



# Cargo Cult Christianity— All About Appearances

B Y G R E G A L B R E C H T

*Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.—Matthew 23:5-12*

**D**uring World War II the American and British military brought the material goods of their culture into the remote islands of the South Seas. These civilizations had never experienced the wealth and prosperity enjoyed by the powers that had recently arrived to occupy their land. When the war was over, the military bases were closed, and there were no more shipments of the material resources to which the inhabitants of these islands had become accustomed.

While soldiers occupied the islands, the lifestyle of the islanders drastically changed. Up until the end of the war some of the soldiers shared medicine, canned food, radios, tents and clothing with the islanders. The locals had become accustomed to crates descending out of the sky, filled with Coca-Cola,

candy, canned meat and all manner of riches and delicacies they had never known. Suddenly the supply of this heretofore-treasure trove of resources dried up.

The islanders longed for the cargo which had once arrived by plane or by ship to reappear. In an effort to cause the resources to return, followers of what came to be called *cargo cults* started to mimic the activities they had observed the soldiers perform, thinking if they acted like the soldiers, the resources would return.

The islanders built landing strips where airplanes could land with the cargo they so longed for—hence the term *cargo cults*. They created replicas of headsets, carving wooden headphones adorned with bamboo antennas. The hand-crafted headsets were worn by *cargo cult* followers who sat in towers, seemingly functioning as air traffic controllers—for non-existent airplanes. They lit up the runways with signal fires and torches, hoping to attract night landings.

Dreaming of the cargo and merchandise they had once enjoyed, and desiring for those “blessings” to return, they staged drills and marches, with sticks substituting for rifles and military uniforms and insignias painted on the bodies of the *cargo cult* “soldiers.” They believed that the occupying armies had some special and unique connection with the gods, and that something they did must have influenced the gods to

rain down material blessings. The *cargo cult* followers seemed to be doing all of the right things. They had created, to the best of their abilities, the same form and appearance they had seen before—but of course to no avail, for the cargo did not materialize. No planes landed. No merchandise arrived.

## Religion—A Form of Godliness

In 2 Timothy 3:5 Paul warns of those who do not love the one true God, who have a form of godliness but deny its power. Religion can deceive us into thinking that the physical, outward, external form (what is seen and touched and felt) is more important than the spiritual, inner, unseen substance. The image that the eye sees is powerful, leading religion to motivate its followers by appearances. Jesus said that “everything” the teachers of the law and the Pharisees did was “done for men to see.”

There are all kinds of “forms” of godliness that are alive and well within Christ-less religion today:

**1) Ritual.** Many feel that if they can just perform the right rituals and ceremonies and duties, in the right way at the right time, then God will bless them with health and wealth—and conversely he won't curse them. Shades of the *cargo cult!*

**2) Attendance.** Many feel that if they just show up, assemble and attend—then that will make God happy. If they just march around in a “Christian” assembly, with their little stick rifles, in “God's Army” then that will keep God happy—at least for one more week when they will need to do it all over again.

**3) Heritage.** Many believe they have a form of godliness because they were born into a particular religion or denomination. They believe that their religious club has “the truth” or “more truth” than anybody else. They belong to or frequent a particular spiritual address because it's the only thing they have ever known.

**4) Liturgy.** Many think candles, bells, stained glass windows, choirs, pipe organs, incense and chanting is

what God wants, and they believe if they engage in such “holy” behavior and worship then God is pleased. Others, who favor a more contemporary experience, feel if they raise their hands to lively music in an exercise called “praise and worship” then their “worship” will ensure that they know God.

### **Secondhand Spirituality**

The Bible speaks of empty, meaningless religion as being like wells without water. A religious well without water holds the promise of being able to quench thirst—but when the truth is finally realized, such an empty well is but a mockery.

Christ-less religion is an empty spiritual well, incapable of dispensing God’s grace.

Apart from God, religious rituals and ceremonies are *secondhand spirituality*—merely going through the motions. All forms of *cargo cult* religion are but a mockery. God is not influenced, conjured up or manipulated through rituals, machinations, obedience, uniforms, behaviors or practices. The power of God is not isolated to musical expression or devout prayer or outward appearance.

### **Pseudo-Spiritual Pretenses**

In Matthew 23:5-12 Jesus warns about the priority religion gives to concentrating on appearances, and in so doing, missing the real power of God that is often not visible to the naked eye. Jesus warns about a pseudo-spiritual image that can be created by uniforms worn by religious professionals. Such attire creates a holier-than-thou atmosphere. Costumes can then become an essential part of the show, when religious business is conducted.

Most religions have distinctive “garb” or accessories which they use to distinguish and decorate its officials and leaders. Robes, vestments, habits and clerical

collars are among those more familiar to most of us. The teachers of the law, Pharisees, Sadducees and priests of Jesus’ day were no different.

Jesus mentions *phylacteries* or *tefillin*, small leather boxes (still worn today by Orthodox Jewish men) containing selected texts from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Phylacteries are required by Jewish oral tradition to be worn during prayer. Two boxes are bound with leather straps, one to the forehead and one to the hand. You might not see examples of this practice in your day-to-day life. But in the world of orthodox Judaism, it is a daily occurrence.

Apparently the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were purchasing and wearing bigger and fancier phylacteries to distinguish themselves in the practice of prayer. Do better boxes make prayers more effective? Does God pay more attention to the prayers of those who wear broader phylacteries? Does prayer posturing impress God? It is laughable. But it was happening. According to Jesus, prayer competition among clergy is futile religious ambition. Religious arrogance and pride appalled Jesus.

Can bigger phylacteries change the human heart or make a religious leader a better man of God? Some apparently thought so. Jesus could not abide this spiritual obsession without scathing criticism.

### **Places of Honor and Important Seats**

Jesus accused the Pharisees of loving “the most important seats in the synagogues.” Once again, Jesus expresses his opposition to the love of appearances which religious authorities can find attractive. The Pharisees loved being big cheeses. They loved being in the spotlight. They loved the acclaim of men.

Within the religious culture of Jesus’ day, seating at dinners and banquets was assigned according to social rank. The host was seated in a place of honor, as were the most

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honored guests. The closer you sat to the host, the higher your place in the social pecking order. Jesus accused the teachers of the law of coveting the best seats.

Jesus makes it crystal clear that the Pharisees were slaves of empty religion. They coveted the seats of honor at banquets. Their scorekeeping hearts made them jockey for positions of honor before their honor-hungry colleagues. How sad that rather than serving the humble, they ignored the humble to exalt themselves.

God did not come to this earth, in the person of Jesus, so that we might serve him with peeled grapes, chocolate bars and ice cold drinks while fanning him with palm fronds. He came to serve us. While God desires our love and service, apart from his grace we have nothing he needs. He doesn’t need any product we are capable of producing. What he desires is for us to accept his service, which will transform us from thinking solely of ourselves to being his very children who are humble, internally adorned with the attitude of Jesus, thinking of and serving others, in his name.

God is not interested in anything religion assures us we can earn. Larger prayer phylacteries and places of honor at dining room tables earn nothing before God. What matters to God is transforming us, by his grace, into his very children in whom Jesus lives.

Believe it or not, every year in the Republic of Vanuatu a celebration is held, even to this day, with islanders clothed in what look like old United States Army fatigues and uniforms, marching with bamboo rifles slung across their shoulders. It’s so obvious to sophisticated North Americans, isn’t it? *Cargo cult* religion is superstitious, oppressive religion that holds its people in spiritual captivity. □