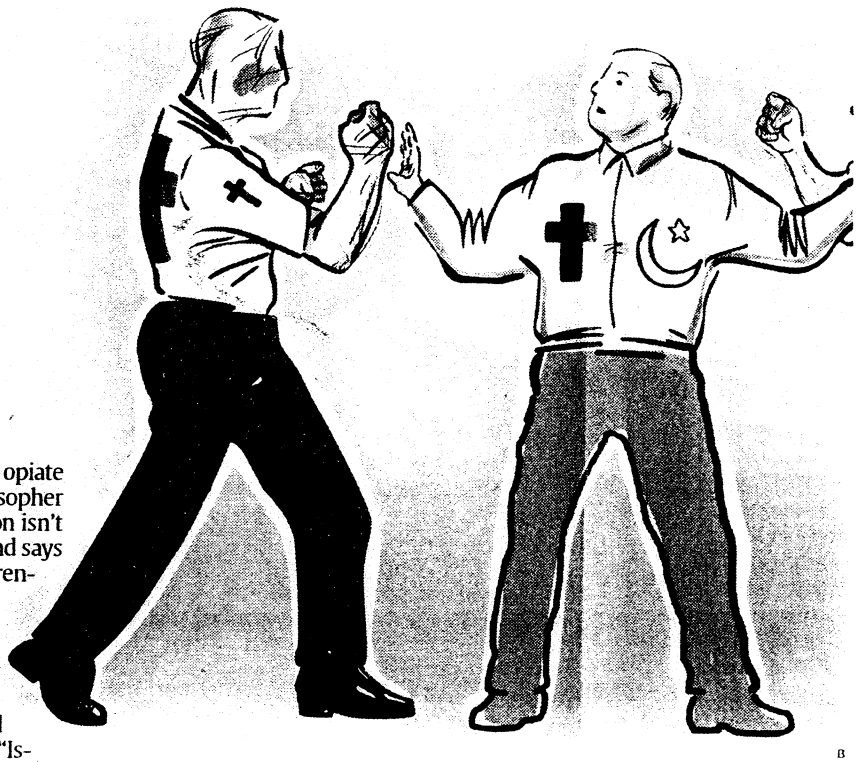
Religion can help *end*

Faith is sometimes the fuel that feeds conflict and spreads strife. History is a witness to this. But lest we forget, believers also can be the salve to bring people and religions back together.



By Tom Krattenmaker

Karl Marx famously called religion the opiate of the masses. My political philosopher friend says Marx was wrong. Religion isn't like heroin so much as *meth*, my friend says — something that can whip us into a jagged frenzy, put our teeth on edge, make us agitated, even violent.

The specter of violent religion certainly hangs over us in these times, especially when it comes to certain followers of the world's two dominant religions. Christian and Muslim conflict-mongers drone on against "Islamic terrorists" and "Christian infidels," respectively, while violence continues erupting in the name of Islam, and conservative Christian figures in America, like Pat Robertson and John Hagee, urge violent solutions to foreign policy problems. (Robertson, you'll recall, spoke favorably of assassinating Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and Hagee, the Texas mega-church minister of falling-out-with-John McCain fame, has repeatedly called for immediate military attacks against Iran.)

Yes, there appears to be considerable truth to the oft-heard claim that Christian-Muslim co-existence must be achieved lest our collective future turn out brief and brutal. Which is why it might appear outrageous to suggest, as I'm about to do, that religion may also be just the catalyst we need to steer us clear of the apparent collision course.

Religion — a solution to the problem of religiously motivated conflict and violence? Yes, actually. Because in their best traditions, the world's two dominant faiths do promote peace, both through their central teachings and the lessons-by-example taught every day by innumerable Muslims and Christians who take their scriptures seriously.

Plays for peace

The crux of the matter might have been articulated best by Jon Stewart of the *Daily* Show, who once joked that religion was "a powerful healing force in a world torn apart — by religion." Regarding the first part of his joke, we could debate forever whether it's truly religion that causes "religious" violence, as opposed to bigotry, culture, politics and the like. But the "healing" part seems incontrovertible in view of recent evidence. Not that peace-waging is religion's exclusive province; secularists are among the leading agents of peaceful change in the world today. But seemingly everywhere one looks, agents of religion — even, shockingly, onetime supporters of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden — are making plays for peace.

Yes, even "jihadists" who once supported bin Laden and his destructively sinister ideology. New reports in *The New Republic* and *New Yorker* detail how some key figures in the rise of Islamist terrorism are defecting from al-Qaeda and its affiliates and rejecting the movement's violent methodology. In the words of one such defector — a man known as "Dr. Fadl" and credited with laying the intellectual foundation for al-Qaeda-style terrorism — Muslims "are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that."

It's hard to imagine a more head-turning example of religion righting the deadly wrongs of religion. But in scope and impact, the al-Qaeda defections are easily topped by the encouraging "A Common Word Between Us and You" initiative.

This olive branch to the Christian world comes from a collection of 138 Muslim scholars representing the major branches of Islam. Citing crucial teachings shared by the Koran and Bible (as in devotion to God and love of one's neighbor), the Muslim leaders invited Christendom to join them in in-

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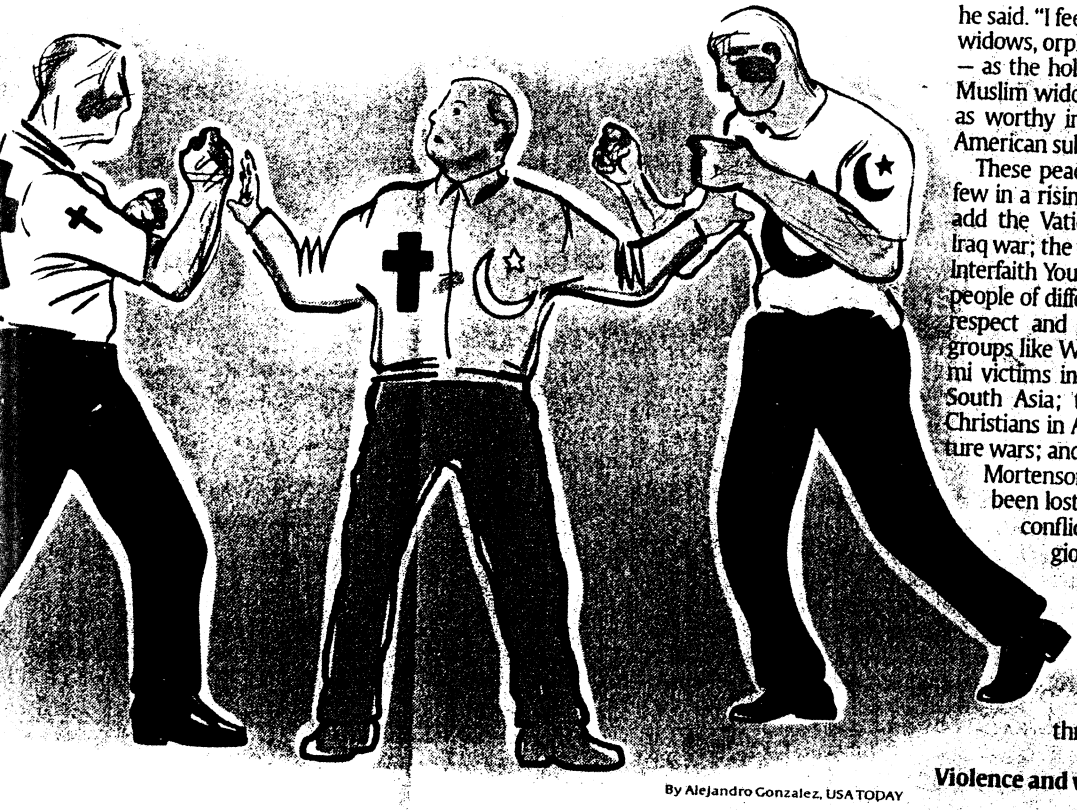

By Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

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terfaith dialogue. In this country, some high-profile conservative Christians rebuffed the peace offering, calling it unacceptable for its refusal to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus, but hundreds of other Christian leaders returned the hand of friendship via a published statement called "Loving God and Neighbor Together."

Starting the conversation

As the humanitarian Greg Mortenson conveys through the title of his best-selling book *Three Cups of Tea*, the sharing of food and beverage can be a great dialogue-starter. I recently had the privilege of drinking tea with Mortenson, the leader of an initiative that has built dozens of schools in impoverished mountain regions of the Muslim world. This is peace-making at its finest, not only because of the enlightening benefits of education but because Mortenson is showing what a difference it can make when American Christians, like him, venture to the Middle East with books rather than bombs.

"They will know you by your love," Mortenson told me, echoing a line from Jesus in the New Testament. He went on to explain the religious motivation behind his highly idealistic (and often dangerous) quest to build schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. "I feel that faith should be more about practice — about action, love and compassion — than about preaching or proselytizing," he said. "I feel our faith should be about helping the widows, orphans and refugees — the 'least of these' — as the holy books implore us to do." A starving Muslim widow in Darfur, Mortenson added, is just as worthy in the eyes of God as a church-going American suburbanite.

These peace-promoting cases in point are but a few in a rising sea of examples. To them we could add the Vatican's unwavering stance against the Iraq war; the work of groups like the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, which brings together young people of different faiths to promote inter-religious respect and understanding; efforts by Christian groups like World Vision to provide relief to tsunami victims in predominantly Muslim countries in South Asia; the growing number of evangelical Christians in America calling for a truce in the culture wars; and many, many more.

Mortenson points out something true that's been lost amid the decade's highly publicized conflicts over faith: The established religions have generally been a clarion for peace, not war. Don't forget that in 2002, after the 9/11 attacks and before the invasion of Iraq, Christian leaders from a broad swath of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches spoke out against the threatened invasion of Iraq.

Violence and world history

No, we cannot lightly dismiss the long history of religion marshaled for violent ends. In Christianity, there are plenty who emphasize not the peace-teaching in the Bible but the apocalyptic violence of the Book of Revelation and the Jesus who confronted the money-changers in the temple with a rough hand. There is history, too. As demonstrated by James Carroll's powerful and dark new documentary, *Constantine's Sword*, Christians over the centuries have too often wielded religion as a lethal weapon. Today that dubious distinction is most strongly associated with violent extremists from the Muslim world, who invoke Islam in terrorist strikes that have killed many thousands of innocents (in violation of crucial Koranic teachings). Judaism, too, has had its spasms of violence, as have other major faiths and sects.

Yet if skeptics are going to hold religion accountable for the atrocities committed under the banners of faith, so, too, must they credit religion for the unifying and uplifting deeds performed in its name. We cannot dismiss the countless acts of compassion and peace-making by devout believers — acts that are central to the teachings of the Bible, Koran and other holy books.

So how we will know religion in the final analysis? By its peace or by its violence? The scriptures have had their say. It's now up to the believers — through their words and works — to settle the account.

Tom Krattenmaker, who lives in Portland, Ore., specializes in religion in public life and is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors. He is working on