

Question: Is religion the cause of most wars?

Answer from GotQuestion.org: To be sure, many conflicts throughout history have been ostensibly for religious reasons, with many different religions involved. For example, in Christianity, there occurred (just to name a few):

- The Crusades — A series of campaigns from the 11th to the 13th centuries with the stated goal of reconquering the Holy Land from Muslim invaders and coming to the aid of the Byzantine Empire
- The French Wars of Religion — A succession of wars in France during the 16th century between Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots
- The Thirty Years War — Another war between Catholics and Protestants during the 17th century in what is now Germany

This list is by no means exhaustive. In addition to this, one could add the Taiping Rebellion and the never-ending Catholic/Protestant struggles in Northern Ireland. Christianity has certainly been a factor in many conflicts throughout its 2,000 history.

In Islam, we see the concept of *jihad*, or “holy war.” The word *jihad* literally means “struggle,” but the concept has been used to describe warfare in the expansion and defense of Islamic territory. The almost continual warfare in the Middle East over the past half century certainly has contributed to the idea that religion is the cause of many wars. The September 11th attacks on the United States has been seen as a jihad against the “Great Satan” America, which in Muslim eyes is almost synonymous with Christianity. In Judaism, the wars of conquest chronicled in the OT (in particular the book of Joshua) at the command of God, conquered the Promised Land.

The point should be obvious that religion has certainly played a part in much of the warfare in human history. However, does this prove the point made by the critics of religion that religion itself is the cause of war? Religion is definitely the reason given behind many of history’s wars. However, is that the same as saying religion the *cause*, of much war? The answer is “yes” and “no.” “Yes” in the sense that as a secondary cause, religion, on the surface at least, has been the impetus behind much conflict. However, the answer is “no” in the sense that religion is never the *primary* cause of war.

To demonstrate this point, let’s look at the 20th century. By all accounts, the 20th century was one of the bloodiest centuries in human history. Two major world wars, which had nothing at all to do with religion, the Jewish Holocaust, and the Communist Revolutions in Russia, China, Southeast Asia and Cuba, have accounted for anywhere between 50-70 million people (some estimate upwards to 100 million). The one thing these conflicts and genocides have in common is that fact that they were ideological, not religious, in nature. We could easily make the case that more people have died throughout human history due to ideology than to religion. Communist ideology necessitates ruling over others. Nazi ideology necessitates elimination of “inferior” races. These two ideologies alone account

for the death of millions and religion had nothing to do with it. In fact, communism is by definition an atheistic ideology.

Religion and ideology are both secondary causes for war. However, the primary cause for *all* war is sin. Consider the following Scriptures:

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:1-3).

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5).

What is the testimony of Scripture as to the primary cause of war? It’s our wicked hearts. Religion and ideology are simply the means through which we exercise the wickedness in our hearts. To think, as many outspoken atheists do, that if we can somehow remove our “silly need for religion,” we can somehow create a more peaceful society, is to have a mistaken view of human nature. The testimony of human history is that if we remove religion, something else will take its place, and that something is never positive. The reality is that true religion keeps fallen humanity in check; without it, wickedness and sin would reign supreme.

Even with the influence of true religion, Christianity, we will never see peace in this current age. There is never a day that goes by without some conflict going on somewhere in the world. The only cure for war is the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ! When Christ returns as He has promised, He will close this current age and establish eternal peace:

“He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).