

Opinion: Why the decline in church attendance won't end here

By [Brian Broome](#)

Contributing columnist

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I remember sitting in the lunchroom back in high school when two girls began to argue and fight. It started with a sucker punch and then quickly escalated to hair pulling, kicking and body slams. The girls were fighting over a boy named Tony. But Tony was nowhere to be found. He didn't show up to break them apart or ease the situation.

He was just absent. Meanwhile, the two brawlers tried everything they could to hurt each other.

I didn't know Tony, but I do remember sitting there wondering where he was, if he cared or if he even knew the girls were drawing blood in his name. I remember thinking that someone should go and get him and tell him what was happening. But I also know that, wherever he was, this fight likely wasn't his fault, and that these two young women were responsible for their own behavior.

This is how I feel about the idea of God.

I was raised in a Christian household, and my family is still religious. But, at a certain point in my childhood, the whole thing stopped making sense to me. I couldn't work out why a loving God would let so many children suffer. The idea of eternal life seemed to be a way for people to skirt their fear of death or assuage the pain of grief. I noticed that the things people told me God wanted were, more often than not, things that they wanted as well.

I didn't give it up all at once. Like many people, I went on a spiritual quest. But, like some of those, I quit the hunt after a while.

I stopped looking for the meaning of life and instead decided to just live it.

I stopped looking for an afterlife and now just try to be a better person in this one.

Of course, I know many kind people who practice their religion in ways that make us hopeful — in ways that are open and loving. People who aim not to convert, but to comfort. Not to shame, but to lift up. Not to demonize, but to include. I find this a testament to who they are as people.

But I often think that faith in God can be just as self-serving as staring at yourself in a mirror. The way a religion is practiced too commonly reflects the person who is practicing it.

If you want to be rich, you can find a religion that tells you that's what God wants you to be. If you're a misogynist, you find a church that will reaffirm your misogyny. If you don't like our politics, or some of our political leaders, there's a pew with your name on it somewhere, maybe closer than you think. If you are a hateful person, there are preachers for that, too. I watch people cherry-pick their religious texts to find what they want and ignore the rest. It was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. who said that the most segregated hour in Christian America is 11 o'clock on Sunday morning.

We are not the only country where things work this way. For those who think it is a good idea to invade other countries, the battle cry will always be that God is on your side. Wars and atrocities have been committed in the name of religion throughout history. People fight over who's doing religion right and who's doing it wrong — or who are not doing it at all. Some religious leaders make no distinction between their role and that of their nation's political ambitions.

All this fighting over who is most righteous in this life — or righteous enough to live forever — causes more problems than it solves. Divides more than it unites. Antagonizes more than it comforts. If your religion is telling you who to marginalize, ostracize and hate, that's more than likely not your religion. That's just you.

Church attendance and membership have long been on the decline in America. My guess is that because many folks realize that fear is at the root of so much religious conviction, the proposition has become untenable. Those fears have led too many people of faith to police the way that others choose to live their lives.

The trend away from church will likely continue. Most of us have enough fear and bullying in our lives already.