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Why Religion Still Matters

Religion played a role in the suicide attacks on September 11. It is hard to deny this fact, nor is it surprising. People motivated by deep religious convictions have often turned to violence. Remember the Crusades? Remember the American Civil War? Yes, it was the biblical defense of slavery proffered by southern clergy that helped convince the South to defend its way of life with a kind of holy war.

So, if religion has such a lousy track record in reducing hate and violence, why remain involved in organized religion? Another question I am hearing since September 11 is why we should commit ourselves to a particular religious tradition when doing so seems to divide humanity ever further? These are fair questions. If religion is producing hateful acts, and balkanizing us into enemy camps, should we not just go to the source of the problem and eliminate religion? Well, even though that would free up some of my weekends, I'm not sure that is the answer.

Many people would suggest that we move away from religious traditions to a more general sense of spirituality. While this may work for some, it raises a question. Where do you find this spirituality that has no connection to tradition?

We act out of traditions whether we define them as such or not. If you are a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or an adherent of some other organized religion you are hopefully clear about what that tradition teaches you. Even if you do not belong to a specific faith community, however, you still act out of tradition. You base your beliefs and actions on some guiding set of principles, even if they are principles you made up last week on your way to work.

Traditions that are shaped by communities, such as organized religions, give us the collective wisdom of mentors past and present. Whether it is Jesus or Mohammed, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Ghandi, these traditions have the guiding force of great teachers and followers. There is a well to draw from that is deeper than our own imaginations and machinations. Does that mean religions never fail us? Hardly. Part of any tradition is deciding what has value and what does not. But just because our religious traditions have chinks in them does not mean we should abandon them.

Since September 11 I have been grateful to be a part of a religious community with a specific tradition. As a Christian seeking guidance for how to feel and respond

to the horror, I was instantly reminded of Jesus' words, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." I was angry and had a taste for revenge, but my tradition redirected my inclination for vengeance toward a perspective with a greater possibility for healing and hope.

But what about this issue of competing religious traditions? Doesn't belonging to a specific faith community mean you believe your way to God is superior to all other paths? For some people that is certainly the case, but I do not understand why such feelings of superiority have to dominate our religious communities. We all belong to families we love and serve, but only the most sheltered of us would actually believe our family is better than everyone else's family. I love my church and faith community. My tradition shapes me in all manner of ways. That does not mean that my church is inherently better than all other religious communities in our world.

After September 11 it is imperative for us to remember the healthy aspects of our religious traditions. It is equally important that we celebrate the ties we have to all people of faith. Religion still matters because it can heal us and it can bind us to one another.

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