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A World Without Religion

In November 1978, a congressman by the name of Leo Ryan traveled to the religious community of Jonestown, Guyana, to investigate claims he had heard concerning the abuse of human rights. Among the party that went with him were an NBC camera crew and reporters from various newspapers. The community called themselves The People's Temple and they were led by Jim Jones. He led the community from state to state throughout the U.S. until he called everyone to gather in the small country of Guyana, which was just north of Brazil, because of persecution over his communistic and socialistic ideals.

Upon Congressman Ryan's arrival, Jones received the party with open arms and held a reception for their guests in the central pavilion. Though things appeared to be bright and cheerful, the party could not let the feeling go that things were not as they appeared. During their visit, fifteen of Jones' followers approached Congressman Ryan and gave him the message that they would like to leave with him. Jones gave no complaint, but after one of Jones' men unsuccessfully attacked Ryan with a knife, their departure suddenly became urgent.

After the knife attack, the Congressman's party and the fifteen escapees had successfully fled all the way back to the air field without resistance. As they were boarding their planes, a tractor pulling a trailer full of Jones' men carrying loaded firearms arrived and began shooting at the Congressman's party, killing Ryan and four others. The rest of the party successfully escaped. Later that same day, Jones put his belief in what he called, "translation" into action. He told his followers that because of the escapees, others would come and force them to change

their beliefs and cause their children to grow up to be “dummies.” To resist the people that would come, Jones administered grape-flavored Kool-Aid laced with cyanide to the community’s 304 children and pressured the rest of the community to partake and lie down with their children in “revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.” He reassured his congregation that death was just passing into another plane where they would dwell on another planet in bliss. That day, 909 of the inhabitants of Jonestown drank the Kool-Aid and died of cyanide poisoning. The body of Jim Jones was found dead in a chair after he had shot himself in the head. For years, the tragedy of Jonestown stood as the greatest intentional loss of American civilian life until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ("Welcome!").

Other similar massive suicides have happened since the tragedy of Jonestown, though not as big. Since the dawn of history, wars have been fought and people have died on both sides of an argument. The topic of the argument – religion– and with so much suicide, violence and persecution over the topic, it is easy for many to say that the world would be better off without religion. The question is though, would it? Evidence supports that despite all of the atrocities done on behalf of religion, the world is still far better off with religion than without it.

Imagine for a moment, if all religions everywhere suddenly disbanded overnight. What would the world be like? Rabbi David Wolpe, a religious scholar and national best-selling author voted the second most influential Rabbi in America by *Newsweek* magazine, imagined that very scenario. Concerning that thought, he mentioned that there are currently millions of religious aid workers all around the world giving support in response to hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, famine, disease, the aftermath of war, and poverty in general. A great many of the recipients of such aid are extremely grateful for religion being in the world, for without the religious people coming to their rescue, many would literally be dead. If all religions everywhere were suddenly

disbanded, that would mean these now not-so-religious aid workers would no longer have the organizations to support them. They would then either be forced to pack up and go home or be left stranded where they were – suddenly in need of the support they were giving (Wolpe).

To counter this argument, one might say, realistically speaking, eliminating religion would have to be a gradual process rather than something done overnight. In that case, imagine if the short-term catastrophes could be avoided. What would the long-term effects of disbanding all religion be? What would the long-term effects of charity be like; would there be more or less of it in the world? If one were to make their predictions based upon current statistics, for certain, one can affirm that there would be less of it. Currently, the number of religious humanitarian aid organizations far outnumbers that of the non-religious. Based on over 3,000 non-biased studies found within the New England Journal of Medicine, JAMA, and Lancet, the best way to measure a society's unselfish devotion to the welfare of others is by determining how involved they are in religion. These studies indicate that in general, religious Americans volunteer more and are much more helpful in their communities. They donate more to charity and are more involved in civic processes. On top of that, they also attend more meetings, and are more likely to vote. On the flip side, religious people are also less likely to do drugs, drink, or get divorced (Koenig, McCullough and Larson). Please be aware that these facts are based on religion as a whole in America and not off of any individual religions. There are individual exceptions, but if religion really does help people feel less depressed and suicidal and more optimistic and meaningful about life, as the studies indicate, to get rid of religion would be to get rid of those religious benefits.

It can be argued that the most important thing religion gives a person is hope. Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a rabbi in England for many years, once recounted a childhood memory from when he and his father were in Auschwitz, a concentration camp during World War II. During the

season of Hanukkah, his father took a precious margarine ration and used it to light the Hanukkah candle. Young Hugo protested, saying this was food, but his father told him, “Listen, my child, we have learned that you can go three weeks without eating. You can go three days without drinking, but you cannot go three minutes without hope” (Gryn).

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, another Holocaust survivor, also commented on the value of hope in traumatic times. In his book *Man's Search For Meaning*, which has sold more than twelve million copies worldwide and has been deemed by the Library of Congress as one of the ten most influential books in America, Frankl recounted many of his own experiences suffering in Auschwitz and three other Nazi concentration camps that murdered his parents, brother, and pregnant wife. He also mentioned how he had witnessed firsthand the life expectancy and deterioration of those without hope, which observations helped him develop his theory of logotherapy, a therapy focused on finding meaning in difficult experiences and learning how to cope with them. Hope and understanding played a significant role in both his survival and the survival of countless others. That is what religion is all about: finding hope and meaning in life. If one were to question why religious people are so optimistic, as the studies indicate, this is why. In his book, Frankl argued that our primary drive in life is not pleasure, as taught by Sigmund Freud and is a common belief among many secular humanists. Rather, our primary drive is “the discovery and pursuit of what we personally find meaningful” (Frankl).

Upon hearing such claims from Holocaust survivors, many might raise an eyebrow and ask, “They say religion has helped people survive the holocaust, but is not religion the whole reason those people were in the concentration camps in the first place? Did not Hitler say repeatedly that he was, ‘On the Lord's business’?” (Hitler)

What many people do not realize is that Hitler only said he was on the Lord's business because it was a part of his propaganda campaign. For posterity's sake, Hitler's private secretaries made shorthand records of Hitler's private conversations within his inner circle. These records were later published by different titles, in different languages, and by different editors—the prominent English title being *Hitler's Table Talk*. According to these records, Hitler wanted the Bavarian Catholics and German Lutherans to join him on his conquest, so he invented a Nazi Christ that sought vengeance upon the Jews. Hitler actually despised Christianity and expressed his hatred toward it repeatedly, viewing it as the Nazi regime's "most dangerous threat" (Hitler, Cameron, Stevens, Trevor-Roper, and Weinberg).

Very well, Hitler did not go on conquest in the name of religion, and many people survived because of the hope and understanding religion gave them. Religion has some perks, but it is still unnerving that someone might run out and kill someone because they believe God told them to do so. That is what happened in the September 11th terrorist attacks, only then it was a lot more than just one person being murdered. In any case, one murder in the name of religion is one too many. If the world could be rid of such murder by sacrificing religion would not the world be a better place? Would not the benefits of religion be worth sacrificing? The answer is still no.

It is important that one does not judge all religion based off the negative behavior of a few. There are bad people in every community. If one were to eat a bad watermelon it does not mean that all watermelons are bad. To believe so would be to fall victim to the fallacy of hasty generalization. Likewise, if different governments occasionally do bad things, that does not mean that all governments are bad and that the world would be better off without government.

One interesting thing to note is that some kind of government has been involved in every

single war since the dawn of history. This makes one ask, if Hitler's conquest was not a religious crusade, as Hitler's private secretaries pointed out, then that must mean Hitler's Conquest was a secular pursuit, an attempt to do the world a favor by cleansing society of those deemed unfit to live. It was an attempt to speed up the human evolution process through survival of the fittest—social Darwinism. Upon further study looking into the *Encyclopedia of Wars*, which documents over seventeen thousand serious wars that have impacted history, only seven percent of the wars mentioned were religious wars, meaning the other ninety-three percent can also be deemed as secular pursuits (Phillips and Axelrod).

With results like these, one can argue that perhaps the world would be better off without secularism. Yes, the secular world has given us things like electricity, vaccinations, and automobiles, but it has also given us the nuclear bomb. Is secularism really worth ninety three percent of all wars? Is not one murder one too many?

Before rushing to any rash conclusions, one can take comfort that we do not live in a world that requires us to have one way or the other – a world completely without religion or a world with nothing but religion. Dinesh D'Souza, former president of The King's College in New York City and *New York Times* bestselling author of *What's So Great About Christianity*, stated, “if you want to make a list of the 200 greatest scientists of all time from Newton, Copernicus, Kepler, Pascal, Gassendi, Boyle, the list goes on, you find that the vast, vast majority of them were religious believers” (D'Souza). In our world we have both religion and secularism which can balance out each other's extremes, its Jim Joneses and Adolph Hitlers. Religion gives us hope and compassion, while secularism gives us science and technology. Together they give us pathos, logos, and ethos.

Religion is not something the world should do without. If all religion in the world were to

be disbanded, the world would be far worse off. There would be less charity, less hope, and there would be much more war. Despite the atrocities committed in the name of religion the amount of good religion brings into world by far outweighs the amount of bad. For this, one can be grateful for the amount of religion we have.

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