

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Can religion really help us become better people?



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Why is it that for some people, religion leads to violence, while for others it leads to love?

Can science help us understand the difference?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, addressed this in his book, "Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence." For Sacks, the problem doesn't come from religion but from human tribalism, and he points to the science of evolution for understanding. We evolve by the passing of DNA from parents to children, but we survive in groups that are in competition with other groups. Our group identity begins with family and kin groups and then tribes.

As our communities grow into cities and nations, religion often provides the narrative for larger group identity. Religions thus become the identifying "markers" that represent these groups that are often in competition and conflict with other groups. It is not the religion or the theology, but the very nature of human groups that can lead to tribal competition and conflict.

While religious narrative and history record some of this conflict, they also call for us to strive to do good, to love our neighbor and to seek a better way of life. Through role models, commandments and examples, they urge us to be more virtuous in character.

Recent Interfaith Insights have looked at the question of "The Character Gap: How Good Are We?" That is the title of a book by Professor Christian Miller, our Grand Dialogue speaker this Saturday. In the last section of his book, he examines various strategies for dealing with the character gap and ways we might improve our character. The last chapter addresses the issue of "Improving our Characters with Divine Assistance."

Miller cites various scientific studies that seem to support the positive connection between religious practice and positive behavior.

Sociologists report domestic violence is 60 percent higher among males who do not attend church, compared to those who attend at least once per week. Similar results are reported regarding violence committed by women. Another study "linked religious attendance with reductions in the rate of forty-three different crimes."

Religious participation is also correlated with educational success in high school, and is related to higher parental education expectations, successful degree completion and even "advanced math course credits." Miller reports on a study using church attendance and the link to staying on track in educational pursuits, "and this link was especially pronounced in neighborhoods with high poverty rates."

His chapter also discusses relationships between religious participation and self-reported life satisfaction, reduced stress and personal happiness. Charity is also highly correlated with religious practice, and not only just to religious causes but to other

## IF YOU GO

### Grand Dialogue Conference

**What:** "The Character Gap and How We Can Become Better"

**When:** 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Loosemore Auditorium, DeVos Center, Grand Valley State University Pew Campus, 401 W. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

**More information and free registration:**  
interfaithunderstanding.org

causes as well. For example, "religious people were far more likely to donate blood than secularists ... and to express empathy for less fortunate people."

While Miller refers to the "literally hundreds of studies that make similar connections," he is careful to point out that such correlation results do not necessarily equal causation. He writes, "We do not know what is causing what — perhaps it is the people who already are low on criminal behavior, high on making donations, low on health problems, and so forth who gravitate toward religion."

He does give his own opinion, however: "I would be shocked if religious practices didn't have some causal impact on these behaviors. And the other direction too — I would be shocked if the behaviors didn't impact the religious practices as well. I see the causal arrow going both directions."

Miller also addresses the issue of the harm caused by religious believers throughout history as well as in some communities today. He asks pointedly, "How has religion helped to shape the characters of ISIS members for the better? How did it improve the moral character during the Inquisition, the Crusades or the Salem witch trials?"

He states that Christians today have to "acknowledge this sad fact" that is also true for every other world religion.

"They all have shameful moments in their histories. But when it comes to committing atrocities, secular worldviews do not seem to have any better track record."

Miller reviews the 45 million killed by Mao and the 20 million by Stalin, both atheist regimes, and concludes that atheists should join religious believers in condemning all forms of violence against humanity.

Miller will be discussing these ideas Saturday in his keynote presentation, "How Good Are We? The Character Gap and How We Can Become Better." In the afternoon, there will be breakout sessions led by people from area universities and colleges. There is no charge for attending this event. We hope to see you there.

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