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# Religion and the Gospel

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(1) STEPHEN H. TRAVIS

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AN anthropologist might say that two main human needs have given rise to religion. First, there is the need for 'salvation' from the condition into which human beings are born. Secondly, there is the need to come to terms with the universal fact of death. So the almost universal phenomenon of religion bears witness to man's attempt to satisfy his needs for security, coherence, significance and permanence by identifying himself with a power greater and more durable than himself.<sup>1</sup>

Discussion of this issue may proceed on two levels. First—and briefly—is such a description of religious phenomena *true*? Now it may well be true as far as it goes, but is this the *only* way to look at religion? Anthropology is not concerned to evaluate a religion's claims to be true. To establish the truth or falsity of a particular religion you have to ask a different set of questions—What is its historical basis? What kind of religious experience do its adherents claim? Is that experience such that it can, in principle, be shared by any other human being? Does the religion 'work' in everyday life? Such questions may be asked of any religion and Christianity may be compared with other religions on this basis. Though the anthropologist may observe whether religious beliefs and practices enable people to cope better with life, he does not deal with this question of truth.

The second level of discussion is this: is religion (as defined in the first paragraph above) a help or a hindrance to the Christian Gospel?

## **Barth's attack on religion**

This question was raised in a radical way by Karl Barth, whose *Church Dogmatics* include a section on 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion'.<sup>2</sup> There he distinguishes between the Christian faith, which is based solely on God's revelation of himself in Christ, and all religion, which is man's search for ultimate meaning. This search is doomed to failure because God is Wholly Other, and cannot be found by men's efforts. Religion is the attempt of self-righteous men to set up their own truth, to justify themselves by their works, to discover God without dependence on his grace. As such it is sinful unbelief, at enmity with the Gospel.

The same approach is found in Barth's two commentaries on Romans, especially on Romans 18.1-32. 'Human religion, as radically distinguished from belief in God's revelation, always originates and

consists in this confusion: in the mistaken confidence in which man wants to decide for himself who and what God is, which can only produce this confusion, i.e. idolatry." The result of men's worshipping man-made idols (Romans 1.23,24) was that 'the distance between God and man had no longer its essential, sharp, acid and disintegrating ultimate significance . . .'. Then there arises 'between us and the "Wholly Other" a mist or concoction of religion in which . . . sometimes the behaviour of men or of animals is exalted to be an experience of God, sometimes the Being and Existence of God is "enjoyed" as a human or animal experience. . . . In all this busy concern with concrete things there is always a revolt against God. For in it we assist at the birth of the "No-God", at the making of idols.'

In this attack on religion Barth could claim to be following a well-worn biblical theme. The first of the Ten Commandments sets the tone: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods besides me' (Exodus 20.2,3). Because God, by his gracious initiative, has acted for the salvation of Israel, to worship any substitute-god would be foolish, pointless and ungrateful. And then there are the tirades of the prophets—their scornful dismissal of the idols of the Gentiles (e.g. Isaiah 46), their anger and anguish over Israel's compromise with the baals (especially Amos and Hosea). The baal-cults were men's attempts to influence the forces of nature. They were focused on man's needs and his attempt to guarantee fulfilment of those needs, rather than on response and submission to the living God. Even the rituals of Yahweh's own cult could so easily become human efforts to 'keep on the right side' of God, or to 'twist his arm'—deserving the rebuke, 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings' (Hosea 6.6, cf. Isaiah 58, and many other passages in the prophets).

In the New Testament, apart from Paul's critique of pagan religion in Romans 1 and his exposure of inconsistencies in Jewish religion in Romans 2, there is the message of Jesus himself. Many of his warnings about God's judgement were addressed to the respectable religious people of his day. The parable of the wicked vinedressers (Mark 12.1-9) ends: 'What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others.' It was possible to be associated with God's people and yet to reject God's Messiah. It is possible to perform religious acts and still be a stranger to Christ (Matthew 7.22,23). J. E. Fison asserts: 'As so often ecclesiastically proclaimed, the one thing that the last judgement is never allowed to do is the one thing that in the New Testament it is most designed to do. Its purpose there is to spring a complete surprise not upon the lost pagan souls outside the pale of the Church, but upon the complacent ecclesiastical souls whose entire confidence is based upon the fact that they are well within it.'

Barth's onslaught on religion is in fact more radical than these biblical onslaughts, and I cannot go the whole way with him. It is surely an inadequate doctrine of creation which leads him to see nothing good at all in man's religious quest. Do not many of men's achievements and insights derive ultimately, whether they realize it or not, from the goodness of God?

Nevertheless Barth put his finger on something which is essential for the true understanding of Christianity. There *is* a tension between religion and the Gospel. There are certain essential aspects of the Gospel which religion constantly threatens to obscure.

### **Religion obscures the gospel**

The first truth which religion tends to soft-pedal is that, apart from divine revelation, man is blind. Plato was aware of the problem when he wrote: 'We long for a more trusty chariot, a divine word in which to make the voyage of life, in place of the poor raft of merely human knowledge' (*Phaedo* 85d). And Paul insists on it: 'The God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel in the glory of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4.4). This fact is unpalatable to people—both ancient and modern—who like to think that they are getting on quite well in the business of finding out what God is like and how they can be on friendly terms with him. But it is the inescapable starting-point for any real appreciation of the wonder and the power of the Gospel.

Secondly, God has revealed himself to men 'from outside'. In acts and words to the people of Israel, and supremely in Jesus Christ, he has revealed his character and his purpose for man and the world. Jesus was not simply the summit of human aspiration towards God, but an act of revelation and salvation from outside. The predicament described by Plato finds its answer in the Word made flesh. Compare the statement of Augustine that all the ideas contained in the Prologue to John's Gospel were familiar to him from the pagan philosophers—except for the declaration that 'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (*Confessions* VII.9).

Thirdly, there is the message of the cross—hardly the sort of thing that religious man would have invented if he had been given the option. The cross cuts every man down to size: the Jew with his compulsive concern to justify himself before God, the Gentile who insists that God's ways with men should appeal to human reason (1 Corinthians 1). The cross reveals God as one who gives himself to men in sacrificial love.

The fourth point sums up the other three: the Gospel is all about God's grace. The Jewish scholar C. G. Montefiore wrote that the one really new thing about Jesus was his teaching that God actually comes to seek for sinners. This is what distinguishes the Gospel of Christ from men's religious aspirations and activities. Christianity

begins with God—his character, his initiative, his purpose for men. The Gospel is about grace or it is about nothing.

### **The Gospel confronts religion**

Bearing these truths in mind, I would like to survey seven expressions of religion to which the Gospel is essentially opposed.

1. Religion which focuses attention on man's achievements rather than on his total dependence on God. It may be the Gentile 'worshipping the creature rather than the Creator' (Romans 1.25), or the Jew 'relying upon the law and boasting of his relation to God' (Romans 2.17). It may be the modern equivalent of the Gnostic offering a 'better way' to the knowledge of God, or the modern legalist laying down new rules for Christian living. In all these cases man is asserting himself over against God, and obscuring the truth of the Gospel.

2. Religion which tries to control the activity of God. By its sacrifices and taboos primitive religion aims to appease the anger of the gods and to guarantee their beneficence. More sophisticated modern religion tries sometimes to control God's activity by means of theological systems or formulae of initiation—you go through a certain ritual and a particular effect is guaranteed. But the living God refuses to be boxed in like that. This is why the various accounts in the Acts of the Apostles of people receiving the Holy Spirit are so frustratingly contradictory.

Religion is commonly thought of as 'something which men do'—to please God or to control him or to persuade him to act for their benefit. But in the Bible God, not man, is the primary agent in all religious activity. Christian worship is a response to God's gracious initiative—never an attempt to 'twist his arm' or earn his favour.

3. Religion which is escapist rather than realist. Human religion frequently exhibits a strong desire to escape—either to the past, with its supposed securities, or to the future, with its 'glory for me', or to some inner spiritual experience which cushions men from the harsh world outside. F. D. Maurice suggested: 'We have been dosing our people with religion when what they need is not that but the living God.'<sup>6</sup> Any so-called Christianity which cushions people from the real world rather than enabling them to see it in fresh perspective and serve it with deepened sensitivity is an affront to the Gospel. Any religion which purveys 'comfort' to the exclusion of radical discipleship is not the Gospel of the Crucified.

4. Religion which divorces spirituality from service. Too much which passes for Christianity is one-sided. Either it is pietistic and inward-looking, or it is so emphatic about social action that it becomes a matter of human effort without a spiritual dimension. Latin American evangelicals such as Padilla and Escobar, and writers like Daniel Berrigan, have argued that prayer and politics, piety

and prophecy are essential to each other if the Gospel is not to be distorted into religion.

5. Religion which is identified with nationalism. History is littered with examples of religion bolstering up an evil *status quo*, when it ought to have been challenging the government in power. Twentieth-century examples include Protestant churches in Hitler's Germany, and the Roman Catholics in some Latin American countries.

6. Religion whose institutions are more important than the truth they embody. Of course, I do not suggest that Christianity can function without an institutional life of some kind. But there is always a danger that the institutional tail may begin to wag the dog. Methods and customs persist when they ought to have been abandoned long ago. Whether we like it or not, a church's institutional life is part of its witness to the Gospel. Therefore if the church is to remain the servant of the Gospel, it needs constantly to be ready for change, adaptable enough to be the spearhead of Christ's mission as every new opportunity arises.

It is said that when a friend asked Ignatius of Loyola how he would feel if the Pope dissolved the Society of Jesus—the religious order which Ignatius had spent so much time and energy to establish—he replied, 'A quarter of an hour's prayer, and I should think no more about it.' Could we be as flexible as that with our modern ecclesiastical institutions?

7. Religion which values a ritual more highly than the truth it embodies and the Spirit who gives meaning to it. In most denominations today there is a tendency for the deepest questions of faith, including the nature of God and Christology, to be open to debate (and sometimes to answers which sail very near the wind), while on lesser matters of discipline and organization there is resistance to greater openness. You can *believe* almost what you like, as long as you *perform* rituals and organizational duties in the prescribed way. Is not this a sure sign that the Gospel is being submerged by religion? The current debates in Methodism over whether believers' baptism is admissible alongside infant baptism, and whether lay celebration of the Lord's Supper is permissible, draw attention to this issue. At the time of writing it remains to be seen whether the church will move towards a rigidly prescribed 'religious' security, or towards the flexibility which the Gospel encourages.

### **Conclusion**

'Little children, keep yourselves from idols' (1 John 5.21). So John ends his first letter, having written of the 'true God' disclosed in Jesus Christ. Christians who claim to serve the true God can be more prone to idolatry than they realize. Formulae, rituals, dogmas can become substitutes for God. Dogmatic formulations can become a

fetish if they are not seen as pointers to the living God. Sacraments can become objects of veneration instead of means of grace. Institutions can become grounds for pride unless they are seen solely as means to an end, as instrument of mission. Even a service of worship can become a fetish if it concentrates on building up one's inner well-being rather than on responding to God's initiative. As A. M. Ramsey writes, 'It is by a constant self-criticism of our own idolatries that we Christians can learn again and present to our contemporaries the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

### *Notes*

- 1 I am summarizing A. Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (SCM 1966), pp.15-17.
- 2 Vol. I, part 2, pp.280-361.
- 3 *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Eng. trans. SCM 1959), p.29.
- 4 *The Epistle to the Romans* (OUP 1933), pp.49-50.
- 5 *The Christian Hope* (Longmans 1954), p.249.
- 6 Quoted in A. M. Ramsey, *God, Christ and the World* (SCM 1969), p.24.
- 7 Op. cit., p.44.

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## (2) DAVID STACEY

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THESE are hard times for ministers of religion. The very word 'religion' in their designation is something of a liability. The industrial working-class, so it is said, has rejected religion completely and, whilst this may be an exaggeration, it is hard to believe that conversation at the working-men's club ranges as freely over the subject of religion as it does over jobs or football or some of those scabrous themes we need not identify. Here and there one still encounters pockets of open hostility. There are still some who echo Marx and see in religion the opiate of the masses, the means whereby the proletariat are deceived into accepting a fantasy salvation in place of their basic economic rights. A glance at the papers reminds us that the ancient capacity of religion to inspire hatred is presently being confirmed in the streets of Belfast. Naturally the man of religion turns to his friends for support only to find that the greatest theologian of the century has castigated religion as unbelief and announced its abolition. It is no better with the radicals. They are devoted to religionless Christianity.

It may be true that all these objectors assess religion in different