

## What Good is Religion?

What good is religion? How do you suppose the typical person on the street would answer? How would you answer?

For many people, religion is a source of morality. It is also a source of meaning. It is also for many a source of community, though the recent rise of “spirituality” in America makes traditional religious communities somewhat passé for millions. And let’s not forget that many folks see their religion as the pathway through this world to a more enduring final destination. Indeed, if they were to be convinced that there’s no “life after death,” many if not most religious people might just give it up – though it’s hard to know what anyone will do when faced with a momentous discovery until it actually happens.

A couple of weeks ago I noticed one of the Bloomington busses with the local atheist claim on one side, “You can be good without God,” and the local evangelical Christian rejoinder on the other, “You can be good without God, but you cannot be saved without Jesus.” As I’ve noted before in this column, I don’t believe goodness is possible without God, because nothing is possible without God. Moreover, I don’t believe that being “saved,” however that is understood, is impossible without Jesus. In my view the atheists are wrong on one count, and certain local Christians on two.

But what does it mean to be saved? That’s too big a question for this column, but I can say that any persons who think that the reason for being Christian is to be saved haven’t paid close attention to Jesus, who taught that “whoever would save their life will lose it.” If your reason for hanging out with Jesus is the deferred compensation plan, you’re going to be sadly disappointed. The reason for being Christian is because you can’t help it. In particular, you can’t help loving God. Never mind whether there’s any life hereafter.

It’ll be nice if there is a hereafter. All those who wreaked heedless havoc in this life will finally get their comeuppance, while those who suffered unconscionably will be rewarded. But don’t let that be your life game plan. The real challenge is to make good on the prayer taught by Jesus that calls for what is of ultimate value, goodness, and beauty to be accomplished in the here and now, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

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