"Tradition is a precious thing, a kind of distillation of tens or hundreds of thousands of generations of humans. It is a gift from our ancestors. But it is essential to remember that tradition is invented by human beings and for perfectly pragmatic purposes."
—Carl Sagan in *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*

On November 28, 1994, Christopher Scarver beat Jesse Anderson and serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer to death with a bar from a weight-lifting machine. Scarver claimed that God had told him to do it. Here was an act of murder by an evidently religious man. Did Scarver’s belief in a deity cause him to murder these men? Did it even increase the likelihood of his violence? Or, did he simply invoke the name of a god to justify what he did? In this hemisphere alone, Christian concepts were used and invoked to rationalize the religious brainwashing of and the physical and psychological torture of American Indian children in off-reservation boarding schools, the outright genocide of North and South American Indians, the killing of men and women alleged to be witches, the shooting of abortion doctors, etc. Were these atrocities caused by Christianity? Does religion cause violence? Here we survey the evidence and demonstrate that at this point there is little scientific evidence to subscribe to or continue to make the claim that it does.

**Does Religion Really Cause Violence?**

Perhaps the most common problem with making the claim that religion causes violence is one of logic; are we finding causal relations where there may be only correlations? Worse, are we fairly weighing a sufficient number of examples to make safe generalizations? In his 2007 bestseller *God is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens, for example, focuses on “religiously inspired cruelty,” and in each of his examples he uses correlations but never once establishes a causal relationship between religion and violence. Should he instead have said “religiously rationalized cruelty”? These are not mere word games or chicken-egg stories. Correlation is not causation. One of the primary jobs of any scientist is to establish and explain causality in correlated phenomena. The claim that religion causes violence is as deserving of such a causal explanation as any other empirical observation.

In his 2005 book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris lists a number of global conflicts, concluding: “In these places religion has been the explicit cause of literally millions of deaths in the last ten years.” (Italics in original.) Harris takes it as “self-evident that ordinary people cannot be moved to burn genial old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran, or celebrate the violent deaths of their children, unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe.” But he fails to consider that there may have been plenty of people who believe that blaspheming the Koran is worthy of death but who are unwilling to engage in such mortal judgment because of differential emphasis and experience. When someone presents a causal thesis as “self-evident,” we should proceed with caution. After all, isn’t it abundantly clear that heavy metal and gangsta rap cause violent tendencies in their listeners? No, actually, these self-evident causal connections are far from clear. In fact, it has been systematically difficult for social scientists to understand what causes violence, and evolutionary theorists are only beginning to uncover it. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker’s advice is instructive: “The first step in understanding violence is to set aside our abhorrence of it long enough to examine why it can sometimes pay off in personal or evolutionary terms.” Likewise, anyone wishing to understand religion has to set aside how utterly improbable religious claims are in order to see how it operates.

So in taking Pinker’s advice, what can we say about the roots of violence? It appears that interpersonal and collective violence are both historically and even evolutionary old. Groups of male chimpanzees regularly patrol their borders and engage in “hits” on rivals from other groups. Modern forensic analysis shows clear evidence of interpersonal violence in the form of head trauma in a 36,000 year Neanderthal skull. Collective violence in chimpanzees is surely caused by things other than
religion and the same was likely the case for Neanderthals—access to food and reproductive resources or competition for status are just a few possible motivations.

Demographic, ecological, and cultural factors all play roles in increasing the probability of violence. Relatively large populations of young men, rapid expansions of urban populations, differential population growth between ethnic and religious groups, a strong reliance on agriculture or pastoralism, and a high valuation of honor and revenge are just a short list of phenomena that are both correlated with and well-argued as causes of human violence. The point is that the causes of collective violence are many, and to take the stance that religion somehow lies at the heart of it all—or is even a primary cause—is shaky at best and untenable at worst.

In step with and citing Harris, Richard Dawkins writes of the 2005 London bombers, "Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people." In this statement Dawkins circles a key empirical question. Is religious faith truly the only thing that could have motivated these bombers? What about power? Personal glory? Freedom? Democracy? Money? Betrayal? Sex? Control of one's turf? Revenge? Even Osama bin Laden's reading recommendation of William Blum's *Rogue States* suggests there is more to his motives than merely or even primarily religion. In fact, such "utter madness" manifests itself quite regularly without the help of religious faith. Dawkins lists the Tamil Tigers and kamikazes as examples of secular motives of making "the world safe for [their] own version of extremism," noting that contrary to patriotism, "religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation" and open questioning.9 Dawkins's implied claim is that secular extremism is not religion and his explicit claim is that religious faith decreases the probability of engaging in "rational calculation," arguably circular in and of itself.

On the other hand, Sam Harris claims that characterizing the Tamil Tigers as secular "is misleading. While the motivations of the Tigers are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus, who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death." Here, Harris suggests the Tigers' Hinduism increases the likelihood that they will engage in suicide terror. He also details the history of martyr worship there to steer our attention once again toward the obvious correlation between religion and violence. While stated as facts, these two variables can (and should) be properly framed as hypotheses: a history of martyr worship coupled with Hinduism (i.e. belief in improbable things) causes suicide terror. Controlling for the circularity of martyr worship and martyrdom, we're left with "improbable beliefs" playing a causal role in suicide bombing.10

**Other Causes of Violence**

Perhaps surprisingly, religion gives us little purchase when it comes to explaining suicide terrorism. Some violence perpetrator groups are very religious, others are not. Religious differences between attackers and victims, however, do explain some of the variation in the use of suicide attacks.12 This lends support to the idea that religion finds its greatest use in strengthening in-group/out-group identities—as do race, birthplace, ethnicity, language, and so on. Religion is just another arrow in the quiver of those who masterfully manipulate others into doing irrational things.

Ordinary people are moved quite regularly to do atrocious things for equally (if not more so) absurd and secular reasons. This is not inconsistent
with the claim that religion causes violence. However, if there are conditions under which most people engage in violence and it is demonstrated that religion shows no significantly different effects from a control condition, then we have little reason to conclude that religion is more likely to cause violence. The question, of course, is how to locate a sufficient control sample. Even when individuals know for a fact that their experience is a simulation, people will engage in violent behavior. The Stanford Prison Experiment, Jane Elliot’s informal “Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes” experiment (with both children and adults), and Milgram’s classic obedience-to-authority shock experiments are cases in point: all of us—regardless of religion—have in us the potential to engage in atrocious acts when under the same conditions as we find religious violence. Considering the effects of supervision, leadership, or authority, if religious concepts had been used as appeals or ways to differentiate populations, violence may have very well occurred much faster or with more intensity.

Religion played a role in the horrendous acts at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Prison, but the causal pathway was potentially reversed; American soldiers tortured Muslims in a way that was very obviously inspired by their beliefs about Islam. State-sanctioned eugenics programs such as the forced sterilization of American Indian women were also effectively secular in their rationale. Children and adults alike are particularly adept in creating maximally ludicrous ways to isolate each other simply by finding a feature of the target they can exploit, and using it to further demonstrate why the target of ridicule deserves a lower status. Religious affiliation is conveniently pre-packaged and typically correlated with class and race. Imagine if Anglo-Americans in Texas complained that “those” Catholics were taking all of their jobs and adding an extra burden to the state. It’s clearly an ineffective strategy now, although it worked in the 1800s with the Irish. If we were all one race and one religion, perhaps those with hitchhiker’s thumbs or connected earlobes would be targeted. We excel in finding ways to justify the subjugation of others, just as we do extremely well in demonstrating and justifying our own unreasonableness. Evidence suggests that if conditions are right people will find ways to violate others. If religious concepts can play a role, they likely will, but they may not be the cause. The determination to engage in violence may pre-exist.

From Emile Durkheim to David Sloan Wilson, researchers of religion have observed yet another remarkable feature of religion, and that is its “secular utility.” Regardless of whether it is conscious or not, religious beliefs and rituals regularly converge around very practical concerns. Whether the most significant events in the life history of an individual or coordinating access to valuable resources, or motivating people to organize against a colonial power, religion is—at least in traditional societies—inextricably linked to all social life and may increase in significance during time of organizational need. And evidence strongly suggests that the various components of religious traditions change to accommodate the needs of people, suggesting that contrary to our immediate intuitions and emphasis on the rigidity of dogmatic religious leaders, religion is remarkably flexible. So are individuals’ rationalizations for doing unreasonable things. Notice too, that people do not need to consciously represent the functions of their religion in order to reap the practical benefits of participating in it. If those practical benefits of participation were provided more effectively or less expensively by other institutions, religious participation would likely dwindle.

**Socioecological Factors and Violence**

Drawing from a number of empirical studies, evolutionary anthropologist Scott Atran illustrates there are many practical factors involved in religious violence in the case of suicide bombing, concluding that “both psychosocial (unattached males in supportive religious and peer groups) and socioecological factors (small cells organized under charismatic leadership) shape the causal network of interconnected representations, emotions, and behaviors that are broadly characteristic of contemporary suicide bombing.” In other words, under the right conditions, individuals will engage in destructive behavior. When matched against these other conditions, even if the presence of religious motivations did affect the likelihood of engaging in violence, it would play a minimal role.

Compare this to the mafia and other criminal organizations. The mafia’s initiation rites are shrouded in religious symbolism, but their crimes are economically motivated. The Blanquist appeals of the anarchist—“Ni dieu, ni maitre!” (“Neither god nor master”)—are actually anti-theist and anti-statist appeals. All share the similar internal features. Appeals to atheism or gods are not demonstrations of causation or even probability of causation. This again does not support the claim that religion causes violence. Brian Barber and the Adolescents
and Political Violence Project (APVP) have demonstrated that there are many factors at work that affect individuals' willingness to participate in violence. Bosnian Muslims, for instance, are less inclined to engage in violence than Palestinian Muslims. As it turns out, it is the nature of the conflicts that play a significant role and not religion. For instance, Palestinian children regularly personally witness the Israeli Defense Force's public humiliation of their own and each others' fathers, whereas 90% of Bosnian Muslim adolescents report never having personally seen such humiliation. The fact that Bosnian children see their conflict as distant from themselves even though the "rate of [a Palestinian adolescent] having a family member killed in the conflict was approximately half that of the Bosnian experience." This evidence suggests that if anything, violence causes religion to become part of one's perceived essential identity and this leads to more violence, arguably the reverse of the claim under question.

Religion as Rationalization

The idea that certain forms of any religion cause violence still requires support beyond simply the correlations provided by those making such claims. When we look at the evidence—with control groups as in the case of the APVP's work—we find little if any reason to conclude that any essential feature of religion(s) plays any real role in causing violence or oppression. There may indeed be something particular to Christianity that caused the insidious acts mentioned in the introduction of this article, but without any evidence as to the causal force of this tradition, we're left with a correlation and depending on what it is we're counting, not a very good one at that. The only things that we can say are particular to this or that religion are the beliefs, which of course are internally inconsistent between members.

Nevertheless, is it possible that a completely secular society would have also committed genocide against the indigenous people of this hemisphere? It's likely they would have. Unless the cost of circumnavigation was borne exclusively for exploration in the pursuit of knowledge, things would have been in all probability not that radically different. The practical, "secular utility" of exploration was gold, spices, and control of trade routes even though it was done in the name of God and royalty. And the atheistic-ish Soviet Union assassinated monks and shamans throughout Siberia not because these leaders were religious, but because of the influence they had over their constituents, a classic and effective tactic for social control. The allegedly enlightened British Anglicans said the Catholic Gaels of Scotland were "lost" to their priests' influence, so that "every attempt to reform them would fail," and saw "Roman Catholicism and progress of any kind [as] mutually incompatible because of the alleged superstition and aversion to change inherent in that faith." After the Battle of Culloden, tartans were banned. These were not acts inspired by people who thought their beliefs were the "right ones"; they were an attempt to abolish any sense or indication of cohesion in the subordinate group for the benefit of empire. Religion was simply used as another means to amplify difference.

Richard Dawkins argues that we have no reason to believe or bother with claims that Hitler's alleged or Stalin's real lack of faith (i.e. different models of the world) caused their atrocities. "What matters is not whether Hitler or Stalin were atheists, but whether atheism systematically influences people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does." When considered together, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris' demonstrations of the so-called secular states' religious roots and/or connections pose serious problems for the tu quoque arguments typically posed by individuals defending religion. Religious belief undoubtedly has a high correlation with violence. Yet, we are also likely to find correlations just as high if not higher with bipedality, music, parents who love their children, etc.; there is not, nor has there ever been any-known non-religious human society nor any society free from violence. Both—given the right circumstances—seem to be natural parts of the human experience. This, of course, makes them neither acceptable nor inevitable. Considering religion's track record with regard to truth, reflection, consideration of unorthodox and/or far more reasonable ideas, its perpetual unwillingness to have its ideas empirically tested, its demands for the non-religious to respect it as a system of truth statements (yet retreat to "faith" once put to even a mild test), it certainly seems intuitive that such a system would cause aggression. Likewise, it's just as easy to claim that intolerance, ignorance, and the inability to reflect also cause violence. While they certainly make violence easier to accomplish with the right support, they are the conditions which, when present increase the chances of violence. We must also point out a possible ascertainment bias in the attribution of violence to religion. It may be that people predisposed to religious belief are accordingly less
tolerant of out-groups and more likely to act violently toward them.

If religion plays a significant causal role in anything, it is maximizing and maintaining in-group cooperation and identity. But so do sports, political parties, gangs, music, universities, etc. Religion does provide two things beyond what these non-theistic groups can. First, religion can unify much bigger and more varied groups of people than sports teams and the like. Second, religion offers a vaguely defined supernatural agent whose presence is unverifiable and thus unchallengable. While this may increase the likelihood that someone will engage in costly behaviors, these costs are demonstrations of commitment and thus provide reliable indicators that one won’t betray the group. Beyond supernatural claims, there is nothing about religion that is not found elsewhere.

What Makes Religious Violence So Special?

It would be interesting to find a case of where two religious traditions came to physical blows over which had more truth value and actually used such terms in their fight. This is essentially the argument being made when someone suggests that “they fought over religion.” They certainly wouldn’t fight over who has more empirical support. Were the imperial benefits reaped from the Crusades a mere convenient consequence of a religious war or the “real” motivation? When President McKinley claimed that God told him that “there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them,” this was an appeal to other Christians inasmuch as it was a way to rationalize his participation in the slaughtering of Filipinos. Regardless of whether or not George W. Bush believes God instructed him to invade Iraq, the National Defense Council Foundation—a think tank that he, while governor of Texas, characterized as “a warrior for freedom [with a] relentless drive to work for the betterment of all mankind”—makes it remarkably clear that control of oil reserves is the reason the United States has been involved in the Middle East for so long.

In state societies, there is a concentration of decision-making power “at the top” of most institutions, including religious organizations. Religious leaders certainly do not suffer skeptics lightly and with good reason; an active, persistent requirement of evidence and sound reason in any context is a nuisance to those who wish to maintain their own influence by appealing to tradition. Political leaders do much the same. Religious leaders in traditional societies are notoriously competitive over both material and ideological resources using magic and other supernatural claims to propel their status. However, such ideas do not necessarily become doctrine, but are associated with their performers. Christians don’t worship Jesus’ alleged walking on water, they use it as “evidence” of his divinity. Allegiance to religious leaders comes with its benefits as well. In such cases, it is not even dogma that is the root of the problem; it is the utter lack of active participation in the establishment of tradition. Top-down decision-making in any institution or social organization is a matter of efficiency; real democracy is notoriously slow because individuals have a direct influence on their destinies.

In their 2009 article in Skeptic (Vol. 15, No. 2), Robert Kurzban and Peter DeScioli detail a compelling case for the evolutionary reasons behind religious organizations’ desire for so much control, along with our willingness to buy into it. Sosis, et al. found a positive correlation between the brutality of male religious rituals and warfare frequency; rates of violent conflict co-occur with disfiguring rituals (e.g., scarification, tattooing, etc.). Secular examples abound as well, ranging from tattoos of one’s fraternity or gang to carving the name of one’s favorite band onto an arm. Warfare requires significant coordination, cooperation, and obedience, and it appears that costly religious rituals are one way in which groups increase male solidarity to maximize and maintain such bonds. Indeed, Ginges, et al. found that religious attendance predicted out-group hostility and support for suicide terrorism, not religious belief. Contrarily, their commitment hypothesis accurately predicted that “any relationship between religion and support for suicide attacks is a by-product of the positive effect of collective religious ritual on coalitional commitment and, thus, that attendance in collective religious activities… positively predict[s] support for suicide attacks.”

Steadman and Palmer make a compelling case that the witch hunts were not because of religion, but rather, “to intimidate a category of people who actually threaten the social relationships (particularly the social hierarchy) of the killers.” Sosis and Bressler found that religious organizations with costly rituals last longer than those without or secular organizations.

These results suggest that religion may facilitate social bonds that are necessary for engagement and success in war. They do not, however, demonstrate that religion causes war. Likewise, there is
significant evidence that commitment to supernatural agents functions to inhibit self-interested behavior, and thus in turn contribute to the evolution and persistence of human cooperation at least among in-group members. 34 Does this mean that religion causes prosocial behavior? No, it suggests that components of religion facilitate and serve to maintain cooperative behavior. Remarkably, many rituals originally done “for” spirits—from firewalking to making donations at sacred places—are presently rationalized in secular terms with appeals to tradition (i.e., “our ancestors did this and we want to keep up the tradition”) rather than supernatural agents.

Like any tool, religion can be used for ends of all kinds. It is maximally effective at organizing and mobilizing collective action but has little success when it comes to explaining the way the universe operates. There are plenty of compelling arguments why religion should have as little influence on our lives as possible, but the idea that it causes violence has yet to be ranked among them. 3

REFERENCES

11. The historical rationale can be used to support all sorts of currently secular behaviors abominable, benevolent, and inconsequential alike. Depending on where we draw the line, everything can be historically connected to religion. Mendelian genetics is but one of many traditions that would be considered a religious tradition by this rationale.
18. Revitalization movements such as cargo cults are textbook examples of how religious concepts are useful in rallying people together against an oppressive regime.
27. See their “Hidden Costs of Oil” reports at http://ndcf.org. Former National Review columnist Ann Coulter notes: “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punitious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. And this is war.” http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter.shtml. Accessed January 26, 2010.