



## Questions from Our Culture: Aren't We Better Off Without Christianity?

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In 2010, sociologist Phil Zuckerman published *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*. Zuckerman lined up evidence that the least religious societies also tend to be the most peaceful, prosperous and equitable, with public policies that help people to flourish while decreasing both desperation and economic gluttony...

Here are six ways religions make peaceful prosperity harder to achieve.

1. **Religion promotes tribalism...**Religion divides insiders from outsiders. Rather than assuming good intentions, adherents often are taught to treat outsiders with suspicion. "Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers," says the Christian Bible. At best, teachings like these discourage or even forbid the kinds of friendship and intermarriage that help clans and tribes become part of a larger whole. At worst, outsiders are seen as enemies of God and goodness, potential agents of Satan, lacking in morality and not to be trusted. Believers might huddle together, anticipating martyrdom. When simmering tensions erupt, societies fracture along sectarian fault lines.

2. **Religion anchors believers to the Iron Age.** The Iron Age was a time of rampant superstition, ignorance, inequality, racism, misogyny, and violence. Slavery had God's sanction. Women and children were literally possessions of men. Warlords practiced scorched earth warfare. Desperate people sacrificed animals, agricultural products, and enemy soldiers as burnt offerings intended to appease dangerous gods.

Sacred texts including the Bible, Torah and Koran all preserve and protect fragments of Iron Age culture, putting a god's name and endorsement on some of the very worst human impulses. Any believer looking to excuse his own temper, sense of superiority, warmongering, bigotry, or planetary destruction can find validation in writings that claim to be authored by God.



Today, humanity's moral consciousness is evolving, grounded in an ever deeper and broader understanding of the Golden Rule. But many conservative believers can't move forward. They are anchored to the Iron Age. This pits them against change in a never-ending battle that consumes public energy and slows creative problem solving.

**3. Religion makes a virtue out of faith.** *Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus.* So sing children in Sunday schools across America. *The Lord works in mysterious ways,* pastors tell believers who have been shaken by horrors like brain cancer or a tsunami. *Faith is a virtue.* As science eats away at territory once held by religion, traditional religious beliefs require greater and greater mental defenses against threatening information. To stay strong, religion trains believers to practice self-deception, shut out contradictory evidence, and trust authorities rather than their own capacity to think.

**4. Religion diverts generous impulses and good intentions.** *Feeling sad about Haiti? Give to our mega-church.* Crass financial appeals during times of crisis thankfully are not the norm, but religion does routinely redirect generosity in order to perpetuate religion itself. Generous people are encouraged to give till it hurts to promote the church itself rather than the general welfare. Each year, thousands of missionaries throw themselves into the hard work of saving souls rather than saving lives or saving our planetary life support system. Their work, tax free, gobbles up financial and human capital.

Besides exploiting positive moral energy like kindness or generosity, religion often redirects moral disgust and indignation, attaching these emotions to arbitrary religious rules rather than questions of real harm. Orthodox Jews spend money on wigs for women and double dishwashers. Evangelical parents, forced to choose between righteousness and love, kick queer teens out onto the street. Catholic bishops impose righteous rules on operating rooms.

**5. Religion teaches helplessness.** *Que sera, sera—what will be will be. Let go and let God.* We've all heard these phrases, but sometimes we don't recognize the deep relationship between religiosity and resignation. In the most conservative sects of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, women are seen as more virtuous if they let God manage their family planning. Droughts, poverty and cancer get attributed to the will of God rather than bad decisions or bad systems; believers wait for God to solve problems they could solve themselves.



This attitude harms society at large as well as individuals. When today's largest religions came into existence, ordinary people had little power to change social structures either through technological innovation or advocacy. Living well and doing good were largely personal matters. When this mentality persists, religion inspires personal piety without social responsibility. Structural problems can be ignored as long as the believer is kind to friends and family and generous to the tribal community of believers.

**6. Religions seek power.** Think *corporate personhood*. Religions are man-made institutions, just like for-profit corporations are. And like any corporation, to survive and grow a religion must find a way to build power and wealth and compete for market share. Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity—any large enduring religious institution is as expert at this as Coca-cola or Chevron. And just like for-profit behemoths, they are willing to wield their power and wealth in the service of self-perpetuation, even it harms society at large.

In fact, unbeknownst to religious practitioners, harming society may actually be part of religion's survival strategy. In the words of sociologist Phil Zuckerman and researcher Gregory Paul, "Not a single advanced democracy that enjoys benign, progressive socio-economic conditions retains a high level of popular religiosity." When people feel prosperous and secure the hold of religion weakens.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the claims on this list that you find to be true about religion in general, or about Christianity in particular? What are some claims you can affirm?
2. What do you think this list says about the witness of the church?
3. What are some ways you would answer these claims?