

True Religion: What It Is and What It Ain't¹

The texts

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

– James 1:17-27

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

– Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Introduction

What's it all about, Alfie?
Is it just for the moment we live?
What's it all about when you sort it out, Alfie?
Are we meant to take more than we give
Or are we meant to be kind?

So begin the lyrics to the title song of the movie "Alfie." I saw the original 1966 version with Michael Caine as the lead shortly after it came out. And I viewed the more recent 2004 re-make with Jude Law just a few weeks ago. What I recall is that at the time I watched the first film, I was in one of my recurring phases of high moral rectitude and self-righteousness. I found Alfie to be a thoroughly disgusting character, with no socially redeeming features. What I think now is that Alfie was on a quest that he scarcely understood. He was asking a question, not with his lips but with his life: what's it all about? This is the ultimate religious question, if one understands the word religion in terms of its Latin root: *religio*. *Religio* means to bind together. Religion denotes the quest to see life as a whole, to connect its disparate pieces, and to find some meaning in the pattern. Even if you are not asking the question with your lips, you are asking it with your life: what's it all about?

The first answer

So what distinguishes genuine answers from phony ones? What distinguishes true religion from, if you'll pardon my grammar, religion that ain't? Our first answer comes from the epistle lesson, which is contained in a New Testament writing that Martin Luther and subsequent Lutherans have held in disdain: the book of James. Luther thought that James was too legalistic, too much oriented toward law and not enough toward gospel, too consumed with works righteousness and not enough with the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. He wanted it out of the canon, out of the Bible. But he didn't get his way. So this morning we have to deal with it.

Hear the text from James again:

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

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This is not the reply to the question about true religion that I wanted to hear. Now that the shoe is on the other foot – namely mine and not Alfie’s – I want someone, namely God, to cut me some slack. This text – still in the collection we call Word of God – sounds to me like a “go to jail” card, not a “get out of jail free” pass. Maybe Luther was right. Maybe we really should drop the epistle of James from our Scripture. Maybe it’s not too late to do it.

However, it is surely too late for me. So, again, I have to face up to the text. Notice one thing in particular: from the perspective of James, true religion has to do with our life in the world. True religion does not consist of a body of beliefs. True religion is not a matter of liturgically correct or musically trendy worship practices. True religion consists of doing the Word, not merely hearing it. True religion has to do with caring for the weak, the weary, the hurting ones. True religion has to do with avoiding wickedness, the wickedness of self-serving exploitation of vulnerable people and of an endangered natural environment. It has to do with bridling our tongues – a lesson that many Christians attending the health care forums around the nation apparently still haven’t learned. It has to do with keeping ourselves unstained by the selfish values of the world.

True religion is not a feeling or a mindset; it is a lifestyle. True religion consists of becoming agents of the Word of God in the world of God: agents of truth, of love, of justice, and of peace. Truth, from a biblical perspective, is not something we have; it is something we do. The ultimate meaning of our lives is about whether or not we do the truth: the truth of God that nurtures re-born lives, that frees us for service, that generates genuine humility.

If all this is the case, then true religion is always something toward which we aspire, never something we have in hand. True religion involves a daily dying to our selfish excesses and a daily rising to a service-oriented life. True religion is something we confess each week that we haven’t done satisfactorily, and that we’re emboldened each week to try again. True relig-

ion can never be flaunted because it has never been achieved. True religion is a life-long vocation that requires life-long learning.

Finally, I think it is clear that – from the perspective of James at any rate – true religion is not something that we can do here, in this sanctuary, in this place and at this time. If we come here simply to be comfortable, if our most serious question about worship is whether it ought to be traditional or contemporary – or whether a 60-minute time limit for worship is a sacred obligation – then we have surely missed the point. We come here not to do religion but to prepare for it. True religion happens – or it doesn't – tomorrow and the next day and the next. True religion is not a sentiment or a security system; it is a risk-filled sending. It is not a collection of doctrines; it is a binding together of life in the world among the wounded of the world.

The second answer

The Gospel of Mark, likely the first of the four Gospels, was written several decades before the epistle of James. It was a different time. There was a different audience. They had different concerns and asked different questions. It should not surprise us, then, that Mark's Gospel has a somewhat different perspective on the matter of true religion.

Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke as having to deal with fault-finding legalists. These were folks who thought that true religion consisted of following the Law in great detail – not just the Ten Commandments, but also over 600 lesser laws having to do with almost every aspect of life.

Jesus responded forthrightly and forcefully: nit-picking observance of laws and humanly conceived customs is not what true religion is all about. Not even those laws dealing with Sabbath rest – so central to Israel's identity and practice – were sacrosanct. They had become diversions, taking the focus off something that was central: namely, the struggle against evil that comes from within; evil that truly defiles; evil that really renders us unclean.

Could it be that we have it wrong about something so important? Could it be, for example, that we spend too much time monitoring our kids' intake of such things such as TV and the internet and not enough time monitoring their outputs and behaviors? Could it be that not even parents, much less teachers, have access to the inner being of children: that only God has such access? Could it be that God has access not only through the biblical stories we retell for our children but also through the story of Jesus we relive in their presence? Could it be that it's not the rules we impose but the values we embody that, finally, make a difference in their lives?

In our gospel text, Jesus gives a long laundry list of despicable, defiling behaviors and habits. Now, we may indeed hone the techniques of these behaviors through observation of others and input from the outside. But their source and their energy is within. We don't just need better habits; we need a new being. It is this that God offers in Christ Jesus. It is this that we receive as a gift through Word and Sacrament. It is this that we need to have renewed each day and every week. It is this that sets us on the path of discipleship, on the way of true religion.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my remarks, I defined religion as the search for connectedness in life, for wholeness in life, for meaning in life. At the end, I am defining true religion not so much as a search for meaning but as an experiment in living out the meaning that God has prefigured in God's Son and has placed in our hearts. True religion wells up from within. Yet is totally beside the point until it is lived out, until *we* – you and I – live it out beyond the walls of this building. If our religion doesn't get us out of the house – out of our comfort zone – and into the world to serve its hurting people, then our religion is false religion. Let me repeat: if our religion doesn't get us out of the house – out of our comfort zone – and into the world to serve its hurting people, then our religion is false religion. Apparently, if we take today's scripture readings seriously at any rate, God thought we ought to know that.

Have I, now living out the last phase of my life, finally got it down? Have I finally mastered the meaning of life? Have I finally got true religion? I wrote something in a personal journal twenty-three years ago that likely still applies to me today.

One would think that at age fifty, with over thirty years of disciplined theological reflection behind me, I could respond more definitively – with more of an air of self-assurance – to fundamental questions. That was supposed to be one of the tradeoffs: a consolation prize of equanimity in return for the losses associated with aging. Perhaps only senility displaces perplexity.

My current take on myself is that I remain perplexed. You, on the other hand, may detect the onset of senility.

Whichever the case, I caution those of you who have not yet made it to the final phase of life: don't look, at the end, to achieve perfect clarity in the answer to the question about the meaning of life. You won't find it. You will find only the clarity that you have already been given about where and how to find meaning: it is as a disciple of Jesus the Christ, liv-

ing out that discipleship in a raucous, messy, and sometimes fog-en-shrouded world.

And I caution those of you who, like me, *have* made it to the final phase: if you think you possess perfect clarity about the meaning of life, take another look. Don't be so sure. Don't shy away from an honest perplexity. And remember: you are not, in your golden years, in a waiting room where it's okay to sit until you are called. You are still on the path, still on the way that came to be called Christian, still on a mission to serve God by serving others. We cannot rest on our laurels. We don't have any laurels to rest on. We are now, as always, reliant on the grace of God. That's never a bad place to be in life.

Three weeks ago, at Kim's and my book launch, we were asked a fundamental question, a question about identifying what is central to Christian faith and life. I responded with a quote from an English historian and philosopher of history named Herbert Butterfield. In his book titled *A Christian Philosophy of History*, Butterfield's last page contained a statement with which I'll conclude my series of sermons on the meaning of life seen from the end of life: "Hold fast to Jesus Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted."

Hold fast to Jesus Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted. I first read that statement some fifty years ago. It still rings true to me today. I commend it to us all. That's what it's all about, Alfie. You got it half right: the part about not being committed. But you missed the other, more important half: hold fast to Jesus Christ. There *are* answers to your questions, Alfie: we do *not* live just for the moment; we are *not* meant to take more than we give; and we *are* meant to be kind. We in the church have learned these things while we were holding on for dear life to Jesus Christ.

Hold fast to Jesus Christ. There is a world of significance in that brief statement. There is a whole lifespan of meaning. There is a working summary of true religion, to be elaborated in our lifetimes of discipleship and service. Hold fast to Jesus Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted. *Soli Deo gloria*. Amen.

¹ Presented by Tom Wilkens at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, VA, on 08/29/09 and 08/30/09.