

## NEGATIVE ROLES OF RELIGION

### Bad religious programming

There are many examples of religious ideas which are bad for mother earth, bad for creating human unity and bad for the advancement of society. Examples of such beliefs include viewing people of other religions as unbelievers and preventing scientific research because it may conflict with our own religious ideas.

### Injustice and wars

Humanity has gone to war and fought with itself over many different non-religious things including minerals, resources and land. Much of the conflict and war in the 20th century was also as a result of non-religious atheist ideologues with Hitler leaning on the work of atheist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche and Stalin leaning on Karl Marx for support. Nevertheless it is unfortunate that people have used religion since its creation as an excuse to go to war with one another and use religion as a tool to justify their oppressive actions.

### Rationalisation for hatred

Many religious institutions have been responsible for contributing towards social injustice and hatred towards members of their own communities who may for example support different interpretations of holy texts or may hold different views around morality such as supporting homosexual marriages.

### Power hungry religious leaders

Religion is usually started by pure, enlightened beings like Jesus, Nanak, Buddha whose aims are to help humanity understand higher spiritual truths and make the world a better place. Then much later the followers of those spiritual masters will formalise the teachings into a set of religious doctrine and build institutions with seats of power usually aimed at controlling people. As with any other secular or political institution those centres of religion become breeding grounds for power hungry, ego centric, self righteous personalities which do more harm to society than good.

### Segregation of humanity

We have seen civilization advance from the precivilization of Neolithic farming villages to the first cities to states to nations and now to

transnational communities like the EU or the Sunni/ Arab hegemony in the Middle East. The harmony and cooperation that religion (arguably) facilitates within those boundaries is offset (and some would say outweighed) by the animosity that the religious rivalries created between e.g. the Christian states and the Muslim states. Humanity appears to have the capability to finally transcend all tribal differences and merge into a single global community which would usher in an era of unprecedented harmony and cooperation, but religion appears to stand militantly in the way.

### Anxiety created through religious views

Everyone knows that stress and anxiety can compromise health and well-being. Perhaps ironically, religion, which can help reduce anxiety, can also cause it. The reason is that some religious beliefs are at odds with scientific knowledge and research in cognitive dissonance theory indicates that people are distressed by these types of situations and go to great lengths to resolve them in some way. For example, the debate between creationism vs evolution.

## SUMMARY OF PURPOSE OF RELIGION

The Sikh scripture states that religion is very much a force with both positive and negative qualities.

*"Rituals and religions are all just entanglements; bad and good are bound up with them. Those things done for the sake of children and spouse, with ego and attachment in the heart, are just more bonds. Wherever I look, there I see the noose of attachment to Maya. O Nanak, without recognising higher Truth, the world is engrossed in blind entanglements"* (SGGSJ, p. 551)

Religion, misused and exploited, can be the most dangerous and the most persuasive force on Earth, but at its best, can be the path of re-connecting a person to higher spiritual truth and the reason behind the most loving and noble actions.

# The Purpose of Religion

## INTRODUCTION

Religion is derived from the two latin words “re” and “ligare” which means “to reconnect”. The concept of religion is relatively recent considering that humanity has been on earth for at least 200,000 years and the oldest living religious traditions namely Hinduism date back to only 6000 BCE. So for over 95% of human history, men and women have nourished their sense of spirituality without any formal religious constructs.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES A RELIGION?

There can be no single definition of what constitutes religion because the word means many different things to different people. But certainly many people would agree that religion is a multifaceted entity consisting of but not limited to theology (study of God), philosophy (study of wisdom), anthropology (study of human beings), mysticism (awareness of an ultimate reality), morality (rules of personal conduct), cosmology (relationship between humans and the cosmos), social action, ethics, rituals etc. Approximately 75% of humanity in the modern world, describe themselves as belonging to an organised religious tradition with over 50% following either Christianity or Islam.

## THE HIGHER PURPOSE OF RELIGION

Religion has and continues to impact almost every aspect of human civilisation in both positive and negative ways. The great spiritual masters from all traditions, have taught that we need to adopt and develop higher qualities of love, mercy, generosity, kindness and so on. These higher qualities are a natural by product of developing a deeper connection with our spiritual nature and so in this respect religion can be thought of as a vehicle to support our spiritual development and our re-connection with divinity. In this way, human beings will be better at working together to create a better and more harmonious world.

Unfortunately this higher truth does not necessarily correlate with the reality of what different religions have achieved throughout the last 8000 years. Nevertheless in the next section we will explore both the positive and negative roles that religion has

historically played and continues to play in modern society.

## POSITIVE ROLES OF RELIGION

### Source of hope and optimism

Research in psychology indicates that positive attitudes are good for our health. For example, people who are optimistic about their chances of recovery from major diseases tend to better adhere to medical treatment plans, be less bothered by disease symptoms, and have better recovery rates. For many people, religion is a major source of hope and optimism.

### Promotes feelings of belongingness

Humans are social animals and meeting belongingness needs is good for our psychological and physical health. Despite the higher purpose of religion being a tool for spiritual progression, religion has always been and continues to be largely a social activity. For example religious people, will typically be more inclined to visit regular religious programmes which are a group activity.

### Boosts self-esteem

Like optimism, self-esteem has been shown to be a predictor of good physical health. We gain self-esteem from feeling as if we are people of value. Religion can offer a particularly potent and resilient sense of self-worth because God's love in most traditions is often perceived as non-contingent. In other words, many religious traditions assert that God, like a good parent, loves and values us no matter what we do. Many sources of self-esteem (e.g., beauty, success, popularity) are not so reliable.

### Protection from existential threats

As intellectual animals, we humans are uniquely able to ask existential questions. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Is there any meaning to our existence? What happens to us when we die? Many scholars think that the capacity to ask such questions is why religion exists at all. For many, it is not satisfying to accept the possibility that human existence is by chance, and people are no more significant or enduring than any other organism. Religion offers feelings of existential meaning, purpose, and transcendence. Research supports this assertion as increased religiosity is associated with

increased feelings of meaning and decreased existential anxieties.

### Healing of mind and body

Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), is a relatively recent branch of science that enforces beliefs that physicians have held for many centuries, perhaps well before the times of the ancient Greeks. The premise is that a patient's mental state influences diseases and healing. Specifically, PNI studies the connection between the brain and the immune system. Religious people will most likely possess a strong belief in the idea of being healed successfully through God or other divine beings and so as a result, religious and spiritual people have been shown to have a higher ability to experience healing of their own mind and body.

### Improved mental and physical health

A review of more than 40 scientific studies has found that religion appears to soothe the body as well as the soul, and as a consequence people who are highly religious tend to live longer than others. Several reasons have been given as to why this is the case, and they include a healthier lifestyle, a positive mental attitude and the social support provided by religious communities.

### Encourages charity and altruism

Many religious teachings have taught about the importance of giving up ones time and money to those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Certainly over the last few thousand years the majority of charity work was co-ordinated and performed almost exclusively through religious institutions whereas large secular charitable bodies are a phenomenon of more recent times.

### Food for the soul

Religious traditions provide many teachings to help heal the individual. When individuals are healed, families are healed, and when families are healed, society is healed. So religion feeds the hunger of the soul and your soul has more needs than your physical body does.