

## What Is Religion?

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A recent article in the local paper details an interview with several members of a pagan religion, Wicca. After the celebration of the Spring Solstice they were asked about the nature of their beliefs and faith. "Tell me if this is true," said the interviewer. "You pick what you like from other religions and throw the pieces together. You might be absolutely wrong, and you know that. But this religion seems true to you, so you believe it is. Is that right?" To the amazement of the article's author, "the pagans were delighted. They cheered and laughed and yelled, 'That's it.'" (Christine Wicker, "Pagans' Progress, *The Dallas Morning News*, page 1G.). A pagan is even quoted as saying "I don't care if your god is 5,000 years old or something you just made up last Tuesday. If it gets you through the dark of the night, if it's there for you when you celebrate, if it's there when you need comfort from the death of your mother or your best friend, then it's a true religion, whatever it is. My religion is there for me just as much as a Baptist's is there for him" (page 3G).

While being somewhat concerned by a handful of people who wish to wear laurels and celebrate spring, I must confess great distress that their description of religion accurately reflects most Americans' assessment of it. Is religion whatever we make of it? If it seems true to me does that make it true, even if I just made it up last Tuesday? What is religion?

The apostle Paul sheds light on this matter in his sermon in Athens. Addressing a crowd that was very religious, with more idols and temples than he could count, Paul did not tell his audience all was well. Acts 17 is completely without any

statement of Paul that "You are making it up as you go along, and that is great" or "If it seems good and true to you, then it must be." Instead Paul challenges his listeners to realize what religion is actually all about: "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that **they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him**, though He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27). Religion is the seeking of the Lord that we might find Him. That is what religion is concerned with, and that is the driving force behind it. Religion is, in simple terms, the search for God that we might understand Him, His purpose for us, and how we can serve Him.

Do we understand the vast implications of this definition? It means, for example, that **religion is not primarily concerned with improving conditions on this planet**. Many have decided that this is organized religion's role in society. The church should offer homeless shelters, soup kitchens, job training and every other kind of social program to improve humanity's lot here. Yet this is a man-centered focus in religion, instead of being God centered. Is it a coincidence that the social-gospel movement was born in Europe's seminaries, where faith in God and the Bible had long been destroyed? Since religion's primary object (God) had been declared dead and nonexistent a new emphasis had to be found: the problems of people. Read Paul's statement again. He does not say that we are here to create our own utopia or paradise. Our job is to seek God and find Him. That is religion.

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# All Feeling, No Proof

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*By Robert Turner, via Plain Talk, April 1970*

[Editor's Note: it is always a delight to bring brother Turner's clear thinking to our readers. With more and more mainstream churches of Christ talking about being "Spirit led" and leaning to all out charismatic practices it is of interest to see that this article, written in 1970, proves there is nothing new under the sun! -- mdr]

The current rash or tongue-speaking, miracle-sanctioning, and the far more common errors concerning direct Spirit indwelling, that infects many institutional churches of Christ, was not brought to earth in the Apollo 11 moon dust. It sprang from causes within the ranks. Last month we suggested that reaction to coldness may have triggered some of this error. As an interrelated cause, some sought to promote "genuine worship" with material props, such as dimmed lights, mood music (a cappella, of course) and other "devotional" clap-trap; and the resulting emotionalism was glibly assigned to the Holy Spirit.

Serving God "from the heart" involves the emotions, to be sure — but such emotions as proceed from knowledge of God's will, and desire to serve Him. The "art work" and parties of the popular Young People's Classes produce only a superficial knowledge of the Bible, ("doctrinal" studies, you know, are no longer "relevant") so churches that have gone along with the modern trends are poorly equipped to combat "direct Spirit" errors.

But the underlying cause of this and practically every other "brotherhood" problem is subjectivism — looking within ourselves for authority. When brethren no longer feel the need for Bible authority (external authority — going to the Bible for their faith, Rom. 10:17) they look inward, to human reason, practical experience or "feelings" for the answers. This may begin with their feelings about instrumental music (I like) or the care of orphans (Surely that is good) or other churchhood projects (proven right by "mainstream" acceptance) until

finally, demands for Bible authority become most distasteful.

Subjectivism takes many forms. The rank modernist makes God's word subject to his approval — divine truth becomes "relative" to his understanding, or so he thinks. But the same error is at work among those who say God's word can be understood only by the Spirit-endowed elect. And those who believe they are cut by the Holy Spirit (apart from His sword, the written word) are but a step away.

When Pat Boone says that God communicates with Him "in a way that maybe you wouldn't understand except inwardly and in a spiritual way" — this is subjectivism. The product of the communication is put upon exactly the same ground as the feeling, or "still small voice" of the sectarian, that he offers as proof of his salvation. Neither can be proven by the external authority of God's word, as revealed to the Apostles and Prophets. ( 1 Jn. 4:6; Eph. 3:3-5; 1 Cor. 14-37).

Conservative brethren, who have steadfastly demanded Bible authority for faith and practice, are little affected by the current Spirit craze. It is the brother who has been softened by earlier forms of subjectivism who now "feels" that the Holy Spirit helps him to find a parking place. I feel no joy in stating this. I am saddened by the defection of Pat Boone, and all the others. But my sadness began long before they got this far. It began years ago, as they took their first steps in institutionalism and the social gospel movement. †



**This month Tape of the Month** discusses idolatry in America today. While our culture may not build and worship statues there is much that constitutes idolatry all around us. "**American Idols**" will help you see today's idols in the light of the Scriptures. **Write, call or email today for your free copy of this tape.**

**Further, religion was not designed to provide a coping mechanism for life's unpleasant realities.** In truth, this may be what most people think religion is for. As the lady quoted above says, "If it gets you through the dark of the night . . . if it's there when you need comfort from the death of your mother or your best friend, then it's a true religion." Many people who are not religious in any form (right or wrong) suddenly want to have all sorts of religious ceremonies, services and preachers around them when they are near death, or a loved one has died. This is also true whenever there is a tragedy or terrible illness. People just seem to sense that religion ought to have something to do with life after death, or prayer and petition when in real trouble. Yet again, this is not the purpose of religion. Religion is about finding God. Once we find Him then we may discover that He offers comfort in time of trouble, or has promised to respond to our prayer. But that would simply be a "by product" of finding that God is good and benevolent in His care for the universe and creation. Like a small child who is only concerned with the candy that his grandfather offers, with no concern at all for the grandfather, all too often we want to grab the "goodies" that God offers without showing any concern for Him. Religion is the showing of that concern, and should not be confused with the benefits that religion might offer.

**Religion is not about the business of making you into a happier, more fulfilled person.** Again, so many today want to substitute their own agenda for the real purpose of religion. There is so much talk about "spirituality" in our media that many have decided they need to address the spiritual dimension of their lives. In a characteristically human way, they selfishly look to see what they want, rather than seeking God to see what He desires. This is not religion. This is nothing more than selfishness wearing the mantle of religion to conceal its real intent. It will not work. Gratifying self is different from seeking and serving God. It does not matter if I gratify myself in a cathedral or church building, and everyone calls it "Christianity." Doing for me, finding what I want, and serving myself is not the goal of religion. Finding God is all that matters.

**Finally, religion is not something that we**

**are at liberty to "make up" or do as we please.** Religion is the search for God. As such, it is a quantifiable, objective process and pursuit. Every kind of evidence ought to be marshaled to first determine if God even exists. Then we should examine all evidence that He has communicated with humankind. Is God there? Has He spoken to us? What does He want? For what purpose did He make and create us? These are the primary questions that religion is concerned with. Understanding this it becomes apparent that the idea of "making up" a god is ridiculous. The god that I conjure up will not be the true God that real religion is involved in finding and serving. Instead, I will have deluded myself with my own little concept of God and actually deprive myself of finding the true God! How sad (and crazy) it would be if someone who was searching for Mount Everest decided to make a little mountain out of modeling clay and proclaim that this was, for him, Mount Everest. No, it is not, because Mount Everest is an objective, fixed item existing in this universe. Likewise, those who fashion their own gods have failed to reckon with God's objective, fixed nature and that He exists in this universe just as surely as Mount Everest does. Any search that ends before it finds Him is a search that has been called off too soon! In truth, the person who bows down to their own creation of god (made up last Tuesday) is simply not as well off as the person who is serving the real God who can answer prayer and save our souls. A made-up god is a cheap and poor substitute for the real God who governs our world.

What we are saying then, is that God is not an amorphous, do-with-Him-as-you-will abstract notion that no one can find or really understand. God is a fact. He is a Being with a nature, the ability to speak with His creation, and actual purposes and design for each of us. Our feelings and what we want to believe have exactly nothing to do with His reality. Let us search for Him, and be content with no other god or substitute religion. The Bible claims to be from the God who created us all (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Genesis 1:1ff). I would strongly suggest that all turn their attention to this Book of Books and begin their search for God right there. Then and only then can we find true religion. ✚

*from June 1996, Abundant Life*



## The Preacher's Pen

Who would've thunk it? The Texas Legislature is concerned about the sexually provocative practices of school cheerleaders! The good Legislature is only a little behind. For years preachers have been saying the standard "uniforms" high school cheerleaders wear (namely very short skirts) are immodest and that their "dance moves" in these short skirts provoke teen-age boys to lust. Of course, when preachers say this mothers shriek at the mere thought that anyone would *suggest* their daughter might be dressing *suggestively*. How antiquated! After all, being a cheerleader is so all-American. Who could possibly oppose such?

Apparently, the Texas Legislature will. Al Edwards has introduced a bill that directs the state education commissioner to intervene when high school cheerleaders dance routines get "too down and dirty." The bill has passed a Texas House Committee and is now continuing on its way through the process for a final vote. Edwards said he wanted to put an end to "sexually suggestive" performances at athletic events and other extracurricular competitions. "It's just too sexually oriented, you know, the way they're shaking their behinds and going on, breaking it down," said Edwards, a 26-year veteran of the Texas House. "And then we say to

them, 'don't get involved in sex unless it's marriage or love, it's dangerous out there' and yet the teachers and directors are helping them go through those kind of gyrations."

Finally someone has recognized the outrageous hypocrisy that is much of today's cheerleading. I expect much of this is due to the professional dance teams that now degrade themselves and pander to carnal lust at every professional sporting event. These dancers perform during time outs, and are enough to make one wonder if he is at a strip joint or a ball game! Naturally, high school and junior high cheerleaders are now copying what they see on television and at the pro games. How sad. I firmly believe that if there never had been cheerleaders and someone just now came up with the idea of dressing up high school girls in short skirts and bare midriff tops to dance around before everyone people would call the idea sexist, chauvinistic and perverted. But because it was introduced slowly, and because cheerleader skirts gradually got shorter and shorter, America has been conditioned to expect such, and want more. I applaud the Legislature for finally doing something about these embarrassing scenes at ball games and urge every Christian, especially Christian girls and their mothers to heed Paul's admonition: "women adorn themselves in modest apparel." (1 Tim 2:9). **Mark**

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