

The End of Religion

HEBREWS 10:11-14, 19-25 (NRSV) *And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” ¹³and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ...¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

OK, class, get out pen and paper; we're going to have a "Pop Quiz." (Word on the street is that some of you may not have done your Christianity homework!) The quiz is one multiple-choice question. Listen carefully: Which of the following is NOT a religion:

- A. High Fiber Cereal
- B. The National Association of Scholars
- C. *The Wall Street Journal*
- D. The Christian Faith

Pick one. You got it right if you picked "D" The Christian Faith. So, you always thought Christianity was a religion? So did I. Then, 20 years ago, I ran across this "pop quiz" gimmick from Will Willimon, who was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University.¹

I dug through articles and blogs and books—academic essays, inspirational fluff, coffee shop wisdom... Trite clichés abound: "Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship." "I'm spiritual; but not religious." But, I found nothing on which to hang a solid basis for the idea that Christianity's not a religion. I've been coasting since then, concluding it's all semantics: Christianity is a religion. It's just word games.

And then, last Sunday at the Table I shared an off-the-cuff improvised idea. I almost stopped talking, to grab pen and paper and write it down before I forgot it (fortunately, it was recorded). I had no idea from where it came, but it was an "epiphany" moment; and all the stuff I'd read and heard—all the things I'd written—all the things upon which I'd meditated came together.

I remembered Robert Capon's definition of religion: "The attempt by human beings to establish a right relationship between themselves and something beyond themselves which they think to be of life-giving significance."²

It began in the primeval awareness of forces and events beyond human control,

¹ Will Willimon, ...

² Robert Capon, *Health, Money, and Love* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990) pp. 27ff.

and from the moment homo sapiens first stood and walked on two legs, our species has had difficulty dealing with things beyond our control. And so, efforts evolved intended to control the unknown beyond ourselves.

Earliest expressions were what we call "magic." Org, the cave man, trotting down a path, jiving to some silent rhythm in his head, and it started to rain. Next day, he tried it again: same rhythm, same jive; and, low and behold, it started to rain again. Voila! The rain dance!

Or Gronk, tribal shaman seemed to get results from certain incantations, blowing smoke, waving feathers... The beginnings of religion: human activity intended to control and manipulate forces previously thought to be beyond human control.

The dances and incantations change thru the millennia; fine tuned, adapted to *get it right*. But religion generally continues to follow that pattern: us, doing the right things, saying the right words in order to receive something in return. That pattern's not limited to things we associate with deity. It's a human attempt to get a handle on some obscure key to life, to plug in to some ambiguous source of power, to find some lock-step program that leads to happiness, or success, or self-esteem, or whatever it is that gives a person life—or at least the illusion of life. That's religion.

And, given that definition, I note that there's not much difference between religion and the policies and procedures of business, politics, marketing... It's a *quid pro quo* thing: do this; get that.

Willimon says religions have creeds—formulas that direct our thinking or actions and tune us in to the power—intellectual recipes which, *if we get them right* give us an edge over whatever it is outside ourself that will give us life.

Willimon continues: religions have cults—practices emerging out of the creeds. I don't walk and exercise for the fun of it. Nobody eats oat bran because it tastes good, for heaven's sake! We do it "for ourselves—and hope we *get it right*—for what we can get out from that something beyond ourselves—a lower cholesterol count, six-pack abs—whatever leads to eternal life, or at least an entry into 'Who's Who.'"

And religions have prescribed conduct which, *if we get it right* lands us in Nirvana, or Wall Street, or wherever we think life ought to land in order to be home free.

Creeds, cults, conduct. That's religion; and maybe you've picked up a pattern. It's all about *getting it right*. So, it's not difficult to see how the result of religion is fatigue—stress, anxiety, fear... all the dysfunctional conditions that result from trying to *get it right* and never quite being able to pull it off.

But see, here's the thing: in religion, the relationship to that "something beyond ourselves" which would give us life is always up to us. And no matter how much we watch what we eat or master portion control, or listen to the tapes, there's always someone on "Good Morning America" to tell us we got it all wrong.

Willimon says, "Religion is a one-way ticket to failure. The harder you try, the more conscientious you are, the more often you realize how you got it wrong."

And here's where things get a little—well—spooky for me. At the Table last Sunday that comment came into my mind—I hadn't planned it; in fact I never had put things together like this. But it came into my mind, and I said it:

"A table of sacrifice, but the sacrifice already has been made. The truth is, God said repeatedly through the prophets—Look in Jeremiah 7:22-23 ~ God said, "When I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. (They had gleaned those practices from the surrounding pagan cultures, you see.)²³ But this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you."

Look in Amos 5:21-24 ~ "I hate your burnt offerings; but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

That's how Jesus related to all humanity: in justice and love. And so, we take the bread and we remember Christ's body, broken on the cross, not as sacrifice, but as the ultimate expression of love. And we take the cup and we remember Christ's blood shed on the cross, not as sacrifice, but because he loved so much that he refused to recant when that love confronted and challenged the religious and political powers that be."

That's what I said at the Table last week. I didn't know then that today's Lectionary would include Hebrews 10, in which Christ *is not the sacrifice*; he's the priest, offering the sacrifice in the form, not of a lamb or a Bull, but in the form of just and righteous relationships that flowed from a heart of pure, perfect love.

Jesus announced the end of religion as something humans must get right in order to be in right relationship with God. Jesus didn't get into what we call religion: the anxious, tiring, ultimately futile effort to *get it right*, because God already made it right.

Christianity is not humanly initiated. It's not up to us—what we believe or what we do. Christianity is Grace revealed and Grace realized. Christianity is trusting that Jesus is God's way of saying that God already made it right. On the cross, religion died, and we humans, God's beloved creatures, are set free from the obsession to *get it right*. And in that freedom, something wonderful happens.

Oh, we still reach out to the poor; we still advocate for justice and right public policy. We still desire to live and relate out of a heart of pure, perfect love. But we don't do it out of a sense of, "We've got to get it right." Instead, in the realization that we are free from needing to get it right, we can do it as an act of thanksgiving and praise and worship of the one whose love is the channel of God's Grace. It's not up to us! Thanks be to God! Amen!