

Patrick H Gormley

## TOXIC FAITH

Toxic Faith (a summary by B. Jackson)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A. The following is a summary of the book Toxic Faith by Stephen Arterburn & Jack Felton (Oliver-Nelson, 1991)

B. I wrote this during the most trying time of my life when the issues raised by Arterburn and Felton came as a godsend to me. They apply the insights of family systems theory and religious addiction to life in the church. I helped to father a church in Indianapolis that had aspects of toxicity and these principles and truths enabled me to understand and explain much of my history in both my family of origin and the church

### 2. INTRODUCTORY ISSUES

A. Religious addiction

1. Def. of addiction: when a person is excessively/compulsively devoted (sacrificing family, job, economic security, relationship with God, their bodies or mental health) to a substance, relationship or behavior

#### REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

In response to Point 1: Jesus Christ asked for excessive devotion to him. He said we must give up all our money, stay with our wives for life and have such a revulsion for sin that it is to be compared with the hatred of sin that a person feels if they cut off their hands to prevent themselves from sinning. He said that whoever is not for him is against him - this is very uncompromising and intolerant.

If there is a God, then we are insignificant. Christians believe that God didn't have to make us. They will answer the only way they can. They will say that God gives us importance for he loves us so much and he has a plan for us. We are to love God with all our feelings and our whole being - that is far more extreme than putting alcohol before yourself. At least then you still care about yourself a bit!

All religion, whether it manages it or not, is an attempt to nurture religious addiction in the vulnerable. The book says you can and should have a committed Christian faith without religion for it sees faith in terms of a personal relationship with God. This does not get away from the problem of religious addiction. You may see yourself as having a personal relationship with God and you may be very individualistic. You will deny that you are religious. But you are. You are trying to be your own religion with God.

2. When people suffer from not knowing they are secure and significant, things which should be learned from one's family of origin and ultimately from a relationship with God in Christ, they have a vacuum in their soul that demands to be filled

#### REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

In response to Point 2: To say that all people have a vacuum in their soul that can only be filled by God through Jesus Christ is to say that counselling and psychiatric and everything else should be Christian and anything that isn't should be banned.

Not all of us experience this vacuum. And the vacuum is emotional. It is a common mistake to assume that emotional problems are psychological problems and spiritual problems. Somebody that is feeling bad has had a bad chemical reaction to some event or situation. That is all.

It is a form of bullying to assume that we have this vacuum that only Jesus can fulfil. It also accuses those who have ditched Christianity of damaging themselves and going to damage others.

Point 2 is a promoter of toxic religion not a repudiation of it.

The Christian is asked to base their faith on the idea, "Christianity fills a hole nothing else can fill," thus even the good Christians are only outwardly good. They base their happiness on a toxic principle. That has to lead to misery whether they admit it or not.

The idea that liberal Christians have, that all who are sincere in their religion are saved by Jesus whether they know him or not contradicts the experience of some that they were not saved or fulfilled until they explicitly knew of Jesus even though they were sincere in their previous faith. The notion that Christianity alone is the one true faith is highly offensive in today's world. It receives vehement opposition even from so-called Christians who are sick of the arrogance and division and hatred that are rooted in it and they fear the implications that could be teased out.

3. The pain in our souls was intended to drive us to God who, alone, can meet the deep longings of the heart.

Instead of getting the message, we pridefully fight relying on God alone to meet our needs. We avoid listening to the pain by playing self-protective games. Along the way, we often find patterns of behavior that dull the pain, thus making it easier to live with. These pain medications can be virtually any substance, relationship or behavior that provides relief. When a person develops a pathological (abnormal) relationship to a mood-altering experience or substance that has life-damaging consequences, addiction exists

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In response to Point 3: belief in God automatically leads to fatalism. If God is all powerful then randomness does not truly exist. If you win the lottery he has rigged the game. And if you ask him for a win you are asking him to fraud for you. Also, if God should hurt us in the hope of driving us to him that is vindictive. Christians try to manipulate people into having a relationship with a horrible God. They are trying to spread an addiction.

Religion is about being and doing not just believing.

People tend to form groups and be intolerant and sometimes violent. Violent means aiming to hurt. Even silence is a form of violence when engaged in with an intention to let harm take place. Religion may be violent against other religious groups. The religious tend to be disrespectful of those religious people who differ from them.

You might say, "Considering that, we see that even if religion disappeared tomorrow people would still be forming their exclusive little societies and causing division." But at least there would be no religious element. There is a difference between a golf club that excludes women than a religion that excludes sinners or other religions. The golf club prejudice is not as ingrained or as damaging.

Some experts say that religion is a wonderful maker of peace except when it exercises a high degree of control over and a dominant influence upon political and civic life.

When members of intolerant religious systems become easygoing and liberal and become religious moderates, this is due to their fundamentalism being distorted and "infected" by secular principles. The moderates are guilty of double-think. It is not religion that is good but the secular influence. The religionists don't have a strong enough faith to obey their vicious scriptures.

They hypocritically say, "Let us make our children religious and maybe they will not get pregnant before marriage or end up on drugs". Their efforts to keep their kids on the straight and narrow are destined to fail because who listens to hypocrites?

Point 3 is ludicrous for the Christian doctrine that we must detest sin and love the person who expresses his sinful nature through the sin is pure hypocrisy. This implies that God is a God of judgment and hate.

More honest Christians reject the hypocrisy. They teach, "Sometimes it is said that God hates sin (impersonal) but loves the sinner (personal), but this attempt to mitigate the wrath of God is not really faithful to the biblical witness. Wrongdoing in the Bible is never disassociated from the wrongdoers, who are fully responsible for their actions. Retribution cannot be shifted to an impersonal level without it ceasing to be what it is. We cannot imagine a judge excusing a murderer who says he is sorry and offers to clean up the mess, as if the crime were all that mattered. However sincere his repentance might be, the murderer would still be held responsible for his sin, just as we are held responsible for our sins before God" (page 222, *The Doctrine of God*, Gerald Bray, IVP, Illinois, 1993).

Christians say that we need a general purpose of life. It bases this claim on its dogma that God has made us for himself so that we can have a relationship with him for all eternity. They are not talking about a purpose at all though they pretend they are. They are really taking about feeling you have a purpose.

4. Addictions can be divided into three basic types: substance addiction (e.g., alcohol), emotional addiction (letting an emotion run your life e.g., depression), process addiction (e.g., work, religion)

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

4. Devotion to God may be caused by emotional addiction and process addiction. If you understand God as that which only really matters then you are telling yourself you should get addicted.

5. Addiction is ultimately idolatry, that is, the worship of a relationship, substance or behavior instead of God. The idolator worships what is not God. Anything can be an idol - not just a religious figure or a statue of a god. The idolater may say, "I cannot be happy unless I make money. I do this for the glory of God in my own way. I know even in my addiction and greed I am following a warped form of good. Indirectly, I glorify God."

REPLY BY PATRICK GORMLEY

5. To worship a relationship with God is not the same as worshipping God. You can cherish your marriage rather than your spouse. It is easy to love what a person does for you and to imagine that you love the person. The person is bigger than what virtues they have. The Christians say you must love God not to fulfil any need in you but you must simply love him. If you love God, you will love him no matter what he does to you or what he becomes. Even if he were evil it wouldn't matter.

If you loved another person literally with all your heart and soul and mind, that would prove you have an addiction. According to Christianity, its not an addiction when the other person is God. Talk about double standards. And its even worse when you cannot relate to God like you can to yourself or another person.

6. Religion becomes unhealthy when our attendance and service flows, not out of faith in God who has loved us in Christ and given us opportunities to serve out of that place of rest, but out of a need to be loved and find worth. Religious addiction is hard to spot because it has to do with motive. Two people could be serving side by side and one is doing it by faith in God for an eternal reward (gold, silver and precious stones; 1 Cor 3.12) while the other is doing it by faith in the behavior for a temporal reward with no eternal dividends (wood, hay and straw). Religious addicts are also usually the best workers in the church so their dysfunction is not only overlooked but rewarded. Meanwhile, their lives head for disaster.

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6. Who knows if most Christians are suffering religious addiction? You can't tell such apart from those who are not suffering for this addiction. You can't disprove the possibility that all Christians suffer from this addiction.

Religious addiction tends to be more internalised than other forms of addiction. A person who is addicted to God will not show it the same way as a person who is addicted to alcohol would.