

The Answer to Bad Religion Is Not No Religion



*A Guide to Good Religion
for Seekers, Skeptics, and Believers*

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JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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PREFACE



Several years ago Jerry and Susan Walker (not their real names) and their two children visited my congregation. Up until that time the Walker family had never attended church. Like many young adults they thought Christianity was judgmental, closed minded, antiscience, and antiwomen. And yet, one Sunday morning, they showed up for worship at First United Methodist Church.

When they returned the following week, I offered to set up a time when I could visit with them. Although polite, they made clear they were just checking us out and not interested in scheduling a visit. The weeks went by and they kept returning each Sunday until, several months later, they scheduled an appointment with me to discuss baptism and church membership. During our visit I asked them, “What first attracted you to our congregation?”

“The sign,” they said.

“What sign?” I asked.

“The sign in front of your church that says, ‘Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.’ We thought all churches were narrow-minded and judgmental. So when we saw your sign, we decided to visit. When we discovered the church inside lived up to the sign outside, we wanted to become members.”

Before joining our congregation, the Walker family belonged to a subgroup of Americans whom sociologists call the “nones.” This term comes from national surveys that ask people to identify their religious preference. In this survey people self-identify as “Protestant,” “Catholic,” “Jewish,” “Muslim,” “Buddhist,” “Hindu,” or “Other.” They can also choose “None.” So “nones” are people who have no formal religious affiliation. That does not mean they are not interested in spirituality. In fact, many nones describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Only a small percentage of them are atheists. For many years only 6 percent of Americans were nones. However, over the past decade that number has skyrocketed. Today 20 percent of the population are nones, and that number is rapidly growing, especially among young adults like the Walkers. One-third of adults age eighteen to twenty-nine currently have no religious affiliation.

What prompted this major increase in religiously unaffiliated people? Researchers have discovered that by the early 1990s most Americans identified Christianity with religious-right fundamentalism. This brand of Christianity is seen by many as arrogant, judgmental, negative, closed-minded, and partisan in its politics. Over the past twenty years, that kind of fundamentalist religion has turned off a huge number of Americans, especially young ones, and caused many of them to reject religion altogether. In essence they said, “If this is Christianity, I want no part of it.” This dynamic, say the researchers, is the primary reason for the huge increase in people who now have no religious affiliation.¹

Like the Walker family, a growing number of Americans are starving for an alternative to negative, closed-minded, judgmental, partisan, antiwomen, antiscience religion. Instead, they are searching for a positive, grace-filled, open-minded, gender-equal faith option. Many of them are finding that in moderate and mainline denominations. They are discovering, like the Walker family did, that the answer to bad religion is not no religion but good religion.

Note

1. For a complete overview of this new religious reality in America, see Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and United Us* (Chicago: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

INTRODUCTION



ONE PASTOR'S STORY

I vividly recall the day I realized that the religion of my previous denomination no longer worked for me. Like Don McLean's classic rock song "American Pie," I remember "the day the music died." I was a young pastor in my late twenties, attending a national meeting of ministers in my old church. A well-known speaker was preaching. During his sermon he said, "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew." All around me pastors clapped their hands and enthusiastically shouted, "Amen!" and "Preach it, Brother!" His intolerant and hateful words about Jewish believers, combined with the positive response it elicited, literally made me sick to my stomach. I got up from my seat and walked out of the auditorium. In hindsight I probably should have driven home, resigned my church, left my denomination, and never returned. But at that point in my life, I wasn't ready for such a drastic decision. It took another decade to finally arrive at that necessary ending.

I did not grow up in the life of the church. My first real experience with Christianity came at age fifteen. At the time I was a mixed-up young man searching for answers. Through a series of life-changing events, I landed in a conservative church in Muskogee, Oklahoma. At that church I first heard the gospel message, affirmed faith in Christ, was baptized, and fully immersed myself in the life of the congregation. Soon thereafter I felt a call to vocational ministry. After high school I attended a Christian college where I received an excellent education in religion. I had exceptional professors who taught me an open-minded and progressive faith. After a few years of faith struggles and a short but positive career in the insurance business, I went to seminary. Upon graduation I landed at a county seat “First Church” pastorate. That congregation accepted, loved, and affirmed me, giving me a joyful and healthy birth into pastoral ministry.

It’s Hard to Leave Your Family

However, during that decade of college, seminary, and my first pastorate, my old denomination began a dramatic shift toward religious-right fundamentalism. I grew increasingly uncomfortable with the toxic direction my denomination was taking. And then I attended the pastors’ meeting I just mentioned. Another speaker at that same event said, “Brothers (all the pastors were men), you don’t need to seek truth. You already have all the truth you need.” Then, holding up his Bible, he said, “You just need to proclaim the truth.” I still remember thinking, “If I ever come to a time or place when I stop seeking truth, I hope somebody will put me out of my misery.”

So why didn’t I leave my church right then? As many people know, it’s hard to leave your family, even when it’s

dysfunctional. Plus, I was young and idealistic. I naively believed that I and other “moderates” in the denomination would eventually win the day. In the end, however, we lost the battle completely.

I also had selfish reasons for staying. I served a large church for my age, with growing opportunities to speak, publish, teach, and serve on various boards and committees. I had a promising future ahead of me. And I was ignorant of the broader Christian community. For example, I had no knowledge of mainline churches. I did not know other places existed in the Christian family where people affirmed more progressive and open-minded faith. I had never even visited a Methodist, Episcopal, or Presbyterian church. My religious worldview was extremely provincial and narrow.

Over the next decade I continued to experience professional opportunities. I published several books with my denomination, wrote dozens of articles, was on the speaking circuit, and pastored tall-steeple churches. And then, at a young age, I was invited to work at the denominational headquarters, working with pastors and music ministers throughout the country in the area of worship and preaching. Although uncomfortable with the direction of my denomination, I loved my work and felt I had too much to lose to seriously consider leaving.

But the drumbeat of religious-right fundamentalism continued to overtake my denomination. Leaders demanded that members believe in biblical inerrancy (everything in the Bible must be interpreted literally), told women they could not serve as clergy and must submit to their husbands, and became intensely partisan in their politics. Large numbers of professors at our seminaries and leaders at our agencies were being fired or forced out for being “liberals.” The church that introduced me to Christ, that loved and educated me, and that had given me

wonderful opportunities of service was, at least from my perspective, being destroyed. Finally, I came to believe the national leaders of my denomination were guilty of heresy—not doctrinal heresy, but heresy of spirit. Their arrogant, judgmental, mean-spirited, and intolerant positions were the exact opposite of the spirit of Jesus Christ. I could no longer avoid the new realities of my church. I faced a spiritual and vocational crisis.

The Cost of Staying

Sick to my soul over these developments, I scheduled a lunch appointment with an older, wiser, and respected pastor. He, like me, felt devastated over the toxic faith taking over our beloved church. However, with only a few years before his retirement, a denominational change was not a viable option for him. But I was still in my thirties. During lunch I kept talking to my older pastor friend about “the cost of leaving.” I moaned about losing my status, my financial compensation level, my publishing and teaching opportunities, and the only church I had ever known. He listened with compassion. But then he said, “Martin, you’ve been telling me about the cost of leaving. Now I want you to tell me about the cost of *staying*.” His question was a burning-bush epiphany for me. I knew at that moment I could no longer stay in my church of origin. The cost of staying—loss of integrity, identifying with a denomination I could no longer affirm, and constant anxiety—was much higher than the cost of leaving. It was time to go.

I want to be clear that I deeply appreciate the many gifts my old denomination gave me. They introduced me to Jesus, loved me, educated me, and gave me exceptional opportunities of service. And I want to affirm that my old church is full of wonderful laypeople and clergy who love

God and serve Jesus faithfully and who are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. My controversy was not (and is not) with the people in the pews or most of the people in the pulpits. My problem was with the national leaders who, in the name of religious purity, engaged in ruthless ecclesiastical power politics and decimated a beautiful and wonderful religious tradition.

And so, in 1994, I left my old denomination and began a journey that had an uncertain destination and future. For a while I felt absolutely lost. I even considered leaving vocational ministry altogether. But in spite of my wounds and the grief over losing my previous church family, I knew God had called me to serve as a minister of the gospel. A year later, after much soul searching and investigation, I landed in the United Methodist Church, a denomination of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.” In this mainline denomination (which, like every church, has flaws) I felt like I had finally arrived home. For the first time in my life, I experienced an orthodox and centrist faith that was also grace-filled, open-minded, gender-inclusive, tolerant, and life-giving. Through this experience I’ve learned that the answer to bad religion is not no religion but good religion. To that subject we now turn our attention.

PART 1



THE ANSWER TO BAD RELIGION

Way back in 1859 Charles Darwin startled the world by publishing his famous (many would say infamous) book *On the Origin of Species*, which laid out his theory of evolution. You may know that at the end of his life, Charles Darwin was an atheist. However, that was not always the case. Darwin was raised in the Anglican Church and even considered becoming a clergyman. So, what caused him to renounce Christianity? Many people believe Darwin lost his faith because of his belief in evolution. But that's incorrect. To the end of his life, Darwin insisted that evolution was completely compatible with Christian faith. Neither science nor evolution caused Darwin to reject Christianity. Instead, bad religion caused Darwin to become an atheist. For example, when his beloved daughter died at the age of ten, Darwin blamed God. Eventually he quit believing in God altogether. He simply could not believe in a God that killed off ten-year-old children. I don't blame him. I don't believe in that kind of God either. If space permitted, I

could give you other examples of how bad theology undermined Darwin's faith, including the doctrine that all Jews were destined for a devil's hell. In the end it wasn't science but bad religion that caused Darwin's atheism.

Unfortunately, there continues to be a lot of bad religion out there, still causing people to lose their faith. Though this book focuses on Protestant Christianity, bad religion affects other traditions as well. For example, think of all those young Muslim men and women who blow themselves up, along with dozens of innocent people—all in the name of God. Think about all those Roman Catholic priests who molested children and all the bishops who covered it up. There's plenty of bad religion in Protestant churches, too. I recently heard about a Baptist preacher from California who prays daily, in the name of Jesus, for God to kill President Obama. Sadly I could go on and on. Bad religion abounds, including closed-minded religion, arrogant religion, intolerant religion, and judgmental religion. You can add to that list religion that tells women they are inferior to men and religion that says science is the enemy of faith. When I think of all the bad religion out there, especially in the Christian faith, I can relate to the musician Bono's statement, "Christians are hard to tolerate. I don't know how Jesus does it."

In the pages that follow, we review a few examples of bad religion, primarily focused on Protestant Christianity in the United States. This list is not anywhere near comprehensive, and not everyone will agree that these examples constitute unhealthy religion. But they are illustrative of the kind of religion that turns many people away from Christian faith.



BAD RELIGION ENGAGES IN SELF-RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF OTHERS

On Mother's Day 2012, a North Carolina Baptist pastor preached a disturbing sermon that went viral. In his sermon this pastor said, "I figured a way to get rid of all the lesbians and queers. Build a great big large fence, fifty or a hundred miles long, put all the lesbians in there. Fly over and drop some food. Do the same thing with the queers and the homosexuals and have that fence electrified so they can't get out. And you know what? In a few years, they'll die out. Do you know why? They can't reproduce!" He later added, "It makes me pukin' sick to think about. Can you imagine kissing some man?"

Whatever you think about homosexuality, this kind of hateful condemnation is deeply troubling. It's also a prime example of bad religion. And it's not a new development. Even in Jesus' day, judgmental religion was a serious problem. Many passages of Scripture reveal it, including the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector praying at the temple in Luke 18:9–14. The story begins, "To

some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable” (Luke 18:9). In the parable the Pharisee thanked God that he was not a terrible sinner like the tax collector praying on the other side of the temple. Meanwhile the tax collector prayed for God to be merciful to him, a sinner. At the end of the story, Jesus affirmed the contrite tax collector and criticized the self-righteous, judgmental Pharisee. Throughout his ministry Jesus regularly challenged the arrogant and judgmental religion he saw all around him.

Before diving into the topic of judging, I need to make an important clarification. When Jesus said, “Do not judge,” he was not saying we should never evaluate a person’s character. Jesus’ command not to judge people doesn’t mean we overlook lying, cheating, stealing, or criminal behavior. Jesus is not saying we never hold people accountable for their behavior. What Jesus is saying is that having a self-righteous, superior, judgmental, condemning attitude toward others is bad religion, and we need to avoid it.

One of the most famous biblical stories dealing with judgmental religion is found in John 8:1–11. A woman is caught in the act of adultery. Religious leaders wanted to stone her to death in accord with Jewish law. Jesus responded, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). Eventually everyone left the scene, leaving their stones behind. This powerful story of grace illustrates at least four problems with judgmental religion.

1. *Judging is selective.* The story begins like this. “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery’” (John 8:3–4). Even a quick review of the story reveals a major problem. The man involved in this adulterous affair was missing! The religious leaders were

quick to judge, but their judging was selective. They condemned the woman but not the man. Modern-day judging is the same. We come down hard on some people but not others. We condemn some sins but ignore other sins. For example, a few years ago a pastor in middle Tennessee said in a sermon, “Homosexuals will not be allowed into heaven.” That comment is troubling on many levels. First, God makes the decision who makes it into heaven and who doesn’t, not preachers. Second, there’s no doubt his comment caused a lot of pain for people in that congregation who were gay or had loved ones who were gay. But mostly this story is an example of selective judging. The pastor supported his pronouncement with several passages of Scripture—texts that Christian believers interpret differently.¹ But the same passages this pastor used to condemn homosexual behavior also speak about pride, greed, lust, adultery, gossip, gluttony, and dishonoring parents. That preacher didn’t say prideful people won’t be allowed into heaven. He didn’t say gluttons won’t be allowed into heaven. He didn’t say gossips won’t be allowed into heaven, or greedy people, or lustful people, or children who disrespect their parents. He only said homosexuals won’t make it into heaven. One of the major problems with judging is that it is selective. We are quick to judge other people’s sins, but not our own.

2. *Judging is destructive.* In this story religious leaders said to Jesus, “‘In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him” (John 8:5–6). As we see in this text, judging others is destructive. Obviously, the judging in this story would have been destructive for this woman. If the religious leaders had carried out their plan, she would have been executed in a brutal fashion. But that’s not the only destructiveness we see here. The scribes and Pharisees were also trying

to destroy Jesus. They used this episode to trap Jesus, to have ammunition against him. They were hoping he would say, “No, don’t stone her,” so that they could accuse him of not believing the Bible and not obeying the law of Moses. The entire episode was terribly destructive. Arrogant, self-righteous judging always hurts people.

We see that clearly in America today. Hateful judgment of others is epidemic in our country and is polarizing us in dangerous ways. That’s especially true in politics. For example, during the last election cycle, I heard a person on the political right call people on the political left “a bunch of communists.” Think about that. Should we really be calling people “communists”? Communism as practiced under brutal dictators like Stalin and Mao was responsible for the slaughter of millions of people in the twentieth century. In fact, it just about destroyed the world. We need to think twice before we accuse someone of being a communist. But don’t think I’m picking on the political right because it’s no better on the left. A week later I heard a person on the political left call people on the political right “the American Taliban.” Do you really think we should be calling people “the Taliban”? The Taliban indiscriminately blow people up with bombs, behead people, throw acid on women’s faces, and burn down schools. This kind of hateful judgment, on both the left and the right, is tearing our country apart. It’s destructive. And it is inappropriate for Christian believers.

But judging isn’t just destructive on a national level. Judging is also destructive on a personal level. When we judge people, we—at least partially—destroy them. I once heard a story by Tony Campolo that broke my heart. During his school years Tony knew a boy whose classmates constantly picked on him. He was different from the other boys, sort of effeminate, so during junior high school some of the students began calling him a sissy. By high school

they suspected he was a homosexual, and their judgment got worse. They called him “homo, fag, queer,” and worse. They were merciless in their judgment of this boy. Then one day, right after gym class, five boys cornered him in the locker room shower and urinated on him. Afterward they walked off laughing. He showered again, dressed, and made it through the rest of the day. But the damage had been done; the breaking point had arrived. That night he hung himself in the basement of his house. This young man made a horrible decision to kill himself. But when we judge and condemn others, we hurt them, we tear them down, we break their spirit, and sometimes we literally destroy them. Self-righteous judging of others is always destructive.

3. *Judging is hypocritical.* The story in John 8 continues, “When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there” (John 8:7–9). The point here is clear: We have no business judging the sins of others when we have sins of our own. Unless we are perfect, when we judge others, we are hypocrites. Only perfect people have the right to judge others. And there are no perfect people.

This story reminds me of the time when former President Bill Clinton engaged in sexual misconduct with a young intern named Monica Lewinsky. Lest I be misunderstood, I believe Bill Clinton’s behavior in this matter was despicable. I was highly disappointed in his actions and am not defending him. But that incident is a vivid example of the hypocrisy of judging others. When the news broke about Clinton’s affair, a lot of people who began casting stones at the president had no business doing so. For example,

Representative Dan Burton called Clinton a “scumbag.” Soon thereafter Burton admitted fathering a child outside of marriage. Senator Steven Johnson also attacked Clinton for his misbehavior; Johnson, a married man, later admitted to having a sexual affair with a twenty-three-year-old intern who worked in his office, just one year before Clinton’s affair. Representative Helen Chenoweth, a prominent critic of Clinton’s sexual conduct, later conceded she had carried on a six-year extramarital affair herself. Representative Henry Hyde, who viciously attacked Clinton’s sexual sins, fessed up that in his forties he carried on an extramarital fling with a married woman, although he discounted it as a “youthful indiscretion.” The whole incident was a pitiful spectacle of pure hypocrisy. We had all these senators and representatives throwing stones at the president for having an affair while they were guilty of affairs of their own. Unless we are perfect, when we judge others, we are being hypocritical. That’s why Jesus said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7).

4. *Judging violates the example and teaching of Jesus.* The story concludes, “Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you,’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’” (John 8:10–11). One final reason for not judging others is that judging violates the example and teaching of Christ. Jesus was the only person in the world who had the right to condemn this woman, but he did not do so. That does not mean Jesus was soft on sin. In fact, Jesus told this woman to go and sin no more. Jesus did not condone her behavior. Jesus did throw out one of the Ten Commandments that says, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14). But neither did he condemn her. Jesus knew people need grace, not judgment. In this text and in many other passages in

the Bible, Jesus tells us not to judge others. When we do judge, we violate the example and the teaching of our Lord. For the four reasons mentioned above, self-righteous judgment of others is bad religion and needs to be discarded.

Note

1. For an overview of the three major Christian positions on homosexuality, see chapter 9 of my book *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian: A Guide to What Matters Most* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).