

Spiritual, But Not Religious

sermon digest

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Isaiah 1:10-18; James 1:27

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In his address on the identity of God to the people of Athens, Paul observed among the numerous Greek images of deity the empty pedestal “to the unknown god.” His message to the Athenians was either a complement or an insult, depending on which translation of the Bible you choose to read. The seventeenth century King James translators viewed Paul’s speech as a condemnation of pagan religion, “I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.” Later translators softened the word *superstitious* to *religious* in the light of Paul’s intention to convince, not insult, the Athenians: “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” The Greek word, literally “reverence for divinity,” can mean *religious* or *superstitious*, depending on the context. As we were reminded in the sermon last week, Paul quoted the Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides to identify God: “in him we live and move and have our being.” So I agree with my wife that Paul must have seen some value even in pagan religion.

As we learn to speak Christian, how shall we speak of religion? I can remember when the media addressed all religious values in a positive light with little or no discrimination about the source. In some church circles we were certain that all religions other than Christian, or in my case Baptist, were false; but we tended to view religious people as superior to secular people. Somehow we agreed that a false religion was better than no religion at all. However, religion has come under scrutiny as not only a questionable social value but as a practice that has little or nothing to do with the reality of God. A common trend for our time is found in the statement of distinction, “I am spiritual, but not religious.” The statement usually indicates a personal belief in a higher power or spiritual reality without any connection to or commitment in a specific religious institution like a church.

Lillian Daniel is a pastor, popular speaker, and writer. Last September, she wrote “Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me,” a brief internet article about the clichéd spirituality of our time to explain “why I don’t go to church.” These folks are not always hostile to religious institutions, but they tend to see them as unnecessary, unneeded, and certainly uninteresting. Daniel characterizes this attitude with the *meism* that emerged in the 1970’s. The standing question about every aspect of life is “What’s in it for **ME**?” The world ought to revolve around *my* needs and *my* interests. Although the attitude is identified with Gen-X, people born between 1964 and 1978, it has invaded the thought of older and younger generations reacting to religious institutions.

Is religion the problem? The prevalence of religion in primitive as well as modern cultures is a fact of life, but the ubiquitous human practice of religion does not answer the basic question of value. Is religion evidence of the reality of God, or is it a human invention that is corrupting society? In a word, is religion a good or a bad thing? The proliferation of best-selling books by men touted as “The New Atheists” cite the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York by religious fanatics as absolute proof that religion is the root problem of humanity. As we rush to the defense of religion against the atheists, we sometimes overlook the problem of religion that has been the target of attack by religious people.

Christian theologian Alan Richardson (“Religion,” *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 288-9) declared, “This is hardly a biblical word at all.” He suggested that the entire Old Testament might be viewed as a treatise *against religion*. The Jews existed in the middle of a religious stew which constantly threatened to corrupt the unique faith which set them apart from their neighbors. The threat of religious pluralism helps to explain hostility toward gentiles, prohibition of marriage to foreigners, and the justification of genocide that makes most Christians squirm when they try to defend the Bible. The Roman world of the Christians was worse. The mix of religions traveled with armies and international commerce on new roads constructed by Roman taxes. Christians saw the religions as props on the stage for Roman military cruelty.

Karl Barth was convinced that all religion—even Christian religion—is a Tower of Babel, a human creation invented to penetrate the heavens to gain access and control of God. Like other serious Christians in the age of Hitler, Barth was disillusioned with the corruption of the state-run churches of Germany. His contemporary Dietrich Bonhoeffer looked away from the institutional church toward a day of “religionless Christianity.” The problem was a church that had substituted religion for God.

Theologians of the Hitler era recognized that religion can be and has been an institution protected by human greed. Throughout Christian history, the church has persecuted saints of God. Like all human institutions, religious institutions in every age have been guilty of exploiting the very human need which they claim to fulfill. Humans will always find some object of worship even if it is the mirror image of themselves. Institutional idolatry is always a threat to the worship of God.

A major theme of the Old Testament Prophets was the futility of ritual divorced from justice. Jewish worship always stood under the judgment of a holy God who demanded justice and mercy from the people. The ancient world which produced the Jewish witness to God was never lacking in religion, but a cursory reading of the Prophets reveals that religious institutions and rituals were never substitutes for the holiness of life and fidelity to God. The Book of Isaiah begins with a scathing condemnation of the Jewish religion of his time that focused on worship rituals of animal sacrifice, burning incense, the liturgical calendar, solemn assemblies, festivals, and prayers. Isaiah, like his spiritual brother Amos, sounds like a modern critic of the church—with one major exception: Isaiah is not consumed with *me* issues. Isaiah is concerned with integrity. If your worship is not integrated with your behavior, you have missed the boat. According to the Prophet, right religion should lead to political and social justice. James (1:27) reflects the Prophets in his criticism of the early church and his definition of “religion that is pure and undefiled before God.”

Theologian Paul Tillich struck a note of dissonance with some Christians when he demanded that Christianity is in perpetual need of the Jewish religion as a reminder of our need to resist idolatry. We tend to worship that which concerns us ultimately. Tillich insisted that God is above the images of god in our limited human imagination and certainly in our structured institutions of religion. Even our worship of God in the Christian religion, can become an idolatrous act of bowing before our idea of god rather than the God beyond our grasp or understanding.

So, what good is religion? The universal human presence of religion requires some explanation even from the New Atheists. Richard Dawkins is certain that religion can be “explained” by natural selection. (He means explained away.) What if the universal presence of religion reflects a vacuum at the center of the human soul that drives to be filled?

I recall our struggle with the meaning of words when we began the Forum on Religion and Science in 1997. Rufus Ritchie and Sam Hurst were the scientists who initiated the forum and they gravitated to the word *religion* as the best descriptive term for folks like us. I recall my discomfort with the word in a dialogue with one of our atheist friends. Remembering the problems with religion in history and in theology, I preferred to talk about our *faith*. But I gradually came around to the word *religion* with the realization that religious atrocities in history were no more a denial of the good of religion than the sins of humanity denies the good of people. Religion is not necessarily good, but the religions of humankind have tended to reflect the human good and to indicate our need of the transcendence of God. Karen Armstrong repented of her attack on religion in her early writings as she wrote her more recent book *The Case for God* in which she defended and justified the existence of religion as a human response to a transcendent reality in life.

When the cynic claims to be spiritual but not religious, I have to wonder about the product of his/her faith. Personal spirituality, in some sense of being vaguely open to the idea of another dimension, a higher power, an ultimate reality that we may name God, may avoid the problems of institutional idolatry; but it also loses touch with the community of faith that joins people together in the cause of justice and peace. Lillian Daniel judges, “There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.”

As a student of Christian historical theology and of all of the problems of religion reflected in church history, no one has to inform me of the human limits of religion and its contribution to some of the worst moments in all of human existence. But I have to ask, what has secularism produced that is better? What has atheism produced that is an improvement on religion? I have never forgotten a word from a friend when I was just entering the life of Christian ministry. I was youth director in a suburban Houston church the summer before beginning seminary. My pastor Peyton Moore commented one

day that any faith worth mentioning takes on the flesh of human life in the form of an institution. That is why we ended up with the church.

So Isaiah is not blind to the problems of religion and James is certainly aware of the self-centered greed that can take over the church, but for both of these prophets of God the proof is in the pudding. Real religion lifts up the folks at the bottom of the social pile, like orphans and widows. Real religion seeks justice, rescues the oppressed, defends orphans, and pleads for widows, to paraphrase Isaiah. Real religion in our time, reaches out to people of difference whether it is skin color, gender, sexual identity, or religious origin with the realization that we are all the children of the one God, all reflecting the very image of God in our being.