We're living through the "most peaceful era" in human history — with one big exception

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An AK-47 (Credit: Wikipedia)

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Studies demonstrate the world is becoming less violent, and that human warfare is on the decline. There is one aspect of the human existence, however, that continues to ignite humans to commit violence and atrocities against fellow humans. A major new study published by the Pew Research Center shows that religious hostilities reached a 6-year high in 2012.

Dr. Steven Pinker, Pulitzer prize-winning author and Harvard psychology professor, writes, "Today we may be living in the most peaceful era in our species' existence." He acknowledges: "In a century that began with 9/11, Iraq, and Darfur, the claim that we are living in an unusually peaceful time may strike you as somewhere between hallucinatory and obscene." Pinker points out, wars make headlines, but there are fewer conflicts today, and wars don't kill as many people as they did in the Middle Ages, for instance. Also, global rates of violent crime have plummeted in the last few decades. Pinker notes that the reason for these advances are complex but certainly the rise of education, and a growing willingness to put ourselves in the shoes of others has played its part.

Religiosity, however, continues to play its part in promoting in-group out-group thinking, which casts the difference between people in terms of eternal rewards and punishments. Sam Harris, author of Letter to a Christian Nation, observes, "Faith inspires violence in two ways. First, people often kill other human beings because they believe the creator of the universe wants them to do it…Second, far greater numbers of people fall into conflict with one another because they define their moral community on the basis of their religious affiliation: Muslims side with Muslims, Protestants with Protestants, Catholics with Catholics."

According to the Pew Research Center, a third (33%) of the 198 countries and territories included in the study had high religious hostilities in 2012, up from 29% in 2011 and 20% as of mid-2007. Notably, religious hostilities increased in every major region of the world except the Americas, with the most dramatic increases felt in areas still reeling from the effects of the 2010-11 political uprisings known as the Arab Spring.

The study demonstrates there has been a sizable increase in the share of countries with high or very high levels of social hostilities involving religion. "Incidents of abuse targeting religious minorities were reported in 47% of countries in 2012, up from 38% in 2011, and 24% in the baseline year of the study (2007)." Pew cites several illustrations of religious minorities being attacked by the perpetrators of the majority faith. In Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, for example, monks attacked Muslim and Christian places of worship in April 2012. Several worshippers were killed in an attack on a Coptic Orthodox Church in Libya, which according to the U.S. State Department was the first attack on a church in Libya since the 2011 revolution.

"One of the common things we see in that group of countries is sectarian conflict," said Brian J. Grim, senior researcher at Pew Research. "In Pakistan, even though minority religious groups like Christians face hostility, there's also inter-Muslim conflict between Sunnis, Shias and Ahmadi Muslims."

The study finds rises in religious motivated threats of violence, harassment of women over religious dress, mob

violence related to religion, sectarian violence, and religion-related terrorist violence. One in five countries experience religious motivated terrorism in 2013, which is up from one in ten countries in 2007. Examples cited include the killings of a rabbi and three Jewish children by an Islamist extremist at a Jewish school in Toulouse, France. The study also mentions the August 2012 shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin that left six worshipers dead and three others wounded. While the 2013 al-Shabab attack on a Nairobi shopping mall fell outside of the date range studied in the analysis, the Islamic motivated terrorist attack highlights a steady increase of religion-related terrorism in Kenya, which ignited when more than a dozen Christians were killed by Islamists near the Kenya-Somalia border in November 2012.

Wherever you look in the world, there continues to be religious motivated violence. From the fighting that has plagued Palestine for the past six decades (Jews vs. Muslims), to the dispute over Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus). Also, there's Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians), Philippines (Muslims vs. Christians), Iraq (Sunni Muslims vs. Shiite), Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus), and the Caucasus region (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims).

While most of the above examples have basis in disputes over land and political control, it's religious belief that shapes the terms and the willingness of one party to negotiate with the other. War, by definition, suggests an all-or nothing conflict to determine a dispute against an enemy one believes in hell-bent on our destruction, and therefore cannot be placated via diplomatic means. In other words, war and violence becomes an excuse for not finding compromise. Religion provides the excuse to be violent.

Harris writes, "Scripture itself remains a perpetual engine of extremism: because, while He may be many things, the God of the Bible and the Qur'an is not a moderate. Reading scripture more closely, one does not find reasons to be a proper religious lunatic – to fear the fires of hell, to despise non-believers, to persecute homosexuals etc. Of course, anyone can cherry pick scripture and find reasons to love his neighbor and to turn the other cheek. But the more fully a person grants credence to these books, the more he will be convinced that infidels, heretics, and apostates deserve to be smashed to atoms in God's loving machinery of justice."

Charles Kimball's book "When Religion Becomes Evil" begins with the following claim: "It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history." It's easy for American Christendom to dismiss this and studies that show increases in religious violence, for it's something that can be waved away as something that happens over "there" in those "crazy countries." But lest we forget that it is right wing American Christians that have helped shape Uganda's anti-gay laws, which carry life imprisonment for homosexual acts and the death penalty for repeat offenders.

The findings of the Pew Research Center's study confirm the importance of secularism, as one sees a strong connection between governments imposing religious beliefs, customs and norms on its citizens and the outbreak of sectarian violence. Let's hope America is listening.

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