

Jesus and Religion

By Frank D. Macchia

My daughter, Desiree, recently showed me a youtube video entitled “Why I hate religion but Love Jesus” in order to garner a response. I teach theology at a Christian college, so it was natural for her to be curious about what I thought of it.

I watched it with great interest. It burns with passion and commitment. Line after line seeks to call the viewing audience to a shocking realization, namely, “religion” cannot save you. Just going to church or serving any other religious institution will not, in and of itself, grant a genuine experience of eternal life. In fact, religion can even be a barrier to salvation, granting people who seek to “play church” a false sense of security that masks a deeply-hidden sinfulness and an even deeper need for God. The poem supports this insight with allusions to a few biblical passages. The role of religion in “sprayin’ perfume on a casket” recalls Jesus’ rebuke of the religious leaders of his day that they were “like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27). The poem’s question as to whether the churches would let Christ in today recalls Jesus’ knocking on the door of the church of Laodicea asking to come in to dine with them (Revelation 3:20). “When religion says do, Jesus says done,” the poem says further, pointing to the cross as the place where atonement is accomplished for humanity at great cost to God. This finished work of Christ is indeed the place where religion as an assumed means of salvation shipwrecks and has to be laid aside as inadequate. Only the costly grace of God can give us life.

I can only but affirm the core of this message. How can I do otherwise? This is indeed a message that has been spoken in past generations (in a scholarly vein, for example, one can refer to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s call nearly sixty years ago for a “religionless Christianity” or, on a popular level, the little book I enjoyed reading many moons ago in college by Paul Little entitled, *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*). This message needs to be heard afresh today.

This is not to say that the poem is flawless (no form of human proclamation today is). The poem seems to assume that “religion” is *nothing more* than an effort to gain salvation by works, a cryptic form of human pride and self-righteousness. Of course, this is the dark side of religion, all religion, including that which is practiced in the church. But religion as a human search for God also has a positive side. In fact, Paul’s sermon in Athens recorded by Luke in Acts 17 has Paul noting in a positive vein that the Athenians were religious (v.22). Paul then notes further that God has guided the unique journeys of all peoples in the world “so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (v.27). According to Paul’s message, the inherent search for God that fuels religion was actually

inspired originally by God by creating us to live from the divine Spirit in a state of communion (Gen. 2:7) and has as its goal the true discovery of God's offer of grace in Christ. Of course, Acts 17 also slashes away at the presumption of religion that God can be grasped through human temples or shrines built by human hands (vv.24-25). Salvation comes only through the crucified and risen Christ (vv.30-31). Yet, the religious search for God in Acts 17 is still viewed as something potentially positive as well, granting humanity a thirst for God that the grace of God in Christ alone can quench. The author of the poem would have been most accurate had he qualified his speech to say as much, but, then again, had he done so, the poem would not have been quite as shocking or effective. So, we can forgive the one-sided rhetoric, and be inspired by it, even though we know that it needs to be qualified.

Qualifying it is important; lest we fool ourselves into thinking we can enjoy a "pure" form of faith free from anything that can be called "religion." If religion is a human search for God that takes institutional form, we cannot ever really live without it, nor would we want to. The question is, however, will we constantly seek with God's help to purge our religiosity of human pride and make it ever anew a joyous search by God's grace for life evermore abundant?

So, it is really the *pride of religion* and not necessarily religion itself that should be condemned. As the poem poignantly reminds us, we can discover the true power of the cross for our lives only when we lay aside our pretensions of righteous achievement and stature. Only then can we realize that we hold this treasure of grace in vessels of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7) and say with Martin Luther that the church meets every week as the "infirmary of the sick" in desperate need of receiving anew that healing grace without which we are surely lost.