

**THE END OF RELIGION; HEBREWS 10:11-25; NOVEMBER 15, 2015;
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The terrorist attacks in Paris Friday night sent a deep shudder through the vast majority of the human family. While the groups responsible for the acts of violence are radical Muslim extremists, the forces that contribute to their existence and to their mission are wide-ranging and complex.

The battle between the two main branches within Islam has spilled over into the region and world. We have heard that some of the factors that spawn radical Islam are mid-east dictatorships that have quashed the Arab Spring, depressed economies offering no hope for the future – particularly among young people, and lack of viable, public education.

Whatever the reasons for Friday's chaos in France, one take away and what I'd like to focus on this morning, is the increasing ill-will toward organized religion. The atheist movement and a new secularism that wants to have religious values without religion will find new opportunities to blame organized religion for what is wrong with the world.

In a way, this is understandable. While much of the developed world grows more modern, homogeneous, and secular – religious, political and ethnic differences and tensions stand out more prominently and problematically.

Indeed, developed nations control much of the world's resources while developing nations languish and struggle to survive. Dictators vie for power in lands that suffer from lack of resources and development; fundamentalist leaders explain the state of their suffering and plight in anti-West, anti-Israel, anti-Christian and anti-Jewish narratives. These are often apocalyptic scenarios couched as final battles between the faithful and the infidel.

Fundamentalism in all religions rejects the decadence of modern life. The path to salvation requires adherence to rules enforced by 'no tolerance' punishments. Wealthy nations are seen as driving self-indulgent consumption leaving the door open for 'holier than thou' extremists to fight back with their own versions of reality.

ISIS is the epitome of these developments and a symptom of the cultural, political and economic disparities between rich and poor, east and west; ISIS has opted out of the global community to impose its own reality led by a caliphate that recognizes no national boundaries, no national leaders and uses terrorism as its foreign policy.

ISIS envisions an apocalyptic process ushering in the end of the world. We are now in the midst of the 'end times' and the world is in a state of struggle until the final Islamic regime imposes its rule over the earth.

Radical Islam is not the only religion giving organized religion a bad name: the Roman church and its legacy of pedophilia; right wing Protestant Christianity adversely affecting education, health care, and women's rights; or any local church that subtly or overtly perpetuates bias, an 'in-crowd' culture, or did not respond to a member in time of need. The bar is high when you call yourself the body of Christ.

No wonder there is a growing chorus of NONES – that’s n-o-n-e-s, the people who check the box “none” when asked their religious affiliation – no wonder so many of them do not participate in organized religion or its institutions.

Indeed, much of organized religion does need to change. Even some of the religious groups, congregations and synagogues who are responsible members of their communities are found wanting when it comes to appealing to a younger generation. Messaging, technology, online learning/ shopping/ and dating have shifted the focus of attention from the traditional physical religious community center to computer screens and monitors.

And because religious institutions are the keepers of sacred texts and traditions they are by nature slow to change; many if not most religious bodies, including, increasingly, evangelical and mega-churches find themselves missing connections with the people and resources that traditionally sustained their missions and ministries.

It’s been a bad weekend for organized religion. But if we stop and consider what religion is and does we may uncover other human endeavors that strive to provide what the world’s great religions provide but also fall short of their goals.

Robert Capon in his book *Health, Money and Love* defines religion as, “the attempt by human beings to establish a right relationship between themselves and something beyond themselves which they think to be of life-giving significance.”

Given that definition you could make a pretty strong case that diet, exercise, political and economic philosophy, academic achievement, endurance sports, the arts, volunteering for worthy causes – among others, qualify as ‘religions’ for some of those who practice them.

Let me expand on that. Every religion has at least three things: creed, cult and conduct. **Creed** is an intellectual recipe or formula for tuning into whatever power is determined to have redeeming value; **cult** is the practice or ritual evoked by the creed. Most people don’t run for the fun of it, or eat extra fiber for the taste. We do it for ourselves, for that something beyond ourselves. Finally, **conduct** is the behavior prescribed that will land you in the right place – Nirvana or Wall St. or a summer home on Nantucket or wherever you think life ought to land to be home free.ⁱ

All of this leads to **fatigue** because we never get it perfectly right. So there are redoubled efforts to be better Christians or Buddhists or Torah scholars or, for that matter self-actualized, compassionate people who give back to the community. And this is followed by burnout then wandering and disaffection.

And here’s the key: religion is a one-way ticket to failure. The harder we try, the more we realize how we get it wrong. Religion will sometimes tell us it loves the something beyond ourselves it is trying to connect us with. But it’s not love that motivates religion, it is appeasement, self-protection, control that is its goal. Three-hour interval training, oat bran, seven habits of highly effective living, best practices: “I love you?” Forget it. It’s called work, hard work. We can eat right, exercise right, manage right then get clobbered by a bus.ⁱⁱ

And here's the other key to understanding religion and the religious impulse: we are all born religious; we are desperate to find the right relationship between ourselves and something outside ourselves that will give us life. Augustine said, "our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee." For Augustine "thee" meant the Creator, but today "thee" could and does refer to any number of self help remedies or programs that people think will bring final enlightenment and peace.

We smile up from our bassinet toward the smiling face and notice paroxysms of joy; "The baby just smiled!" Later comes the National Merit Scholarship, a major in electrical engineering or a law degree. But despite our changing creeds, cult and conduct we never seem to get to the Nirvana we are after.

This process of turning into religious pursuits either what we call religion itself – like the rich ruler referring to his practice of the law – "I have observed all these things since my youth" or other pursuits that demand no less time, money and effort, this process leads always and inevitably to a dead end. ⁱⁱⁱ

This approach to life, practicing religion as something we must get right in order to have a correct relationship with God, or find inner healing and true peace interested Jesus less than Herod's new mansion on the Mediterranean.

Religion as that which we do when we get serious about our cholesterol or when we really hunker down and give all we've got to our career, or when we really clean up our act morally speaking, separating the good from the bad, the saved from the damned, the in from the out – Jesus could have cared less about. He didn't get into what we call religion, the anxious, tiring, ultimately futile attempt to get it right because, in him, God made it right.

Today's passage from Hebrews is revealing. It depicts the priest in the temple standing before the altar of God, in the holy of holies – he was the only one deemed worthy enough to be in that sacred space – offering sacrifices for the people; usually animal sacrifices (that the people purchased outside the temple) then turned into burnt offerings. The process is never ending because the need of the people, the pilgrims from near and distant lands is never fulfilled, their lives never complete or whole or free of that which keeps them back, holds them captive to their fears or worst habits or poor judgment.

This image of the priest standing, sacrificing, day in and day out, again and again is contrasted in today's reading with Jesus sitting at the right hand of God who by a single offering has "made acceptable for all time those who are sanctified."

You remember what happened at Golgotha when Jesus was crucified and died: the veil of the temple separating us from God was torn in half; by the act of his laying down his life as a sign of God's unconditional willingness to accept and love us – Jesus put religion out of business.

Thus, there was no need or point to in getting on some treadmill of right thoughts, words, actions because we had already been made right with God; and we need only trust that he had indeed done what needed to be done.

This is the awareness that the writer of Hebrews has when he remembers the prophet Jeremiah who scorned the futile attempts of the people to practice a perfect but empty religion and he said there will come a day when God will remember our sins no more; and if there is something God wants us to know God will write in our hearts and inscribe it in our minds.

So maybe you're wondering what's up with all the liturgy and ritual we practice; why then prayer? Or confession? Breaking bread? Sprinkling water on babies' foreheads?

None of it is to beg God to show up or to buy God's favor. God is already here. Hard as it may be to believe God already favors you and me. And Jesus is seated. The work has been done. The right relationship with that something beyond ourselves accomplished, established, waiting to be lived out.

You see, there's nothing here in this service or in anything I have said or can say that can establish a right relationship with God.

We are here to remind each other that it's already been done; we are here to point to the one who made it right and who offers us a life free of the treadmills of religion, the self help industry, the definitions of success we've bought into and teach our children to strive for.

When the disciples realized what had happened on Good Friday and then on Easter morning they became Apostles, that is 'those sent out' to tell the world about this remarkable man, this remarkable good news.

Of course, there are forces of darkness and confusion and chaos that would keep us on the treadmill, keep us thinking our little religion can get us right and the nones are spot on to reject that religion.

That's what drives the insanity of radicalism and extremism – the idea that their little religion will make the world right and to that end they are justified imposing it on others – at any expense.

These are trying times. It's important to see religion – sacred and secular – for what it is and purports to do; and then remember that the God we worship put an end to all that. Amen.

ⁱ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 43, No 4. Year B, October – December 2015, 30.

ⁱⁱ Willimon, 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon, 31.