

*"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings
and grain offerings, I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!"*
Amos 5:21-24 cp. Hosea 8:11-13

*When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
Even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood*
Isaiah 1:15 cp 29:13

When God brought his severe judgements of war and exile on the two Jewish nations, Israel and Judah, both nations were intensely religious. Whatever the cause of the judgement, it was certainly not a lack of rites, religious services or the mention of the word "God". There were priests and prophets in abundance, and both were a key part of the established structures. There were "places of worship" everywhere; altars and holy places were to be found in every town and on every hill. The message of the prophets is that these religious activities did not delay or hold off the judgement in any way, but, on the contrary were part of the very cause of the judgement. Religion, therefore, according to the prophetic witness, was not in itself necessarily something which attracted the favour of God. In the case of Israel and Judah the religion which was being practised was actually an invitation to the judgement of God. It was even "detestable" to God! Through his prophets, therefore, God made abundantly clear what he expected of religion, and what true religion really was. The distinction between offensive religion and the genuine worship of God is imperative for every generation, not least our own.

The Problem of Empty Religion

Setting aside for a moment the element of idolatry that had invaded the religious scene and was overtaking both nations, it is clear that much of what aroused the displeasure of God was associated with the religious practices which he himself had ordained under Moses. The "burnt offerings", "grain offerings" and "fellowship offerings" which Amos refers to as unacceptable (5:22) were the very offerings which God had enjoined on his people. They are terms which apply to the religion of Israel, not the pagan religions. Similarly, what Amos called the "religious feasts" would have been the feasts that God had originally enjoined on the nation of Israel. The "spreading out hands in prayer" to which Isaiah referred was something which God expected as a matter of course from priest and people. For Isaiah the "new moons, Sabbaths and convocations" were equally God-ordained. Likewise the "songs and harps" to which God objected through Amos were the very instruments that he had encouraged to be used in the singing of his praises within the temple precincts. Yet at this juncture of Israel's history they were clearly something that God "hated" (Is. 13-14).

The reason for their rejection was not that God was seeking to abrogate the forms and rites of the temple worship; it was not that he no longer wanted his people to pray or to hold festivals of remembrance for the great deeds of deliverance that he had wrought. In other words, it was not that the Israelites were persisting in outdated patterns when God was trying to bring in something new. **What made the offerings and festivals nauseating to God was that those who were involved in them had lost all sense of moral and community obligation.** They were thieves with blood on their hands, and they were adulterers. The fact was that rites and services, no matter how accurate and God-inspired they may be, were of no consequence whatsoever if, underlying them, there was no moral or ethical behaviour. The God who had given the forms of temple worship to Israel, had also given to Israel a moral law through Moses, a law epitomized in the Ten Commandments (see Jer.7:22-24). He expected it to be obeyed.

It is very clear, then, from the prophets that the moral law was utterly prior to the forms of worship, and where worship was not accompanied by the moral behaviour expected by God it was not acceptable; indeed it was an affront. This simple truth was expressed by Amos very tersely by the words, *"Away with the noise of your songs! But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never failing stream"* (5:23-24). God, said Isaiah, would not listen to prayer for *"your hands are full of blood"*, and he commanded the people to *"take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!"* (1:15-17). What was being made very clear was that, whatever the religious rites may be, God-ordained or not, failure to seek a righteous, moral life according to the commands of God, renders those rites "meaningless offerings" (Is 1:13). Every generation needs to understand that fact. **All expressions of worship remain acceptable only to the degree that those who offer them use them as a genuine expression of their desire for a moral and righteous life.**

It may seem unthinkable that an age which appeared to value its religious inheritance should in fact be so far away from God and should be so blind to its moral obligations. But such was the case, and has been the case frequently throughout history, particularly when religion has become the agent of the political world or the vehicle of some other ambition. At such times there can actually be every suggestion of "sincerity" about the religious devotions, but "sincerity" is an insufficient guide. In a remarkable passage God speaks to Isaiah and says, *"do not hold back ... declare to my people their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the command of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. 'Why have we fasted', they say 'and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?'"* Here is a religious nation pleading its prayers and even its fasting. It all looks desperately sincere. But God rebukes with the words, *"is not this the kind of fasting I*

have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice ... to set the oppressed free to do away with pointing finger and malicious talk to spend yourself on the hungry” (Is. 58:1-6). The reality of religion is in its ethical behaviour. No one faced this issue of empty religious practices more sharply than Jesus in his generation, and he firmly underlined the lesson God had made plain through his prophets.

The Israelites were not without their theology, of course. They had a very clear doctrine of Yahweh as the God who had made a covenant with David and promised that his line would endure for ever. The sacrifices, and the temple in Jerusalem (and those at Dan and Bethel), were the assurance and token of this. God indwelt his temple and land, and any suggestion that he was not in their midst was simply not acceptable. The very notion that the sacrifices they offered were void was nonsense. But it was deficient theology: it had completely lost touch with the covenant at Sinai with Moses with its moral demands. Theology can be very inadequate at times!

God was not, of course, advocating a purely ethical religion devoid of any prescribed rites or any worship of him. The rites and offerings he had given the Israelites epitomized what he had done for the nation, and they expressed the terms on which he had brought his deliverance and forgiveness. They were full of important instruction about God, and were an integral and necessary part of genuine religion. They were a proper basis for theology. They were not optional, but the very seat of corporate worship. But they epitomized God’s love to the nation, his forgiveness, his grace and his righteousness. Hearts involved in such rites must first mirror the heart of this God of love if they were to use those rites to come close to God.

The Problem of Perverted Religion

Because it had lost its own moral dimension, the religion of Jahweh saw no harm in tolerating other amoral religions. It was wide open to syncretism. God, therefore, had another quarrel with the Israelites over their religion. This had to do, not with “empty” religion, but with the tolerance and practice of “perverted” religion. Amos draws attention to the fact that the land was littered with altars and rituals to gods other than Yahweh. He singled out the shrine to Sakkuth, the Assyrian war god, who was also worshipped as a star (Amos 5:26). Hosea declared that the Israelites “consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood” (4:12), “they sacrifice on the mountain tops and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar and terebinth” (4:13).

A cursory look at the worship of such gods might pose the question of why such cultural deviations should warrant such condemnation. It’s the sort of question the modern secular world poses as a matter of course. Why not a Pantheon of different gods? Would that not make for harmony among “faith communities”? That was quite evidently the prevailing outlook at the time of the prophets. It could be argued that some such syncretism of religion enabled marriages between rulers of different nations to take place with the consequent possibility of peace. After all that was the example that even Solomon had set, one whereby he had built up a vast and peaceful empire. Unfortunately, however, a closer look at the gods that the prophets denounced shows that there was not the innocence about them that might at first appear.

The chief influence which led to the presence of idolatrous shrines on every hill throughout Israel and Judah, along with idolatrous sacred stones and sacred trees, came from Canaanite Phoenicia. The main feature of that religion lay in its fertility cult. Ashtoreth, a mother goddess was worshipped in the form of Asherah poles erected in every town and high place. The rituals which surrounded her worship were sexual in nature, and her shrines were attended by temple prostitutes, whose services were offered as part of the rites intended to ensure agricultural fertility. Her consort was Baal and again the emphasis was on sex and fertility, male prostitutes being part of his rituals. **The consequence of this religion was to bring about widespread prostitution and adultery. The whole moral tone of the nation was polluted with promiscuity.** God’s perspective is given in Hosea, “I have seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel. There Ephraim is given to prostitution and Israel is defiled” (Hos. 6:10). Amos notes that as a consequence of temple prostitution, “Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name” (Am. 2:7). This sexual licence is a constant theme in the prophets, and it is this gross degradation that makes the idolatry of Israel so detestable to God. Ashtoreth, the goddess, was not only grotesquely sexual but violent, a goddess of war who also encouraged cruelty and violence.

“There was no essential underlying moral basis in pagan religion”

The polluting effect of pagan religion did not end with the Asherah pole. Israel boasted altars to Chemosh, the god of Moab, and to Molech the god of Ammon. These were no innocent idols, for they demanded human sacrifices. Violence, fear, dehumanisation, cruelty were all involved in the religious practices encouraged by such gods. Kings as well as subjects were involved in those practices. The fact is there never was any essential underlying moral basis in pagan religion; it was religion that expressed and played to the baser human instincts. The encouragement of it was a heavy price to pay for political alliances, and it was never the case that the mutual sharing of such gods always secured peace.

Conclusion - The Ultimate Yardstick for Religion

The condemnation of the pagan religions lies ultimately in the same place as the condemnation of empty Israelite religion; they both allow the breaking of the moral law, empty religion by neglect, paganism by active encouragement. They are both an affront to a God who puts righteousness, holiness, love and justice at the heart of what he seeks to do for humanity. Such is his nature, and true religion and its practices must reflect that nature.

The severity with which God dealt both with the empty institutions of his own religion and the obscenities of the idolatrous religion may seem offensive to some. But both, in different ways, were leading to abhorrent human behaviour which could not be tolerated for ever. Failure to reform meant only one thing; they had to be destroyed so that humanity might be driven to re-appraise and learn an essential lesson. There is a warning here for traditional Christian institutions: empty profession of faith is an affront to God and invites judgement. With regard to pagan religion, in proportion to its obscene behaviour patterns so will it bring its own nemesis. Righteousness alone will prevail.