

Religion Has Failed... Now What? Defining and Redefining the Purpose and Presence of Religious Ideals in the 21st Century

Maddox Larson
maddoxlarson@creighton.edu

ABSTRACT: This paper will explore the notion that religiously justified acts have often been the source of great harm. From the continued persecution of the LGBTQ community to acts like the Waco incident and in extreme cases, even genocide can often stem from religious belief. There does exist, however, a more generalized, noncentralized belief system (which I call “spirituality”) which seeks similar motives as most organized religions, but rarely—if ever— leads towards such terrifying and monstrous acts. In this paper, I pose that modern organized religion can learn from the individualized focus of spiritualities to create a more open practice which would allow for more personal reflection before engagement in the congregation and, I pose, would lead to less horrendous acts of physical and cultural violence. Neither religion, nor spirituality is wavering in the modern world, so why not learn to use them to benefit the greater society, rather than using them as reasons to harm others? This should be a larger focus of religious congregations—the manner in which they interact with others about their beliefs.

KEYWORDS: religious pluralism; Abrahamic religion; philosophy of religion

PAGE COUNT (excluding references): 12

WORD COUNT (excluding footnotes, references): 3,838

I. Introduction

In his 2011 book *You Lost Me*, author and researcher David Kinnaman seeks to identify reasons why young people are leaving the Christian church and even changing their general view of the church and of faith. In his research, Kinnaman was able to identify several key types of young persons who had left the church: “nomads” who consider themselves to be Christians but refrain from church involvement; “prodigals” who were once Christian, but no longer describe themselves as such; and “exiles” who wish to not abandon their faith but feel stuck between the church and modern culture (Kinnaman 2011, 45). In this writing, readers are presented with the idea that what young people want from the church is drastically different from previous generations. All throughout, Kinnaman seems to be suggesting that in order for the church to maintain its younger members, it must begin to accommodate for them. With this, I disagree. While Kinnaman’s analysis of the grievances of young people seems to be rather accurate,² he is incorrect in identifying and articulating the full weight of what is at stake and at what is being argued. The issue at hand stems far further than from the ideology of a younger generation of people, it stems from the very methodology and practice of the church which, I argue, has evolved to be based upon a different purpose than has been identified and promoted in the past by philosophers and theologians alike.

In this moment, having made such a bold claim, I find it necessary to begin an analysis of the very purpose of religion, with a particular emphasis on those Abrahamic religions which make up approximately 54.8% of the world’s population (Pew Research Center 2015). Though a great many religions have risen and fallen in the history of humanity, these are the most prevalent, fastest growing, and (looking to the past) most potentially harmful religions that are still around in the 21st century. Through further analysis, I will begin to identify not only sociological evidence of

the general failure of these Abrahamic religions in attaining the purpose which each of them teaches and claims to practice, but I will also identify philosophical (and subsequently sociological) solutions to the problems which I will identify. This analysis will be brought about through close looks at some of the greatest religiously motivated atrocities through human history—though, of course, there is not time nor purpose for identifying and detailing all of the atrocious and deceitful actions which religion has brought about. I pose, also, that a particular solution which exists for the failure of Abrahamic religions is a further clarification of the intersection between spirituality and religion. This intersection will prove pivotal for the application of the revised version of religion which we seek to create and practice.

Finally, the bulk of my argument in this paper will be to prove that the purpose of religion is to give life by basing one's actions and beliefs on a primary example of “good” for the respective religion. Unfortunately, as a result of religious persons' failure to commit good acts, religion has continued to fall short of achieving its purpose and requires reformation to rectify its fall from the original purpose—which can be found in several different ways.

II. Purpose/definition of Abrahamic religion

In order to make the claim that religion has failed to attain its identifiable purpose of producing good individuals who are able to bring about the existence of several different virtues within the world, I must first clarify how I arrived at the disposition that this is even the purpose of such religions and how this is further proven by each of the religions' general teachings and practices.¹ With that, looking to St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, we are able to decipher

¹ Good within respect to each of their varying definitions of good; also consider, assuming that to be good is to be following the “rules” of religious practices—good also being in living your life like Jesus/Mohammed/according to the Torah.

Religion Has Failed... Now What?

a bit more of what is meant by this. In an effort to answer the question of whether or not humans are to act for a telos, Aquinas (1485) makes the argument that:

...it is clear that whatever actions proceed from a power, are caused by that power in accordance with the nature of its object. But the object of the will is the end and the good. Therefore[,] all human actions must be for an end.

This seemingly implies that because humans act with reason and within our own will, we are acting for something; it is this thing which is our “end” or telos. I believe that this argument is to be directly applied to the argument of the purpose of religion. Aquinas says that we are to act towards an end and towards “the good.” This can then lead us to believe that a goal of ours is to find the best means of doing this, ergo a search for teleological meaning is to land us at the feet of religion—whose deities and practices are to provide us with a clearer image of what it means to lead a life in pursuit of our telos and the good.

Keeping this in mind, I now call our attention to commentary of Alfred Whitehead’s work that was written by David Crosby. In this commentary, Crosby identifies the several ways in which Whitehead classifies religion; one of these is called “communal religion.” Crosby (1972) writes the following in explanation of Whitehead’s term:

[C]ommunal religion served several essential functions in preparing the way for religion itself. It sensitized the human consciousness to depth of emotion disassociated from the pressing demands of daily survival. It provided a vehicle for the rise of myths and beliefs which were a necessary prelude to religious concepts

of a more general character. And it nurtured ethical intuition by creating a sense of social unity and mutual responsibility. But it lacks genuine religious insight because it is authoritarian, provincial, and merely pragmatic in its outlook.

In this particular portion of writing Crosby does two very important things; (1) he provides us with a strong differentiation between communal religion and religion itself and (2) Crosby gives us a strong sense of the sociological (and maybe even teleological) purpose of communal religion—allowing humans to both disassociate from the demands of their daily life and strengthen their sense of social unity and mutual responsibility. For the former, Crosby describes communal religion as authoritarian, provincial, and pragmatic; for the latter, Crosby provides the idea that communal religion is a steppingstone of sorts for true religion.

While some may look at the ideas of Aquinas, Whitehead, and Crosby and say they point to different definitions—I say the opposite. From each of these we are able to develop that religion admits of degree in regard to pragmatism and authoritarianism and each of their practices or beliefs allow one to disassociate from the struggles of their daily life.

In development of a more concrete definition of Abrahamic religion, we combine this previous definition with Aquinas' stronger emphasis on a search for "the good" through specific practices which are heavily developed in Abrahamic teachings where one aims to live a life up to the caliber of goodness which was presented by the Jewish rabbi called Jesus of Nazareth or, alternatively, to the ideals presented by Muhammed the prophet.

In further effort of supporting this definition, we can look to additional works regarding Islamic philosophy. Dr John Walbridge is the authority that we will turn to in order to gain the desired insight. In a reference work by Dr. Walbridge, he provides an overview of the place of

scholastic rationalism in the Islamic tradition throughout the historical development of Islam. More specifically, in a section titled “The Institutionalization of Disagreement,” Walbridge inadvertently generates necessary conditions of one being considered a Muslim—which includes ideas of tolerance and diversity.⁷ Once again I present a potentially controversial interpretation: that tolerance and diversity are ideas and ideals which belong within Aquinas’ religiously based search for the good. This comes from an interpretative idea of the good being to the standards presented in the lives of Jesus and Muhammad and they each represented an ideal of inclusivity, diversity and tolerance. In effort to maintain a primary focus on philosophy, this notion will be explored in future work.

III. Deficits of Abrahamic Religion

At this point, having developed a stronger understanding of the definition and purpose of religion and, more specifically, Abrahamic religion, there is now time to identify the ways in which these religions have failed to achieve their purposes in both their practices and teachings. This will be done through close analysis of several sociological examples—which I believe most people to be familiar with in conjunction with more general teachings from each of these religions.

A primary example of abuse of religion can be found in the Islamic practice of jihād.² In an article about Islamic philosophy, Dr. Asma Afsaruddin notes that the Islamic tradition of jihad has many meanings but most often, in its Qur’ānic usage, refers to a meritorious struggle in one’s spiritual journey (Afsaruddin 1998). Equally important, however, is when Afsaruddin (1998) notes that classical Muslim lawmakers had used the tradition of jihad to insinuate military duty, she says:

² It is important to note that jihad does exist in several different types, which Dr. Asma Afsaruddin notes in her article, not all of which are mentioned in this paper for lack of necessity—instead, a general definition of the term is provided.

In their articulation of international law, classical Muslim jurists were primarily concerned with issues of state security and military defense of Islamic realms, and, accordingly, they focused primarily on jihad as a military duty, which became the predominant meaning in legal and official literature. It should be noted that the Qur’ān... explicitly forbids the initiation of war and permits fighting only against actual aggressors...

Further, Dr. Afsaruddin continues to note that: “Throughout Islamic history, wars against non-Muslims, even when motivated by political and secular concerns, were termed jihads to grant them religious legitimacy.” She even goes on to clarify that in several instances in the 20th and 21st centuries, there were Muslims claiming to make attacks out of jihad in order to gain religious legitimacy as well. In this moment it becomes easy to identify this dissonance that occurs when we try to compare this example with the purpose we have previously established, this is because if religion (and subsequently religious practice as well) is meant to be in pursuit of not only a telos, but also the good, then acts of extreme violence that do not correlate to the doctrine which they claim to represent can be considered a shortcoming of the religion.

A more specific, well-known example of abuse of religious power occurred in 1993 in an event now known as the Waco Siege. Though this event occurred in the 1990s, its origins can be traced back to the 1950s. Prior to the actual siege a man by the name of Victor Houteff led a group of members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and began the Davidian movement. Houteff spread his belief that certain signs described in the prophecy of the Biblical end times were becoming evident and that preparations must be made. However, it was after his death that another

faction arose, which Ben Roden took control of, called the Branch Davidian movement (Melton 2001).¹¹ In the end, a different follower of the movement—Vernon Wayne Howell—ended up changing his name to David Koresh.³ For sake of brevity, these events lead to a shootout and subsequent storming of the fort where Koresh took fatal gun wounds. However, what, without disregard to the lives lost, I argue is more important to look at rather than the history of the event is the spirituality and philosophy that you had behind the leadership of such an event. To elaborate, here you had a younger leader who claimed to have the spiritual authority to able to have a higher degree of interpretation upon which he learned of the inevitability and rapid approach of the end times. However, what I argue is that the means of interpretation and implementation run contrary to, as I understand it, the purpose of religion. Once again, we find that this is a religion which doesn't necessarily promote violence—because individuals all want to live according to the life of Jesus— so for there to be an amassing of guns is quite uncalled for and illegitimate in the search for signs of the end times. (Though this is not to say that one's religiosity is broken through the ownership of guns.) With being in violation of the search for Aquinas' good and not pointing to a clearly supported end, I argue this is another example of the failure of religion.

Yet another example of abuse of religion is found through examples of religiously based homophobia and transphobia in the modern-day, across all Abrahamic religions. To illustrate the prevalence of we turn to the widely known Christian author and fundamentalist Ken Ham. In one of his most popular writings, *The Lie: Evolution*, Ham (2013, 85) writes that:

Some people have the opinion that a homosexual lifestyle is wrong. However, if it is just an opinion, then surely the view that homosexuality is acceptable is just as

³ Koresh is the Hebrew-to-English translation of the name Cyrus—a notable Persian king; David is the name of the similarly notable Biblical figure who is able to smite a “giant” and later becomes a king (Melton, 2000).

valid as any other view. And where does it stop? What about euthanasia, bestiality, or pedophilia? Who decides what is right or wrong? The point is, it is not a matter of one's opinion. It is really a matter of what the One who is Creator, who owns us, gives us as a basis for the principles governing this area of life...

Beyond other reasonable objections that may arise from this passage, it becomes clear that Mr. Ham differs in thought from Aquinas who has been our basis for our definition of religion—of course, perhaps this is a topic for another paper. Regardless, Mr. Ham's interpretation and promotion of the ideas that homosexuality is wrong has become widely popular—a 2015 study found that a “negative relationship between religious involvement and the acceptance of homosexuality was shown for both Christian and Muslim believers” (Roggemans et al 2015, 270). Another important point of contention in this issue is the results of a study done in Belgium that sought to analyze the effects of gendered friendships on the presence of homophobia in Belgian youth (Hooghe 2009). This study inevitably concluded that one's religiosity was strongly correlated with the level to which homophobia was present in the group. Belgium has approximately 70.4% of their population belonging to Christianity, Islam, or Judaism (Pew Research Center 2015). Though, obviously, this study was done in Belgium, similar results can be expected in countries and societies that have a similar ratio of religious persons to non-religious persons.⁴ Both of these examples can be viewed as failures to achieve the defined purpose of religion by once again not succeeding in attainment of the good that Aquinas speaks of. Though it is important to note the controversy surrounding homosexual behavior in the Abrahamic belief. This is still a failure due to the heavily emphasis that is created surrounding the idea of loving

⁴ In the United States, approximately 81% of individuals belong to one of the main three Abrahamic religions (Pew Research Center 2015).

Religion Has Failed... Now What?

others which is cultivated by the Abrahamic figures we cited as being the “authority” by which we associate the good—Jesus and Muhammed.

Further examples of abuse of religion can be found through events such as the Holocaust, the Crusades, slavery of the African peoples for hundreds of years, and many other examples of religiously justified antifeminism, antisemitism, and other dangerous beliefs being perpetuated through the teachings and practices of the Abrahamic religions. Similar to the prior exploration of events and themes which have been perpetrated by individuals who reside within religious belief and assume religious legitimacy, I propose the events and topics such as the Crusade, American-European slavery of Africans, religiously justified anti-feminism, and anti-Semitism also represent a failure to meet the criteria established for Abrahamic religiosity. None of these events/teachings seem to promote a pursuit of the good or a generally viable pursuit of an Abrahamic supported telos.

IV. Solutions

Though it is very easy to identify problems, I wish to also propose solutions to those I have pointed out. Just as in any scenario, solutions to the failure of religion come in many different forms, some better than others. I believe that the most effective solutions are identification and implementation of the intersection of religion and spirituality, cultural accommodation in interpretation and implementation, or further analysis of religious pluralism in the contexts of Abrahamic religions.

The first possible solution which I will pose will be identification and implementation of the potential intersection between religion and spirituality. Though many lump these two together, I separate them in referring to religion as those classically organized and centralized faith-based

groups, whereas I refer to spirituality to main faith-based groups with no directly centralized doctrine for their beliefs or practices, such as Buddhism. With this, my proposed intersection between the two comes from the strictly internalized and individualized practices of the Mādhyamika school of the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism. To clarify, in the Mahayana tradition, those practicing the faith find themselves devoting a heavier amount of time to individual reading and meditation in an effort to truly identify with and develop their own thoughts on the respective Dharma which they study. Keeping this in mind, I call our attention to a psychological study from the early 2000s which aimed to “examine in the present research is whether a more internalized regulation of religious activities leads one to approach one’s own religion in a symbolic and open manner, thereby leaving room for other interpretations” (Neyrinck et al 2006) This study, performed by a team that was led by Dr. Bart Neyrinck, took a total of 186 individuals that were interested in or committed to the Roman-Catholic church and (through several questionnaires) measured the level at which the participants were able to internalize their beliefs. The final results of the study are reported as follows:

[T]he more one foresees the personal relevance of one’s religious activities, the more cognitively open-minded one’s own belief contents are approached, confidently leaving room for possible ambiguous elements inherent in the Roman Catholic message. (Neyrinck et al 2006, 327)

Based on the language used above as well as the known practices within Buddhism, I propose that through identification and implementation of the intersection between Buddhist and Christian practices, we can begin to address this problem. To clarify, one the research suggests that be

Religion Has Failed... Now What?

internalizing the relevance of one's own beliefs and religious practices, one was able to become more open-minded (and assuming open-mindedness will lead to less reprehensible behavior), then does it not become clear to more heavily internalize Christian beliefs. With this, I propose that heavier emphasis on individual practices within the Abrahamic religions would be able to increase the rate at which one is able to recognize the relevance of their beliefs and practices.

Another possible—though perhaps more plausible—solution in regard to the issue of the failure of religion is one author David Kinnaman referred to as “cultural accommodation” (Kinnaman 2011, 145). Though he uses the term to mean the process by which the Abrahamic religious institutions would be able to introduce old doctrine to supplement new ideas and changes in culture, I purpose it in a different light. Rather than Kinnamanian cultural accommodation, I propose this term to mean an interpretive accommodation for the culture at which you are analyzing. To elaborate, when referencing any given part of the Bible, Qur’ān, or Torah, to understand the socio-cultural context in which it was written in in order to better understand in implement its true meanings into your teachings and practices. I propose this because each writing that we read is written with the bias of the writer and to understand the cultural and social context of the time the writer is in, is to understand the reasons that they write and to understand why and how they arrive at the conclusions which they do. Ideally, utilization of this practice would result in people being able to better understand the legitimacy of the documents which they put at the center of their beliefs and, subsequently, to act in a manner which appeals more strongly to the purpose of religion which I propose.

A final—yet more sociologically unlikely—solution would be the total disestablishment of the organized Abrahamic religions altogether. This solution, no matter how implausible, arises from the recognition of the great harm which has risen across time from religion and subsequent

religious ideals that permeated through cultures during the development of religion. As previously noted, the existence of tragedies such as the Crusades, the Holocaust, slavery, and the Waco Siege in addition to religiously based homophobia, white supremacy, anti-feminism, and anti-Semitism promotes the idea that religion has been used to cause far more harm than good for far too long. Though I expect a great deal of opposition to the complete disestablishment of religion, I propose it nonetheless as an option that makes sense given the scope and context of this paper.

V. Conclusion

Though it is often hard to admit when the systems which have existed for so long and that we are so used to have failed or fallen short of their purposes or of our desires; however, I pose that in an era of such great social change and activism that there is no issue as important and needing of change than the failure of the Abrahamic religions. Through an analysis of great minds like Aquinas and Whitehead, I hope to have proven that religion exists—if for no other reason—to improve our lives and to give us more from our experiences, and anything or anyone who fails to increase their own quality of life (or of those around them) and claims to belong to an Abrahamic religion is someone who gravely misunderstands the purpose of their beliefs. Similarly, there have been many egregious examples of an abuse of religion and religious power throughout both recent and far past history, however, in order to prevent the great next religious tragedy, we must begin to mend the teachings and practices of those such communities through heavier emphasis on individualization of beliefs, cultural accommodation, or by entirely removing them altogether. The power of Abrahamic religions is rather undisputed when taking a look at world history, so let us begin to use that such power for healing and helping others, rather than destroying others.

References

- Afsaruddin, Asma. 1998. "Jihad." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad>.
- Aquinas, Thomas. 1485. *Summa Theologica*.
- Neyrinck, Bart, Maarten Vansteenkiste, Willy Lens, Bart Duriez, Dirk Hutsebaut. 2006. "Cognitive, affective and behavioral correlates of internalization of regulations for religious activities." *Motivation and Emotion* 30: pp. 323-334.
- Crosby, Donald. 1972. "Religion and solitariness." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1): pp. 21-35.
- Ham, Ken. 2012. *The Lie: Evolution*. New Leaf Publishing Group, Incorporated.
- Hooghe, Marc. 2009. "The impact of gendered friendship patterns on the prevalence of homophobia among Belgian late adolescents." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40: pp. 543-550.
- Kinnaman, David. 2011. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*. Baker Books.
- Lilith Roggemans, Bram Spruyt, Filip Van Droogenbroeck, Gil Keppens. 2015. "Religion and negative attitudes towards homosexuals: An analysis of urban young people and their attitudes towards homosexuality." *Young* 23 (3): pp. 254-276.
- Melton, J. Gordon. 2001. "History of Branch Davidians." *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Branch-Davidian>.
- Pew Research Center. 2015. *Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050*.
<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/2010/number/all/>.

Walbridge, John. 2011. *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.