



## Foundations of Religion

### Should You Be Religious?

When I was between my sophomore and junior years in college, I took a short vacation to visit a friend in a beach town in Florida. My friend had three roommates and when they picked me up at the airport, every one of them was stoned. They all had been smoking marijuana on the way and the ride to their place was an adventure to say the least. It was my first time praying with such fervency and fear. I was taken to parties where there was lots of drinking and drug usage but as I did neither, I certainly stood out. Conversations were a roller coaster of incoherence and strange meanderings. One wild event at the beach had hundreds of young adults and teens there wildly drunk. Even a gun went off over the crowd. By the end of the week though, each one of my friend's roommates came to me with their stories of terrible childhoods and years spent as young teens living on the streets. Each of the guys longed for the sort of life I had of stability, pursuable dreams for the future and more importantly, faith. They all wanted to know about my life as a Christian and how I held onto Christ for my salvation. I had never been around anyone so broken and wrecked as the roommates of my friend and it changed how I saw life, how I viewed my mission as a believer. It was my first time fully grasping how the lack of religion impacts the lives of others.

Not all religions are created equal. According to James, the brother of Jesus, there are two religions. He writes, **Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.** (James 1:27 NIV) The translation does not bring out the full insistence James makes. Let me share with you a slightly more precise translation. **Religion, void of evil and pure from the God and Father is this, to bring comfort to orphans and widows in their distressing circumstances and to keep oneself spotless from the world.** (James 1: 27) So, there is religion that is from God the Father which is void of evil and pure and all other forms of religion that are out there. Choose any of them and they all have this one quality. They aren't from God. Only the religion that is void of evil and pure is from God and it is, because it is from God, precisely that. Void of evil and pure. James does not tell us where this vast category of non-God religions originates; he simply lets us know they are not from God. And more importantly, the religion from God is void of evil and pure.

How does God religion look? It has two quite simple characteristics. First, it is comprised of comforting orphans and widows in their distressing circumstances. We are going to discuss that quality today. The second characteristic is that those practicing religion that comes from God work hard to not be tainted by the world. This second characteristic is a complicated topic and one that will be tackled next time. Now, let us be clear from the beginning. God religion is not just about helping orphans and widows who are in painful or difficult circumstances. They of course represent the entire class of people everywhere who are hurting, who face tough times. It's the broken of the world, the defenseless, the hopeless who God religion brings comfort.

Ancient religions that were not from God had horrific practices. In many parts of the world, widows were sacrificed so they could join their dead husbands in the afterworld. Children were sacrificed to the false gods, who the Bible labels demons. A common way of worship for the religions that were not God religions was to have male and female prostitutes at the various temples for the benefit of the men who came. Men, women and children were mere tools, objects of lust and destruction in the hands of non-God religions. In contrast,

God religion in the ancient world required that the people of Israel provide for the poor. Fields were not to be completely harvested by their owners, grain and fruit were to be left behind for the poor to gather. **"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God."** (Leviticus 23: 22 NIV) Likewise, foreigners, who chose to live in Israel were not to be treated any different from fellow Hebrews and special care was to be taken that they enjoyed the benefits God's people had. **The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.** (Leviticus 19: 34 NIV) Of course, God religion had no room for child sacrifice of any sort. **Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire..Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.** (Deuteronomy 18: 10-13 NIV)

God religion brings comfort to those in need. We have no greater authority than Jesus who said there are two great commands of God and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. **Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."** (Matthew 22: 37-40 NIV) Less well known but even more dramatic is Jesus taking this command to a more profound level of practice. He insisted that God's people are not only to love their neighbors as themselves but also their enemies. **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.** (Matthew 5: 43-45 NIV) Only God religion insists this is the case. All human interactions if they are to be in the realm of the "void of evil and pure", of God religion, removes the category of enemy from the vocabulary of life together and that is most revolutionary and profound.

This war in the Ukraine has been on nearly all our minds now day and night. It threatens the stability of the entire world, and the evil of the invasion is profoundly terrible. What has struck me as it is being described is the sort of love your neighbor as yourself behavior that God wants of us being unleashed in the midst of this tragic invasion. Maarten Roelofs, who lives in the Netherlands was bidden to come to the aid of the wife of someone who used to work with him. She was nine months pregnant and approaching the border of the Ukraine, trying to escape the Russian attackers. Never having met the woman, he quickly said he would go get her. Him and a neighbor took off work and drove fifteen hours to bring Ellen to safety. He said it was heart-breaking when he arrived and was happy he could bring Ellen to a safe place. A father who was desperate to try and get his two children away from the fighting but couldn't leave the country himself because all men were needed for defending Ukraine brought them to the border and asked a stranger who was crossing the border if she would take charge of his children to bring them to safety. She quickly agreed and Ableyeva was entrusted with the passports of the children and was able to get them to their mother who had been outside the country at the time of the invasion.

Nick Horseman drove thirty hours to the Polish Ukrainian border to bring much needed medical supplies and food but when he got there, he was so overwhelmed by the desperate need of the people he stayed there. He has brought twenty women and children to safety, driving fourteen hours each day and spending over \$3,000 of his own money to pay for their first night lodging and hot meals on the way to where they asked to be brought. Moms in Poland have been leaving strollers at the train station for Ukrainian moms who needed them. Many of the strollers were filled with warm blankets and items the children would need. Perhaps you have already seen the video of the young Russian soldier who was captured by the Ukrainians being fed a sandwich and tea by some of the Ukrainian women. He was invited to call his mom back home on a video call and as he was talking with her he wept. At the German central train station in Berlin, thousands of Germans held up signs offering the Ukrainian refugees a place to stay. We may not know how we can show the same sort of kindness and love Christ has shown us but every day is an opportunity to practice the religion of God that loves others any way they can knowing full well kindness is the way of true Christian living.