

6 Easter, Year C (RCL) – *No Religion in Heaven*
Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29; Psalm 67
The Rev. Skip Bushee

Those who know me well know that I tend to get a bit irreverent at times. In particular, I often seek out those things which religious authorities declaim just to see what they are all about. As an example, one of my all time favorite movies is *Dogma*, which was banned by many religious communities. It is the story of two angels, played by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who committed some indiscretion as part of their heavenly duties and for punishment, they have been sentenced to spend the rest of eternity in Wisconsin.

There is a wonderful scene in the movie where the two of them are walking through the Milwaukee airport, which is filled with people wearing those stupid cheese head hats, and Matt Damon talks about how sinful humans are. After providing a long list of the variety of sins humans commit, he notes that many of them don't even acknowledge the existence of God and yet God continues to forgive them over and over. "And look at us angels," says Damon's character. "One tiny little mistake and we are doomed to spend the rest of eternity in Wisconsin."

To me, this is a wonderful statement of God's unbounded love for us humans and why I seek out such things as this movie. Because sometimes in the midst the heretical and profane can be gems of theology and spirituality.

It is because of this aspect of my character that I find the book of Revelation to be fascinating. It was probably the last book of the New Testament to be written and it certainly was the last to be included in the canon. It was controversial from the start and even today, there are many theologians who feel it is too bizarre and thus should not have been included. Many others try to read too much into it, seeing Revelation as a precise predictor of future events, which, for the most part, are proven wrong with time.

I see Revelation as a beautiful text, full of lovely imagery of the divine, much of which has contributed to the beauty of our music and liturgy. And it is a theologically uplifting work that tells us of Christ's triumph over the forces of evil and of the promise of salvation.

This morning's reading, from near the end of John's book, contains a wonderful vision of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city where God's light shines day and night and nothing unclean profanes it. The river of life and tree of life are there to provide healing and comfort for all.

And here is the statement that really gets me. Verse 22 says, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Interesting, according to John, in this heavenly city there is no temple and thus no priests, no deacons, no bishops, no religion of any kind. No religion! Doesn't this seem like

heresy? Why would John of Patmos advocate that religion be abolished? And yet there it is right on the very concluding pages of the Holy Bible. Perhaps you can see why I am so drawn to this statement.

In many ways, this passage reminds me of John Lennon's song "Imagine," which is also a vision of a utopian world. In it, the modern prophet, who is curiously also named John, also describes a world where there is no religion. I was always offended by this line in the song but now I am seeing it in a new light.

The obvious question is, if there is no religion in heaven, why should we bother with it here on Earth?

First we need to understand that religion is a purely human invention created in our attempt to help fallible human beings bridge the great divide between ourselves and our creator, a divide caused by our own sinful natures. Religion can be an effective means to achieve spirituality but we must always remember that religion and spirituality are not one and the same. Religion is a human institution while spirituality is a personal and hopefully divinely inspired one. In heaven, there is simply no need for religion because we are in the direct presence of God and so have no need to bridge any divide.

Sadly, there are many problems with religion. Throughout history, many atrocities have been committed in the name of religion and those atrocities continue today. It breaks my heart whenever I hear of a young Islamic militant destroying his own life and those of other innocent people in the name of religion. Just last week, I read that one of the London suicide bombers had a wife and infant child. What a thing to do to your family.

And so many religions and religious authorities proclaim that they have all the answers. It always upsets me when a leader of a particular denomination proclaims that theirs is God's way and all others are doomed to hellfire and damnation or when the Pope or an Anglican archbishop proclaims some religious doctrine that must be accepted by all members of the faith under pain of excommunication. People may call me a heretic but isn't it heresy for any human, no matter how highly placed in the Church to proclaim that they know God's mind? Aren't they, in fact, really placing themselves above God?

Still, for all its faults, religion is also responsible for much of the good in the world. Although only a means to an end, it has helped countless numbers of people find a path to a personal relationship with God. Religious organizations bring people together to accomplish many, if not most, of the good works done in this world.

There is an old Swedish story about a country doctor who came to a farmhouse one night to help deliver a baby. As the mother labored on the kitchen table, her husband held a lamp to illuminate the makeshift delivery room. After a time of intense labor, the mother gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Then, to everyone's surprise, the doctor announced: "Get ready, a second one is on the way." A lovely baby girl emerged from the womb.

The husband was already visibly shaken by the turn of events, so you can imagine his astonishment when he heard the doctor proclaim: “Hang in there, I think there’s a third one on the way.”

At this point the father grabbed the lamp and ran out of the room. “Hold it!” the doctor yelled. “Bring back that lamp.”

Oh, no!” exclaimed the father. “It’s the light that attracts them.”

Well it certainly is the light that is responsible for the miracle of new life but it is not any man-made light as the farmer concluded. Rather it is the light of God that produces all miracles. Just as the farmer made that mistake so it is with us humans. Our human religions do not produce the light; although hopefully they help lead us to the light. And the true light can only come from God. As our reading from Revelation says, “...for the glory of God is its light, and the lamp is the Lamb.”