

Sometimes even good people do bad things



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

There's a saying that often gets passed around in secular circles: "With or without religion, good people will do good things and bad people will do bad things. But for good people to do bad things – that takes religion." As with many of these clever quips, we should give serious thought to what truth they may offer, while asking hard questions about what they may be leaving out. I happen to think the quote makes a good point, yet it misses the mark about the whole story of being human. Good people who believe in God clearly do bad things sometimes. But they aren't the only ones. So I suppose we have to ask what "good" and "bad" means here. Are

we always good or do good things? Of course not. And, it remains true, as I see it, that religious beliefs can cause good-hearted people to do wrong sometimes. But more must be said.

Religion can, and does, cause great harm in the world. Examples are myriad. However, it also makes sense to recognize, or admit, a good person can make a mistake in judgment, or a person of faith can forget to follow an ethical teaching of their own religion. They might mess up, then ask forgiveness or make amends. They may learn from their mistake and move on. There are many secular people who do bad things, too. They won't have a deity to turn to, but they can seek forgiveness from others and learn to do better. In other words, religion itself is not always the primary cause for a person to do something harmful, hurtful or "bad." Humanity may not be "bad-hearted," but we don't always get things right.

A believer may see something "bad" as "sin." A sinful act is done in disobedience to God and biblical instructions. Others who don't share those beliefs, may determine improper actions are just that, wrong actions, rather than a violation of traditional teachings. A nonbeliever doesn't think there is anyone above or over them, looking over their shoulder, but they still have a conscience. Perhaps that's one common denominator here: anyone with a conscience has a sense of good and bad, right and wrong. Call that morals or ethics (or instinct), anyone with a rational (and conscientious) mind has the ability to choose the best actions.

This raises the question of what to do when a religious person actually does wrong to another. The intent of the clever quip written above, is to put the blame on the religion, when there may be other reasons, maybe several reasons, the person is acting in a certain

way. I think most of the time, whether we have a personal religious belief or not, we have the ability, the common sense if you will, to know when something is good or bad, right or wrong.

So, it turns out, upon reflection, that the original quote passed around is insufficient – it's simply too simplistic to be meaningful, and maybe not helpful at all. In my mind, we have to get beyond the judgments tossed back and forth between the religious and the nonreligious. Blanket statements about "those and them" does no good to anyone. Some in the religious community may believe atheists or agnostics have no "moral compass," which makes them inclined to "bad" actions. As I once believed, if you don't believe in God and follow "His Word," you can never be good enough to please Him. That belief is not only unhelpful, but hurtful, and

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based on ignorance. Jesus once told someone, "No one is good except God" (Mark 10). Though he also said, "Every good tree bears good fruit" (Matthew 7), so I guess "goodness" is in our life's harvest.

The purpose of wrestling with platitudes from whichever angle of belief, is to ask ourselves if we're trying to score points against "the other side," to make "them" look "bad," or if we are merely passing along a clever meme because it sounds good. To my way of thinking, there are no "good people" or "bad people." A bad decision doesn't make a person bad. In my years as a jail chaplain, I spent many hours talking with incarcerated

people, men and women accused of criminal acts. Though many who broke the law were "broken" people themselves, I rarely met someone who didn't seem to have a conscience. I regularly heard inmates admit they made poor judgments that got them in trouble; they knew they were facing the consequences of "bad choices" and acutely felt their responsibility. These experiences underscore the fact that people I

encountered in jail were essentially good human beings, whether religious or nonreligious.

Maybe our own poor judgments deem people good or bad.

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