

Real Religion

By Ariel Bar Tzadok

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What is real religion? Often I find myself in discussion with people who, seeing that I am a Rabbi, say to me that they are not religious. I, in turn, ask them how are they not religious. They usually respond by saying they simply do not believe. Inside my head I say, "Gotcha."

I again respond and say, "Religion is not what you believe, it is what you do." Let me explain. If one looks at all the world's religions there is underlying them all a code of moral conduct and correct behavior. Although all the world's religions have different stories to tell about life, the universe and everything, they all seem to agree, more or less, as to what is right and wrong and what is moral and immoral.

Ultimately, all religions originally were about character development and seeking to make adherents the best human beings we can possibly be. Therefore, I continue and comment, "What you believe does not define you as being religious, your behavior does. You may be a lot more religious than many of those who profess themselves religious." This gives the one I am talking with something to consider, a new, different, but not all that original proper understanding of what religion was meant to be, from the start.

How sad is it that everyday I see religious bigotry and racial hatred. Some Christians hate Jews and now some Muslims hate Christians. Some Christians call Jews "Christ-killers" and want nothing more than to harm Jews. Some Muslims call Christians "infidels" because they reject the Prophet Muhammad and want nothing more than to harm Christians. Sorry, in my view this is a terrible waste of valuable resources. Fighting over our differences, when we have so much in common, to me, is not a valuable enterprise.

Muslims, Christians and Jews all share a common code of morality and understanding of righteous behavior. Strangely enough, Muslim, Christian and Jewish clerics often unite and stand together to promote specific positions on public morality and issues of behavior. We disagree on theology and yet we agree on ethics and character. While this may not be 100% correct in every detail, it most certainly is almost always correct.

I have never understood the attitude of burning bridges. I have always thought that building bridges would better show one's service to G-d than the burning of them. After all, would not the Creator of humanity desire to see His creation prosper and grow? Would it really be the Will of Heaven for one group of human beings to hate and desire to kill another? How do we become Heavenly creatures all the while that we act like earthly animals? No, I do not understand the mentality of those who only want to see the entire world formed in their image and are willing to use cruelty and violence to achieve their purpose.

On the other hand, yes, I do understand how some religions preach that they are the one and only true Word of G-d and that everything else is terrible, wrong and a sin against G-d. Yet, if this is so, why then does not G-d himself intervene in human history and clear up all the confusion? After all, the members of the numerous religions are for the most parts good and decent human beings, each living by the code of proper conduct handed down to them within their individual cultures and societies. Most people, in the end, just want to get along through life, not to suffer too much and prosper the best they can. Some peoples may or may not like others, or may or may not agree with other views about life, the universe and everything. Nonetheless, most people just want to be left alone, to do their thing and be done with it. How come then there are those individuals that seek to stir up the masses and arouse them to a frenzy of hatred, prejudice and violence?

The strong always pick on the weak; it is never the other way around. The strong always see their way as right and all others as wrong. Conflicts therefore are inevitable all the while that such foolish concepts of right and wrong, or strong and weak continue. Almost all religions speak about strengthening oneself and to always help those weaker than ourselves. Somehow this most fundamental religious message gets lost or forgotten when it comes to being applied to those not following the same religion. This is not what the religious books teach.

Many years ago, I had the opportunity of meeting one of the most famous and charismatic Christian missionary ministers. In his religious zeal he has sought to convert others to his brand of faith, condemning all others to an eternity of hellfire for rejecting what he believes to be G-d's message of salvation. He has successfully converted numerous Jews to a religion and path foreign to us. I was not interested in arguing with him. I knew full well, in spite of the tremendous amount of information that I have that could seriously challenge everything he has learned about his religion, I would never succeed in proving anything to him, either pro or con. Yet, he had to approach me, he had to at least make his attempt to try to convert me.

This is a man of faith. Faith is a matter of the heart; it is not subject to proofs, analytical discussion, historical accuracy or any other type of academic challenge.

Knowing well the power of heart felt faith, I made a single comment to him that (I was told) silenced him into humility. I said to him, *"I know your beliefs and you know mine. We are not going to agree. Yet, we both believe that the Mashiah is to come and that his feet shall one day stand upon the Mount of Olives. I pray that we may both be alive and present on that glorious day to greet him. Yet, as we kneel in honor of the king, I pray that our first words would not be, hey, solve our argument, what is your name, but rather together we should be able to say, blessed is he who comes in the name of HaShem."* As I told you, his press manager took me aside and told me, that the minister was shocked and had no answer for me; this was the first time he was silenced by any Rabbi or Jew.

I believe that we best serve G-d by building bridges rather than burning them. I believe we best serve G-d by opening lines of communication rather than severing them. I believe that we best serve G-d by all humanity working together to seek the hidden wonders in creation and using them for our betterment rather than exploiting nature and using its forces to destroy one another. I believe that somehow G-d wants all of us to learn the great lesson how to overcome our own differences and learn to live together in spite of them.

When Mashiah does finally come, would it not be an honor for him to come to a world where everyone lives in peace instead of having to come to a world destroyed by war? Would it not be to the honor of Heaven that Mashiah could come in peace rather than to have to rebuild from scratch. Yes, I always dream of what can possibly be. Then I open my eyes and am rudely awakened by the way things actually are.

Religious zealots of all types continue in their zeal. They attack everyone and anything different from their own petty little concepts of how the world and universe should be. Funny enough, if Mashiah were to come, he too would be attacked for not fitting into the mold of what each group swears is the absolute truth revealed by G-d. What is even more strange is that each group feels that G-d is not doing enough to enforce his absolute truth on the wayward disbelievers, therefore it is the job of the "faithful" to pick up the mantle and do G-d's work. After all, if G-d does not do His own work, then who is left, other than the faithful to accomplish it. In their own arrogant way, the religious zealot is subtly saying that G-d is not doing enough of a good job in guarding His own absolute Divine truth and therefore the zealot has to do G-d's work for Him; a task that the zealot expects G-d to appreciate and compensate him for handsomely.

This is not religious behavior. This is not religion. This has nothing to do with G-d. This has everything to do with one's self and one's selfish narrow-minded inability to recognize reality and how a spark of the true Divine Creator is to be found everywhere and in every thing.

There is an old saying, "*a little bit of knowledge can cause of whole lot of damage.*" Nowhere is this more true than concerning religion. Newly religious, like those not well educated in religion tend to believe that by being extreme they are some how being better. This is a classic case where more is not better, on the contrary here more is worse. Those who are greater educated in their religions are more able to understand others, simply because they better understand themselves and are comfortable in their own path. They have no psychological or emotional need to view others different from themselves as being any kind of a threat.

Ultimately, all our beliefs are different. Even within specific religions, certain groups condemn others who do not agree with their specific view of how their shared religion is to be. One need look at the history of how Catholics and Protestants, and Sunni and Shiite, Litvak and Hasid treat one another and worse what they say and believe about one another.

No one group has a monopoly on Divine truth. No one group speaks for G-d. G-d is quite able to speak for Himself if and when He would ever choose to do so. Until such a time, we are left to our own devices, to sift through religious material and literature, extract from it the best of the best, and mold ourselves accordingly. Unfortunately, as I said above, I live in the real world; I know full well that these, my words, will fall upon heavy hearts and closed ears. Everyone is too busy being right and perfect; knowing full well how wrong everyone else is. Everyone is indeed willing to live in peace with everyone else, just as soon as everyone else gives up their false beliefs and practices and adopts those that each group says must be followed. Therefore, in the end we are in a continuing downward spiral where conflicts will lead to wars and wars to further destruction, suffering and hatred. I am certain that this is not why G-d gave us religions.

Indeed, I do not believe that G-d gave us religions at all. I think we did this all ourselves. I do believe that G-d has spoken to us and on numerous occasions. I do believe the Divine message is clear. Although we may disagree on who is the messenger and what we should do with those who do not receive the message, nonetheless the message is still clear.

The message is all about proper behavior, moral character and personal integrity. When it says to not steal, it does not mean not to steal only from a member of our own faith, but from others it is permissible. No, this is a lie. We must act as full human beings towards all other human beings. This and this alone is the Divine message. Anything less than this is just one of the many man-made religions and anything man-made, like man himself is fragile, and subject to easy breakage.

The Divine message is eternal, it will last forever. It is a message that binds us and unites us for the sake of the greater common good. Man's message on the other hand is as mortal and finite and is he. As we are subject to corruption and breakdown, so too then is any message that originates from man.

How then can we tell the difference between the Divine message and the (less than) human one? Simply look at what comes out of it. If it is a message of building, security and peace, then it must be good. However, if it is a message that seeks to dominate others and force them out of their own, then maybe we should be a little suspect towards it.

To be human is to be Divine. Anything less is to be like an animal. We are created in the Divine Image. The Divine message is therefore ingrained within us. I believe it is time we acted like full human beings, embrace the Image of G-d within us and act accordingly. As I said in the beginning of this essay; I do not care what you believe; I care what you do. If you, like me, endeavor to hear and live by the Divine message of brotherhood and peace, then we are together, regardless of how religious you think you are or are not and regardless of what religion you consider yourself to be. On the other hand, if you are of the extremists, those who create division and harm then we are miles apart, even if you are a member of my own faith or nation.

Actions speak louder than words. Do not talk; act! When Mashiah comes then and only then will we know Heavenly truth. Until then, at least let us act human, as if we already knew the Heavenly truth and live by it. Only then can any of us call ourselves truly religious. As for all the other so-called religious peoples in the world; watch out for them, for they are leading us down the road to a terrible future. We may not be able to change them but we can change ourselves. Now is the time, here is the place. You know what to do, now go do it.

שויתי ה" לנגדי תמיד