

Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion?

James 1:19-27

Sunday, January 15, 2012—Orion United Methodist Church
Pastor Dave Schultz

This past New Year's Eve pop singer Cee Lo Green gave a live performance on NBC, singing in the New Year. In the process, he generated some controversy when he sang John Lennon's 1971 classic, "Imagine" because he changed a key line in the song.

In imagining a better world, John Lennon originally wrote and sang, "Nothing to kill or die for/and no religion too."

Cee Lo Green changed those lines to the—might we say the more inclusive—"Nothing to kill or die for/and all religion's true."

I love John Lennon—always have—but I've always hated that line, so I have no problem with Cee Lo's creativity. But the way some people reacted, you'd think that Cee Lo had just changed scripture or the Pledge of Allegiance.

While longtime Lennon fans may have been upset, I think Cee Lo Green touched a far different nerve in our society. There seems to be a growing sense in our society that we would be better off without religion than with it.

Look at the public reaction to Denver Broncos Quarterback Tim Tebow: he's become a line drawn in the sand. On the one side are those who know nothing of football but are cheering for Tim Tebow because of the way he wears his faith in Christ on his sleeve. But on the other side of the line are those who can't stand the way he publically praises God when he succeeds. They feel that football is no place for religion.

A few weeks ago I was looking for Garrison Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" on National Public Radio when I happened to catch the end of an Oxford-style debate. The proposition was: "Would the world be better off without religion?" As you can see, it was yet another shining example of our tax dollars hard at work.

My initial reaction to the broadcast was: "Oh no. Is this going to be another series of tired old arguments about the number of wars which have been started by religion?"

Certainly the Church has soiled its reputation over the centuries: the Crusades and the Inquisition of the Middle Ages spring to mind as well as the Church's deafening silence during the Holocaust and the Church's defense of slavery prior to the Civil War.

On the other hand, it was the Church that stood at the forefront of the abolition movement, leading the fight to end slavery forever. It was a preacher of the Gospel—a Baptist minister named Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who, through civil disobedience, led the fight to bring civil rights to all Americans, including and especially those of color. And it was the Church that gave us the clarion voice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was willing to die in a Nazi prison camp rather than acquiesce to Nazis.

Yes, the Church is culpable for its many sins but we have long since repented of them. I hoped that those tired old arguments would not be the extent of the debate.

Arguing in favor of the proposition were two atheists: one, a descendant of Charles Darwin and the other a philosopher. Arguing against the motion were an evangelical Christian author and a Jewish rabbi. If someone could just get the four of them to go into a bar, we'd have the perfect setup for some sort of a joke.

It would be impossible for me to summarize an hour-long broadcast in these few minutes and then to reflect on them in any sort of constructive way. However, as I listened to the broadcast—and later downloaded it to listen to it again¹—I picked several presuppositions to which the two atheist presenters held—and yes, they were atheists:

¹ [NPR: Would the World Be Better Off without Religion](#)

1. Science and reason are superior to religion. That means that if any person is devoted to a religion, then that person must be unreasonable or must have a weak, unthinking mind.
2. The atheists maintained that religion has brought more harm than good to the world. It was, after all, religion that gave us the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.
3. And that leads to the third presupposition which I picked up: all religion is the basically the same; one is as bad as the next.
4. According to the atheists, one of the reasons why religion is bad is because it indoctrinates children and proselytizes adults.
5. Finally, the atheists maintained that a person doesn't have to hold to a religion to be morally ethical.

Indeed, one of the primary arguments in favor of religion was that religion promoted respect for both humankind and nature. However, the atheists would have no part of that argument. They argued that a world without religion would be a world in which people had more respect for one another as well as for the environment. They also argued that atheism does a better job of promoting social action for a better world than religion does. In fact, they argued that religion does not promote ethical behavior at all.

At this point, it would be helpful to define "religion." Simply put, a religion is a system by which a people organize themselves to worship and serve God.

What that implies is that religion is a rather all-encompassing term. Billy Graham is religious. Mother Teresa is religious. And the Islamic jihadists who turned four jetliners into weapons of mass destruction on 9-11 were religious. But there is a difference between being religious and being righteous. Just because someone claims to be religious it doesn't make that person righteous.

When I was a teenager it was fashionable to say, "I'm not religious; I'm a Christian."

And yet, the Bible talks about being religious. In our New Testament lesson James writes, "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion *is* useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

James does us a couple of favors in that passage. First, James gives us a simple definition of religion that is pure and undefiled. He tells us that pure religion is that which is not polluted by the things of this world. Such pollutants might include addictive behavior, illicit sex, greed, racism and the list goes on.

On the other hand, James makes it clear that pure, undefiled religion reaches out to the less fortunate. In the NPR debate on religion, the Jewish rabbi told about a reporter who followed Mother Teresa around for a couple of days as she ministered to the needs of the less fortunate. Looking on as she cleaned the wounds of a leper, the reporter said, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars."

Mother Teresa turned to him and said, "Neither would I."

That's pure religion! *That's* undefiled religion! And the world needs that kind of religion. The world is better off with that kind of religion.

Over the course of the past eleven months, Grace United Methodist Church in Jacksonville, Illinois has opened its doors to the homeless. Working with two area charities, the church has converted two Sunday school rooms into men's and women's dormitories—each with ten beds. The church also provides showers in the restrooms as well as another room which serves as a commons area. The ministry operates from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. seven days a week and has provided over 2,000 "bed nights" to the homeless.

Their pastor, Rev. Mike Fender explains, "The ministry is not designed to become home. It is a transitional shelter that enables people to get the help they need. There are individuals from the Jacksonville Correctional Center that are paroled, having paid their debt to society. But in

order to be released, they have to have a place to go and have a job. A rural transportation system provides a ride to Beardstown-based Cargill where they can find employment and get a couple of paychecks in hand so they can transition into an apartment. The shelter provides a place for them to be able to get on their feet.”

That's pure religion. *That's* undefiled religion. And the world needs that kind of religion. The world is better off with that kind of religion.

Last summer I was privileged to watch seven of our young people reach out to the less fortunate at Lake Traverse Reservation in South Dakota. They reached out with paint brushes and games and piggy back rides and songs and smiles of love and acceptance. *That's* pure religion. *That's* undefiled religion. And the world needs that kind of religion. The world is better off with a religion that goes to Sisseton; that goes to Hope Church; that goes to Camp Reynoldswood; that goes to Haiti; that goes to Mexico and Slidell and Liberia.

Thankfully, our church has sent people to all of those places. The world is better off with a religion that goes the extra mile.

There's something else in James' little epistle. In describing pure and undefiled religion, James also makes it clear that there are such things as “useless religions.” There are such things as “deceptive religions.” There are such things as “impure religions” and “defiled religions.”

What are those useless religions? A narrow definition from the Epistle of James would describe a religion as useless when it becomes verbally abusive, when it features hate speech or when it tries in any way to deceive its followers.

Hate-filled rhetoric is one of the hallmarks of radical Islam: notice that I said “radical Islam”—not all of Islam. I find the Beatitudes to be so very helpful here. There Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”

I have no problem with Muslims who want to make peace with me and live in peace with me. One could make the case that such religion is pure and undefiled and the world needs more of religion that is rooted in peace and compassion. After all, Jesus made it clear that when anyone loves peace and works for peace, those peacemakers become the children of God.

On the other hand, anyone who turns a jet into a weapon of mass destruction is not a peacemaker and is not blessed of God. I don't care how zealous they are in their faith; their religion is useless and harmful and the world would be better off without their destructive religion.

Sadly, a person doesn't have to be a radical jihadist bent on death and destruction to have a useless, defiled religion. There is such a thing as spiritual abuse, even within Christian circles. Spiritually abusive language takes place when someone says something like, “You must have sinned terribly for you to suffer like this. God must be punishing you.”

While it is true that sin can and does lead to harmful consequences, statements like that are spiritually abusive.

Like many of you, I'm currently reading the book of Job on Wednesday mornings. Two weeks ago we read how Job suffered unimaginable loss, despite his right standing before God. This past week I read the first speech by Eliphaz who said to Job, “You must have sinned terribly for you to suffer like this. God must be punishing you.”

The truth of the matter is that Job's so-called comforters were not comforters at all; Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are all spiritual abusers, who, in the words of James considered themselves religious and yet were not able to keep a tight rein on their tongues. Consequently, they deceived themselves and tried to deceive Job. James would describe their religion as worthless.

It's sad but true: Christianity can be misused and abused and when it does, it becomes judgmental and harmful.

One of the things which struck me as I listened to the debate on NPR was the ignorance of the atheists. Their ignorance was in failing to acknowledge atheism itself as a religion—which it is.

Atheists may not meet for worship the way other religious groups might, but they have all the other characteristics of religion.² Atheists have certain tenets to which they adhere: They believe there is no God and that there are no spiritual forces in the universe.

Atheists believe in evolution. What that implies is that anything is possible if you simply give it enough time. And if you challenge an atheist on any point of evolution, he or she will simply respond by saying, “Then you just have to give it more time. If it can’t happen in a billion years, then it will happen in a trillion years. Just make time greater.”

In the process, atheists deify time, turning time itself into a god with creative powers just like God. But atheists do not realize that time itself was created by God and that God transcends time.

Atheists believe that the universe itself is eternal. It has no beginning and will have no end. In the process, atheists defy the universe just as they deify time. As you can imagine, this also informs their world view of environmentalism.

Atheists believe in the supremacy of human reason; there is no room for faith. Truth is determined by logic and evidence. There are no miracles, only mysteries which, given enough time and reason, will eventually be answered (Archer).

I’ve just laid out for you the “holy trinity” of atheism: that holy trinity is comprised of Time, Environment (or Universe) and Reason. Atheists assign to Time, Environment and Reason the same characteristics which we Christians attribute to God. And in their own way atheists worship Time, Environment and Reason. But then atheists sanctimoniously deny that they’ve created gods out of Time, Environment and Reason when clearly they have.

The truth of the matter is that atheists are being dishonest when they claim there is no God when in fact Time, Environment and Reason have become the spiritual forces of their faith. And yes, it is a Faith. Yes, it is a religion.

But the most disturbing thing I heard in that NPR debate was the criticism of religion because religion seeks to proselytize others. In Christianity, we call it “making disciples for Jesus Christ.”

The reason I found that criticism of religion so disturbing is because atheism is also a belief-system—a religion—that is also hell-bent on proselytizing others. The atheists who participated in that NPR debate criticized religion for trying to make disciples of others when atheists can be just as zealous as Christians or Muslims or Jehovah Witnesses who strive to make disciples of others.

It is ignorant for atheists to deny that their belief system is anything but a religion when clearly it is. It is therefore disingenuous for them to argue that the world would be better off without religion when they, in fact, are one of the religions they are arguing against.

But I would be in agreement with the atheists on that point: yes, the world would be better off without the religion of atheism.

I long for the day when the Supreme Court of the United States of America recognizes atheism for what it is—a religion—and then applies our principles of separation of church and state to atheism. Then our government and the ACLU and the atheists of our nation can stop trying to establish atheism as the state religion of America.

One of the criticisms raised by the atheists in that NPR debate is that there are hypocrites in the Church. What they do not realize is that the Church was not created as an institution for *saints*; rather, the Church was created as an institution for *sinners*. Christians—just like non-Christians—are fully capable of getting it wrong; of messing up. I’ve gotten it wrong before; we all have. But where else are we to go but to the Church where we can find hope and forgiveness and the path to a faith that is pure and undefiled?

² While two of the debaters were clearly espousing an atheistic world view, I also relied on James E. [Archer's 15 Principles of Atheism](#) for a more concise definition of atheism.

So would the world be better off without religion? If by that you mean, would the world be better off without religions that are marked by unbridled, spiritually abusive dialogue; then yes, the world would be better off without those religions.

If by that you mean, would the world be better off without religions that are impure, defiled and polluted; then yes, the world would be better off without those religions.

If by that you mean, would the world be better off without religions that are racist, deceptive and destructive, then yes, the world would be better off without those religions. They are all useless.

But just because some religions are harmful, they don't make all religions bad. There is a vital need for forgiveness and the pure, loving, affirming Church of Jesus Christ is the best place to find that forgiveness.

There is a vital faith that we need—that the world needs—because it brings people to a place of peace and reconciliation with God.

We find in such churches what John Wesley called “means of grace.” When we worship together, when we search the scriptures together, when we pray together, when we feast at the Lord's Table together, we find grace. When we reach out to others in the name of Jesus, we find grace. It's not that those things save us from our sin—they can't. But when we participate in those religious activities, we find that they can lead us to a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And we need that kind of pure, undefiled religion in our lives, in our nation and in our world.