

I KISSED RELIGION GOODBYE



by Greg Albrecht

Religion: A non-Christian (though popularly believed within Christendom) worldview that convinces humans that their performance earns a higher standing with God than they would have otherwise enjoyed. Religion controls humans by persuading them that their relationship with God is governed by their attempts to do and be good and by their abstinence from sinful activities.

What picture emerges when you ask the average North American to define organized Christianity or to draw a portrait of what a Christian looks like?

A friend who was invited to a Christian event that actually turned out to be a political rally told me about his unsettling experience. He is active in a business that provides resources for evangelical Christians, but he was unprepared for the mudslinging and negative rhetoric that ridiculed *Demoncrats* and lavished unadulterated praise on all things Republican. He left shaking his head at this attempt to politicize Christianity—at the hostility displayed toward anyone who didn't march to the drumbeat sounded from the stage.

He went home, examined his home church, and determined that it, too, was filled with the very attitude and spirit that was beginning to trouble him. He and his wife left and started the search for a Christ-centered place of worship. They're looking for places where Jesus is welcome.

Some see Christianity as angry and even bitter toward a culture it condemns. Others see Christianity as irrelevant, self-absorbed, tilting at windmills with its own meaningless in-house arguments. Many Christians have themselves been lulled into a spiritual stupor, convinced that the real problems exist outside of their church, and therefore they allow themselves the luxury of endlessly feasting on "them-and-us" rhetoric. Fundamen-

talist Christians relentlessly attack sinners outside of the holy huddle where they have circled their religious wagons.

What has happened to the revolution of peace and love Jesus started almost 2,000 years ago? The only qualification for the revolutionary movement Jesus started was the lack of qualifications of its members. Jesus started a movement that we humans have continually attempted to "improve." The movement Jesus started concerned relationship with God, but along the way, we humans have overwhelmed the very heart and soul of the relationship Jesus offered us with organization, structure and institutionalization.

Where are the voices of Christendom today leading us? Self-help



WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE REVOLUTION OF PEACE AND
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and how-to books abound. “Christian” management, leadership and programs urge us to become successful. Sure-fire, can’t-miss, your-church-will-multiply with our purpose-driven management techniques promise to increase the size of any church.

Many spiritual addresses within the world of Christianity promote their brand of Christianity with a dynamic infomercial-like appeal—a spiritual parallel to our culture’s obsession with cosmetic surgery that will enhance our exteriors by reduction or enlargement.

Look what we’ve done to the church, the body of Christ. We’ve turned the body of Christ into a place of conformity to a long list of religious rules.

If you’re in the “in crowd” then you must be at the right place at

- Attend regularly—at least once a week.

- Volunteer for self-improvement, recovery, stewardship, missionary, discipleship activities and break out groups and seminars for men, women, seniors, teens, singles and children (not to mention exercise groups, yoga for Christians, Overeaters Anonymous, recovery groups for former smokers, for alcoholics and children of alcoholics). In many churches attending the worship service is not enough... you will need to spend a lot of time doing a lot of stuff.

- Tithe 10% of your earnings (“yes, we believe in grace, but...”)

- Evangelize—make sure you fulfill your weekly or monthly quota of confronting the lost (which in some cases includes anyone not in *your* church).

being tortured. And you need to believe in the Rapture, the time when members of your church (at least those who are in good standing) escape hell on earth. Some call this time “The Tribulation”—a time when so many who richly deserve it will “get theirs.”

- Don’t play cards or gamble—or if you do, keep it real quiet.

- Don’t worry about the environment, the poor or global warming—those liberal, do-gooder churches have programs for those kinds of things.

- If you’ve got a moral problem or a “flesh” problem—stop attending for a while so you won’t embarrass your church.

- Be successful. Drive a new car to church. Look good.

- If you’re divorced, don’t expect to go very far in leadership at your church.

It sounds like the kind of place that got Jesus so upset that he turned over tables and drove out the money-

changing prosperity gospel.

Jesus wasn’t too fond of religious tradition. In fact, it takes some considerable hermeneutical gymnastics to turn Jesus into a religious leader. He came on a religious-search-and-destroy mission, but religion has wormed its way, insidiously, into the very fabric of the Christianity Jesus brought.

I am upset with religion. I am disappointed that I got sucked into

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the right time, wearing the right clothing, using the right in-house clichés, singing the right songs, belonging to the right political party, parroting all of the right biblical proof texts, following the party line by never, ever asking a tough question—going along to get along.

Want to join a church? In many cases you will need to get ready to meet a long laundry list of religious qualifications:

- Vote and politically agitate in absolute, lock-step agreement with pro-life and anti-homosexual views, exactly the way your church promotes and endorses them.

- Don’t drink, or if you do, don’t let anyone know because it might hurt your “witness.” Religiosity is generally not concerned about authenticity...so if you drink, keep it quiet.

- You need to believe in the hottest possible hell with billions

...THE MOVEMENT JESUS STARTED CONCERNED RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, BUT ALONG THE WAY WE HUMANS HAVE OVERWHELMED THE VERY HEART AND SOUL OF THE RELATIONSHIP JESUS OFFERED WITH ORGANIZATION, STRUCTURE AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION.

the religious games people play. I played the games, I organized and officiated at them. But thanks be to God, I have kissed religion goodbye.

I've kissed religion goodbye, but I'm still in a profound relationship with the church because it is the body of Christ, warts and all. I love Jesus, I love his church, in fact my relationship with Jesus, the Lord of the church, has deepened since I kissed religion goodbye.

I pastor an online church—a church that is exclusively online, that's the “place” we meet. I love to pastor this church—and many who join me for worship tell me they love to “go to” *Christianity Without the Religion*.

These are people who are spiritual refugees and aliens—many of whom have had a hell on earth experience with people who gather in buildings and call themselves a church.

Being the church is not necessarily the same thing as *going* to church. What about all of those Christians who don't do conventional church anymore?

What about all of those “missing” Christians?

Are people who don't attend a church that meets in a building still Christians? If they are, can God actually be as happy with them as with those who “go to church” religiously?

Some say Christianity is in trouble here in North America. I categorically deny that charge. I agree with

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noted Christian trend-watcher George Barna, who, in his book *Revolution* reports that Christianity is morphing into new forms. Church attendance, according to Barna, doesn't tell the whole story about the health of the body of Christ.

In fact, why people don't attend church as much as they used to (or at all) is part of the story. Could it be that many have left a visible, structured church because they know they need more Jesus and less religion?

Christianity is bigger than any one attempt, or for that matter, all collective attempts, to institutionalize it. Christianity is a revolutionary movement, and it is constantly in need of purification and reformation. The body of Christ needs reformation that asks the hard questions, with courageous reformers willing to take an unpopular stand.

Let the revolution of Jesus Christ continue, and may we yield to the humility, honesty, authenticity, inclusion, mercy, love and grace and transparency of the Master.

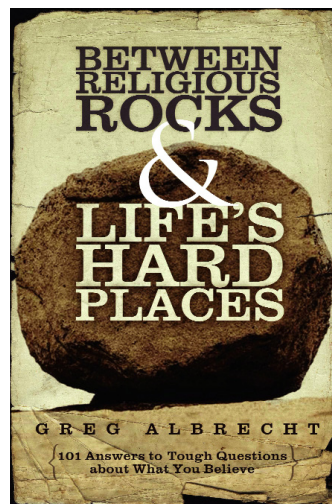
May he help us to purge ourselves and repent of religious idols that are mere human innovations and manipulations.

May we forget about trying to be bigger, better and superior to the church down the street. May we get off the case of sinners, may we lay down our theological spears and religious swords and take them to Jesus so that he might transform our weapons of bitterness and war into implements of peace. □

—Greg Albrecht

IT'S HERE:

WARRIORS



...to hard questions

See back cover for details.