

A Christian Answer to the Question: "Can Religion Bring Peace?"

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In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, the Prince of Peace, through whom we have been reconciled to God and who has Himself committed to us the message of reconciliation— His glorious Gospel of Peace! Dearly beloved of God...

We are now well into the season of Advent, that season of preparation which precedes our commemoration and celebration of the coming of God's Christ into the world, the nativity of Jesus. Advent is a time that is pregnant with meaning and significance as it sets our sights to seeing that which truly transcends all of the pageantry that suffuses the season which will soon follow. Soon, with Christmas fast approaching, countless Christians, nominal Christians, and even non-Christians, will raise their voices in singing the season's songs. They'll even sing about the angel's singing, with strains and refrains which frame stanzas like "Hark! The herald angels sing! Glory to the new-born King! [...] Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!" Indeed, as they sing each stanza of this popular Christmas carol, I pray that they'll pay attention to its words and that they'll recall the words of the angelic host to the shepherds of Bethlehem, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth *peace*, good will toward men." "Peace", that was the subject that I was invited to address at an interfaith symposium that was organized by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Mississauga exactly nine years ago today (back when I served as the Director of Christian Outreach for The Church of St. Mark- Lutheran). Indeed, perhaps today more than in the days before, it seems fitting to revisit the question that I was asked to answer from a Christian perspective at this interfaith symposium: "**Can religion bring peace?**"

I'd like to revisit this question for two reasons: first, since we live in an age in which we've begun to speak in terms of a "global community", this question is being frequently raised as people seek to address the changing landscape of our times; and secondly, in our particular patronizingly pluralistic and politically correct culture that seeks to embrace everything while committing to nothing, the Christian answer to the question— an answer in sharp contrast to all other positions— needs to be heard amid the din of pathetic platitudes proffered by the multitude of false prophets who proclaim, "Peace! Peace!" When there is no peace."

At this interfaith symposium, the other speakers— even while speaking from differing spiritual perspectives— ultimately spoke with the same voice, and said essentially the same thing, because their message was sown by the same source. Again, the question set before us was: "Can religion bring peace?" As I searched the Scriptures and scrutinized the subject, I found myself returning with an answer in the negative, rather than the affirmative, time and time again. Can any religion, if it is no more than a series of metaphysical assertions, bring about a meaningful peace? If by peace we mean the absence of conflict, then can human effort succeed in bringing about such a desired outcome? The record of human history bears witness to the contrary. So too does the testimony of Scripture.

The problem cannot be solved by religious propositions because the very heart of the problem is a problem of the heart... and not the head. The problem is relational and not rational. Hence, the power to redress the problem can never be found in a set of propositions, but is to be found in a person: He who formed the heart. The problem is that mankind— the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve— have turned their hearts from God, and, consequently, from one

another. People are not at peace with one another, nor even themselves, because they are not at peace with God.

Christian theologians refer to the onset of this alienation between God and the creatures that once bore His image as "The Fall". In the Garden of Eden, the progenitors of all peoples—Adam and Eve—set out on a path of independence that would ultimately mark us all, and leave a paradisaal peace in pieces. The Tempter's snare was set as He hissed the words, "Yea, hath God said", and, "ye shall be as gods." In disobedience Adam and Eve embraced the pursuit of an autonomous existence and turned from Him by Whom, and for Whom, they were made. When they transgressed against God, they tore the fabric of the relationship between the Creator and His creation. Those who were formed by God, and animated by His Spirit so as to be Living souls, died in that day; they were cut off from the Life of God... just as He had warned them. Turning from the Author of Life, they found only death. The implications of this would be heightened through the struggles of each successive generation of Adam's spiritually stillborn offspring. Many centuries later, but still cognizant of the ramifications of the Fall, St. Augustine reiterated this reality when he wrote, "O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." The wrath of God that threatens to justly dash us all to pieces was kindled and the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve would know no peace while under God's curse.

It is written that in the Paradise of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned, "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." To this day, as a consequence of the fall, people have tried to clothe themselves in all sorts of attire so as not to appear naked before both God and their

fellow man. By this, I am not referring to garments of cloth, but to mankind's quest for identity, and their attempt to find their soul's significance and acceptance in the eyes of others. Man is ultimately not at peace with himself. To quote Blaise Pascal, "Man does not know the place he should occupy. He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness." Since the fall, people have vigorously sought to cloak themselves with wealth, power, and prestige, and root their identity in their talent, beauty, physical prowess, and so forth. The world values all those who possess those articles and attributes worthy of its praise... but only for as long as such things are possessed: fortunes are squandered, fame is fleeting, beauty fades, intellect is enfeebled, and strength wanes. Yet, people continue to seek validation and recognition in such temporary and temporal things. So People strive to climb the various ladders to worldly success at any cost— all too often using other people as the rungs they step on as they ascend! The costs of ascending are deemed acceptable because people believe that at the top they will find themselves and their place in this world. Adam and Eve knew their place in God's world, but they forfeited that place both for themselves and their progeny. In this world, mankind's efforts to clothe themselves in significance are ultimately confounded. Apart from God, the people of this world can not be at peace with themselves... there is no rest for the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve.

Man is not at peace with God and consequently not at peace with himself; and therefore, man cannot be at peace with others. In the account of the Fall we witness the dissolution of the relationship between Adam and the one who was "flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone" as his first course of action when confronted with his transgression was to place

himself first and then shift the blame to Eve... and even God Himself. Adam's seed bears his image in this same self-centred way that undermines all relationships even before they begin. Human history bears witness to man's inhumanity to man, as one person seeks their own at the expense of another: brother against brother and nation against nation. Peace in the affairs and relationships of this world are only temporary "ceasefire" agreements at best. Surely, mankind's best efforts are akin to sandcastles built upon the seashore. No matter how intricate and impressive they are, they are ultimately washed away by the tide of egocentric pride. Indeed, there is no peace among the children of Adam and Eve... children who are not at peace with God.

The problem that undermines all efforts at peace is a spiritual one that is rooted in the sinfulness of the human heart. However, God, in His grace and mercy, has not abandoned us even though we "like sheep have gone astray, each one his own way." He is the Good Shepherd who seeks after us. In His goodness He tirelessly calls us to Himself. He is a Holy God who is wholly committed to restore the relationship that we've ruined. This encroaching reality—the pursuit of a Holy God—assails the deepest consciousness and consciences of all people; and yet, far more often than not, man's ready response is to turn and fight, or to take to flight, via their respective religions... their idolatrous claptrap.

In recognizing that the human dilemma of a God-shaped void in our hearts is somehow the source of our discontent, we, as the autonomy seeking offspring of Adam, often set out to find solace on our own terms. All men—although they may not readily admit it—realize that they have fallen short of a moral standard that is external to them, and that they stand guilty before their own conscience. We inherently know what is morally right and wrong. We intrinsically

recognize the Moral Law. We don't need to be taught nor told of these truths. Yet, even though we know what we ought to do and what we ought not do, we daily find ourselves doing what we know we ought not do and failing to do what we know we ought to do. Even if we attempt to diminish the demands of the Moral Law with a myriad of rationalizations, we still find that our moral reach exceeds our grasp. We ultimately can't even live up to the moral standards that we set for ourselves! Our perversion thwarts us at every turn as we push virtue to the periphery, and we engage in hypocrisy. We even find that our very attempts at moral conduct can lead us to into immoral attitudes— and even actions— that negate all of our efforts. The fact that we are at times afforded a glimpse beyond our own self-deluding veil of pretence should bring us to sobriety in such matters. If God is good, then He is just; if He is just, then we all stand condemned.

The knowledge of our guilt can lead us into idolatry if we allow our hearts to move us away from acknowledging the Creator whom we cannot manipulate so as to worship the creatures that we can. Men are often guilty of making the One who made them in His image... into their own. Religiously striving to become righteous can readily degenerate into self-righteousness and awaken the desire to fashion a god that suits our selves and is, therefore, safe. However, God, because He is good is most assuredly not safe. Manmade religions cannot change this reality. How can any of our efforts bring us pardon for all our sins? How will we stand when God confronts us with every single one of our evil thoughts, words, and deeds? While the Law that is written in our hearts may serve to show us how we ought to live, and thereby act as a sort of restraint against sin, this is not its primary spiritual purpose. It primarily acts like a mirror that shows us the true state of our soul. For example, honestly searching

ourselves in the light of the second table of God's Ten Commandments, would reveal to us that we are all— without exception— greedy, lying, thieving, adulterous, murderers at heart. In the language of the Bible, the Law brings with it the "conviction of sin" so as to inspire "repentance", and in so doing, it cuts through our layers of self-deception so that we may come to recognize how truly helpless we are to affect our condition.

The Law is the prelude to the Gospel (the Good News of the Christian faith). It is the Bad News that sets the Good News in sharp relief... the Good News: God loves us and has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. The Author of Life has tasted death so as to bring those condemned to death to Eternal Life! The Son of God became a man so that men could be counted as sons!

In Christ, God forgives those whom He draws to repent and trust in the Good News, for as it is written, "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." The Christian message is all about what God has done, and continues to do, to rescue us from our miserable state so that we can be at peace with Him, ourselves, one another, and, in fact, all of creation! We do not have to ascend to God; He has descended to us. Christ became accursed so as to set us free from God's curse. In Christ we find peace with God.

Can religion bring peace to the world? No. Peace is secured in a relationship and not in religious rites or spiritual speculation. Peace cannot be found in a set of propositional truths that pertain to a particular way of life; rather, peace is found in a person: the One who said of Himself, "I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Our peace can only come by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. At this point, you may be thinking that "Christian"

religions are exempt. However, this is not the case. Church membership does not save and cannot, in and of itself, transform the heart. Nor can religious works bring about the salvation that is peace with God. A nominal Christian *cultus* confers nothing. Recall Jesus' words, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'Away from me, you evildoers! I never knew you.'" You see, there is a profound difference between 'knowing about' and 'knowing' someone. "You believe that there is one God.", writes James, "Good! Even the demons believe that— and shudder." Hence, even sound doctrine, in and of itself, cannot save. Apart from a relationship built upon repentance and faith in the person and work of God's Christ, there can be no peace with God. Only by being grounded in the one true faith, in a right relationship with God, do the Sons of Adam become the Sons of the Kingdom... and know peace with the King of all Kings!

In conclusion, peace comes to those who've entrusted themselves to Christ and, in having received Him who receives them, have come to be counted as the children of God. To proclaim this truth is the blessed privilege and obligation of every single Christian, for it is written, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us." Let us then, in the remaining days of this Advent season, prepare the way of the Lord by making a straight path in this world's spiritual wilderness by proclaiming the good news of Christ. Let us use our voices

to call out to those in the midst of this vast spiritual desert and declare what the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Let us communicate God's Word to this fallen world so that the words of the Christmas carol I quoted at the onset, would become infused with their full meaning as they're heard sung throughout the season: "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!; Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel!; Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth... Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!" In His name. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.