

SPECIAL PRINT

FROM:

Religion, Christian Faith,  
and Secular World

Some thoughts on the meaning and role of religion  
from the perspective of  
science of religion, theology, philosophy and sociology

edited by

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## **Jesus > Religion.**

# **The rhetorical function and theological motivations of contemporary Christian rejection of religion**

Gunnar Innerdal

It is notoriously difficult to define what religion is. The contributions of this book as well as countless other scholarly debates and conversations attest to that.<sup>1</sup> However, regardless of the fluidity of the concept, it is clear that religion is a *word*. And as a word it is always part of discourses where the word has different connotations, meanings, and rhetorical purposes. It has its history, its etymology, and its contexts. One of the more curious uses of the word religion is by those who reject the word as a label for what they believe or do, all the while believing, practicing, and promoting things that by the most commonly agreed elements of scholarly and public definitions of religion definitively belong to religion, such as belief in deities, worship, and behavior regulated and/or motivated by religious norms. Most often they are even fully conscious of that, but

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, *Store norske leksikon*, a mainstream Norwegian lexicon, attests to it the opening of its entry on religion that “it is difficult to give one common definition of religion” (det er vanskelig å gi én allmenngyldig definisjon på religion), last modified January 9, 2020, <https://snl.no/religion>

still in some sense reject the word as a self-description as part of their strategy for forwarding a specific religious message.

In this article I will analyze some significant examples of contemporary Christian uses of the word *religion* where the aim is to reject the term as a self-label and avoid being religious in some sense of the word. The most thorough analysis will be given of Jefferson Bethke's 2012 viral YouTube-hit *Jesus > Religion* and its follow-up book and connected debate. I will ask: What is the part of religion contemporary Christian voices critical of religion want to reject? Through this analysis it will become clear that the rejection of the word often has a clear rhetorical purpose, and that Christian rejection of religion can have clear theological underpinnings, often independent of scholarly uses of the term religion. In the following discussion, I will draw on theorists on the current condition of religious life in Western societies, mainly Charles Taylor, to show how different contemporary Christian approaches to rejection of religion both conform to and is critical of some broader societal trends in this field.

## **Rejection of religion gone viral: Jefferson Bethke: Jesus > Religion**

Jefferson Bethke is an American evangelist/preacher able to create some attention. In January 2012 he published the rap/slam poetry-like spoken word video "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus" on YouTube.<sup>2</sup> The genre involves high use of poetical devices such as alliteration, amplification, rhymes and other rhythmic expressions. Part of the point is to put things very straightforwardly and bluntly to create attention and reflection, sometimes reminiscent of aspects of hip-hop. Clear definitions and scholarly distinction are not necessar-

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIAhDGYlpqY>. The complete transcribed text can be read as an appendix to this article. The video and audio track were also published on other platforms than YouTube.

ily within the scope. The video is filmed in the courtyard of a building reminiscent of establishment and institution, thus giving it an aura of verdict on traditional beliefs and ways of living. The genre of the video itself is also an expression of critique of traditional practices and attitudes; in many Christian milieus this kind of communication could have been judged as inappropriate quite recently. At the same time, the video is also clearly addressed deliberately to the future, as an appeal to action.

The video went viral and had almost 7 million views in 48 hours, and today it has gone far beyond 34 million views and received more than 146 000 comments. It thus sparked considerable amount of comment and debate in many channels, both criticism and appraisal. Bethke appeared or were discussed in mainstream media such as *Wall Street Journal*, *Huffington Post*, *New York Times*, *CNN*, and *ABC News*, and in Christian media such as *Christianity Today* and *Christian Post*. Opposing voices posting on YouTube also had millions of views.<sup>3</sup> It has a certain shade of irony to it that when the rare thing happens that something as religious as this video goes 10+ million viral on the internet, it contains despise of religion. Many commentators pointed out that millions of views indicate that Bethke hit a nerve in the so-called millennial generation's way of thinking about religion and their attitude to religious institutions and authorities. It is also a very interesting example of how religious expressions can become influential in a postmodern, media-oriented society. As a follow up, floating on the viral wave, Bethke wrote the book *Je-*

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the most important include the Catholic Fr. Pontifex' "Why I Love Religion, And Love Jesus" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru\\_tC4fv6FE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru_tC4fv6FE); just reached 1 mill views), the Catholic Bishop Barron's response (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLta2b9zQ64>; exceeding 500k views), the *Talk Islam* "Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus || Muslim Version" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNGqrzkFp\\_4&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNGqrzkFp_4&t=6s); just reached 4 mill views), Amazing Atheist's "I Hate Religion, And Jesus Too" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBo7Z\\_abiLE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBo7Z_abiLE), almost 3 mill views). All numbers in text and note accessed Nov 2020.

*sus > Religion: Why He Is so Much Better Than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough*, published in 2013.<sup>4</sup> In the book he purports to explain more about what was the thoughts underlying the viral video hit. It will be used to fill out the picture in my analysis of the video in what follows. While the genre of the video makes it quite open to interpretation and gives outsiders to Bethke's context and message little information about which views he defends beyond what the video says, the book in many cases fills out the picture; it is also bound to be more prosaic. It is thus less rhetorically appealing and more explicit on some of the details of Bethke's message.

### *Ambiguous rejection of religion*

Bethke's poem video starts by straightforwardly claiming that "Jesus came to abolish religion", and it concludes by him saying in quite harsh words that he *hates* and literally *resents* religion. At first that might be taken, together with the whole anti-religious rhetoric of the piece, as meaning that Bethke thinks that religion, by some definition of that concept, is always and in every sense opposed to Jesus and Christian faith and life. Many critical responses to the video pointed correctly to the obvious fact that the biblical and/or historical Jesus as well as the contemporary following of Jesus in the way Bethke himself does as a regular attendee of an evangelical contemporary worship church, is also in some way religion, according to most commonly understood uses of the term.<sup>5</sup> It is also reasonably clear that the last line of the poem is anachronistic and makes bad

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<sup>4</sup> Jefferson Bethke, *Jesus > Religion: Why He Is so Much Better Than Trying Harder, Doing More, and Being Good Enough* (Nashville: Nelson books, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> An early and lengthy criticism making this point was pastor Kevin DeYoung's blogpost at *The Gospel Coalition*: "Does Jesus Hate Religion? Kinda, Sorta, Not Really", <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/does-jesus-hate-religion-kind-sorta-not-really/>

exegesis in suggesting that Jesus' words on the cross: "It is finished" (John 19:30) in any way relates to religion.<sup>6</sup>

The move of just waving the whole thing away as a false dichotomy, however, might be a little simplistic as a way of understanding the message and effects of this video, also when it comes to the meaning and use of the term religion. From the beginning, in the description section below it on YouTube, Bethke called it a "poem I wrote to highlight the difference between Jesus and *false* religion,"<sup>7</sup> – even if there in the video itself is no mention of a distinction between different types or meanings, trueness or falseness or a positive sense of religion, just quite harsh juxtaposition of Jesus and religion, with Jesus always being good and religion bad.

In the follow up book, Bethke returns to this discussion by saying both "yes" and "no" to whether "Jesus is a religion".<sup>8</sup> He even says that he *loves* "the word *religion* in its true sense" and evaluate it as helpful in some cases.<sup>9</sup> He has also admitted in interviews and conversations that his real concern with the video was not to evaluate Jesus and the following of Jesus to be inside or outside some scholarly definition of what religion refers to, but to make people think and talk, basically to make a door opener for evangelization.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> In the context of the Gospel of John what Jesus refers to as finished most likely is the mission the Father has given him to do according to the will of the Father and to fulfil the Scriptures (cf. John 3:35; 5:19; 6:38–40; 13:3; 19:24.28). Fr. Pontifex (cf. note 3) puts this bluntly in the end of his video, claiming that "When Jesus said 'it is finished', his religion had just begun."

<sup>7</sup> In the about section of the YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGyIppqY>. Emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> See the interview with *ABC News* available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUoERBj-b2g> (from about 3:50), and similarly in the book: "A lot of people didn't want to talk about religion but seemed fine talking about Jesus." Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 34; "When I juxtaposed religion and Jesus in my conversations, they took a different turn" (27).

structure of the book also attest to this fact; apart from being in the title of each chapter and spread around as rhetorical spice here and there, the concept religion does not play a significant role in large parts of his argument. The book looks more like traditional devotional Christian literature than any argued attempt to refine the use and understanding of the term *religion* in relation to Jesus or Christianity. For entire chapters the word religion or cognates is not even mentioned, and in the entire second half of the book religion as a concept is only substantially discussed once over two pages.<sup>11</sup> The more interesting approach is thus not to just show that he is by most normal uses of the words plainly wrong in asserting that Jesus isn't religion, but to investigate what religion means in the dichotomy he is rhetorically crafting to put Jesus in a more attractive light.

An element of Bethke's and similar kinds of rejection of religion in favor of Jesus not to be thoroughly examined here due to considerations of space is the claim that Jesus is totally different from all other religions. Jesus is "the work of God", while religion is "a man-made invention". And further, "religion is man searching for God; Christianity is God searching for man." Such sayings can be read softly to indicate that from a Christian insider's theological perspective, there is a qualitative difference between where God is at work, in revelation and salvation, and where he is not.<sup>12</sup> The Gospel is, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "what no mind conceived". But from a human point of view, that notion cannot exclude the fact that it was communicated to and through the mind of Paul, and as such is in a sense just as man-made as God-made, so the issue remains complex even here. However, in the rhetoric of the poem the claims are

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<sup>11</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 138-139.

<sup>12</sup> The theology of Karl Barth (1886-1968) has been a classic object of discussion in this regard among theologians the last almost hundred years. Barth was critical of the this-worldly character of so-called culture Protestantism in the tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and wanted to construct Christianity and theology purely 'from above'.

likely to be interpreted as meaning that Christianity is totally different from all other religious thought from an objective comparative point of view. The whole discipline of history of religions should make people cautious about making such absolute claims. Even such a simple point as the Jewish/Old Testament heritage of Christianity makes them untenable – they are similar despite existing significant differences. While it cannot be shown at length here because of limited space and the difficult task of accumulating every other religious idea available, it remains unlikely that what Bethke in his following critique of religion wants to promote is phenomena exclusive to Christianity. Religions often tend to have their own discourses and debates over the most central questions of human existence vis-à-vis God, for example in the question of the understanding of human activity and/or passivity in relation to the work of God, which is one of Bethke's central points. Bethke is thus not out neither to refine a concept of religion nor to provide a theology of religions.

### *Religion as legalism: Bethke's Protestant roots*

Bethke's two (only) explicit alternative ways of understanding or defining the concept *religion* in the book is as (1) "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe" and (2) "what one must do, or behave like, in order to gain right standing with God."<sup>13</sup> He accepts Christianity as a religion in the first sense but rejects it in the second. Much could have been said about how his first positive attempt at a definition overlooks significant sides of the cultural and practice dimensions of religion often underscored in the turn to lived religion in contemporary religious studies<sup>14</sup> as well

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<sup>13</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ammerman, Nancy T., "Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 1(2) (2016), 83-99.

as in the empirical turn within theological research the last decades.<sup>15</sup> It gives a prominence to the cognitive aspects of Christian faith typical of some Protestant Christian traditions that runs into problems as a description of what religion and religious life is like as a human phenomenon. In scholarly debate today it would be closer to be a definition of the term *worldview* in settings where that is used as a concept overarching both traditional religions and modern worldviews of atheist and humanist types.<sup>16</sup> These glimpses into the scholarly and theological debate about how to understand religion as a human phenomenon confirms the point that Bethke's agenda is not to go into any kind of scholarly discussion about the precise limits or content of the concept religion. The in-depth discussion of this dimension of Bethke's use of religion, however, must be saved for another occasion.

Bethke's other definition (2) in the book is also indicative of central elements in Protestant theological traditions, namely of polemics originally aimed at Roman Catholic and other traditions that phrase the doctrine of justification in other ways than the tradition coming from Martin Luther and the other reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> They emphasize that salvation comes through justification, which is given freely as a gift by a good God by grace alone, by faith in

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Henriksen, Jan-Olav, "Theology and the empirical world", *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology*, 63:1, 1-2 (2009), DOI: 10.1080/00393380902930669.

<sup>16</sup> A prominent example growing out of traditional religious studies is Ann Taves, see e.g. "From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies", *Religion*, vol. 50, 1 (2020), 137-147. From a more theological perspective closer to Bethke and evangelicalism, see e.g. James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Many Lutheran and other Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church have toned down this kind of polemics today after decades of ecumenical dialogues, resulting in *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) and follow up events such as the Lutheran-Catholic commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

Christ alone, not through human works that please God or in any way deserve salvation. In Bethke's rhetoric the intended opponent is not primarily or explicitly the Roman Catholic Church, but rather church establishments of all kinds that emphasize works above grace and end up in hypocrisy. The approach to religion as 'works righteousness' aiming to deserve a right standing with God is perhaps the most central element in the poem. Early on it is stated that religion is "behavior modification" that "never gets to the core". For Jesus, "the Son of God never supports self-righteousness." Toward the end the dichotomy is spelled out:

religion says "do"; Jesus says "done" [ . . . ]  
 Which is why salvation is *freely* mine, and forgiveness  
                   is my own  
 Not based on my merits, but Jesus' obedience alone<sup>18</sup>

The focus is moved away from the believer, and to the work of God. Bethke's Jesus is not about doing, but about putting trust in the free gracious gift of God.

A similar and more recent example of such a Protestant approach to Christian faith that strongly opposes the term religion due to a legalistic definition of the term is found in Donavon Riley's little book *Crucifying Religion*.<sup>19</sup> This book to an even larger degree than Bethke's poem and book does not present an explicit concept about what religion is or make precisely clear what is meant by the term.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup> Donavon Riley, *Crucifying Religion: How Jesus Is the End of Religion* (Irvine: 1517 Publishing, 2019). Jesus put an end to religion; "the gospel reveals that Jesus takes our religiosity, hangs it on the cross, and sets us free", *ibid.*, 10; cf. 56, 77.

<sup>20</sup> The question "What is religion?" is asked straightforwardly (*ibid.*, 8), but the answer is always kept at a kind of implicit level, and his understanding of religion is never related to any kind of textbook, lexicon, or common usage definitions of the concept religion.

He describes his life as “an exodus from religion to Jesus Christ”,<sup>21</sup> fleshing out a dramatic life story, compromised of parental and own alcohol and drug addiction, and decades of religious searching and failed missionary attempts, before he found the peace he confesses to have found in the Jesus of the Lutheran tradition, which is something completely different than religion.<sup>22</sup> Riley’s rejection of religion depends on a strongly confessional version of Lutheranism, where the distinction between law and gospel is the key to most questions. Law is the Lutheran term for the Word of God when it demands, threatens, and promises reward. Gospel is the Word of God that freely gives, bestows and is unconditional. Other versions of Christianity that does not get this right are themselves *religions* in the way Riley rejects the term; systems of self-improvement, pious action and therapeutic belief in the un-demanding love of God that seeks to help us to get saved by our own powers.<sup>23</sup> The same holds paradoxically for Bethke, stating that one of the problems of religions is that it “builds huge churches”, so it seems, the problem of religion is in many ways a problem within Christianity itself.<sup>24</sup>

Riley’s intuitive understanding of religion centers on religion as something human beings do in order to please God: “Religion is what we invent to bridge the unbridgeable expanse between ourselves and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>22</sup> Christianity, according to Riley is “about Jesus and Jesus alone”, Ibid., 40. Thus, “[w]hen Christianity becomes just one more religion in the marketplace of religions Jesus fades into the background” (41). “Christianity is not about our belief in God. It is not about being nice or good. It is not about our traditions, rituals, and dogmas. It is all about Jesus. Christianity is, top to bottom, about what Jesus does for us” (49).

<sup>23</sup> With a term borrowed from Christian Smith and Melinda Lindquist Denton, Riley uses the term *moralistic therapeutic deism* to describe this sentiment, Riley, *ibid.*, 41ff.

<sup>24</sup> “My ‘Christianity’ [became] just the American religion of work hard, do good, feel good, and maybe God will say, ‘We good.’” Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 8.

God.”<sup>25</sup> What Riley found in other religious texts was “a list of dos and don’ts I have to complete if I want to be saved.”<sup>26</sup> The Christian message of Jesus as our savior through grace alone, in contrast, “is not a religious message as such because it does not point us back to our doing.”<sup>27</sup> Riley also sharpen the rhetoric of who’s the active part in salvation: “We are completely passive, and he [Jesus] is totally active.”<sup>28</sup> This holds even in worship; Christian worship is unique because of its turning upside-down of who is the active one in the relation between the worshipper(s) and God: “when worship is primarily about our actions, it is no different than any other religion’s worship.” Rather, true Christian worship is “God serving us with his gifts.”<sup>29</sup> Thus Riley takes Bethke’s points about religion as something one must do even further and articulates it within a language closer to its reformation heritage.

A central difference between Riley and Bethke’s approaches to faith and works is that the former does not to any significant degree combine his rhetoric of passivity with demands regarding an active Christian life. To Bethke, one of the problems of religion is when the Christian faith does not have any consequences in your life – if your Christian only by your Facebook status and still keep doing things that Christians should not do, covered behind a nice façade

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<sup>25</sup> Riley, *Crucifying Religion*, 3

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 17; All philosophies and religions say: “[D]o good if you want to save yourself from earthly and divine judgement” (35). “Every religion I have studied essentially teaches that there is a god, goddess, or gods that have made us and put us here to serve them and to be subject to their whims. The entire purpose of our lives is to be tested by the gods. [. . . ] Christianity is different. [. . . ] Life is not at test. Instead, life is a gift that the love of God reveals to us through Jesus crucified for our sin” (97).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 54. Similarly, “religion teaches us to ‘do more, better.’ But on the cross, Jesus declares, ‘It is done’” (58). Note the same approach to John 19:30 as Bethke (cf. my earlier remarks).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

and steadfast going to church. You do not “play for the Lakers just because you bought a jersey”! In this perspective Bethke is walking on a knife’s edge towards inconsistency in claiming that religion is bad because it is about what you must do (in opposition to God’s freely given grace), whereas Jesus is good because in him everything is done – but you still have to do your part in form of right works to avoid ending up as religious. In the book, there are just some few lines between the claim that “Religion says do. Jesus says done” and the “*only* question with Jesus”: “will we follow him?”<sup>30</sup> Bethke’s point here could be compared to other Christian rejections of religion aimed at nominalism, such as Matthew Ferris’ little book *Losing Religion, Finding Jesus: Moving beyond Cultural Christianity*: church affiliation without repentance and Christian life, but that is more of an argument for doing more than less.<sup>31</sup>

### *Religion as wrongheaded rule-following and hypocrisy*

Closely connected to the grace – works distinction as constitutive of what is false religion and what is the real message of Jesus and the Christian life for Bethke is the attack on self-righteousness in the form of making things look good on the outside, while remaining in sins hidden on the inside. Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees in the Gospels Bethke aims at the religious establishment today. These words of Jesus “were written just as much to us Christians today as they were to the religious leaders of [Jesus’] day, the Pharisees.”<sup>32</sup> A central notion in this criticism is hypocrisy: To say something, but do something else yourself, or to emphasize your effective solution to small problems in order to get away with the larger ones. In the

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<sup>30</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 28. Emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> See Matthew E. Ferris, *Losing Religion, Finding Jesus: Moving beyond Cultural Christianity* (Houston: Lucid Books, 2019). As with Bethke and Riley, Ferris does not define or discuss the term religion at any length or depth, the word functions as a rhetorical device contrasting Jesus.

<sup>32</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 17.

words of the poem: “They can’t fix their problems, and so they just mask it.” Religion is to “make the outside look nice and neat”, by “spraying perfume on a casket” or in the language of the Gospels to “whitewash tombs” (Matthew 23:27). Bethke stands in an old tradition of using quite harsh language in addressing hypocrisy, although to label what is criticized *religion* is a more recent move.

What are the real problems or the misguided good works of hypocrites today according to Bethke? In the poem there are two central notions. One is the criticism of exclusion of divorced people from the church and God’s love. Corresponding to that is the more subtle sins of pornography addiction and loose sexual relationships. They are less visible and thus easier to get away with. The other notion is the criticism of religion for failing to “feed the poor”, because it builds too huge churches. The concern could be rephrased as an emphasis on practical love and compassion before appearance,<sup>33</sup> when it comes to congregations and church buildings as well as in the personal life of Christians.

In the book, this criticism is expanded into a discussion of the phenomenon of *fundamentalism*.<sup>34</sup> Bethke is positive to the term as a self-designation meaning to “adhere to or live by basic truths”, but follows up by complaining that “the term in our modern American culture has taken on a more negative connotation that misrepresents Christians”.<sup>35</sup> Here he adds to the list of hypocrisy problems those practices that are shun by many conservative “fundamentalist” Christians, but not explicitly prohibited in Scripture, such as drinking alcohol, having tattoos, and swearing. In contrast, Bethke underscores that Christian life should be filled by joy, life, and bliss.<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, Bethke does not shy away from exposing views on Christian morality that are controversial to the larger pub-

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 40, cites Matthew 23:23 to make this point.

<sup>34</sup> Chapter 3: “Fundies, Fakes, and Other So-Called Christians”, *ibid.*, 37–57.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 44.

lic. “Let me clarify” he says in the poem “—I love the Church, I love the Bible, and yes, I believe in sin.” In the book he expands the point of excluding divorced people to include hate of gays, but he still advocates a restrictive view of homosexual relations based on Scripture.<sup>37</sup> At the same time he underscores the importance of loving life together in a pluralist society, even across significant differences.

### *Religion and politics*

The second central rhetorical move in the opening of Bethke’s poem, added to the juxtaposition of Jesus and religion, is about the link between Christian faith and politics. “[V]oting Republican really wasn’t [Jesus’] mission”, and “Republican doesn’t automatically mean Christian”. Those claims are generally uncontroversial in most Christian circles, as a great majority of Christian groups at least in principle do not claim that there are necessary political choices inferred from being Christian. The point of these sayings is thus probably not to clarify the matter, but to appeal to the hearer in setting up a potential common enemy – young, urban people in Bethke’s generation are more likely to be negative than positive to Republican political views and are open-minded to critiques of power. Bethke is not putting much energy into forwarding specific positions in questions about which sides to take in internal Christian debates than about whether and how religion is linked to political votes and in which cases. By undermining the link between Jesus and Republican belonging, Bethke is critically addressing the so-called “Christian or religious Right” in the United States, mainly comprised of affiliates of evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic churches, which supports the Republican party openly due to socially conservative views on issues such as abortion and gender/marriage. Bethke is criticizing those who make these issues too important, wanting to emphasize other Christian values and attitudes of life as well.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 64–68.

## Discussion: Religion in the religionless age

The last hundred years or so have been a time of diverse and significant changes and developments when it comes to the role of religion in individual and communal life in Western societies (with global implications), in its interwovenness into cultural, social, and political structures of power. Statistics of religious belief, belonging, behaving and worship attendance have changed dramatically – most notably declined – in most formerly monolithic Christian societies growing out of the European Latin tradition. Religion has lost influence through laws and social structures. Scholars of religion know this process as (perhaps the last and most intense phase of) secularization.<sup>38</sup> In response to the characteristics of this process of religious change, scholars, philosophers, thinkers, and preachers have in different ways tried to describe or envision a new kind of religion, a new spirituality, or a version of Christianity or some other faith existing in this new age *after religion*.

Stephen Wasserstrom uses the expression *Religion After Religion* in the title of his 1999 work on the central figures of the *Eranos* group consisting of scholars of (history of) religion(s) Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem and Henry Corbin.<sup>39</sup> They are thinkers that advocate some form of new kind of religiosity (with Christian, Jewish and Islamic roots) in response to the end of the old as they see it in the changes in their time early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, preferring myth and symbols over rationalism. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas use

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<sup>38</sup> The changing views and works of sociologist Peter Berger on the so-called secularization thesis is a standard discussion topic in this field. See for example, with many references to Berger's works, Dylan Reaves, "Peter Berger and the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization," *Denison Journal of Religion*, 11 (2012), 11–19. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol11/iss1/3>.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

similar terms in talking about *The Spiritual Revolution* in which *Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*.<sup>40</sup> Their perspective is more as sociologists of religion, pointing to different surveys and research that indicate how something called spirituality is growing while traditional religion is declining. Diana Butler Bass enters this discussion with a clearer agenda of promoting a new form of Christianity in response to these findings in her *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*.<sup>41</sup> Bass insists on viewing the current stance of religion in society, which is often interpreted as a crisis by sociologist and theologians, as a possibility, an awakening, new life grown out of the old dying things that have come to an end. They all share the terminology of a possible Christianity, Jesus-relationship, or spirituality without *religion* in some traditional sense with the more conservative voices rejecting religion already cited such as Bethke, Riley or Ferris. Examples of similar wording could have been multiplied from all camps.

Many Christian voices who appeal to a new awakening of faith beyond religion appeal to the German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), who in his letter from Nazi prison during World War II envisioned how

we are moving towards a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as “religious” do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by “religious”.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>41</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012).

<sup>42</sup> *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2009), 362.

What Bonhoeffer really means by the concepts employed in this quote remains something of a riddle, accomplished as it is by a lot of questions that does not receive any clear-cut answers.<sup>43</sup> One part of his concern was the trend also prominent in many theological circles to critique simplistic philosophical answers in traditional theism, often connected to the critique of metaphysics initiated by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). This is an aspect absent from Bethke's and similar critiques of religion.

How to assess Bonhoeffer's statement today is even more complicated since the cultural environment of Western secularized societies has changed significantly since he wrote these lines almost 80 years ago. The text is quoted in order to achieve quite different things by Bethke in his *Jesus > Religion* book on the one hand,<sup>44</sup> and as the opening quote of Part I of Bass' *Christianity After Religion* on the other.<sup>45</sup> For Bethke it is about conversion from hypocrisy and fake Christianity without spiritual life to the real, original Jesus of the Bible as he interprets it. For Bass, it is not about returning to something old and genuine that has been thwarted, but about embracing something new and different that grows out of the old. Their different takes on religionless religion can be mirrored in how they respond to the catchphrase "spiritual, but not religious" associated with the societal movements and changes sketched out above – to Bethke it is a sign of a fake and lazy attitude to God and real Christian morals deserving contempt, to Bass it is an expression of brave resistance to bad Pat Robertson Evangelicalism, "a critique of institutional religion and a longing for meaningful connection".<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For a nuanced interpretation of this statement in context of Bonhoeffer's wider thought and bibliography, see Arve Brunvoll's contribution to this volume.

<sup>44</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Bethke, *Jesus > Religion*, 46–47; 171; Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 65–68.

### *Authenticity in and beyond religion*

A central voice in the scholarly and philosophical discussion about the understanding of secularity in the last decades has been the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.<sup>47</sup> One of his central ideas is that secularization is not only about religion declining numerically, but also about changes to the way we live and eventually believe and worship, our “social imaginaries”.<sup>48</sup> It is different to be religious (or spiritual) in a secular age. Taylor argues that our age is an *Age of Authenticity*, by which he means

the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious and political authority.<sup>49</sup>

The slogans go: “Find yourself, realize yourself, release your true self.”<sup>50</sup> It is important that you *choose* – even to the extent that we encounter “bare choice as a prime value, irrespective of what it is a choice between, or in what domain”.<sup>51</sup> Taylor connects this strong longing for authenticity in the form of personal choice and identity making in our contemporary Western societies to the emergence of youth culture following the revolts of the 60s, and its corresponding

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<sup>47</sup> The most influential work remains Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *ibid.*, 171–176.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, 473–504, citation at 475. The material presented here builds further on thoughts expressed in earlier works of Taylor, especially *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1991; the original Canadian publication was called *The Malaise of Modernity*).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 478. At 479 Taylor cites Alan Ehrenhalt: “Choice is a good thing in life, and the more of it we have, the happier we are.”

market and fashion. Bethke's appeal to reject religion and turn to Jesus does not itself explicitly mention this kind of self-realization, but his criticism of previously established religion and its implications seems to go in the same direction. He stands forth as a typical youth leader critical of the parental generation, wanting the new generation to make their new choices in opposition to old norms, and his popularity among the millennial generation fits Taylor's analysis very well.

Bass describes her former experiences from an evangelical context as such an identity changing experience of becoming something new, being "born again", and put into a relationship with God which "isn't a religion".<sup>52</sup> It is about forming one's identity in relation to God outside of conformity, pressure, and prescribed doctrine. Both Bethke and Bass thus gives expression to trends pointed out by Taylor, claiming that in our society "one can only connect with God through passion." Authentic sentiments based in real feelings of relationship and belonging are more important than doctrine or their corresponding authorities. What is "really valuable" in a post-Schleiermacher religious environment is "spiritual insight/feeling".<sup>53</sup>

Taylor further reasons that the attitude prevalent in the age of authenticity has clear implications for the *ethos* of how we live together:

we shouldn't criticize each other's 'values'; this is predicated on a firm ethical base, indeed, demanded by it. [ . . . ] [All] have the right to live their own life as you do. The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance.<sup>54</sup>

Embedded in the embracement of the making of each one's self is a kind of pluralism, because we will all need to find our own way. The sin of intolerance, however, can take different forms. To Bethke it is a sin of those who exclude people from the Christian commu-

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<sup>52</sup> Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 488–489.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

nity because of what they have done, the church should be a “hospital for the broken” rather than a “museum of good people”; a place where sinners can receive forgiveness. At the same time, he upholds many conservative Christian norms that are experienced by many people as exactly intolerant – from a perspective like Bass’ an example of the same sin of intolerance. It may seem like an example of how Taylor describes “moralism”: “the crucial importance given to a certain code in our spiritual lives,” claiming that “this outlook ends up putting all the emphasis on what we should do, and/or what we should believe, to the detriment of spiritual growth.”<sup>55</sup> The claims are far-reaching and perhaps not very well grounded, in some sense resembling Bethke’s earlier described ambiguous relation to what is already done and what you should do. Very different theological approaches go together in shunning intolerance, disagreeing wholeheartedly about which views and practices that are intolerant, and about what one must do or what leads to growth within a framework of rhetorically forwarded tolerance and inclusion. These tensions also make clear an ambiguity in Bethke’s rhetoric as well; first he appeals to the new intolerance-shunning generation by criticizing exclusion from Christian community and God’s love, but in the next moment he must correct what he obviously conceives as a possible misunderstanding of his message, in saying that he upholds church, Bible, naming of sin through commandments, and institutions as belonging even to Jesus and not only to religion. Part of the reason why it is possible to get away with this rhetorically is probably that the quest for what is real and genuine in the Bible also vibrates with the same longing for something authentic.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 497–498.

## Conclusion

In this article I have analyzed and discussed some significant examples of Christians rejecting in some sense to use the word *religion* as a self-designation for what they advocate. Authors as diverse as Jefferson Bethke and Diana Butler Bass both appeal to deep tendencies in current Western societies in their rejection of traditional religion, although under very different headings. Their thinking and rhetoric can both be interpreted as different takes on religion aiming to reach people in what Charles Taylor has called the *age of authenticity* with their own version of Christianity.

Bethke's rhetoric against religion resonates very well with general tendencies in the development of religious life of our societies in direction of finding oneself and realizing one's spiritual make up freed from previous authorities and external constraints or prescriptions. At the same time, it has a resistance in it to these developments, as he still emphasizes traditional religious notions of Christianity such as church, sin, biblical authority, and a Christian sexual ethic. Perhaps he is doing his own camp a disservice by rhetorically surfing on a wave that will eventually slip his feet of the ground where they are standing as well. His millions of YouTube viewers in the next generation of Christians might not understand why the rejection of religion goes this far, but not further.

I have shown quite extensively in the case of Bethke that what is rhetorically crafted as an attack on religion is for the most part not any attempt to define religion and his version of Christian faith over against each other with any kind of detail. Neither is it about rejecting other religions in favor of Christianity. The religion he rejects is rather versions of Christian doctrine and Christian life that he rejects for theological reasons, especially connected to understandings of grace vs. works as basic to the relationship to God and fake vs. authentic Christian life. Other authors tend to make the same move: the rejection of religion has the rhetorical function of describing how

their own version of Christianity (which, yes, after all, is a religion) differs from what it is not or ought not to be.

From my own perspective as a systematic theologian in the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, the ways of rejecting religion analyzed here, in liberal theological milieus as well as conservative evangelical circles, seem a bit exaggerated. The rhetoric might be effective on the surface (click ratios seem to confirm that) but fails when people dive in below the surface. In time people will realize that Christianity is just as worldly and human as any other religion in most senses, because it is something happening within the history of the world we all share, and within the constraints and possibilities we live inside as human beings – even if we claim that a transcendent God is active just there through historical revelation or individual re-birth or some kind of religious experience. As such it can always be viewed both from without as a human and historical phenomenon (as a religion among religions), available to sociologists and historians, and from within through attempts at theological discernment (as a religion which is not totally like any other religion, and even quite special at some points). It is possible to claim that Christianity is not fully like any other religion (then they were ultimately not separate religions, but one), but at the same time arguing that it is possibly not anything completely special to Christianity in relation to religion except for what gave its name: the person and history of Jesus Christ and his influence then and now. To relate to that in a constructive way, open to the challenges it might throw at us in each age, is still the task of any church or theology, regardless of how the term religion is interpreted and whether it coincides with our understanding of how to believe and live in Christ.<sup>56</sup>

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## Appendix: Jefferson Bethke's poem

Transcribed with minor adjustments from <https://genius.com/Jefferson-bethke-why-i-hate-religion-but-love-jesus-annotated>

What if I told you Jesus came to abolish religion?  
 What if I told you voting Republican really wasn't His mission?  
 What if I told you Republican doesn't automatically mean Christian  
 And just because you call some people blind doesn't automatically give you vision?

I mean, if religion is so great, why has it started so many wars?  
 Why does it build huge churches but fails to feed the poor?  
 Tells single moms God doesn't love them if they've ever had a divorce  
 But in the Old Testament, God actually calls religious people whores

Religion might preach grace, but another thing they practice  
 Tend to ridicule God's people; they did it to John the Baptist  
 They can't fix their problems, and so they just mask it  
 Not realizing religion's like spraying perfume on a casket  
 See, the problem with religion is it never gets to the core  
 It's just behavior modification, like a long list of chores  
 Like, "Let's dress up the outside, make it look nice and neat"  
 But it's funny that's what they used to do to mummies while the corpse rots underneath

Now I ain't judging; I'm just saying, quit putting on a fake look  
 'Cause there's a problem if people only know you're a Christian by your Facebook

I mean, in every other aspect of life, you know that logic's unworthy  
 It's like saying you play for the Lakers just because you bought a jersey  
 See, this was me too, but no one seemed to be on to me  
 Acting like a church kid while addicted to pornography  
 See, on Sunday I'd go to church, but Saturday getting faded  
 Acting if I was simply created to just have sex and get wasted  
 See, I spent my whole life building this facade of neatness  
 But now that I know Jesus, I boast in my weakness

Because if grace is water, then the Church should be an ocean  
 It's not a museum for good people—it's a hospital for the broken  
 Which means I don't have to hide my failure; I don't have to hide my sin  
 Because it doesn't depend on me; it depends on Him  
 See, because when I was God's enemy and certainly not a fan  
 He looked down and said, "I want that man."  
 Which is why Jesus hated religion, and for it He called them fools  
 Don't you see so much better than just following some rules  
 Now let me clarify—I love the Church, I love the Bible, and yes, I believe  
 in sin  
 But if Jesus came to your church, would they actually let Him in?  
 See, remember He was called a glutton and a drunkard by religious men  
 But the Son of God never supports self-righteousness—not now, not then  
 Now back to the point—one thing is vital to mention  
 How Jesus and religion are on opposite spectrums  
 See, one's the work of God, but one's a man-made invention  
 See, one is the cure, but the other's the infection  
 See, because religion says "do"; Jesus says "done"  
 Religion says "slave"; Jesus says "son"  
 Religion puts you in bondage, while Jesus sets you free  
 Religion makes you blind, but Jesus makes you see  
 And that's why religion and Jesus are two different clans  
 you vision?  
 Religion is man searching for God; Christianity is God searching for man  
 Which is why salvation is freely mine, and forgiveness is my own  
 Not based on my merits, but Jesus' obedience alone  
 Because He took the crown of thorns, and the blood dripped down His face  
 He took what we all deserved—I guess that's why you call it grace  
 And while being murdered, He yelled,  
 "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."  
 Because when He was dangling on that cross, He was thinking of you  
 And He absorbed all your sin, and He buried it in the tomb  
 Which is why I'm kneeling at the cross, saying, "Come on, there's room"  
 So for religion—no, I hate it; in fact I literally resent it  
 Because when Jesus said, "It is finished," I believe He meant it

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