



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. -

Matthew 15:9

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A Fraudulent Gospel

Today I watched an old Sci-Fi channel episode. It involved the intersection between religion and technology. Like a lot of Hollywood products it got a little mystical so as to allow for the mystical beliefs some people have related to their faith. The ultimate question was what to do when someone misuses religion for “criminal” purposes.

But what makes a religious practice “criminal?” The wide variety of religions with conflicting teachings about God make it impossible that they can all be right. So that means at least some, if not most, religious practitioners are engaging in fraud at some level. So when does that fraud rise to the level where criminal justice authorities should rightly get involved?

In the United States we used to honor a principle of “separation of church and state.” The government wasn’t supposed to tell the church how to go about its business, and reciprocally the church didn’t attempt to dictate government policy. For the last generation or so, however, that idea has become less and less honored as the churches seek to dictate laws against abortion, homosexuality, and other sins the church thinks ought to be outlawed. The problem is that as the church breaks down that barrier it loses protection from government interference in how it goes about the things it believes it is required by God to do.

If you think that the grey area around what level of fraud warrants criminal prosecution, recall that all of us engage in fraud at some small level. When you take a personal phone call at work, when you “fail” to mention the problems you’ve been having with the used car you’re trying to sell, when you tell

someone you're busier than you really are to avoid being called on to volunteer something, you engage in fraud. Not actionable fraud, mind you, but fraud none the less.

So when a preacher promises the blessing of God if you donate to him or a particular cause he's engaging in fraud. Jesus clearly stated that God sends his blessings on the evil and the good. You can't "buy" God's blessing. But is the fraud that preacher is engaging in enough of a fraud to warrant enforcement action? Probably not. Let's face it, religion as practiced in this country would cease to exist without that fund-raising potency. And we would lose all the good things these "fraudulent" religions do in our world.

Is there a blessing in giving? Yes. The sin problem is the problem of selfishness, and giving allows you to practice selflessness. But you can give to all sorts of good causes and receive the same blessing. The gift doesn't HAVE to go to a church or other religious organization.

And while I'm on the topic of giving let me point out one fallacy that most organizations, in order to receive donations, fall for. That's the idea that the giver retains control of the gift. If you retain control, you haven't given. You have bought control. Most churches and other charitable organizations allow donors to specify how their gifts will be used. But if you specify how your gift is to be used, as I've already stated, you haven't really given. The blessing of giving noted above is reduced because self is still involved and directing things.

So you know a religious practitioner who uses the types of fraud discussed here? Don't hate him or her. Don't revile them or call them out on their duplicity. Most of them honestly believe they're doing the right thing. Pray for them. The best sermon they can hear is your selfless, love-driven life. If you model a better picture of God, they may decide they want the relationship with God that you have. They are growing (hopefully) in grace just as you are. Help, don't hinder, them.

May God bless you this weekend,

Elkanah

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