

## **“Is Religion Worth It? A Sermon Duel”**

**February 4, 2018**

**Rev. Nathan Detering vs Jessica James-Carnes, Ministerial Intern**

### ***Sermon Introduction***

***Doug Brown***

- Explain what we are doing (auction, topic), what the format will be (2 min, will cut us off),
- Disclaimer: these views may or may not be the ministers’ own views

### ***Anthem***

***Give Me Some of that Old Time Religion***

***(2 min apiece – Doug will flip a coin on who gets to go first!)***

**Jessica James-Carnes won the toss.**

### ***What is religion?***

#### ***Jessica:***

Religion is our real life super power for saving the world. It’s where we acknowledge we can’t do it alone. We need other people, even to save ourselves. Without religion, there is no justice or mercy or grace. Religion is where we call everyone into their highest selves simply by loving them. Religion is the bottle for our Good News message we send out into the world...the message in which we say to everyone: you have inherent dignity and worth no matter how many hours per week you work or how much money you have or how often you volunteer your time. Religion is that only place where we say you are more than what you can produce or what your body can perform. It’s where we proclaim that everybody is made in the image of God. God calls all of you beloved. No matter what, everyone is redeemable. Religion is where we bind up the broken, feed the hungry and tie our hearts and our fates to one another. It’s the last place where we can have real relationships with people of different generations. Religion

compels us look at each individual who walks through the doors, and say: you are loved, you are worthy, you are necessary, you are enough and we are all in this together. That, my friends, is religion.

***Rev Nathan:***

What is religion? You wanna know what religion is, Doug?

Look. Don't let any minister quote some forgotten language like Latin  
To tell you what it the word originally meant.

And what I mean is: Don't let etymology hijack your common sense, ok?

Because we all know when I say religion what we're all thinking of is  
Top-down, you sit all passive and I'm gonna tell you what to think and feel  
and do,

There's a right way and there's a wrong way,

And God is this and not that, and not that, and not that,

Because religion is...look...religion is the **Religious Industrial Complex**,

You feel me?

And what I mean, there's a whole industry out there that tries to organize  
our spirituality into institutions, and tell us what to believe

And how to behave....

And, yeah, sure, the candles are nice,

And the clergy smile,

But that's how they hook you in!

Because before you know it, you're being told you have to pay your way

Into heaven – and heaven, you ever notice, is always depicted

As super gaudy and gold and full of fountains, like it's Vegas or something!

You want to spend the rest of eternity in Vegas, people?

I didn't think so.

But serious now...religion and the religious industrial complex has caused such damage.

You know I'm right.

Crusades! Crucifixions! The invention of thumb screws to punish the heretics!

Spanish Inquisition!

Holy Wars!

And in more recent times – sex abuse in the Catholic Church!

Taliban! Isis! 9-11!

God sanctioned prejudice against gays, lesbians and transgender people.

Bombs every day in Afghanistan set off between warring factions  
Of Islam!

So sure, yeah – maybe religion does some good, but I'm sure

You could also say Darth Vader had some of positive qualities.

My point is, on the whole, in the totality,

Religious is authoritarian, dogmatic, and dangerous.

Right? Right.

## Question 2

***Why bother (with religion) when so much harm is done in religion's name? (aka is secularism better?)***

***Jessica:***

Is it religion that has caused so much harm? Or is it misguided humans? Is religion the root of the problem...because I think the problem might actually hetero-normative patriarchy and white supremacy. These things don't define religion and they also exist in secular spaces. Joseph Stalin was pretty secular, right? And in 1917, when the Mexican government severely enforced secularism and shut down churches around the country, it set off the Cristero War and 250,000 people were killed. As a result, more extremist subgroups became deeply entrenched and used the martyrs of the war to justify themselves. When dialogue stops, growth stops. Why do we want to abdicate religion to fundamentalists? Look, when everyone sits down this evening to eat delicious crab dip...I mean to watch the Super Bowl, we will all have different things we want from that experience. We all have our ideas about how the event will unfold, right? Some of these we have in common, some not. If a handful of players walks onto the field tonight and decides they are going to change the rules or the equipment of the game, is everyone going to go just go along with it? If the other players don't agree, will they say "I like to exercise and kick the ball around sometime, but I don't know if I can really call myself an athlete..." If the new ideas are lousy, will fans just walk out of the stadium, turn off their TVs and say "well, geez, football is AWFUL...football is a terrible idea! You know what? I'm only going to watch chess championships from now on. They have better snacks anyway." No! They're going to lift up their voices and stay in the conversation.

***Rev. Nathan:***

Well, that's a great question, Doug.

That's a great question.

The fact that you're asking it,

And you're all thinking it, means we are all a bit doubtful,

A bit or a lot skeptical.

But ok, look – I'll play your game.

Religion's upside – helps people create and find community,  
 Describes a worldview where things happen for a reason,  
 That Mr. God is up there and in charge (ever notice how  
 Most religions always depict God as a dude? Hmmm),  
 Give's folks a reason, beyond altruism, to be a good person,  
 Because someone down the line we're told it will pay off.  
 If your religion is a Sunday thing, gives you a place for listen  
 To live music, hear spoken word and get some warmed up coffee.  
 Provides jobs for people who are so bad at be spiritual they need  
 To make it their full-time jobs and serve as clergy.  
 What else am I missing? Any upsides congregation?  
 See, you can't think of anything, can you?

And the downsides – I already covered that, no repeat necessary,  
 You already heard my gospel truth.  
 My point is this – we can do all this that we're doing here  
 This morning – the candles, the bells, the smells,  
 The robes, the TNT, the music, and we can just call  
 It our blessed Secular Sunday Time, ok?  
 Because all the baggage that you and I know comes  
 With religion – the hitching post of dogma and doctrine,  
 The smelly history none of us can deny,  
 The 'flat earth' mentality that asks us too often, over too many generations,  
 Never mind Vatican-Two, us to deny reason, science, truth...

Just don't seem worth the energy or the effort or the pretending.

Just ask your friendly local millennial if you doubt me;

They're leaving institutional religion by the droves.

And it's just because they're all on their phones instead.

And, what's more, so are countries like...all of Europe!

And guess what, the more secular those countries become,

The more peaceful and chill and happy their people report to be.

Here, Doug, let me submit into the record of evidence

This book – The Secular Life – and you can read all about it.

### Question 3

#### *Can I be good without God?*

##### *Jessica:*

Who wrote these questions, anyway? No, you cannot be good without God. That's nonsense! Why would you want or need to do that? God comes from an old German word that means Good. So, God is quite literally goodness. God is the exchange of energy...the transmission of hope and kindness between human beings. God doesn't care what anyone calls God or what anyone thinks God looks like. God just is. And God is what convicts us to have empathy for people who are suffering, to care for the sick and shelter the homeless. God is our ache for justice and healing. God is our roar for righteousness. God is what stirs our hearts to offer mercy, cultivates the gifts we can bring to saving the world and animates our hands to pick up the work we see before us. God is what inspires us to rely on one another and to carry our burdens together. God is the music we sing to and the community we lean on to carry us through the valley. God is our laughter and celebration and gratitude for the abundance we share. There is no good without God.

##### *Rev. Nathan*

Yes. Duh.

Look, it's a common sermon, first given by Voltaire, That failed philosopher, that if God didn't exist we would have To invent him, his point being that without a divine being to check Right and wrong, any number of atrocities are possible and could Go unpunished.

What a nube.

If God exists, Jessica, then is what we're seeing in the world, And in the good ol' USA right now, what you call good?

Seriously?

But it's such a common slag against atheists, that you can't

Be good person if you don't believe.

I mean, a study at the Univ. of Kentucky discovered

That most individuals conclude that a serial killer is more likely

To be an atheist than religious.

People – correlation does not mean causation!

I mean, I could go through the list of Wikipedia of famous, happy,

Decent, moral atheist and secularists, but I won't waste my time or yours.

We all know that we don't need some Big Ol' Peeping Tom

In the Sky to keep us on the up and up.

I mean, really, the only reason you are a nice, Jessica,

Is because of some great big spy camera in the sky????

This notion that we can't be good without god is one among many

Of prejudices we learn,

Because most of us grew up in a religion that taught us that nonbelievers are

bad people.

We are products of our culture, and what's considered good or bad

Or in-between is more a product of the norms of that culture

Than any dude telling me what to do in his white robe and staff

And flowy, hipster beard.

Because doing good for its own reason is good enough!



Because when there is no afterlife, there are no do-overs or heavens to make things right.

Atheists do good in the world because we know this is the one life we have, so we should make the most of it.”

## Question 4

### *Why use religious words anyway?*

#### *Jessica:*

What makes a word religious? Who gets to say which words are religious and which words are not religious? My religious words are love and hope, justice and healing, covenant and tradition, grace and worship, ritual and redemption, prayer and story. There are so many religious words. My religion is how I intentionally practice saying and imperfectly embodying these words in community with others. Some people practice them in churches and temples and synagogues and some people practice them outside under the stars. Wherever it happens they are still religious words. If someone misinterprets or abuses some of our religious words, we don't simply throw up our hands and then take ownership of the whole dictionary. We get to use our Sacred NO. We get to lift up our voices and demonstrate to the world what those words mean to US. Reinventing the wheel is exhausting and unnecessary. We come from countless generations of wilderness people. We carry their stories in our sacred texts and inside the marrow of our bones. Don't let anyone steal that from you. We all get to keep interpreting and translating and living out the heart of those stories in the context of THIS moment in time. Re-warp the loom and weave your own unique thread into the tapestry of religion...and use religious words while you do it.

#### *Rev. Nathan*

Yeah, really.

Look, I like what Barbara Brown Taylor says, how she says

That when it comes to language, especially religious language,

We all "Damaged Trusters"....

Meaning, we have seen how the church, the ministers, the parade

Of so-called ministers damning people to all kinds of pain or misery

On behalf of God,

And we all know how symbols of religion have been weaponized  
To exclude, harm, sanction prejudice, name who's in and who's out...  
And so, we all know how loaded, how heavy, how bogged down  
And baggage full these words like *religion, church, God, Jesus,*  
*Bible, worship, prayer, sacred, spirit, confession, sin,*  
*Heaven, hell, holy* are, right?  
They done damage!  
We don't trust them anymore to mean what you want them to mean, Jessica.

So isn't it enough to say, enough already?  
I mean, can we invent new words?  
It worked for the Internet! Google! Text! Email! Hashtag!  
Emoji! Website! Spam!  
I mean, a whole new language is possible  
To describe what goes on in here...  
This place that we might call a 'Secular SteepleDome'  
And instead of sermon, we can call a 'Morning Memo!'  
And instead of worship can call a 'a tasty hymn sandwich!'  
Yeah? Yeah!

**Question 5**

***What does it say about our church that we can debate religion's worth in a sermon? Conclusion***

***Jessica:***

We debate the worth of religion in our church because our ancestors were heretics! We honor them with our doubts and questions. We pay our respects by balancing intuition and mystery with logic and reason. We understand that wisdom is what emerges from combining each of these virtues. We remember the courage and sacrifice of the heretics by remaining in the arena with them and wrestling with our language and symbols. We debate religion's worth because we value humility and we don't presume to know all the answers to questions of ultimate concern. We debate religion's worth because we care about how other people experience and understand the world. We debate because we want to make religion better. We debate and learn and grow and change because we are fierce and proud religious people!

***Rev. Nathan:***

Um, that our steepledome is amazing!

Seriously though, what it says is that we value dialogue.

It says that that we practice one of our historical affirmations,

That all of us are given a free pew to go along with this free pulpit,

And that the first word for religion ought to also include

Some words against religion,

Because we need to doubt, wrestle and argue (though

Not in the receiving line) the pronouncements we hear

In church, as well as affirm, align and bless.

It says that doubt is not an enemy of our faith, but an asset.

It says that covenant religion, horizontal religion,

Religion made in relationship rather than  
In creed, top-down, tell you like it is...  
Is a valued and valuable alternative.  
It says that when church members buy auction sermon ideas  
From us, and hand them to their ministers and say ‘preach  
It way I like it’  
And we say back: *I don’t know you if paid quite enough for that to happen!*  
While also taking your perspective and point of view seriously...  
All of which, is to say, that in this house revelation is not sealed,  
And dogma is not locked up,  
And God is not God’s name,  
And atheists can sing a hymn round with people who pray to God everyday  
Without kicking each other out,  
Or throwing hymnals at them...  
It means we belong to tradition where worship hour is an act of generosity  
To the person next to you and not just about getting your own needs met,  
Because we all know that we’re not at the mall here,  
Where we have to pay to get what we want,  
Or look all shiny and happy to get blessed,  
Because the culture of commodity and you are what you earn  
Ends at the front steeple doors,  
  
I mean, I could go on, Jessica and Doug,  
With this memo, because I got lots to say,  
But there is always another Sunday,  
And the Super Bowl is just a few hours away,  
So just suffice it say – what it says about our church is this, in this week

Of memos and states of union:

The state of church is strong.