

# RELIGIOSITY IS ADAPTING

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In our long-term quest to pursue *Christianity Without the Religion*, we've noticed that Christless religion can adjust itself to shifts in popular culture. In other words, religiosity is quite capable of adapting to new forms and expressions, while continuing to wander far from the Jesus Way.

As I've visited 10-20 different congregations per year for the last 30 years, I can testify to real changes in church culture over that time—some changes for the better and others not so much. Nonetheless, religiosity is always looking for a fresh foothold.

## LESS PROBLEMATIC TODAY

### 1. *Less Money-Grabbing*

Despite religion's reputation for being a money-grabbing industry, I can report that with few exceptions I no longer encounter heavy-handed offering appeals in local congregations. Not because faith communities aren't in great need of money. Rather, the money rhetoric has toned down because most churches know they can no longer get away with it. Some churches I know still pass an offering plate, but that is increasingly rare and the invitation to give is far subtler than it was previously (of necessity).

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### 2. *Less Legalism*

Nowhere I go do the churches directly promote ritualism or legalism as ways to gain merit with God. That's too obvious. Yes, we still have faith practices (congregational prayers, songs and Scripture reading) that are expressions of faith. And we still have a sense of Christian morality (right and wrong is not out the window). But most churches know that making these a ladder to heaven in the age of "grace alone" is a turn-off and likely to empty the pews. Religion has moved on from the old church's "indulgences" tactics in a major way.

The exception to this is when the rituals and rules are transposed into new super-spiritual lingo (mainly connected with revivalism). For example,

“passion for Jesus” and being “radically sold out” may sound saintly but can become clichés for the new legalism. In other words, “striving” sounds bad, so now we “press in.” “Law-keeping to earn merits in heaven” sounds awful, but “pressing in for a breakthrough” is so spiritual. And thus revivalism becomes the new legalism.

No, Christ-less religion doesn't just dissipate into the ether. It is a crafty and cunning chameleon, ever-changing its color for new habitats.

## MORE PROBLEMATIC TODAY

Over time, Christ-less religiosity has advanced on new fronts that are more obvious now that they once were. Some examples:

### 1. Consumerism

It has been popular to sneer at the expensive cathedrals built by serfs in the middle ages, but are modern multiplex monstrosities and their overhead so dissimilar? No sooner do eyes roll at priests wafting incense than the worship pastor is installing a smoke machine. As hymn books are being demoted to doorstops, the CCM industry (contemporary Christian music) vies for Top-40 sounds, styles and rock star status.

I believe that God loves and inspires beauty in our lives and in our worship. I have no quarrel there. But I would pay close attention to how religion is finding new inroads into the faith through performance orientation and consumerist culture. Too often, churches are assessed by how they scale in their entertainment value. “What I got out of it” or whether “I was moved” depends on if I experienced goosebumps or “liver shiver” and assume that as the work of the Holy Spirit.

### 2. Moralism

While avoiding legalism (gaining merit through law-keeping), there is still a very strong pull toward moralism (belonging by behaving). Legalism and

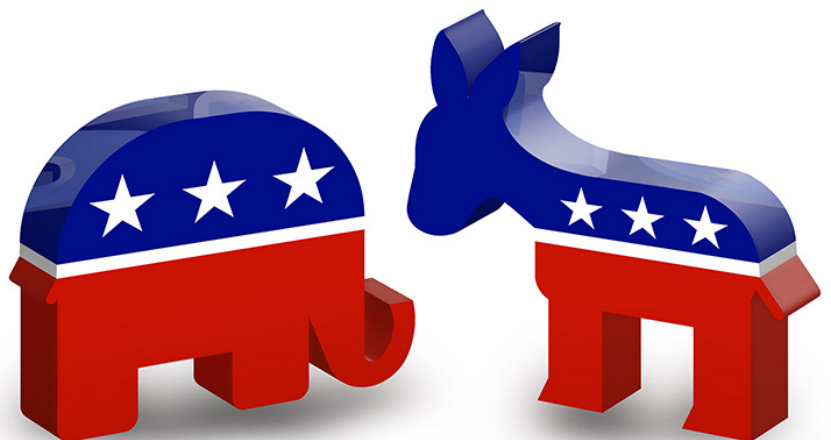


moralism sound similar, but even “grace alone” people who deny being legalistic can still be very exclusive and condescending toward messy and marginal people—those less “holy” than them. This still marks a profound in/out division (the same wall of partition Christ destroyed) that leaves strugglers feeling “less than” while those who play by the script are rewarded with social standing. This

phenomenon can be especially prurient—a word that describes Christianity's undue emphasis/obsession with sexuality. Moralism is Christ-less religion in its willingness to pick up stones. Christ is so clear about checking the beam in your own eye and letting our voyeuristic judgments fall from our fists.

### 3. Politicization

I have noticed a marked increase in politicized faith, where our morality is NOT derived from the Sermon on the Mount or Christ's ethical teaching. Rather, these days it simply mirrors the popular political and ideological trends that dominate the most recent polarizing culture wars. My sense is that the political right and the



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ideological left are not only at war with each other across the nation but together, conspire to co-opt and dominate the front end of religious discourse. In my recent book, *A More Christlike Way*, I describe how the left-right spectrum is itself a matrix of tribalism and the most obvious expression of what the apostle John condemns as “the world” [system]. The “world” wants to displace Christ in determining Christianity’s moral imperative ... and I’m afraid that’s already a done deal. We want to call Christianity back to Christ himself as the first determiner and final judge of what is right. Hint: Love God, love your brother and sister, love your neighbor, love the stranger and love your enemy.

#### 4. *Divine Retribution*

Finally (for now), I see Christ-less religion surging among those who are doubling down on divine retribution. Just when I thought we were beyond that... No, a new “skinny jeans fundamentalism” struts across the big stage. Some of the fastest-growing churches in North America are thriving on a market that wants to push back hard against postmodernism and the perceived liberalism of those who preach the beautiful Gospel of God’s infinite love. They wave their fists at this gospel and condemn the so-called “hippie Jesus.” It’s now become common to hear them deride what they’ve coined as “*the God is love heresy.*”

Their increased emphasis on God’s wrath against sinners,

penal substitution and eternal hellfire finds purchase in the ready soil of hearts weary of “50 shades of gray” and craving authoritarian leadership. Yes, immorality is a real problem these days. But no, Christ-less religion is not the solution!



The good news is that the tide has turned. The apostolic truth that *God IS love* would have been strange news to the Christ-less religions of the ancient world. But prophets like Abraham, Moses, David and Hosea began to catch glimpses of the grace that would arrive in the person of Jesus Christ, love incarnate. He showed us that God is about restoration, not retribution. The *Abba* Jesus revealed is nothing like the imaginary competitors who thrive on wrath.

The great tragedy is that even Christianity quickly reverted to pagan notions of an angry god who needs appeasement through violence. That image held sway for many centuries but it is fast fading in the light of the glory of the Father’s great love. Even my agnostic friends know that if

there is a God, that God is kind, welcoming and merciful. Their intuitions of God are far more Christlike than what they’ve heard from Christ-less religion.

Indeed, I suspect the time has come for toxic theologies of divine retribution, eternal fiery

torment and angry moralism to take their turn on the defensive. Those who slander the good news of God’s grace are now ensnared in a perilous error. It’s time for them to repent of the ways their “gospel” has created generations of fed-up atheists. It’s time they see that love wins!

#### SUMMARY

Yes, religiosity is alive and well, but we can learn to sniff out its sneaky inroads into the most popular and powerful streams within Christendom and into ourselves. Resistance isn’t futile but it does require vigilant discernment. May God grant us mercy to follow the Jesus Way. □

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