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CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD RELIGIONS. . . HOW SHOULD WE REGARD OTHER RELIGIONS: ATHEISM

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~ Scripture: Psalm 139:1-14 ~

INTRODUCTION

We've been talking about different world religions:

- Not to knock those who don't believe like us;
- But to understand them and to know where they're coming from;
- At the same time to be grounded even more firmly in our faith;
- And hopefully to open doors of conversation with those of "other" faiths or "no" faith in a way that demonstrates respect, understanding, and appreciation.

You ask, "For what purpose? To convert?" Well, we don't do that. We don't talk people out of what they believe OR into what we believe. The Holy Spirit is the one who does the convicting, the convincing. However, people can be hard to convince at times. Consider this **STORY**. . .

A man woke up one morning and said, "*I believe I'm dead.*" His wife ignored him and sent him off to work. After he persisted with this notion for some time, she thought he might need some help. So she took him to see a team of psychiatrists. They couldn't change his mind. They thought, we have to establish empirically that only living people bleed. So they brought out all sorts of charts and all the evidence they could muster. Finally, the man said he believed it. So they took a pin. . . thrust it into his skin. . . and he started to bleed. He gasped: "*Great Scott, I guess dead people bleed too!*" ☺ ☺

This morning I would like to look at "*contemporary American religions*" (or the lack thereof) –specifically, ATHEISM & NEW AGE. They end up on opposite sides of the spectrum:

- **Atheism** being the absence of religion or faith in a Supreme Being (no one or nothing gets to be "god");
- **New Age** being hyper-religiosity in which anything (including ME, MYSELF, and I) can be "god".

Let's begin with a reading from Scripture—one of my favorite passages—**PSALM 139, vv. 1-14**. Just let the words of this psalm soak into you. . .

¹ *O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.*

² *You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*

⁴ *Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.*

⁵ *You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.*

⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.*

⁷ *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

⁸ *If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

⁹ *If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

¹⁰ *Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

¹¹ *If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"*

¹² *Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

¹³ *For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴ *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

These are the words of one who has obviously worked his way through to a belief in God!

But not everyone believes in such a God. According to **Matt's pie chart** from last week, some 16% are NON-religious. . . probably 6-8% are avowed atheists.

WHAT IS ATHEISM? AN ATHEIST?

Is it a person who doesn't believe in God?

[the absence of a belief system]

Or a person who believes there is no God?

[an active belief system]

Subtle difference!

Is it a belief that God does not exist?

[philosophical atheism]

Or is it a matter of not believing that God exists?

[practical atheism]

That issue is hotly debated among atheists themselves. Some don't want to think of their atheism as just one more religion in the pantheon of religions. They would prefer to think of it as the absence, the abandonment of religion.

My contention is that it IS a religion in the sense that it is a belief system—a belief system that is based on a world view—a world view that says a Higher Power is not necessary.

However, it probably ISN'T a religion—if you think of a religion as including:

Prayer

Miracles. . . Afterlife

Churches / Temples / Synagogues

(or something that challenges the rational mind)

A Holy Book / Scriptures

Supernatural origins of the universe & humans

Priests / Religious Leaders

Belief in supernatural beings (e.g.: angels / devils)

Regular ceremonies / Acts of worship

Belief that we have a soul

Most atheists claim that it is not a religion or faith, but *"the happy freedom (escape) from them"*.

That's one of the main reasons people become atheists: They want freedom from (not "of") religion.

STORY: A young man had prayed every night before going to bed—all his life. He went to

college, and in his first year he tried going to bed without praying one night. Next

morning, he got up and found the sky hadn't fallen in on him. Instantly, he became an

atheist.

He set about to free himself of all the "shackles of his religious upbringing",

claiming that it

was all "superstition" and that he had been "brainwashed".

A. Why do we believe in God to begin with?

Here's a quote from an atheist: *"Most people stick with the religion in which they were raised, never thinking or examining the reasons why. Those that switch religions (or sects of a particular religion) often never truly question their belief in a god."*

Point well-taken! Most of us are a little afraid or a little lazy, and we do not take the time to "examine the faith that is within us".

Why do people believe in God anyhow? Here's what the atheists say:

- *We are indoctrinated at an early age. . . taught never to question or doubt. . . we believe because we have always believed.*
- *There's got to be some purpose, some reason for us being here. The universe and this beautiful earth cannot be a pointless "accident". God is the best explanation.*

- *There's got to be some fairness, some justice*—given all the evil in the world and all the terrible acts people commit. Heaven & hell provide some assurance that good people will be rewarded and bad people will be punished.
- *Comfort.* It's comforting to believe that a loving God is always watching over us and caring for us—especially when something bad happens.
- *To bolster the weak and the inept.* Religion is "*the opiate of the people*". . . a "drug" to relieve pain and get us through—because we're not strong enough on our own.
- *Afterlife.* It's incomprehensible to think that we evaporate when we die. Try imagining no longer being able to experience anything. Something must continue.

All of those reasons have a core of truth. But there's a fatal flaw in the way all of them are stated: They assume that WE invent a God to believe in. . . that we imagine, conceive, create in our mind's eye a "GOD" up there in the sky.

Don't we have our roles reversed here? It isn't me who creates God (because I'm needy, weak. . . or imaginative—I am all those things, but). . . it's God who creates me, and gives me all I need to live.

II Peter 1:3 -- "*His divine power gives us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who calls us by His own glory and goodness.*"

I don't believe in God because I need something to believe in, and so I concoct a legend or fairy tale like Santa Claus or Zeus. [Read **Psalm 139** again. God is quite different from Santa Claus or Zeus.]

I believe in Him because He created me with a longing and a need--a God-shaped hole that can only be filled with Him (not all the other stuff we try to put in there).

Well, one issue is WHY do we believe in God to begin with. The OTHER issue is.

B. Why do we hang on to a belief in God?

Another quote from an atheist: "*As an atheist, you have broken out of the cycle of doing what you're told because someone says God says so. You think for yourself, you are self-reliant, and you are responsible for your own actions and decisions.*"

Again, point well-taken! We should "think for ourselves", be "self-reliant", and be "responsible for our actions and decisions". But I want to clear up a couple points this morning.

Christianity is not mind-control. If you are a Christian, it is because you have chosen Christ to be the center of your life. Let me show you what I mean. . .

~ Diagram of a circle (your life) with a chair (throne) in the center ~

It is your choice WHAT or WHO sits on that chair (throne). Something will ultimately sit there and rule, control our lives. If no one or nothing else, then "I" will rule my own life. "*I will be the master of my fate, the captain of my soul*" (W. E. Henley writes in *Invictus*). But, are you the best ruler? You be the judge. I know for me:

- I can't handle the bigness of life. . . I don't have all the answers.
- I can't handle the uncontrollable emotions, the drives and urges I sometimes feel.

This morning, if God is on the throne of your life and you are walking with Him, it's because you have chosen for Him to be there. No one forced that onto you. You have entered this relationship by your own free will. *Free will* is a cornerstone of Christianity. Sure, He is not willing for any to perish—but it's always by invitation, never by coercion. "*Whosoever will may come.*"

- **God** gave us that free will. His invitation can be accepted or rejected.

“Yeah, but doesn’t God throw people in hell who don’t choose Him? What kind of a choice is that?” Well yes, God does judge sin. No debate there! There is a price to pay. We live in a moral universe. Sin & evil don’t just pass by unnoticed. But you know what? God Himself has paid the price! With the death of His Son on the Cross, HE paid the price so that WE might be reconciled to Him. We don’t have to be consigned to eternal punishment. All we have to do is...well, NOTHING...other than accept His gracious invitation.

- **Jesus** may stand at the door and knock [Rev. 3:20], but He won’t break the door down.
- **The Holy Spirit** may nudge you, but He will never overpower your will.

You get to choose who will sit on the throne of your life!

BUT, says the Atheist: “You Christians believe you are right. And you’re in a never-ending quest to make everyone Christian.”

GUILTY AS CHARGED! I do believe I have found the solution to the one problem I could never do anything about (i.e.: guilt & sin). If I am convinced I’ve made the right choice, that’s not a bad thing:

- So do Coca-cola drinkers. . .Ford drivers. . .Craftsman Tool lovers.
- Try to talk a MAC user into buying a PC! Why, it’s the other way around!

Once you develop a love and a devotion for a certain product, you won’t necessarily force it on anyone else, but you might invite someone to try it and see for themselves.

That’s what the Bible does when it says: “*O taste and see that the Lord is good*” [Psalm 34:8].

The reason we share Christ is that we have been commanded by Him to go into all the world. Did you know that all four Gospel writers have a *Great Commission*? God is a missionary God. He wants everyone to have a chance to respond to His invitation (to come to know Him).

When we do share our faith, we don’t make anyone a Christian. You become a Christian when you place your trust in Him. . .when you put Him on “*the chair*”. I can’t do that for anyone else but me. Each of us has to make that choice.

We are just beggars who have found an incredible source of soul food. I once was lost, but now am found. I once was in chains (i.e.: a slave to whatever or whomever I had allowed to occupy “*the chair*”). . .now I’m free. . .and you can be too! You see, without God, I had no “*atoner*”. I was stuck in my sins & guilt. *No freedom there!* Now I have freedom. . .PLUS I belong, I belong to Someone (to Him) and He belongs to me. I abide in Him, and He abides in me.

What incredible fellowship!

Bottom line, it’s NOT that I’m right and all non-religious persons are wrong. It’s not me who is right; it is Jesus who is right about God. He paints the right, the most accurate picture of God. He explains God perfectly.

CONCLUSION

If you’re here and not sure of your own belief, or you’ve “freed” yourself from all belief, please allow me to express my concern:

- The danger is NOT that you will believe *nothing*;
- The danger is RATHER that you will believe *anything*.

Nature abhors a vacuum! It will rush in to fill with something, with anything that looks attractive. That’s why people get wrapped up in:

- UFO’s or ESP;

- Witchcraft or Wicca (which is "whitewashed" Satanism, because they try to make a good guy out of Satan)
- Psychics or Astrology (as a way of foretelling the future)
- Shirley MacLaine and her Crystals (as a source of healing or energizing power)
- Tarot Cards (as a reliable base for life decisions)
- God as "a state of higher consciousness that may be reached" (thru meditation or drugs)
- God as "the total realization of personal, human potential"
- Agnosticism which says, "I don't know if there is a God; it doesn't matter, I am my own god."

All of these are forms of **New Age spirituality**.

The world out there is full of confusion about spirituality and religion. One thing is certain: Everybody is spiritual. Everybody believes something.

Everybody needs something to hold onto. . .or to hold them: *A Power Greater.....*

QUESTION: Who sits on the throne of your life today?
 Is it one of the many "gods" out there? Or is it the one true "GOD"?
 Do you need a change of Higher Powers?