

Religion Hurts, Why religions do harm as well as good by John Bowker, a book review

This is a beautifully written attractive hardback published by SPCK London 2018.

Bowker talks about what religion is and what it means and says it is difficult but he says religions have what is best described as family resemblances. If religion is doing harm, then a diagnosis of how it is doing it is obstructed by the lack of clarity surrounding the meaning of religion. Surely then the Nazis which carried a lot of religious family resemblances were acting in a religious fashion if not actually forming a religion. Something that is trying to be religion but is not is showing religion has a bad side. With the Nazis, the notion that the Jews were demonic and deserving liquidation has a family resemblance with the Christian idea demons as in evil spirits surround us and need the war treatment. If demons and angels do not have bodies that does not mean they are only fighting a metaphorical war. Its real. Christianity is violence.

The title of the book is interesting for it denies that religion can say it is just about good and refuse to take responsibility for the bad. Whatever religion means it does not mean something that is just good. That means you don't need religion to be good or bad or both. It means that all thought systems and communities are as good or bad as each other. It means that a religion by seeking to stand out and monopolise good works is being bad. It's being cynical. Liberals who oppose dictation are really just up to something. They just want to be gods to you.

To say a religion harms is to say it is manmade for only God can make a truly good religion meaning the fault is with anybody that is not in line with it. If it is human it will do harm and you never know what lows it will stoop to in the morning. The claim that Christianity is not a religion but is Jesus who is God's sinless perfect son is thus by default harmful and unacceptable.

The author decides that paradoxically religion is both good and bad and extremely good and extremely bad. "The paradox of religion, that religions are such bad news (when they are) because they are such good news." If religion is about extremes in the way nothing else is then that is a worry. Why does it have to be so extreme? And extreme good balanced with extreme evil or even the threat of extreme evil is useless. Better to be more moderate and do more good than bad. If you are like that then there is no need for religion. The extreme element would be a hint of some psychological disorder. The author has as good as defined religion as extremism! The good then is actually evil if the leaning towards extremism is behind it! Religion depends on pushing forward examples of its extreme good in order to silence those who see through its facade. They don't want to come across as callous evil cynics.

He is firm, "religions have been and still are involved in many of the most difficult and apparently insoluble conflicts around the world." He is clear concerning terrorism that saying, "violence of this kind is not caused by religions but only by the perversion and corruption of religions" is false.

Fanatics will always exchange one form of fanaticism for another one. It is like there is a hole there that does not care what fills it as long as it is a belief that goes too far. That is why we have examples in history of fanatics doing good obsessively and benefiting many and then converting then to some belief system that wants innocents hurt. Extremely good religion then is paradoxically bad!

He seems to think that religion is an alternative to seeing us as some type of machine. But when we don't know what a spirit is and cannot prove what it would be if it existed what if we are spirit machines? Bringing in spirits does not get you away from reductionism, the seeing of us as just as clockwork. If free will is something that cannot be explained by nature or material things that does not mean spirit forces are not programming it. So nothing can show you have real free will.

Interestingly he warns that using Occam's' Razor to make explanations as simple as possible assumes that nature is simple in the first place. Some make that error yes but the fact remains that making something as simple as it can be can still leave you with something complicated. Occam's does not call nature or whatever it comes from simple. It merely asks that you avoid too many explanations for something. Use what is needed. In fact it is those who assume that God is a simple explanation for all things, religion says he is spirit and spirit is simple, who are condemned by proper use of the Razor.

He goes on to reject the Astonishing Hypothesis. This is that because all your feelings and loves and joys and choices can be explained in reductionist fashion as molecules and nerve cells at work that means nothing more is needed. So God's and magic and souls are out. You could say that that reductionism is all we need so if there is anything else it does not matter.

He writes that to assume, "that claimed religious constraints are always absurd and wrong makes it impossible to understand what religions are." But if religion is absurd what would you expect?

He quotes Dagobert Runes in *The War against the Jew* page 82. "No group or nation or alliance of nations in all known history has ever perpetrated on a hapless minority such sadistic atrocities over so long a time as the Christians have on the Jews. Not one denomination or another, but all did, and especially those of the Catholic faith." In the light of how Jesus said by your fruits you know them you would wonder what is going on.

The book says that Darwin did not like the phrase natural selection. It points out that the notion has turned into a justification for aggression in politics and business and economics to name a few things. Darwin preferred "natural preservation". The idea is that a battle against rivals cannot be as important as preserving your own social group.

I would suggest that the two phrases are different ways of saying the same thing. You cannot preserve your social group and genes without being ready to destroy or incapacitate enemies. War is about trying to preserve those you perceive as your own. In fact the wording natural preservation is more manipulative and dangerous than natural selection which is simply being blunt and honest. Natural preservation is simply trying to give a sweeter impression of something that is anything but. You need blunt, you need reality. Blinded people trip.

The author thinks that natural preservation is the reason religion concentrates so much on family and sex and children. It is about gene preservation. I would call it a form of mild eugenics!

The book says that "genes do not control what any individual or group of people must do." What they do is put them in a state of preparedness. They can do it but don't have to. For LGBTQ this means you are made able to be LGBTQ but don't have to be. "Born this way" is called a cruel lie.

Richard Dawkins is criticised for his theory of the selfish gene. The error is that the gene which holds the DNA is thought just because it holds DNA to be about making sure bodies survive well enough to transmit DNA. The interesting thing about this logic is that the gene is selfish if there is a God. It depends on his intention. If it is just there it is just there. If there is intent then it is set up to organise competition and taking from the weak to live.

I dismiss the author's notion that it is the selfless gene we should talk about for genes do not have a self. Why can it be about neither self or non-self? The author says it is just very dull and boring and it is about just, "Transmit me". Wondering if genes have a self is as pointless as wondering if gemstones think about Christmas dinner.

Next we are told that these genes with no self lead to bodies that do have self and are able to sacrifice it altruistically and live for the good of others.

This talk of the selfless gene leads the author to the spurious notion that the selfless gene is the reason why we have religions that are about unselfishness.

[I would add to that to say religion is that natural and ingrained is accusing atheists of being abusers and threats! Surely we all agree that if religion is based on such a thing and even declares it that religion is dangerous and a potential threat to the life of the atheist and thus should be abandoned. If it is natural then we should keep trying to abandon it!].

The real reason for this bizarre logic is that if you believe we arise from genes and they are of extreme importance and make us who we are, it would be strange to say there is a God who wants us to be brethren but who has left genes to -

Act as if they are just there

Act as if it does not matter if we are selfish or not

Act as if we should be about ourselves to the exclusion of others

The book explains how the altruism in human nature leads to religion endorsing sacrifice. A helpful list is made.

Sacrifice can be a way of cleansing sin. Dealing with illness and ill fortune. Turning away the anger of the deity or an enemy. Saying thanks. Offering a deity something in the place of another for example offering a sacrifice of an animal for all life belongs to the deity anyway. [I wish to add this makes no sense. If the deity owns the animal's life then the animal does not need killing. It is killing and using worship as an excuse.] Having meals to unite people together in a community and that entails sacrifice.

He ends the list with "dealing with violence and anger through catharsis (defined, in part, by Aristotle in *Poetics* as leading through religious frenzy to healing and purgation), accepting death in order to give life to others." This one was worth quoting for it virtually says religion can be your punchbag. You unleash your hateful violent side and indulge it. Religion gives you an outlet instead of you attacking others and ending destroyed by them. He says sacrifice is one of the family

resemblances of religion.

He writes, "It is clearly possible to scan and map the parts of the brain that are engaged and active in those beliefs and behaviours that we call 'religious'." He thinks that this is not sufficient on its own to account for religious behaviour. But surely it suggests in some way that those who report no religious inclination are lying or sick?

His point is hard to make sense of. If we do spiritual things the brain will react. So the wording should be "It is clearly possible to scan and map the parts of the brain that are engaged and active in those beliefs and behaviours that we call 'SPIRITUAL'". There can be spiritual without religion but there cannot be religion without spiritual. His point has no real relevance to religion. And as spiritual is really a cloak for emotional experiences of a certain type spiritual is not the right word either but we will say no more.

The book says that religion speaks of how human nature has a transcendental part, something that is bigger than mere nature. "Religions speak of this characterized individuality in such terms as atman, nephesh, jiva or soul. These terms are not synonyms, and they demand much careful analysis if we are to understand what religions mean by them". If religions then cannot agree on what your spirit means then that means there are huge differences between the religions. All religions at heart are not the same at all.

Core religious values differ from religion to religion. As life is important, it follows that if a religion considers animals to belong to God, and remember Jesus said God loved animals, then it has a huge insurmountable difference with a religion that sacrifices animals. If a moral teaching is that you are evil if you hurt animals then what about religions that won't stun animals before killing them for food?

The book says that human rights are assumed to be true for we all have a state of nature, it is just the way we are. But this is vague which is why one party won't agree with the other about what we really are and what rights we need. Needing food and water and other things is not enough to show we all have a common human nature and are alike enough to apply the same rights to us all. There are other issues such as how we think and feel. It is obvious we should have liberty and happiness but that does not tell us much about how to go about providing them.

He rejects the notion that God is so different from us and transcendent that different religions with diverging views of God are differing in the detail but are reaching out to and getting the one God. This is really making God so vague that it can mean anything. It does not fit the Bible God's opposition to other views of deity. He writes, "One might conclude that religions are simply different roads leading to the same destination. But not all roads lead to the same destination simply by virtue of being roads." One God account may be true to the exclusion of others. I would add the notion of all religious people being on the same road is hypocrisy for they are not at the destination yet so how do you know who is going to get to the destination? If you are not at it already then you might never make it.

The lie that all religions are somehow the same is dangerous for it dismisses conflict between religion as a mistake when it is deeper than that and down to fundamental differences. It is going to lead to a dangerous optimism.

Religious texts deny that all religions are the same in the important things. The book says how Qur'an 14:1 is clear that the Qur'an is a book sent down from God to the prophet so that he may lead all people from darkness to light. In other words, Islam is the only truth. Everything else is darkness. If there is truth in other religions, they are dark even if it a lighter shade of darkness. You still need the light. Thus Christianity is darkness. That is an example of a religion that cannot be mocked by being told that it is basically the same as paganism and everything else.

The author warns that he wrote in 1985 that politicians cannot really know what they are talking about when they talk religion. That is very true and yet you see the media influenced by what politicians say about religion when they should be talking to the real experts.

Every religion knows this will happen so if it does not see its grave responsibility and engages in gimmicks such as trying to use baptism and schools to recruit that is not being an example of caution and wisdom.

I wish the book had this point in it from the excellent work by the former bishop of Edinburgh.

"When religion enters a quarrel it adds a toxic ingredient to the mix that is not always present in other conflicts. Humans are prone to violence anyway, but if they can persuade themselves they are doing it in obedience to God it removes any chance of mercy and moderation from the conflict" page 229, A Little History of Religion by Richard Holloway. I would add that they think God is persuading them and that is the problem. The notion that God put the thought and feeling you must fight in you is one side of it. The notion that God spiritually inspires you by somehow communicating with you is the other.

I am impressed about the courage and honesty of this book in relation to religious violence.

Violence does not just appear but emerges from something else. The corruption that leads to violence is rooted in faith in God. One lack is how this is not explored. It answers the question of why Monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism are so combustible and tensions between them are so strong.

People say they love God and God humbles them. They claim to be trying to do something about pride. Part of you know that you are investing God with attributes you want him to have to suit yourself. Even if there is a God, it is really the one you create in your head that is your God. Obviously, you are superior to this God in your head. God is idea and the idea is yours. You are better than any idea you have and you know it.

God is not God to you no matter how fair or loving he is unless you judge him worthy to be called fair and loving. This is about your values. You are being superior to God by deciding he is worth your love and devotion. You are living "your truth" though you know fine well that truth is no democracy and does not care in the slightest what you want to think. This is not about humility but power and pride. Humility often is shown off so it is just a form of pride.

Another fatal problem is that if God makes all then you should forgive those who hurt you for he is the one really in control. If you trust God then you will forgive the enemy. But the fact is that this thought is moral bullying. One bullying teaching is that you are doing the enemy wrong by not forgiving. The other is that you MUST forgive for God says so. Nobody has the right to make it a duty for you to forgive. If you owe God anything you do not owe him that. He has no right to say the evil person is his beloved child so you must forgive for his sake. This duty is brutalising those who have been abused as children. No God, no duty. Simple. Religion wants you to forgive so IT can look good. It simply cannot look good without lying that it is your duty.

If God wants to impose such a duty he has to prove his existence. It is a matter so serious that only proof will do. There is no proof. Worse, there is no proof of the type of God of mercy Jesus preached.

Finally, I recommend Religion Hurts hugely despite the fact that as you can see there is much room for development in its ideas and deliberations.

Submitted to Amazon December 2020