

THE UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

From Religion Hurts, Why religions do harm as well as good by John Bowker

This is a beautifully written attractive hardback published by SPCK London 2018.

In the introduction the author asks what religion means. He said that religio in Lucretius when he wrote, "How many evils has religion caused!" is not the same thing as what Marx and Engels attacked when they said religion was the opiate of the people. I would advise not getting into that except to say that for Lucretius religion meant running after gods for favours and for Christianity/Islam it is about dedication to a God who is claimed to be absolute goodness. Both Lucretius and Marx/Engels could still be right to be critical of religion as it is in their day.

At this point, I would like to add that religion for a Muslim does not mean the same thing as for a Hindu. For a Muslim, you need a prophet or prophets who are basically dictating the words of God word for word. That is what makes a religion. Hinduism holds that there are many gods and you just choose whatever works for you and its true for you.

The Christian might say that religion is nothing more than Jesus Christ himself. The idea is that people are in a relationship with him and they learn from him and get spiritual 'food' to be good from him. He is the doctor for sinners. Christ is Christianity. So religion is a person not a gathering of similar beliefs even though being with this person may lead to a gathering of that kind. This means that no pope or individual has the right to demand to be seen as Christian for only Jesus assesses that. It is a way of avoiding confusion if some liar or heretic pretends to be Christian and lies about the principles. It means that no other religion is really religion in any proper sense. In this view, if people who say they are devoted to Jesus are not on the whole any different from atheists and those who are not devoted to Jesus then Jesus is to blame. A relationship with him is not producing results so it falls back on him. He stands condemned.

He talks about religion and religious. The two might be or not be the same thing. It depends. A person who is not in the Catholic religion or baptised and thus is not considered Christian might take up the religious practice of the rosary.

For some it is dangerous to be religious for they do evil in the name of faith. For others involvement in a religion is what is dangerous. It depends. Or being both may lead to grave harm.

He agrees with Wittgenstein that religions are recognised by having family resemblances. It is something like Augustine said that we know when we see it but it is hard to explain it. If religion can hurt or heal as this book says, what if it is God's religion? It does not even matter for no religion has a monopoly on helping people. Religion says it does matter for only God has the right to set up a religion and use it to bring us to him. But how can it matter if all of us on earth are just as good or bad as each other? Religion is acting like an ideology with lies and pretence and double speak.

Jesus sanctioned the greatest commandment which says only God must be loved as God by you and nothing else which summarises the commandments which are part of the ten that that no other God or image must be worshipped but one. The reference to the need to love God with all your being is a way of saying what many say, "You need to worship God and if you don't you will worship another god so you are innately religious." But this defines everything as true religion or false. This lacks credibility. It is virtually saying, "Most religion is bad". So there is a religion or two that can be excepted. But the atheist will say, "If nearly all religion is bad, then it matters little if I just go a step further and condemn them all! One thing that will lead to that is the realisation that if love means you need the other person to be happy even if it means you are in total misery as a result, this cannot apply to God who cannot be hurt or made unhappy. The commandment to love God then is based on a lie or philosophical incompetence.

Some who say religion is the best of human nature blame those who say religion is bad for making members do bad in the name of religion. But if religion is able to make even a few react that way then it is bad. No religion will ever be able to corrupt all. It has to make do with corrupting what it can. And at the end of this the critic is blamed and demonised! It is not a numbers game and it is evil to say it is.

Suppose God did set up a religion. If God is good then the followers of his religion are somehow injecting harm in it. They turn what is innately good into something that is innately both good and bad. It is not right to accuse people like that over God who may not exist when you cannot prove him or cannot prove that the religion is his.

Or maybe you will decide that if some supernatural power set up the religion then it is a morally dubious one.

The fact remains that if a religion is saying it came from God then even if it says God is good it is still suggesting he might

not be. You can take a position but unless the position is 100% firm which it cannot be there are suggestions being made that you may not talk about. But they are there. If the religion imagines it is from God and is not, then God himself is being abused in a sense, in the name of religion.

A manmade religion will hurt as well as heal. That is what anything human does. But saying the religion is from God dodges this responsibility. It then becomes a claim that God made a good religion and people won't live it. So if you are corrupted by the religion nobody wants to know and thus the problem is prolonged and even empowered. No accurate diagnosis, then no cure.

Nobody has thought of defining religion as being based on a book that is to be considered the same as if God wrote it or protected the writers from doctrinal or moral error. Or you could define religion in its fullest sense as what appears when people take such a book seriously.

The author then speaking of fundamentalists starts to ask if the text dictates its meaning to the reader or if it is up to the reader to discern the meaning. "Dictation theories of meaning allow the text to move from page to person in a direct way." Both dictation of meaning and you discerning are compatible. Dictation from God seems to be the only way to stop or at least minimise the risk of a person being led astray by somebody claiming to having authority from God. You get direct communication. Also, it is harder to fake dictation from God. Sure enough it is obvious that books that claim to be dictated even by something of remarkable intelligence, never mind an all knowing God, fall short. Dictation needs to really happen and need to be from God and that makes it the best way to free you from humans who exploit the religious desire and need.

A religion that can hurt or harm is not the same as a religion that can be used to hurt. (That is not to say a religion that can hurt cannot be used to hurt even in a way it does not sanction!) The latter is not the religion hurting. To say that religion hurts or harm is to say it has no right to be immune from criticism. Also, as each religion hurts in different ways a person should be granted encouragement to find a religion that suits them even if it means leaving their own. Yet Catholicism, Mormonism and Islam are examples of religions that just won't let go. A decent humble religion encourages you to go and throws a party if you have found what is right for you.

Religion is also not something that accidentally hurts. We are talking here about something that does good to you but with a but. It might turn nasty. Indeed the seed of nastiness is there and that is the real issue not any harm done.