

# God's Take On Religion

**Religion: Noun. "A system of faith and worship." (Oxford Dictionary)**

We have finally made it to Christmas!  
In the lead up to Christmas, the season of Advent,  
Our theme has been "God's Take On..."  
We have explored the ancient book of Isaiah and we have pulled apart our modern culture.  
We have discovered God's take on Lady Gaga, Topgear, Vogue Magazine and Super Heroes.  
If you want to check it out it's all on our website at [www.ichurch.net.au](http://www.ichurch.net.au)

Today we finish that sermon series by tackling the hardest on of all.  
"God's Take On Religion"

Since it's Christmas I would like to start with a whinge session.  
And here it is!

## **The Top Three Things I Hate About Religion:**

There are some things I love about religion.  
But sometimes religion gives me the runs and makes me want to puke.  
Sometimes I find myself hating, detesting, loathing so much of what people call 'religion'.  
I bet you have some of the same problems too.

So here are the top three things I hate about religion...

### **1. Religion Is Often Just Rules, Conditions, Judgment.**



Here's a scene from one of my favourite *Simpsons* episodes.  
The sign outside the church says, "No Shirt, No Shoes, No Salvation."

And it's a good sign of how many people think about religion.  
It's about conditions and judgment.

If you are from the first Church Of Springfield you need a shirt to get salvation.

If you're a Scientologist you have to go through intense deprogramming to become clear.  
If you're Jewish or Muslim one important condition is eating the right Kosher or Halal food.  
If you're Lutheran you have to drink port!  
If you're a Jehovah's Witness you have to go door knocking to get to the next level.  
If that's all religion is, then it's not worth much!

Now here's the second thing I hate most about religion:

## **2. Religion Turns Into Domination & Control.**

Religion isn't always about domination and control.  
For instance, today I don't want to dominate or control you – I want you to decide for yourselves.  
But the thing I hate about religion is that it so easily becomes a domination and control.

When my son and daughter were toddlers I was amazed to see patterns of dominance emerge.

When our girl was three years old, she worked out how to dominate her brother.  
If Kayla told Ben to climb up on the couch he did.  
If Kayla told Ben to jump off the couch he did.  
If she told Ben to grab the bikkies of the bench he did her dirty work for her.  
The three year old girl was the boss.  
And the boy did whatever she said.

A pecking order started to emerge.  
The three year old girl was the boss of the little boy,  
And so the little boy dominated and controlled the cat.  
Whenever he got in trouble he told the cat off.



The toddlers had it all worked out – they were the bosses and everyone else existed to serve their needs.  
Any parents struggling with young children,  
I think I can say that this diagram is an accurate description of a two year old's psychology.

But adults aren't that much different.  
This seems to be the way human beings work in general.

Even religion turns into these sorts of hierarchies – patterns of dominance and control.  
We might put God at the top, then good people, then slightly worse ones all the way down to the worst.



On each level they judge the next level down.  
When religion becomes that I hate it.

### **3. Religion Gets Mixed Up In Wars.**

One time I was at a wedding and the Groom and his groomsmen and I were all waiting up the front. As were waited for bride the Groom and groomsmen and I all were all chatting.

I was saying things like “don’t worry – late is good.”  
I was trying to calm their nerves a bit with comments like  
“90% of the time the bride is late”  
So I started telling jokes and the groom and groomsmen all joined it.  
So there we were anxiously waiting for the bride to appear telling jokes  
When out of nowhere, the last groomsmen says looks me right at me and says  
MATE, RELIGION JUST CAUSES WARS.  
There we are up the front of church and I’m in my traditional gown and he just fires it out!  
Mate, religion just causes wars.  
I was impressed!  
This is a gutsy bloke – there up the front of the church, no fear at all,  
And the other blokes are looking at him as if to say,  
“What the heck are you saying? Do you know who you just said that to?”

So I say,  
“Religion does seem to get mixed up in some wars doesn’t it?  
Which ones were you thinking of particularly?”  
And he just looks at me dumbfounded.  
So I try to help him out a bit,  
“So what do you think about that war they had in Ireland?”  
And he says, “What war in Ireland?”  
The groom was looking embarrassed and piped up  
“Ireland is just about the Brits taking over and the Irish wanting their country back!”

I don’t know exactly why, but I decided to take up the argument a bit then.  
So I said to the blokes:  
*“So who were the two greatest dictators and the biggest killers of all time?”*  
*Hitler exterminated almost 20 million, and Stalin in Communist Russia killed almost 40 million people.*  
*What religion did they kill in the name of?”*

Other groomsmen looked at him and said:  
“Oh man, you’ve been shot down in flames.”

The bloke who started it said "I have never been shot down in flames so bad in my life."  
And we all had a good laugh.

So then we are waiting, no bride, groom pacing around looking more nervous every second,  
And we went back to trying to be funny.

And then randomly a question popped into my head and I asked the groom:

"Would you kill for your wife?"

He looked as if I was mad.

"No really, it's a serious question, you're about to marry her,  
Say someone attacked her or something would you kill for her?"

"In a flash" he said, "Yes".

And I agreed,

"I think I could kill for my wife too.

I hate killing – I don't believe in it,

Even though it's the total opposite of my values,

I can see that if you pushed the right buttons in me, I might flip."

And so I asked the other groomsmen.

"Would you kill for your wife?"

They all admitted that in the wrong situation they might be moved to kill too.

What a weird conversation we were having their at the marriage altar.

The bride hadn't arrived yet.

And then I realized we were still talking about war...

It's in all of us: the potential to kill, to strike out, the potential for war is in all of us.

All of us have this power and this darker side.

There's some sort of dark violent potential in all of us.

We are the cause of war.

But what I hate is when people use religion to justify war.

When people say stupid things like "God is on our side."

I hate that.

Well, those are the top three things I hate about religion and I see that many of you have similar feelings.

## **But What Does God Think Of Religion?**

Through the last four weeks we have been exploring the book of Isaiah.

This amazing book written seven hundred years before Christ predicts his coming.

And it also gives us "God's Take" on much of our way of life.

And right at the very start of Isaiah we hear God's take on religion...

***Isaiah 1:11-16a***

***I am sick of your worship," says the Lord.***

***"Don't bring me any more sacrifices! ...***

***Why do you keep parading through my courts with your worthless sacrifices?***

***The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils!***

***Your religious festivals, your celebrations, and your special days for fasting - even your most holy days are sinful and false. I want nothing more to do with them.***

***I hate all your festivals and sacrifices. I cannot stand the sight of them!***

***From now on, when you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look.***

***Even though you offer many prayers, I will not listen.***

***For your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.  
Wash yourselves and be clean!***

This part of Isaiah is not unique at all.  
The Bible is full of these sorts of statements – where God REJECTS religion.  
And Jesus spoke the exact same way too. (Matthew 23:25-28)

**God doesn't want just "religion" from us.  
God wants us to experience a relationship of GRACE...**

God isn't interested in our clever invented ways to try and please Him,  
God wants us to experience a real relationship with him,  
One based on a thing called "grace".  
And Jesus shows us a totally different way to relate to God,  
A way that steps above the human flaws of religion and gets to our heart and soul...

## **1. Jesus Is Not About Rules, Conditions, Judgment – Jesus Is Unconditional!**

The message of Christmas is that God came down as one of us.  
He was born in a humble stable, visited first by humble shepherds.  
He hung around with ordinary people,  
He hung around with barmen and prostitutes, the poor, the battlers.

Jesus is not about conditions and judgment – he brings the unconditional from God.

*Romans 3:21-25*

*But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight - not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago... For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his grace declares us not guilty through Jesus Christ.*

Following Jesus is all about GRACE.  
I'm inviting you today to be free through forgiveness,  
Come to Jesus, give your life to him now because he goes deeper to free your heart and soul.

**Living In The Grace Of Jesus Christ means:**

- **NEVER having to prove you're holy or work to appease God,**
- **NEVER trying to be better than others,**
- **NEVER worrying about whether you're worthy,**
- **LIVING your live as an act of GRATITUDE!**

Christ goes much deeper than the surface of what many people call religion.  
He changes our hearts!

The second way Jesus is different is this.

## **2. Jesus Smashes Domination And Control - God On Our Level!**

Remember that pyramid – that's how the world works.  
Now listen to what Jesus had to say about himself.

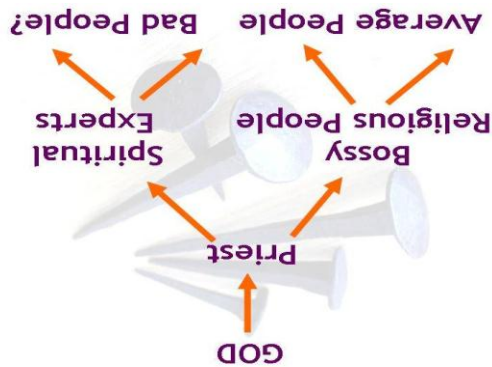
**Mark 10:41-45**

**Jesus called them together and said, "You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all. For even I came not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a to set many free."**

Jesus smashes domination and supremacy.

He does it by turning the pyramid of domination upside down.

He smashes the world of supremacy by going from TOP to BOTTOM.



Jesus reverses the order of dominance.

He is GOD come to the lowest place – to a manger, a cross, a grave.

Jesus starts something new – knowing God in everyday, ordinary life.

Jesus is a servant who changes your heart.

Remember the final thing I hate about religion?

I said that I hate how religion gets mixed up in wars.

### **3. The Violence Is Silenced – Jesus Ends The Violence.**

Religion gets mixed up in wars.

But Jesus is different:

**Matthew 5:43-45**

**Jesus said, "You have heard the saying, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies.'**

**But I say: Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!"**

I could show you many passages where Jesus changes everything around.

Look how different Jesus Christ is.

Jesus loved his enemies,

Jesus blessed those who persecuted him.

He healed one of those who captured him.

He forgave those who killed him.

This is what Jesus is all about...

**Luke 23:32-34**

**Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals - one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."**

When Jesus said those words "Father forgive them," it wasn't just a prayer or asking God for something.  
I see those words as "making it so", as declaring a new reality.  
A new way of approaching God...

Remember I used the word "grace" before.  
Jesus came to change our approach to God,  
To enter into our world of dominance and control and change everything,  
To give us a gift, a simple real alive relationship.  
To be able to know God without fear, and talk to God like a friend.

This is God's take on religion:  
Jesus Christ!

Amen.