslims long before they took their war to Europe and the United States.

I understand how hard it is to admit that such violence exists within one's religious community. For thirty years I taught the history of Christianity to future ministers, many of whom denied that any *real* Christian could have inflicted torture during the Inquisition, beheaded or burned heretics at the stake, committed atrocities in the Crusades, persecuted Jews in the Middle Ages, or ridden with the Ku Klux Klan to preserve white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian America.

My job was not to shield them from such facts, but to help them understand how and why the clergy, theologians, spiritual leaders, and lay people of the time justified such behavior on Christian grounds. While Christians today deplore and reject such behavior, they need to understand how people pretty much like themselves could commit such acts with a clear conscience. It seems foolish and naive to deny that such things have occurred.

Of course, not everyone is reluctant to talk about religion. Believers often promote religious solutions for what ails America, while critics blame religion for America's troubles. From one perspective, religion does not matter enough; from another religion matters too much.

While many Americans embrace religious faith, others fear it. In the U.S. such fear can take many forms, as in the belief that religious people are a threat to American liberties and so must be restricted in their political influence. Another example is the blanket indictment against all religion, as in Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* or Bill Maher's film *Religulous*.

Like it or not, one way or the other, religion does matter, for good and for evil. One group of believers feeds the hungry, heals the sick, helps troubled youth, provides for those in need, or even lays down their lives for others. Another group sets off bombs in public markets or makes plans to bring down airplanes or kill people in Times Square. Different beliefs have different consequences. In addition, increasing numbers of Americans believe that they can live productive and ethical lives without any connection to religion at all.

In a conflicted world like ours, how should we talk about such complex religious matters? Here are a few suggestions:

- **Be honest.** Religion is a powerful force for good in modern life, but it also has a dark side. Political correctness may seem like a good short-term strategy for avoiding offence, but in the long-run, it impedes our ability to ask the right questions and get honest answers. Ignoring the obvious never works when solid information is needed to understand religious differences and their results.
- **Judge fairly.** All religions have the right to define themselves; and no religion should be judged by its worst examples. To their credit, most religions wish they could delete embarrassing parts of their histories. None is monolithic; and most contend with internal "we're truer than you" arguments between rival factions. Passing judgments about such complexity is never easy; but in the end, "by their

fruit you shall know them." Over time religions usually deserve the reputations they get.

- **Celebrate our liberties.** The First Amendment guarantees that the state will neither establish religion nor prohibit its free exercise. Such freedom has been good for believers and unbelievers alike. Religious freedom is America's greatest contribution to modern life, the one that distinguishes us most from those who would force one religion on everyone. That liberty is worth celebrating and keeping.
- **Find common ground.** Religious freedom promotes and protects religious diversity and guarantees, as the Founders believed, that the truth will always be heard. It ensures that religious groups can claim that they alone have the truth and requires that such believers and non-believers give each other room to hold and express opposing views. In addition, religious liberty provides the opportunity to seek and find common ground. Don't just about all of us want to give our children a decent future, safeguard democracy, and exercise the God-given inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" One of the marvels of American history is that a diverse population has found ways to find and preserve such common ground. *E pluribus unum.*

Good information is vital these days. Without it we can jump to unwarranted conclusions, assign blame when none is deserved, or fail to make connections that can help us manage our present and future. In a time when civility is in short supply, *Religion Matters* intends to provide the kind of information, resources, and perspective that both enlightens and encourages. Religious freedom works best when people are informed and realize both the blessings and the challenges of living in a free-market religious economy.