



## ABOVE AND BEYOND RELIGION

When Karl Marx, one of the founders of communist socialism, said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses," he was not far from the truth. He believed that most of the common people were kept from becoming aware of their social and economic realities because of religion. He equated the effect of religious beliefs and practices with the hypnotic effect of opium on people's minds. Religion gave people a spiritual high, but it also made them removed and indifferent to the injustices and inequalities of modern society. Thus, Marxists considered religion as a major hindrance to attaining their movement's goals for society. They wanted to eliminate religion in communist society.

Today, Marxist communism is becoming obsolete and irrelevant, but religion is still here. In fact, it is the most powerful force on earth. Religion is defined as a system of beliefs that govern the moral, social, and ritualistic behavior of its adherents. Based on this definition, most people on earth are religious, including the agnostics, atheists, humanists, secularists, and communists; because they believe in and adhere to some kind of belief system. Every believer in religion holds that his religious belief system has the solution to all of the problems of the human race.

We can credit religions with the humanitarian work that goes on everywhere in the world today. But we can also trace virtually every major problem in our contemporary world today to some religious dogma. Religion has motivated much inhumanity throughout the history of humankind. Horrible crimes were perpetrated in religious wars (the Crusades) and religious cleansing (the Inquisition). Both Christianity and Islam had been responsible for bloody massacres of people who disagreed with their doctrines. And today, our nation is at war because of religious fanatics who would not hesitate to use terrorism against innocent people. It is ironic that religion, the very thing that people believe is supposed to provide the answer to humankind's problems, has itself created more problems throughout history than it has solved.

Where did religion come from? Why is it such a natural, inherent characteristic of human beings? Many students of the Bible have concluded that religion is the result of a built-in hunger in the human soul that man cannot define; yet he must seek to satisfy. This unfathomable craving was created by the loss of something that man used to possess. The Bible says the real source of this hunger is the God who created human beings for His divine purpose and destiny.

Before human existence began, God already had a reason for making man. God said, *"Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."* (Gen. 1:26)

Dominion ("kingdom," "sovereign rule," "royal power") is the purpose for man's creation and existence. When man sinned, he lost dominion over the earth. He lost his power and purpose – the meaning of his existence. That is why all of us now search for the meaning of our existence and the power to control our lives and our environment and circumstances. This pursuit of purpose and power is the primary source and motivation for the development of religion. All religions promise to satisfy man's quest for purpose and power. They all claim to have the truth about life and death. They all promise power to control life and circumstances.

But mankind's deep hunger is not really for religion; because that is not what Adam lost when he sinned. He lost a kingdom, not a religion. The vacuum in the human soul cannot be filled by religion. Man searches for what Adam lost in Eden and no religion can be a satisfactory substitute. That's why religion will always fail in satisfying the human hunger for purpose and power. The sad fact is, in trying to be a substitute for the lost kingdom, religion has become one of the greatest obstacles to God's Kingdom.

Jesus Christ came to earth to restore the lost kingdom. He did not come to establish a religion of rituals and rules. He came to re-establish a kingdom. Everything He did – His teachings, prayers, healings, miracles, His atoning sacrifice, and His resurrection – was focused on restoring a kingdom, not a religion.

The message of Jesus was simply this: *"The kingdom of heaven is here."* (Matt. 4:17) He told the religious leaders of the Jews who focused on strict religious observance of the Mosaic rules and regulations: *"You cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born again."* (John 3:3-7) He taught the people that they must surpass the religion of the Pharisees because it was not good enough for getting them into the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:20) Christians have misunderstood and misrepresented Christ as the founder of a religion and have misconstrued His teachings. The Church has focused more on teaching people its religious customs, practices and rituals than speaking about the Kingdom. Jesus knew that the spirit of religion would rear its ugly head in His Church. This is what He said to His Church in the last book of the Bible: *"I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth! You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."* (Rev. 3:15-17)

If you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked, religion is not the answer. Only the Kingdom will satisfy and fulfill your hunger. You must go above and beyond religion. You must make the seeking of the Kingdom of God your first priority. Nothing is more important than this. All other things are secondary.