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WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT RELIGION

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By: Aaron Armstrong

While waiting for my plane to take off, I did something I rarely ever do: I struck up a conversation with my seat-mate. We covered the basics—family, hometown, final destinations—pretty quickly, but when I started talking about my job, he really opened up.

I work for a nonprofit organization that partners with local churches in some of the poorest countries in the world. One of the things we do is give kids a chance to [learn about Jesus](#) in a safe environment. Telling people about my job usually elicits one of two reactions. They either say, “That’s . . . nice,” and attempt to exit the conversation as quickly as possible, or they start talking about their own ideas and experiences with spirituality and faith.

This man was definitely the latter. He began telling me all about his life and family. He shared that he and his wife really wanted their daughter to believe in *something*, though they didn’t have any particular religious beliefs themselves.

As peculiar as this may seem, my seat-mate isn’t alone. In fact, a recent Gallup survey shows that although about three-quarters of respondents think religion as a whole is losing influence in America, that same number believe America would actually be better off if it were *more* religious.¹ Meanwhile, millennials—the globally connected generation of young adults now taking center stage—have been shown to have almost no interest in religion at all. They find it divisive and unnecessary, if they think about it at all. As one millennial put it, “Religion is just really low on my list of priorities.”²

What does this tell us? At the very least, it tells us there’s a great deal of confusion about the idea of religion and whether it’s good or bad. And this confusion isn’t limited to those who consider themselves nonreligious.

**THERE’S A GREAT DEAL OF
CONFUSION ABOUT THE IDEA OF
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You see, it’s become en vogue in North American Christian circles to put down religion. We publish books on the “end” of religion; we write blogs about why Christianity is superior to “religion.” We even make smash-hit YouTube videos about why it’s OK to [hate religion . . . as long as you love Jesus](#).³

While contemporary critiques of religion all have their own strengths and weaknesses, there seems to be a fact overlooked by many: the validity of the criticism really depends on what you mean by “[religion](#).” The way we understand anything about religion is entirely contingent upon what we mean when we use the word.

¹ Frank Newport, “Most Americans Say Religion Is Losing Influence in U.S.,” Gallup.com, accessed November 11, 2013, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/162803/americans-say-religion-losing-influence.aspx>.

² Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials*, (Nashville: B&H Books, 2010).

³ Jefferson Bethke, “Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus,” YouTube, accessed November 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>.

Religion in the Bible

Millions of people around the globe consider the Bible an authoritative guidebook on how to live a godly, righteous life. So how does the Bible understand “religion”? What does it say?

AT THE MOST BASIC LEVEL, A RELIGION IS A SET OF DEEPLY HELD PERSONAL OR INSTITUTIONAL BELIEFS OR PRINCIPLES.

The answer isn't as cut-and-dried as we might like to think. The Bible itself is neither wholly positive nor entirely negative about religion. After all, at the most basic level, a religion is a set of deeply held personal or institutional beliefs or principles. There's nothing wrong with that, in and of itself. In fact, by that definition, every human being on earth is *deeply* religious.

But the issue is not whether we have deeply held beliefs and practices—the issue is to whom those beliefs are devoted. To better understand this, let's turn to the book of Romans in the Bible.

A bit of context: the Apostle Paul opens this letter by sharing how he constantly gives thanks to God that the gospel is at work in the lives of the Christians in Rome. He wants to visit them and to strengthen their faith; in fact, he says he is eager to go and preach the gospel to them.⁴ He is not ashamed of the gospel, he tells them, “because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”⁵

Clearly Paul is passionate about the gospel, which leads him to write the most exhaustive theological treatise on the work of Christ found anywhere in the Bible. And he begins with the bad news about humanity:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.⁶

In these verses, Paul gives us a glimpse at the foundation of religion. And what he says is this: In all the world, fundamentally there are only two kinds of religions—true and untrue. One God loves and the other he hates. Let's unpack that a bit.

⁴ See *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, Romans 1:15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Romans 1:16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Romans 1:18–25.

All people—whether or not they acknowledge God—know there is a God, Paul says. How? Because he has revealed himself in his creation, in “what has been made.”⁷ If God has revealed himself in creation—if he can truly be known through the beauty and complexity of the earth—then, according to Paul, he must be given all the credit. When we witness the terrifying power and beauty of a thunderstorm, when we stand at the foot of a mountain and then gaze across a valley from that same mountain’s peak, when we feel the squeeze of a newborn baby’s hand on our finger for the first time . . . these experiences should make us stop and give thanks to the God who made them all possible.

And yet we know this is not always the case.

Worshipping Idols

The problem, Paul says, is that instead of honoring God and giving thanks to him, people began to worship “images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.”⁸ They looked at all the wondrous things in creation and said, “Zeus did it,” “Baal did it,” or (as is sometimes the case today) “it just happened,” instead of giving credit where credit is due. That, fundamentally, is the problem with religion that the Bible describes. Rather than acknowledge God, many people turn to alternative explanations. They exchange the truth about God for a lie.

This kind of religion is abhorred in the Bible. It is called *idolatry*, something we are repeatedly and emphatically warned against throughout the pages of Scripture.

The Ten Commandments begin with a warning from God against idolatry: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.”⁹

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When the Israelites turned from worshipping the true God to pursuing false ones such as Baal, God commanded Elijah to issue a challenge to Baal’s false prophets: both would offer a sacrifice to their deity; the god who sent down fire from the heavens would be shown to be the true God. If Baal answered with fire, then the people should worship Baal. If the Lord answered with fire, then they must worship the Lord.

So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made. At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., Romans 1:20.

⁸ Ibid., Romans 1:23.

⁹ Ibid., Exodus 20:2–5a.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1 Kings 18:26–29.

Although the prophets of Baal continued to “rave” and cry loudly and even cut themselves, their god did not answer. Their religion was futile. Worthless.

But the story continues:

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.” They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs[a] of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.” “Do it again,” he said, and they did it again. “Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench. At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.” Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

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As you read the Bible, you’ll see that its harshest language and most biting sarcasm are directed at false religion. The pursuit of false religion is described as prostitution, as whoring after idols.¹¹ God even had one of his prophets, Hosea, marry a prostitute, Gomer, to serve as a living illustration of how God saw his own relationship with his people: they continued to pursue other suitors, and their spiritual infidelity was an abomination.¹²

And then there are the words of Isaiah:

The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is used as fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, “Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.” From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, “Save me! You are my god!” . . . Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, “Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”¹³

¹¹ See *The Holy Bible*, Ezekiel 6:9, 16:25, 20:30.

¹² *Ibid.*, Hosea 1-3.

¹³ *The Holy Bible*, Isaiah 44:12-17, 20, emphasis added.

Jesus and Religion

And what about Jesus? Didn't he hate religion? You may have often heard this point used in discussions of Jesus' teachings and Christianity. However, despite what some say, the Bible doesn't claim that Jesus hates religion. It tells us that Jesus hates *false* religion.

Those making the argument that Jesus hated religion altogether most often point to the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees, a Jewish sect that emphasized the strict keeping of the Jewish Law. And it's certainly easy to see why. Jesus is arguably harsher with and more critical of the Pharisees than any other group of people—including extreme social outcasts such as prostitutes, the demon-possessed, and the tax collectors. In fact, Jesus even calls the Pharisees a variety of insulting names, from hypocrites¹⁴ to blind guides¹⁵ to snakes¹⁶ to a brood of vipers.¹⁷

**IT IS NOT RELIGION THAT IS
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But within that first insult—*hypocrites*—lies the key. A careful reading of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees reveals that it is not religion that is the problem; the problem is hypocrisy and its consequences. Take a look at what Jesus had to say about the matter:

“[The Pharisees] do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see . . . they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel . . . Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”¹⁸

Pretty intense. You can almost hear the anger in Jesus' voice at what was being done. In the case of the Pharisees, hypocrisy had been taken to an extreme degree—a degree that dishonored God and misled his people. Put simply, the Law had become an idol.

¹⁴ Ibid., Matthew 23:13.

¹⁵ Ibid., Matthew 23:16.

¹⁶ Ibid., Matthew 23:33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., Matthew 23:3-7, 23-24, 27-28.

Contemporary Idolatry

Today we may not all worship blocks of wood, iron, gold, or silver. But idolatry abounds, not only in the various religions of the world—including atheism—but more importantly in our hearts. None of us is truly nonreligious. The desires of our hearts are always in pursuit of something to serve, whether our intellect, our careers, or our families. We often place our energy and devotion in the pursuit of material goods or earthly success. At its most basic definition, idolatry is honoring or treating anything less than God as God. When this happens, even our focus on what can be a good thing—our marriage, our children, even our church—can cross the line into idolatry. Whatever concerns us the most is our God.

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In Western culture our greatest idol may be freedom from commitment. We want to be the masters of our own destiny, to be unfettered, free from anything that can take away from **our happiness**. Some people delay marriage and children, thinking they need to get their “fun” out of the way first. Others—including many conservative Christians—put these same things on a pedestal, making **marriage** the ultimate good and leaving single people feeling like second-class citizens.

That’s the power of idolatry. It’s a heart problem. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” the prophet Jeremiah asks.¹⁹ Our deceitful and deluded hearts will ultimately lead us astray; we cannot deliver ourselves.²⁰

Fortunately, there is more to say about religion than what is wrong with it. As much as the Bible condemns false worship, it also commends true religion. And in this we can find much hope.

True Religion

True religion can be summed up in the wise, unadorned words of Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”²¹ The book of James adds on to this with the only passage in which the word “religion” actually occurs: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”²²

True religion happens when **the gospel** takes root in a person’s heart. When that happens, desires change. Instead of trying to find satisfaction in gods who do not answer and things of this world, believers find contentment, joy, and peace in relationship with God—and his promise of eternal life. This is the essence of what is often called the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”²³

¹⁹ Ibid., Jeremiah 17:9.

²⁰ See *The Holy Bible*, Isaiah 44:20.

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, Micah 6:8.

²² Ibid., James 1:27.

²³ Ibid., Matthew 22:37.

And love for God leads to love for others. The second greatest commandment is simply to “love your neighbor as yourself.”²⁴ This love works itself out in our lives in a number of ways, not the least of which is in caring for the poor and pursuing what the Bible calls holiness—harkening back to the directive to be unpolluted by this world.

Love for God leads to tangible action. People who love the one true God will begin to see themselves as less important and will put the needs of others ahead of their own. They will freely sacrifice time, talent, energy, and money to care for those around them who need help, whether spiritually or materially. And they do it not because they feel a need to [earn God’s approval](#) or pay him back for what he has done in their lives, but simply because they *want* to; they feel compelled by their love for the Lord.

This is the essence of true religion.

The pursuit of true religion—a life lived out of thankfulness for what God has done for us in sending Jesus Christ to live perfectly, to die for our sins, and to rise from death to give us the promise of eternal life—brings glory and praise to God. A life lived in [relationship with God](#) is what we are called to pursue if we put our faith in Jesus Christ.

**TRUE RELIGION HAPPENS WHEN
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²⁴ Ibid., Matthew 22:39.

²⁵ Photo Credit: [Elee Vigil | Unsplash](#)