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## On Religion

Oryna Kharchenko

Since religion has such an enormous impact on the world, and so many followers, most people would agree that it is an almost completely positive thing. Most of us know someone who has had a hard time, and religion helped her to move on. However, can religion be seen as a negative thing? The answer to that is also easily “yes.” One needn’t look far to see the chasm between different belief systems. With events like 9/11 still fresh in our memory, religion has justified a gargantuan amount of violence, and post-violence distrust. The question is, does religion improve human culture, or would we be better off without it?

One of the main things that sets us apart from animals is the fact that we are naturally inclined to question our existence and the existence of everything around us. We see something, and we don’t take it for granted. We want answers for how it got there. If we can’t find any, we don’t allow ourselves to stay in the unknown for long. We think of some explanation that we feel is logical and familiar, and share it with others. If nobody has a better idea, everyone is likely to follow the first one, or the one that seems most comforting. Even if the idea is illogical, it provides answers, and having answers is always better than not having them.

Possibly the best example of the previously stated idea is our approach to death. We humans naturally fear the unknown, preferring to stay with ideas that are familiar to us. Death is not simply some unknown thing; it is *the* unknown thing. While we like to make the unknown known by getting more information, there is no way to do that with death. Because of this, religion takes the lead. Since we know much about life and not anything at all about its opposite, many decide to believe in an afterlife. We do not have any concrete

proof, or even hints, that would suggest the existence of one, and yet many people believe firmly. This is because, when something is uncertain, we cling to hope, to what we want to believe.

There is an old saying, “If you worry, you suffer twice.” In this aspect, trust in the afterlife is a good thing. Since death is something we do not experience until the very end, living in fear of it is horrible. Studies have revealed that, unsurprisingly, religious people tend to be more confident in what they do. With confidence on their side, they are more inclined to act freely, not second-guessing everything they do. In ways, this leads to a happier life in which more can be accomplished. And yet, putting one’s trust into the unknown is not always a good thing.

Think of the Medieval Period, when religion was bright and new, and its followers very extreme and passionate. Rather than vetting the truth in a court or other proceeding, matters were decided by getting the accused to place her hand in boiling water and observe the results. If the injury healed as normal, the judge would declare that, “God says that the accused was innocent.” If the hand got infected, then “God proclaimed her guilty.” Is this a good effect of religion, or way of judgment? I think not.

This is not the only negative attribute of blind trust. Instead of taking extreme measures, believers can sometimes do the opposite and *not* act due to the fact that they think they do not need to. A person who firmly believes she has a strong connection with God and that God will protect her from everything is likely to have a weaker self-preservation drive than someone who thinks that she is on her own. It is very common that, whenever someone hears about another’s troubles, the hearer will simply pray for help to come and do nothing else. When someone constantly asks someone else for help and does not actually provide the help they can themselves, they are not

acting very kindly. This situation is made even less desirable when the third party, the one that is being asked for aid, is not someone that can be seen or heard. While it is true that seemingly unexplained miracles do sometimes happen, there are definitely more examples where the problem does not solve itself.

However, as said before, not only bad things come from religion. For many people, the ideas of an afterlife and the presence of an all-powerful god give comfort in times of need. Those who believe that everything happens for a reason are more likely to be accepting of the many troubles of life and have a more optimistic outlook. They may also be more curious to know the reason, leading them to evaluate life more, and have a deeper connection to daily happenings. One of the things I personally find to be the most pleasant aspects of religion is the idea that you are never alone. We all have bad days – times when nobody seems to understand us or accept us for who we are, when we never seem to fit in, when those particularly close to us turn on us and discourage us, when we just want somebody, *anybody*, to understand. When we feel that way, the thought that there is a being – maybe not here with us, but somewhere far, far away, that we do not know the appearance of and have never spoken to, but who loves us very much even when nobody else does – is very powerful indeed. This thought, though it may seem small at first, can be enough to give one the mental strength to move on through hard times and not be too caught up in her sorrows.

Religion is also effective at regulating human behavior. Every religion includes a list of rules that its believers are expected to follow, and often promises harsh punishments for disobeying. The concept of Hell is a great example of this. While everyone knows that life is rather short, it is widely believed that death is forever. Therefore, when it is widely believed that a punishment will follow one into death, people tend to be much more inclined to behave themselves. Nobody wants to suffer forever. The idea of Heaven has a similar effect. If one does follow the rules and is kind in life, then she receives a generous reward – eternal peace and joy.

While religion is an effective check on human behavior, I personally find it kind of sad that we need it. It shows how humans tend to be blindly obedient instead of making choices for themselves. Wouldn't the world be a much better place if we were kind not because some abstract

figure told us to, but because we saw it as the best way? Shouldn't we be good for ourselves and each other, and not for someone we've never seen? It is unfortunate that fear is such a necessary force to control humans.

If there were no punishments for wrongdoing, then there is no doubt that the rate of damage we would cause would be monumental. Yes, there are truly kind people in the world. However, everyone is flawed to a greater or lesser degree, and sadly, people with more flaws are more common. Out of all species on the planet, it is reasonable to think that humans are the most hateful. When in possession of great power, we often search for an excuse to use that power. Unfortunately, when the power is in the form of weaponry, and the *excuse* is religion, nothing happens but death, destruction, mistrust, and fear. There are many instances in which this was the case. Extremists will study official religious writing to see who their religion dislikes, and take their anger out on them. This is absolutely inexcusable. If religion is meant to tell us to be kind and good, then it certainly should not be used to justify such actions.

There is another side to this dilemma that has to be considered. What would the world be like if religion simply did not exist? The early periods of human society would have been very different. Religious rituals were a crucial part of medieval life, so the lack of them would have had a huge impact. Advances in science would likely have been made earlier. Rather than waging crusades and other wars in the name of religion, people would fight for something else. Holidays such as Christmas and Easter would not exist. Instead of telling children that if they are kind, they will go to Heaven, parents would tell children to be kind because they are human.

Overall, whether or not religion is a good thing highly depends on the person who believes in it. Most people are fairly calm and apply religion to their lives correctly. They follow the prescribed rules, participate in spiritual rituals, and generally live and let live. For this reason, abolishing religion completely would not solve too many problems. After all, what is so wrong in believing that this world was created by somebody? Is there a problem with thinking that a higher figure exists somewhere? Of course not. On the other hand, when put into the wrong hands, religion can spark anything ranging from heated arguments to mass destruction. However, some humans are just bad people who spread hate. If religion is not the

thing that justifies that hate, something else will be.

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## Why are States so Red and Blue?

Ryan Choi

In the article, “Why are States so Red and Blue?”, Steven Pinker, a psychology professor at Harvard University, contemplates the reasons for the contrasting political viewpoints in America. Pinker suggests that the colors of the states – red being Republican/Conservative and blue being Democrat/Liberal – are determined well before election season. For Pinker, this is the consequence of the right-wing left-wing system. The ideologies of people in each state derive from the differences in their origins. He describes conservatives as those who are locked into imaginary boundaries and limited in moral epistemology. Liberals, on the other hand, seek to create a utopian society by demanding better social, religious, and sexual rights.

I agree that the current political split in the US has to do with historical and regional differences. In my view, however, the split in the US has a more concrete origin than that suggested by Pinker. It all started with slavery. Once slavery became an established part of the US economy, it divided the US into two different political/regional ideologies – the abolitionist North and the pro-slavery South. This split is deeply engrained in the fabric of America. It survived the Civil War – as evidenced by Jim Crow and the fight for civil rights – and persists to this very day. Look at any political map and one can see that most of the southern states are red and most of the northern states are blue.

There is another factor that Pinker fails to consider. States are actually politically divided into three different types: liberal, conservative, and swing. Swing states – Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida, just to name a few – are the bellwether for the political climate in the US. To use a gaming reference, blue and red states are pre-set status – no matter what you do they stay the same. Swing states, on the other hand, are potential statuses that can assume any value. What, then, is the political and economic history of swing states? Where do they fall in the set of abolitionist/pro-slavery, utopian/barbarian dichotomies? In these questions is where the political divide in the US can be fully analyzed. Ultimately,

Pinker makes a fair point. The US is certainly divided into regions of blue and red. However, there are certain nuances in history and politics that can only be fully considered by accounting for the political and cultural shifts occurring in the swing states.

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## Termination of the Unborn

Marii Komiya

With social issues such as poverty and sexual assault prominent in the world today, abortion has been a controversial topic universally. Abortion is a solution to many women of all ages when put under circumstances of being raped or accidentally becoming pregnant. In addition, in some cases, “what ifs” have led to the termination of the developing fetus. These so-called “what ifs” are when parents are worried about the baby possibly being handicapped due to exposure to X-rays, smoking, alcohol or drugs consumed by the parents. However, if individuals are so afraid of the possible handicaps, then maybe they should have not thought about having a baby in the first place. With countless reasons for abortion to occur, it leads us to questions such as the following: If abortion is the only option, is it truly ethical to abort the innocent life of an unborn? I would like to explore this topic through medical, philosophical, ethical, and religious points of view. When do human rights attach to the unborn? When, if ever, should a woman’s right to choose be prioritized?

When is an embryo considered a human? According to the New Oxford Dictionary, *human* is defined as “relating to or characteristic of humankind.” However, depending on the background and/or knowledge that each person possesses, the meaning of the word *human* could alter. Thus, according to some, being classified as human requires human-like characteristics. On the other hand, some interpret *human* as *human being*. Hence, many may argue that to be human is to either be “a man, woman, or child of the species *Homo Sapiens*, distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech, and upright stance.” In science, an embryo is only considered *human* once it has a working nervous system. There is no single concrete solution that fully establishes whether or when an embryo or fetus can be considered human. An *embryo*, as defined in the New Oxford Dictionary is “an unborn or unhatched offspring

in the process of development, in particular a human offspring during the period from approximately the second to the eighth week after fertilization,” a definition that recognizes the embryo as human as it elucidates it by affirming that it is of “human offspring”. This is very similar to the definition of *fetus*: “an unborn offspring of a mammal, in particular an unborn human baby more than eight weeks after conception” (*Oxford*).

The embryo begins its journey in the second week after fertilization and evolves at around week five. According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, week five is when all of the baby’s vital system and structures such as the brain, spinal cord, and heart begins to progress. By weeks six and seven, the arms and legs start to grow and the baby’s brain is divided into five different areas. The eyes and ears begin to take shape and the baby’s heart continues to develop, now beating at a regular rhythm, with blood pumping through the main vessel. At week eight, the baby’s hands and feet begin to form as the arms and legs extend. The baby’s brain continues to grow and the lungs start to form. This is the period in which the embryo turns into a fetus. From week eight onwards, the fetus progresses with more human-like characteristics. Another factor to be mentioned is that at around week 6, the fetus becomes capable of feeling pain. Genevieve Plaster details this in her February 2015 article on [lifenews.com](http://lifenews.com):

Pain receptors appear around the mouth 4 to 5 weeks post-fertilization, followed by the development of nerve fibers, which carry stimuli to the brain. Around six weeks post-fertilization, the unborn child first responds to touch. By 18 weeks post-fertilization, pain receptors have appeared throughout the body.

This developmental track supports the argument that unborn children are no different from human beings outside of the womb. Both born and unborn humans are made of human tissues and organs and are capable of breathing, eating, sleeping, feeling, touching, and growing. Thus, the only existing barrier between the born and the unborn is the appearance.

The next question to consider is whether the unborn should be given the same rights as other humans. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article One, states:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Does Article I apply to the unborn? Human life begins when the fertilized egg begins to develop into a separate and unique being. The unborn are indeed alive like any other human. Therefore, the rights in Article 1 should apply. The “right to life” has two components: the right not to be killed unjustly and the right to be provided with everything needed to live a sustainable life. Ergo, it would not be legitimate to terminate the life of the unborn, even if a disability or other defect is detected. No one is perfect. On this side of the womb, there are many individuals who are disabled, all of whom are guaranteed the rights of Article 1. Yes, the unborn lack the ability to communicate with fully developed humans, but it is not a flaw. They are still in the process of growing into a fully functional human. Every human that is currently alive and strolling through the streets was once a fetus. Thus, the unborn should be granted the same human rights as those of us who have already been born.

Given that the unborn should have the same rights as the rest of us, whose rights should be prioritized, the rights of the unborn or the mother? In this world, it is not uncommon for a woman to be pregnant due to rape or by accident. Placed under these circumstances, many women opt for abortion. According to the Guttmacher Institute, roughly 56 million abortions took place each year worldwide between 2010 and 2014. Yet, if the unborn are seen as equal to other humans, the rights of the unborn should be equal to the mother’s, particularly in cases of accidental pregnancy. Given that the unborn is not able to convey its true feelings while the mother is capable of doing so, the unborn are at a disadvantage. With this factor taken into consideration, the mother’s rights should not be prioritized in cases in which the woman is pregnant by accident or because she is not ready for a baby.

Prioritizing the mother’s rights in cases of unplanned pregnancies is logically inconsistent as well. On one hand, a pregnant woman who endangers the life of her unborn child through substance or other abuse may be taken to custody for taking these reckless actions, suggesting that the unborn life matters. On the other hand, if the child is not planned or wished for, his/her life is unwor-

thy and thus subject to termination through abortion.

However, should the mother's rights be prioritized in cases of rape? Pregnancy by rape is an entirely different issue, as the woman was impregnated by force. Whose rights should be prioritized in this case? How does the availability of adoption affect the analysis?

What motivates the various opinions about abortion? Many abortion opponents cite religious beliefs as the primary reason for being against abortion. Some of the major religions – Buddhism, Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism – have similar standpoints regarding the issue. Each of these religions view abortion as an act of murder. However, most religions agree that if the abortion is necessary to save the mother's life, then the deed is permissible. On the other hand, experts in the field of medicine do not have a clear stance regarding the issue. Most physicians are pro-abortion when asked about how a person should confront the matter, but they personally do not wish to carry out abortions. In response to the question of whether abortion should remain legal, 69% of those surveyed answered "yes." Tellingly, however, 21% of those surveyed said they would counsel their own patients against abortion, and 75% said they would refer the patient to another doctor or clinic. From a philosophical point of view, the debate on abortion can be observed in two ways: pro-choice and pro-life. Again, very as in the medical community, there is no clear consensus. Conclusions seem to depend primarily on which point of view is taken – the mother's or the unborn's – and on ethical and moral considerations.

In sum, is it morally ethical to kill the unborn? Personally, I believe that it is not ethical. No matter how small or underdeveloped they are, the unborn are human with the same qualities as the rest of us. They do not have the capability of expressing their feelings or thoughts. We fully developed humans do not have the right to end the lives of the unborn without their permission. Abortion, in a way, is an abuse of power by fully developed humans against the innocent unborn. These unborn children are our hope in the next generation. To conclude, it is morally and ethically incorrect to kill any being that possess living features without their consent. Abortion is just another form of homicide.

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## **In Re: Religion**

Kimika Arai

*It is among the things in the world that should be questioned. For it brings happiness but also heartbreak. For it creates unity but also a division.*

Since the dawn of civilization, religion has existed alongside humanity to explain the unexplainable. Religion is the bright star in the dark night sky that teaches us how to love, how to forgive, and how to unite. It is the light at the end of the tunnel. It is the flower in a deserted island. But what should we think of religion now if it is what drives people to fight, to kill innocent civilians? Is religion still “good” for the sense of calm, safety, and security it provides us individually? Or should it finally be held accountable for all the bloodshed, tears, and heart-crumbing images we see on the news everyday?

On November 26th, 2016, Religion was sued by a class of individuals who were victimized by genocides and religious wars throughout history. It was settled that this conflict would be taken to a jury trial on December 14th, 2016.

Given the fact that this trial would be heavily focused on Religion, it was mutually agreed that witness testimony would be made under the following affirmations as opposed to the standard oath: “I solemnly and sincerely declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

**Plaintiff’s attorney (PA):** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. My name is Abaigeal Cohen and I am the attorney for this case. On November 26, 2016, Religion was sued for crimes against humanity and for all the damage - both physical and psychological - it caused to humans and societies over a span of centuries. Genocides, mass-murder, and war are all unacceptable acts against humanity, and today we urge a verdict of guilty. As you deliberate, two pieces of evidence should guide you – the First Sudanese Civil War and the Religious war in the Central African Republic. The defendant may argue that Religion is usually not the primary cause of war, that Religion did not kill as many people as the wars fought for economic gain did. However, our case will show that the number of deaths is not the underlying issue here. It is the fact that Religion – something that should bring people together – is

forcing people to take sides, making people believe killing the “enemies” is a morally justified action. I, myself, have not been raised in a religious family, and I only know of Religion through friends, books, and tragic news all over social media. Looking at the photos of burnt towns and crying children as a result of religious wars. I cannot help but think that Religion is creating more harm than good. Throughout this trial, you will be presented with evidence that leads to no other conclusion but a guilty verdict.

**Defendant’s attorney (DA):** Good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. My name is Abraham St. James, and I stand here today to stop all of us from making a terrible mistake, a terrible mistake that could be the end of all cooperative societies. Religion, though I do agree that it has its ups and its downs, is something that exists purely for the good of humanity. It unites people; it provided civilizations with morals and explanations to the unexplainable. How could something so humane possibly be guilty of a “crime against humanity”? Today I am here to fight for Religion, for the best thing that happened to civilizations. Without it we won’t be the same, not for the better but for the worse. It is scary to think about society without faith. We may feel alone and isolated without a sense of belonging because Religion is the one thing on this earth that unites us all. For that, I ask you to return with a verdict of innocent. Thank you.

**PA:** The First Sudanese Civil war was one of the deadliest religious wars ever fought in history. The only reason for the outbreak of war was the ethnic and religious differences between the Muslims and the Christians. This conflict was a long one – lasting for roughly sixteen years from 1955. Over a span of a little less than two decades, a total of half a million deaths were reported among both soldiers and innocent civilians. Now, let’s use this moment to think about one fundamental question. Do we now live in a world where it is acceptable to murder others for the sake of religion and one’s beliefs? Another conflict to consider is the civil war in the Central African Republic, which is going on right now as we speak. Though this war began with citizen dissatisfaction with the sitting president, it shifted gears when Muslim and Christian populations began shooting each other. This religious intolerance is now responsible for burnt villages, millions of refugees, and the deaths of thousands of civilians. Please

feel free to enlighten me if any of this sounds the least bit humane to you.

Surely, we can agree that religious wars are unacceptable in civilized society. If we learned anything from our ancestors, it is to embrace our differences, not to separate, segregate, and persecute each other like we did in the Holocaust or Christian persecutions in Rome. However, looking at the wars that are fought for religious purposes, it seems like we are just repeating all the mistakes we committed in the past. Religion, as great as you are, definitely have numerous apologies to make.

**DA:** Religion, from the very beginning, helped people develop the societies we take for granted today. Politically, religious tenants created the basis of laws that we follow today. Before science, there was Religion. For thousands of years, Religion answered the questions no one was able to provide an explanation for. Furthermore, Religion solved the problem of feeling alone in a new city by providing people a sense of belonging. Religious rituals and gatherings served to help people come together, make friends, and avoid loneliness. Religion was always and continues to be the glue that connected us to different people, to nature, and to society.

This last point is one that we cannot ignore. Religion allows us to connect with each other during times of hardship. I lived in a few different countries growing up, and I cannot explain how hard it is to survive in a place where everything – landscape, language, food, and more – is not what you are used to. When loneliness strikes, it is not at all rare for people to turn to Religion and its heartwarming communities. Without Religion, what would happen to hundreds of people who are left alone in the dark?

**PA's Closing Statement:** Looking at just two of the many religious wars that were fought, that are being fought, and that will be fought in the future, it is apparent that Religion does more harm than good. Those wars, whether solely based on Religion or not, produced far more casualties than what the world would ever deem acceptable. It does not matter if Religion did good things that revolutionized the societies we live in today. It is still one of the largest reasons why people are dying.

**DA's Closing Statement:** Religion will always be the spiritual power humans crave from time to

time, and it is a terrible idea to let go of something that has connected humans since the dawn of civilizations. The moment Religion is charged guilty, and civilians are forced to let go of their beliefs, this world would become a chaotic mess. Our society would not function without the security, sense of belonging, and calm that Religion provides us. As our only companion since the beginning of human civilization, it is not something we could let go of with one trial. God would not allow it.

War is one interesting, devastating, and unacceptable event that occurred thousands of times over the course of our existence. It is often contradictory as well, as there are several wars fought solely for the purpose of peace and justice. But whatever the reason, whatever the aim, there is not a single justified reason why innocent people have to die. It is simply not fair, and though several things are unfair in life, it should never be to the point where you can no longer live. However, it is important to acknowledge and praise the power of Religion, and how it saved us time after time. Though we may never know for sure, Religion might have been what helped human beings rise up from catastrophes like natural disasters, deadly epidemics, and even the ravages of war.

**Jury Foreman:** I am deeply sorry, but unfortunately we were unable to reach a verdict. Please understand how terribly difficult it is to judge something that is as good as it is bad. So it seems like the debates on Religion will continue. Religion is a cure and a poison, and after all this time we still cannot let go. Well isn't this bittersweet.

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