

Opinion

Perspective

By Jamie Buckingham

The Dangers Of Legalized Religion



Professional religion is the scourge of the world. The Ayatollah Khomeini is a professional religionist who says everyone outside Islam is a pagan and subject to death. Even Anwar Sadat, himself a Moslem, calls the Ayatollah a "madman."

I was once spit on by an orthodox Jewish rabbi for inadvertently brushing against him on a Sabbath's walk through the Mea-Shearim in Jerusalem. I had caused him to become unclean — something his professionalism could not cope with.

I've known fundamentalist Christians who were, like the Pharisees of old, professional religionists. The only thing that kept them from stoning sinners like me was the possibility I might not turn the other cheek.

Yet Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychiatrist, emphasizes that Christianity is the only faith in the world which says God loves the unrighteous more than the righteous. That's not religion. That is the love of a Heavenly Father made known through his son, Jesus Christ, and hopefully shed abroad through some of us also.

I've been careful, over the 10 years I've written this column, to keep from sounding religious. I realize there are a lot of readers who have been turned off by Christ by Christians. But things are changing — and a lot of those old, legalistic institutions called churches are coming to life. More and more folks seem to be understanding that all of life is given us by God to be used for His glory. Faith is not to be limited to churches and synagogues, but is part of our family life, our jobs, our recreation, our civic endeavors.

Spiritual truth is not always cloaked in church clothes. In face, I have a hard time imagining Jesus sitting through a

typical church service. Even though he attended the synagogue, he often caused such an uproar that they asked him to leave — sometimes by force. He did not fit their mold. He was a man of the world — with the single purpose of revealing His Father.

It's been fun to use this column over the last 10 years to do something of the same thing — to reveal God through hundreds of little incidents. The decision to stop writing for a while has been tough, but I'm trying to put into practice some of the things I've been preaching — like paying attention to priorities.

I'll miss taking pot shots at the hook-nosed editor whose friendship is far deeper than our feigned differences. On more than one occasion he has accused me of being spiritually deceived into thinking my gift was to be the thorn in his side. Fortunately, though, we have seemingly agreed on the dangers of legalized religion — whether it is Islam or Christianity — and he has allowed me the freedom to jab my pointed pencil at over-inflated institutions and egos.

For that I am grateful.

I am also grateful for the few of you who have kept on reading, year after year. To you, regardless of your church (or lack of church) persuasion, I leave this word: You are called to be light to a people stumbling in darkness. Do not let the world — or the church — put a bushel over your lamp. The moment you wrap your faith in a creed, box it into a structure, or codify it into a set of rules — it begins to die of suffocation. Take it out. Use it in the community. Let it breathe. Let it live. Let it shine.

I have gratitude for the years. And I imagine, before very long, that I'll accept old Shylock's standing invitation to return again to the pages of the Press-Journal.