

Preaching Against Religion

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During the Sundays of Advent, I received an unusually high volume of criticism. Typical was the criticism of a retired Duke professor: “Your pre-Christmas sermons lack sufficient ethical content. This apocalyptic, mythological Advent stuff gets old. Don’t you have more to say to educated, talented people than ‘just you wait, God is coming to save us’?”

My Barthian assessment of my Advent sermon critics was that they had probably been indoctrinated to think that preaching is supposed to encourage the practice of religion. No, preaching any time of the church’s year, but especially in Advent, is an assault upon religion. Religion is a name for what we do for God. Gospel, in Advent or anytime of the year, is a word that indicates what God is doing -- just you wait, God is coming to save us.

Last year, “I love Jesus but hate religion,” went viral (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>). In the video an edgy young man rapped his scorn for religion, accusing “religion” of perverting the dear, sweet, simple, loving Jesus. The religion refutation riff was refuted by a cherubic young priest in clerical collar (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru_tC4fv6FE&sns=em), who crooned that he loved religion, church, and sacraments. Advent texts suggest that both videos are theologically mistaken. What God in Jesus Christ did was destroy religion in order to save us.

The Sin of Religion

Christians regard religion as a sinful product of human religious aspiration. Our thoughts about God quite naturally tend to be religious. One reason why we must be theologically formed through faithful preaching is so that we won’t confuse our speech about God with God. “God” as spoken of in religion, is a projection, a product of our religious imagination, that is, *an idol*.

A seminal discovery of Karl Barth: *Feuerbach was right*. Barth asserted that the anti-theologian Feuerbach was “more theological than many of the theologians” when Feuerbach said that what we call “God” is merely a projection of human aspirations, “Man” in a loud voice. Barth startled the theological guild by agreeing with Feuerbach, calling religion a human contrivance to have God on our terms, a façade that conceals the deepest, most virulent form of disbelief.¹ (So did Bonhoeffer in his prison thoughts on “religionless Christianity.”)

Barth said that religion was unavoidable and takes many forms.² Even modern anti-religion is religiousness in another form. (Christopher Hitchens was as vehement and dogmatic as any annoying street evangelist. Hitchens never seemed to catch on that he wasn’t against “religion”; he was down on all religions except his.) Jesus Christ was crucified in the interest of religion because religion, for any of its weaknesses, is still able to recognize its chief competitor. Both Barth and Bonhoeffer taught that Jesus Christ is the most severe critic and destroyer of the autosalvation efforts of religion.

Barth calls religion the result of human yearning for the divine: Tillich's "ultimate concern" (defined by Tillich as "the self-transcendence of life under the dimension of the spirit"). Barth countered that religion is the name for the practices occasioned by disbelief. It's what we do to protect ourselves from the living God even as religion claims to be leading us before God. Barth says that religion is probably inevitable and unavoidable because God is God and we are not, and we try to deal with that awesome truth the only way humanly possible – idolatry.³

The only good thing about religion, says Barth, is that it often "brings us to a place where we must wait in order that God may confront us – on the other side of the frontier of religion."⁴ That is, religion sometimes brings us to a deceptively secure holding place where, even while we are (unknowingly) attempting to protect ourselves from the living God through the practices of religion, God seizes the opportunity to jump us. (Oh the countless souls who, settling down in the pew to listen to a sermon, fully expecting to hear a set of reassuring bromides or sensible ethical advice through the sermon are cornered by a living God!)

Many theologies (Calvin) begin with discussion of human religious consciousness, claiming that the desire for God shows the existence of God, alleging some sort of universal, natural consciousness of God. Barth believed that's where all the trouble starts. We are incurably religious, just chock full of desire for God – on our own terms. God begins where human consciousness ends, in that great boundary between God and ourselves.

Borrowing an analogy from Luther, Barth says that religion is merely a humanly constructed rickety ramp, an ideological ladder by which we vainly attempt ascent to God. Sometimes a congregation listens to a sermon, thinking that thereby they will receive comprehensible religious information, only to have the sermon open up frightening space when what they thought they knew of God is destroyed by the arrival of the God who is.

Preaching uniquely participates in and is utilized by God's living, revealing presence (that is, Jesus Christ). Revelation is the "abolition of religion." There is no access to God other than God, no right word about God to be spoken except by God, no way from us to God except by the way made from God to us, that is, no way except revelation. Revelation, God's self-disclosure, devastates religion by unmasking our attempts at God construction and by showing us that only God can speak of God, speaking to us a truthful word about God that we cannot speak to ourselves. Accurate, truthful knowledge of God is not built upon our alleged desire for God or our skilled intellectual conceptualization of God, but rather in the shock occasioned by God's strange desire for us, that is, Jesus Christ.

Religion, attempting to base our relationship to God on what we think, we feel, or we do, is a rejection of God's self-offering, that is, God's revelation to us. Whereas religion attempts to have God on our terms rather than God's revelation (alas, much of contemporary "ethics" and most of what passes for "spirituality" is just that) is God's availability to us, a gift that can only come from God. Bonhoeffer defines "religion" as any recourse to the transcendent that enables humans to avoid the radical claims of Jesus. Pious language in sermons is often a religious, sentimental distraction from concrete duties of discipleship.

Jesus Christ Against Religion

Revelation as Jesus Christ is so devastating to religion because God Incarnate, God as God, rather than as we have imagined, is so very different from the God we thought we needed, the God whom we deemed worthy of our worship. Religion is our attempt to make God mean what we think we need at the moment to give us a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Revelation devastates religion by giving God a name, a face, and an irreducible, unsubstitutable, non-pliable content: Jesus Christ.

Fleming Rutledge (Barthian in Anglican clothing) says that many who are stuck within compromised, liberal, mainline congregations secretly love Advent because that's the only season when the lectionary permits a sustained focus upon judgment.⁵ In Advent the permissive, all-embracing Jesus who – the rest of the year – is just pleased as punch to be with nice people like us, descends upon clouds to judge us. We are exposed to higher standards of judgment than our own individual consciences. We have the opportunity to fall into the fearful grasp of a living God who is not the God we thought we were awaiting. The Advent Christ who comes, rather than the one devised by us, is neither fulfillment of nor progressive improvement upon our attempts to know God; he is judgment upon and the end of our attempts to think about God, the death of all our attempts to, through our concepts and practices, reconcile the world to God.

Jesus Christ is another name for revelation. Without that revelation, which is Jesus Christ, we would never know the sin of our religion. Rejection of mysticism, abstraction and theological systems, principles and noble concepts, all our self-salubrious spiritual practices seem to accompany careful focus upon the oddness and stunning particularly of Jesus Christ.

For our religion to be redeemed, a divine act must occur that is somewhat analogous to that of the justification of sinners. Jesus Christ forgives our sin, including that sin that is religion. If on occasion our religion brings us closer to God, that too is an action of God, a concrete instance of “the just shall live by faith” rather than of our astute religious practices.

As a preacher I find it helpful to assume that most people to whom I preach are listening to my sermon for the wrong reasons. They are hoping to find more purposeful lives or deeper meaning, or to polish their idealized self-image (matters of little interest to Scripture). Miraculously (sometimes during the sermon) their reasons are judged, redeemed, and transformed into a desire to be with the living and true God, whether or not they feel better afterwards.

The grace of God is noted for its disruption because grace is God coming to us in all of God's sovereignty, God so different from the God we thought we wanted. Grace is always an intrusion from outside our human modes of cognition and conceptualization. Thus Barth spoke of the First Commandment as the “axiom for theology,” calling for theology to unmask our anthropologies that masquerade as theology.

Revelation comes to us to judge and to convert us. Faith is given to us, not summoned from us. So far as God is concerned, we have no capacity to hear before God gives hearing. God is intrusive act and pure gift, not something that we discover on our own. Church is whatever God does among those who hear sermons, not something that we must produce through sermons. Church is not a religious society where people go to engage in certain salubrious practices, but rather the strange and surprising form

that Christ takes among a group of people who, even in our bumbling “religion,” are susceptible to Christ who loves to save sinners.

Let us listen to the preaching of John the Baptist, Advent preacher par excellence, and learn that far from being just another religious activity, preaching is a primary means that God uses to dismantle religion, to take us out into the wilderness. John didn’t preach at the synagogue or temple, and we preachers know why: preaching lives uneasily with the church, and we preachers, on a weekly basis, find ourselves in, but at some distance from, the church. Preaching is more than the product of the church; preaching at key moments stands against the church and speaks a word we could not have come up with on our own.

Preaching assaults “religion” in these ways:

1. As Bonhoeffer said, there is only one preacher, Christ. We speak of him only because he has spoken (and speaks!) to us. The word Christ speaks is himself, the Incarnate Word. In Advent we await the living God who is Emmanuel, not an abstract principle or another program for human betterment. Preaching is that daring endeavor whereby Christ is invited to be present among his people in all of his sovereign, prickly glory. And whenever Christ shows up at the temple, there is usually trouble.
2. We don’t make or create Christ’s presence; we announce. Therefore we preachers must beware of apologetics as well as of reasonable, common sense, knock-down arguments. The sermon is meant to call to faith, summoning the congregation to risky exposure to the living God, rather than to serve as a rhetorical substitute for faith. We North American preachers have a full time job avoiding the presentation of Christ as a means for people’s self-aggrandizement. Stanley Hauerwas told me that the best sermon I ever preached was during Advent, a tortured presentation of the kenosis hymn from Philippians. “I dare the congregation to try to do something useful with that sermon!” Hauerwas exclaimed.
3. Christ’s word for us is the judging/gracious news of the end of our burdensome, ultimately futile treadmill of religion. Our vaunted religion is so sad because Jesus Christ has already fixed the problem between us and God, bridged the gap, done the work. Therefore preaching is often simple celebration that all of the heavy lifting in regard to our notorious, ages long “God problem” has been done.
4. Preaching is mostly about witness. We do not offer a better way of being religious; we simply know an open secret that is the world’s good news. The church is recipient of Christ’s love not because we’re the church, but because his love is for all of his world, whether that world is in rebellion against him through anti-religion or through religion.
5. We keep preaching, and we keep listening because revelation is like manna. So far as our relationship with God is concerned, there is no having, possessing; there is only receiving. Preaching is a fragile artistic endeavor. Religion falsely attempts to stabilize our dealings with God, to put matters in our hands rather than to allow the church always to be reconstituted by Christ, received in faith. Our speaking really isn’t a sermon until God says it’s a sermon and makes it God’s word.
6. As testimony, preaching must not attempt to mount knock down arguments, work from irrefutable principles, or base itself upon common sense and proverbial wisdom. These attempts are “religious” in that while they present themselves as a helpful homiletical attempt to bring the congregation close to God, in actual practice,

they protect the congregation from God by implying that we can humanly concoct a way to speak about God rather than be utterly dependent upon God speaking to us. Our sermons cannot be validated or helped much by referral to allegedly certain convictions of science, philosophy, or politics. These disciplines cannot be used as a foundation for or a way up to faith, but in the hands of the religious are themselves religiously freestanding idols against faith.

7. Some of preaching's best work against religion is when our sermons provoke misunderstanding and confusion and thus open the gap between us and God, reminding the congregation of the strangeness of Jesus and the distance between us and God that is only bridged by God. We should not be surprised when many of our sermonically "failures" are preaching at its most faithful. God often speaks where human talk about God ends. Any word about God that can be received or understood on its own, apart from the instigation of the Trinity, is a false word.

Notes

1 Karl Barth, "An Introductory Essay," in Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), xxv.

2 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I.2 ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 280-4. Also see III.4, 456-463.

3 As Nicholas Lash puts it, "All human beings have their hearts set somewhere, hold something sacred, worship at some shrine. We are all spontaneously idolatrous." *The Beginning and End of "Religion"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61.

4 Barth, (*Romans*, II, 22).

5 Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 13.