

RELIGION WITHOUT GOD

A Series of Three Lectures by the Rev. Dr. Jakób Jocz
Norval, May 30-31, 1964

INTRODUCTION

There are two writers who have made an impact upon me - Kierkegaard and Barth. These two men first drew my attention in a way which I never before realised, to the fact that religion can be a substitute for God and, that in the Bible there is a clash between religion and faith in God. They do not coincide.

This came as a surprise to me and I began to look for passages where this occurs and was surprised how much there is to it. Later in life, in the 40s, I was asked to give a series of lectures at Trinity College, Dublin, and I chose as my subject "Religion and the Gospel". I had to go into this more carefully and work out my own way through that maze of phenomena where religion and the gospel sometimes coincide but more often stand in opposition.

More recently, I was asked to speak at a clergy camp, and I chose as my subject "Religion Without God". It is as a result of the three talks that I gave to that camp that people have since asked me to speak again on the subject.

My talks are divided into three parts: the first, Religion; the second, the Bible in relation to Religion; and the third, Ourselves.

SESSION I - RELIGION

The first thing I would like you to notice is that in the Bible there is no such word as "religion". In the Old Testament there is no word for religion at all. The Old Testament speaks of the love of God, the fear of God, the law of God. In the New Testament, there is a Greek word, "threskeia". In Acts 26:5, St. Paul speaks of the Jewish religion, using this word. In Colossians 2:18, he uses the word in the sense of superstition, but I think that what is meant is that man chooses his religion; he exercises his will in a religious way.

One of the most authoritative theological dictionaries says that the paucity of the use of the word is interesting in view of the fact that it was a common word in Greek practice outside of the New Testament. Greek writers used it in great profusion. It is interesting that such an obvious effort was made to avoid a word which meant religion in the sense that man makes a decision as to who is going to be his God and then practices a certain cult.

Man is a god-making creature, and this is the meaning of idolatry, which is the fact that man dominates his god. He makes the god to his own size.

In the Bible, in the Old Testament, there is another phenomenon closely related to this fact. It is where God Almighty is used in such a way as if He were an idol. There are a number of Old Testament cases where God is treated as the idol; for instance, where God becomes a national God, the God of Israel. This makes God mans' exclusive possession.

With regard to religion in our days, there are two remarkable trends or epochs - two aspects. One is the debunking of religion and the other, the new discovery of religion. And these two trends are very persistent in our time. The debunking of religion took place with the rise and dominance of psychology in modern thinking. It is perhaps not realised that a man like Freud, who has carefully analysed the religious phenomena, was greatly influenced by a philosopher called Feuerbach, who wrote an investigation into the Christian faith called "The Essence of Christianity". In this book so much is true. It says that man really worships himself. But just to stand up and worship yourself would be rather ridiculous, so you project yourself into a higher self – what Freud would call the super ego. It was this kind of thinking on the part of Feuerbach, who in 1841, wrote about the Father Image in religion, which influenced Freud. In the book "The Future of an Illusion", Freud says that at this stage we are grown up enough now to drop religion altogether and get rid of it. There is no Father, so we might as well face this fact.

As the result of psychology there has come about a kind of moving away from religious experience. This lasted till about the second World War, which brought about a frightening upheaval. If our idealism wasn't shattered in the first World War, the second World War did it, especially with the slaughter of the Jewish people. So it was Jung who had to deal with patients whom he psycho-analysed and found that these people were drifting. As he said, all middle-aged people coming to him were in religious need. And it was Jung who began to use religion as a therapeutic medium. He was no believer – he was an atheist – but as a doctor, he had a responsibility towards his patients and, as a doctor prescribes a placebo, so Jung prescribed religion for those who needed it. Oddly enough, it was a man like Julian Huxley who realised that a man needs a wider relationship; that the problem for modern man is his isolation, his enclosure, his separation from nature, from the universe, his sense of being trapped; and it was he, a man with such a facility of the pen, who began to advocate religion as a need of modern man. But this was nothing to do with God.

Before Huxley was born, there was a German writer who said of religion without God: "God is a heavy load upon the world. Faith in him reduces man to nothingness. Man cringes before his judgement and man is fearful. In his presence man stands humbled. To redeem man he must be made proud again. The only way to achieve this is to free man from God. Man must believe in himself and this is the only way to true religion."

Huxley doesn't go all that way. He realises first of all that religion functions as a social bond; it keeps people together. Families which worship together stay together. In the past, religion has performed a very important function in keeping the tribe or social unit of the ethnic group tied together. A French sociologist specialising in religion says that the origin of religion is social. The group creates a kind of super ego which transcends the group and becomes the symbol of worship.

The second thing religion does is to relate man to the universe. It creates mysticism where man ceases to be cut off in isolation from the rest of all that exists. It unifies and relates man to the world.

The last book I want to mention is by a man with the pseudonym Szczesney. It is called "The Future of Unbelief". In this book, Szczesney chides the church for holding on to a superstition regarding the Christian God.

Recently, I read a book by a Jewish intellectual, Emil Weitzner, of New York, who belongs to a group of atheists who meet every Sabbath for worship. They meet out of loyalty to their people, because of an old-established tradition; because they have a deep need to express the wonder and mystery of life. They have only one predicament there is no-one to worship. But this they can get over by worshipping what they call truth and beauty. But they would also like to use the Psalter for their worship because it is such an old-established Jewish tradition, but this is difficult because the Psalter makes reference to God. So they rewrote the Psalter (and I have a copy). This is a Psalter without God for people without God who practice religion.

You may think that Huxley is a crank and that the others are soft in the head and talking nonsense, but when you look around you begin to wonder whether there isn't something that is more widespread and, though not voiced or articulated, yet true in the sense that that kind of attitude of preference for religion without God is widespread.

The former assistant editor of "The Christian Century", Martin Marty, wrote "The New Shape of American Religion". W. Herberg, a Jew, wrote "Protestant-Catholic-Jew". These two men, Americans and contemporaries, with a vast knowledge of modern society, have made this discovery that the whole emphasis of American (and this includes Canada) religion is not with a bias towards God but towards religion. God plays a minor role in the religious effort.

Perhaps it is worth asking to what extent does God dominate our thinking and our lives, and to what extent are we just religious people. In this connection, perhaps we ought to ask this: What is religion?

First of all, it is a remarkable fact that it is a general phenomenon. It is everywhere and affects all people in a variety of ways. You do not need God to be religious; there is Buddhism, which is a vast religion without a god – entirely atheistic. An answer to the question, "What is religion?" in the widest sense has been attempted by many people. One of the most outstanding theologians in the last century said that religion is a sentiment of dependence. If this is a fact, then we are not religious. Huxley talks more or less in the same terms - he says (religion is) "a sense of belonging to a small part of the universe". A German theologian speaks of religion in a fascinating book called "The Idea of the Holy" and speaks of religion as the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*. This can be translated as an experience of the shivers down your spine. How then does religion relate to the revelation of the living God?

SESSION II - THE BIBLE IN RELATION TO RELIGION

It would be helpful to see the Bible not as a kind of jigsaw puzzle, but as a place where there is a constant conflict between God and man. Not in the sense that God fights man and man fights God, but in the sense that man is on the run and God is in pursuit – not to imprison him but to bring him back so that he can fulfill the purpose for which he is created. Man is a fugitive.

There is a book by a Jewish rabbi, called "God's Quest for Man". Abraham Heschel, the author, is obviously very much under the influence of Protestant thinking because the title is a typical Christian title, not a Jewish title. Judaism says man is in quest of God, man seeks God, man tries to puzzle out who God is, man must be pious in order to come closer to God. The typical Christian attitude is to say that God is after man and that man is the fugitive. Adam hid behind the trees and God asked him, "Where art thou?".

The fact that man does not seek God but flees from God, that God appears to be man's enemy, has to be taken into account in order to understand the phenomenon of religion. Since, from this aspect, it would seem that man in his religious endeavour is not really in search of God but entrenching himself, assuming a position, going his own way against God. This will perhaps explain why he makes idols. Of this idol-making, a classical instance is the making of the golden calf. This was not actually a calf, but a bull which the Egyptians worshipped. It was made of gold because that was the most precious metal (Exodus 32:1-16).

This was a tangible and feasible god at the bidding of the people and the fact that man can make his god must be taken into account when we talk about religion. Over against man's god is the God who names Himself. We name or define our god so that he is comprehensible, but the real God, the God whom Moses represents, who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is a God who has to name Himself in order to be heard and understood. He is not within man's grasp and the little god of man and the great God never coincide; they are in conflict.

The point is that, in this clash between God and the gods, man finds on the side of his own choice, man is entrenched and has vested interests in his religion – tradition, loyalty to the group; the fact that he can manage the god whom he made or whom he himself visualized. And so in the Bible we find the religious man entrenched. An example of this you will find in Jeremiah 7:1-4. Here is a real instance where God is treated as an idol in that he becomes man's debtor; he can be bribed and become beholden to man. In the sacrifices, are we not a people that do the will of God by offering sacrifices to the Lord? This is a most remarkable thing, that in the prophetic writings there is a real clash between the prophet and the priest.

The representative of organized religion whose profession it is to see that things are done properly in the temple can surely not displease God. But how can God become man's debtor and be bribed? He will destroy the temple. (Verses 21-34). This attitude to the sacrifices is a most remarkable instance of the clash between religion and the living God. (Isaiah 1:12-17)

The reason for reading this chapter is that we are bad. The people were using incense, calling assemblies and observing all rites, but their hands were spotted with blood and they were not doing what was right. Religion was superstition. So the prophet says - wash yourself, make yourself clean, remove the evil from your doings. The point here is the inference that God does not really want sacrifices; what he wants is man's heart, obedience. (Hosea 8:11-14)

You must constantly bear in mind that temple worship, the sacrificial cult, was the very heart of Old Testament religion and the prophet dared to speak against the temple, against the priesthood, and against the sacrifices, in the name of Almighty God. This clash is dramatised in a remarkable story in Amos, where Amos comes from Judah to speak in the name of God and he goes straight to the counterpart of Canterbury - Beth-el - where the high priest Amaziah tells him to go back to Judah and prophesy never again at Beth-el for it is the king's chapel and the king's court (Amos 7:10-13). This is the clash between religion and God. Entrenched, nationalized, tribal, self-satisfied religion with all the paraphernalia that goes with it - the choir, the bells, the censer, and all the rest of it.

Religion can run away with you and it does. But how far can it go? You have to see the situation as it arises in the New Testament in the clash between Jesus and religious leaders of his time. Here is the whole depth of godless religion in the name of God and for the sake of God, broken up and exhibited in a way in which you find it nowhere else. Jesus did not come to a

pagan people - he came to God's chosen people, his own. Then you have to remember that the execution, the condemnation, the real conflict, took place in the holy city of God, Jerusalem, where he was condemned by God's people, by the leaders of God's people in the city of Jerusalem. The person who was most vitally implicated in the condemnation of the Son of God was the high priest, Caiaphas. It wasn't in Rome or Athens, in a pagan city, that Jesus died, but in the holy city amongst God's people, the religious people, and Jesus was condemned by the high priest.

You have to notice that in the conflict which takes place between Jesus and the religious man of his time one group plays a very special part, and that is the Pharisees. It has become almost a synonym to say Pharisee and hypocrite, but this is a mistake because the Pharisees were not hypocrites. They were the most religious, pious people of the time. They were the best in Israel. They were the people who so fiercely, so tenaciously and with such bitterness opposed the Son of God. This we must take very seriously. It means that man in his orthodoxy can so entrench himself that God cannot say a word to him any more. This is really frightening. Because what Jesus said was not in the prayer books; he could not be right.

So we come to one of the most dramatic people in the New Testament, and that is Paul. He made one of the most remarkable discoveries which led to the change of his life. He discovered that religion can be a subterfuge; it can be not a way to God but a way from God; that religion can be an entrenchment which means self-sufficiency and nothing else; and this he discovered when he found himself, in the name of God, persecuting God's people. In order to be able to receive the gift of grace he had to get rid of his advantages. (Philippians 3:4-11). He was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised, a man who practiced his faith with great assiduity, a Pharisee. But in order to know Jesus Christ he had to regard these things as lost and, in fact, he regarded them as dung, or refuse, "in order that I may gain Christ".

When Jesus came, the religious men should have welcomed him but he was the real opponent. The prostitute, the publican, the sinner opened their hearts - they followed the Master, listened to the gospel, asked for grace and received forgiveness. But the Pharisee did not. He was good and he knew it. This derives from the fact that man is a very complex and involved creature.

We are not just straightforward people; we are very warped, crabbed, prejudiced, conditioned people, who have to be re-made, who can only come in the presence of God completely empty-handed with nothing to offer. This exactly what Paul had to do. He had to free himself of all that he called advantage in order to follow Jesus Christ. This is the real secret of spiritual life. (Revelation 3:14-22)

The problem of the Church of Laodicea was the problem of wrong self-assessment. Religion gives you a false security. It becomes a means of entrenchment and self-satisfaction and becomes idolatrous in the end. In other words, conversion means a conversion of your religion; a turning away from idols to the living God.

Our next problem will be to solve the question: How can I, as a naturally religious person, be a worshipper and a follower of Jesus Christ? You cannot get out of your religious situation and cease to be religious for God's sake. You can't. We are naturally religious. Religion is the natural reaction on the part of every man to the outside world. That is how he relates himself - this is experience of the world. It can express itself in music, in art, in study, in science. Every

human activity, if pursued with any consistency, becomes a religious experience. But this is not God. It is just an experience. We have to find a way from religion to God and the way from religion to God is not my path to Him but His coming to me. This is why I quoted the book "God's Quest for Man".

God finds the religious man exactly where he is, but He expects us to respond. The religious man is also in hiding. The man of the world hides among the gadgets, the religious man hides behind the pillar or the pulpit in the church. He sings loud in order not to hear. But God is in quest of him and that is the gospel that in Christ Jesus He finds us exactly where we are, not because we are religious but in spite of it.

In the quest of God for man, in our thinking, by reducing God to a religious performance, it simply becomes a question of an emotional experience whereas in the Bible to know God means to do what is right. (Jeremiah 9: 23-24) When we talk about the knowing the truth we are not talking in Biblical terms; in those terms we do not know the truth but practice it. (John 3:21).

All the things I do must fall into the pattern of God's will. For the Bible, truth was a direction of life, a way in which you must walk. Today, we divide life between religion and the rest of life. On Sunday we are pious and the rest of the week is different. This is because religion is nothing else but an aesthetic experience, an enjoyment of religion.

SESSION III - OURSELVES

Now we come to very close quarters. Our subject is now ourselves; we, as religious people. Perhaps it will be useful to understand ourselves and the precariousness in which man finds himself as a human being.

The odd thing about life is that extremes always meet. Sorrow can, by a turn of a second, become joy. Tears and laughter are closely related. I say this because the line between the idol and Almighty God is a very thin one. In many circles they speak about the vast difference, and in a sense it is justified that you are either on this side or that side. In some ways perhaps this is true. But it is certainly not true in all ways and perhaps it is my special contribution to draw your attention to this fact. I wish it were as clear as that. But it isn't. Man somehow manages to be both a worshipper of God and a worshipper of idols. He seems to be able to be a believer and a non-believer at the same time. If we are very truthful, we are both. And perhaps this would be an answer to the prayer that was offered that we will acknowledge quite openly that we are exactly that - believers and non-believers, people of God and of the world, both here and there, somehow with one leg in the Kingdom and the other leg very much in the world. This has something to do with the fact that humans are able somehow to compromise between the living God and our small idols.

This brings me, first of all, to the question of religious experience. We have reached a situation where we need not have religious experience any more by going to Billy Graham's campaign. You can get it by swallowing a pill called L.S.D. 250. Aldous Huxley has been experimenting with the pill for years. I have in front of me an article from "Varsity", dated January 29th, 1964. This is an interesting article because it shows that now you can have that delightful experience of happiness, a kind of elation, a sense of religious depth, just by chemical means.

Some of us have been talking about the precariousness of emphasis upon religious experience for a long time, but we were looked upon as odd people. But, you see, in our circles we have been basing our whole theology on religious experience, and you can't do that. Why not? First of all, you put yourself right in the centre, whereas really you are meant to rely on God in the hazard, in the venture of faith. If religious experience takes you out of that venture you have put yourself in the centre to start with.

Another thing is that you have your ups and downs constantly, dependent upon digestion and other things. And you cannot depend upon the ups and downs of emotional life for a proper Christian relationship to Almighty God. Perhaps we ought to talk more carefully about an experience of God. Perhaps the real experience of God is inexpressible and not experienced at all but comes into being by a humble obedience and acceptance of His grace by doing His will. I don't know. Once you have begun to doubt your religious experience as a proper measure of your relationship to God, then you have to go one step further and say - Now, who is my God, our God?

Tillich's theology is no good to me at all, but his great asset is his depth of analysis. He is so clever in getting into a thing and that is a very real help. In his book "The Courage To Be" he talks about Theism as a reverent mood. I immediately thought of Weitzner. When we read his introduction to that altered Psalter we find that he wants to express exactly that. He feels reverent and is overcome by all that is around him. His religiosity is nothing else but a reverent mood. Kant expressed it when he talked about the two laws, the two experiences - when he looks up and sees a star-covered sky with millions of stars, and when he looks inside the heart and thinks of the moral imperative, it fills him with awe. Well, you experience something of that reverent mood when you stand alone under the starry sky.

When I was a student in Frankfurt half my colleagues were Swiss and I had constant invitations to spend holidays in Switzerland. When I first stayed with a friend in Basle I had never seen the Alps before and when we went to the Matterhorn I almost did cry. The reverent mood can be easily interpreted as a confrontation with God.

Again, for others, and this is Tillich's point, Theism is nothing else but a poetic symbol. The reverent mood and poetry are close together. God is not a person who confronts you with an imperative, nor the Lord you have to obey, but He is the symbol of all that is good and great and wonderful. He is more than a He symbol. For others again, Theism is a moral symbol, a *summum bonum*.

The I-Thou relationship

When God is not the other Thou; a living person whom I have to meet and confront and answer the question: "Where Am I?" then God is just a moral symbol, an It and not a Thou, not a real vis-a-vis. But God is not just a moral symbol, not an "It" at all. According to the Bible, He is the living God.

God also can just be a stop-gap to fill a void. Only last Sunday I was speaking to the girls at Havergal School. After the meeting a group of girls stayed to talk to me privately. They said, "For most people God is just a stop-gap to fill a void. He is just useful and we cannot believe in such a God".

Lastly, for most people God is a concept. We talk about a doctrine of God. Theology, etymologically, means the science of God - Theos and Logos. But there is no such God. This is not a kind of elusiveness where you have to stand in the void. That is simply His greatness. He is also the humble God in Jesus Christ who stoops down to my level and dies for sinners. The other side is God the great sovereign Lord whom we can only meet in humility.

I said yesterday that we are religious by nature. That is how man is made and we cannot escape the way we react and that all our reactions ultimately are religious reactions. So there is no escape from our religion as there is no escape from sin. We are always sinners. We may be forgiven, but we always are sinners. So we are always religious, though we know that this is a precarious thing. There are certain things which we must accept. First of all, we must realize that God is not a private affair. Religion is always organized; there is a way about it, a liturgy, forms, a prayer which you follow. Even in the non-organized churches, like the Quaker Meeting House, they have their own procedure.

In the college (Wycliffe) we have trouble with some pious students who want complete privacy with God, who do not want to attend services in the Chapel but wish to pray alone in their rooms. This is a very selfish thing, We cannot say the Lord's Prayer by ourselves - it starts with "Our Father".

According to the Anglican rule, there must be at least two people there, otherwise it would not be Communion. To be in the presence of God you need your brother or sister. So religion spells, in spite of all its precariousness, togetherness,

You haven't God because you are together, but God deigns to be present when people are together, We invite God's presence. So it is not a mystical kind of faith I am advocating.

The second thing we ought constantly to remember is that God is supremely a person. So when people talk about God in nature, in music, in history, etc. they are really evading the living God. This is where we differ so profoundly from the pagan god. So it is no help to us to reject organized religion; we will not escape the difficulties by rejecting it. Because we cannot escape the human predicament. The fact is that man is very complex, that he is moved by complex motives, that he is, as Luther put it, both justified and a sinner at the same time. He is a believer and non-believer.

The Biblical solution

First of all, the Christian faith is not a religion but a loyalty. It is an obedience. It spells out a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. We confront God in Jesus Christ as a person. From the beginning our Lord was called Lord. This was the Christian designation of Jesus of Nazareth. Whereas the others called him the Nazarene, for the Christians he was Lord. This meant they owed loyalty and obedience. And this is exactly what the Christian faith is. (Acts 9:2). "If he found any belonging to the Way" means the Christian way of life, the Christian loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Here religion becomes a way of a relationship to a living person. And so, although we cannot escape organized religion and we cannot escape being religious and reacting in a religious way, we must never put religion in the centre. In the centre of Christian living is the living Christ and our commitment to Him takes all precedence. If this is called an experience, then I would allow a religious experience. What really counts is the humble following of Jesus Christ. In a

sense, we are religious people, but in another sense we are irreligious people. God is not only greater than our hearts but he is also greater than our religion.

Now I would like to ask you whether you are people who are enjoying the fellowship of this camp or whether you have been gripped by the presence of the living God in Christ Jesus. That is all I have to say.