

Weighed in the Scales (Part One)

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”

Reflection 3 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

So more and more Americans claim no religious affiliation. This is especially true of those under 30. This whole area is one I’ve given a lot of thought to for a number of years as have many others. Books have been written, and articles, and hardly a week goes by when on Facebook, just on my account, there isn’t another posting on why Millennials are “leaving the church.” And one thing that keeps coming up is that many are now weighing churches against the teachings of Jesus and their own experiences and find them wanting. Now note: they are not weighing churches against the teachings of Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins or some other clever, articulate nonbeliever and finding them wanting. They are weighing churches against the teachings of Jesus and finding them wanting.

They seek compassion, decency, common sense and inclusiveness but in their own experiences they have not found these things in churches, mosques and synagogues. They seek to make sense of a God they still believe in but whom they struggle to find in organized religion. And they will not go to churches they find to be less moral than they themselves are. Nor should they.

Now, it’s true that some are completely secularized living only for themselves and only for their own lifestyles. Some are hostile to religion. Some are what we could call secular fundamentalists; they are as dogmatic, as arrogant, and as black-and-white in their thinking as religious fundamentalists. As Jesus might say, “They have their reward.”

But many others don’t attend church because the teachings of the church just don’t make sense to them. It’s not that they don’t care about being good or kind. It’s not that they don’t believe in God; most of them do believe in God. But they find the implications of some dark doctrines of traditional Christianity too horrifying, for that matter, too immoral to contemplate. And if this trend has picked up speed in the just the last twenty years or so, it, in fact, began a long time ago.

Way back in the eighteenth century, Western culture turned against the historic church. Many educated people lost respect for Christianity. And that respect never came back. We call it secularization, and assign it an inevitability. Many suppose that as more and more people became educated they predictably turned against religion. But there’s nothing predictable about this. It’s not knowing more that undermines faith. What undermines faith is not more education but bad behavior, that is, bad behavior on the part of the historic church. And the West turning secular was far from inevitable. It didn’t have to be.

What happened was thinkers like Voltaire and Hume and Diderot and others held the eighteenth-century church up to the light of history and reason and Scripture, up to the light of the teachings of Jesus, and found it badly wanting. They were tired of the church wrangling, wrangling that had led to nearly a century of devastating religious warfare all across Europe. Millions of people in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe had died because of religions called Christian. So now these thinkers were tired of people being killed for the sake of arguments no one could fully understand because they are sacred mysteries. They were tired of churchmen manipulating three

or four passages that seemed to favor their viewpoint and forgetting a hundred that destroyed it. That happens all the time. Still does.

They were tired of the way some people, actually a lot of people, would pick and choose from the very same text what they would take seriously and what they would just ignore. That still happens over and over. They were tired of religion that was more focused on controversy than rebirth. And they were tired of preachers who presented God as a capricious demon who exercises his power tyrannically and irrationally.

The French scholar Diderot in an article on “Intolerance” in his *Encyclopedia* would ask: “Is it the spirit of God that moves you to hate your brother and preach hatred to your neighbor?” The great Voltaire wondered, “With what [person] could we carry on any [business] or perform any of the civil duties of society, if we were indeed convinced that we were conversing with persons destined to eternal damnation?” He also observed that the Christian religion of his day differed greatly from the religion which Jesus practiced, was in fact the opposite of the religion of Jesus.

And so in the eighteenth century much of Western society, many of the most educated, even many of the most thoughtful, collectively decided that they could no longer take their primary truths from Christianity. They could no longer safely do this. They could not trust peace and prosperity to the historic church. The historic church was primarily responsible for undermining peace and prosperity.

As Voltaire himself noted, all of this goes completely against the original teachings of Jesus. He weighed churches against the teachings of Jesus and his own experience and found them wanting. Not God wanting. Not Jesus wanting. But churches wanting. In fact, the West turned secular primarily for one reason: because the historic church was no longer true to the gracious, humane and merciful teachings of Jesus.

But just suppose it was. Just suppose the church today, well, repented. Suppose it was true to the gracious, humane and merciful teachings of Jesus. And suppose everyone knew this.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week.