



**"CHRISTIANITY:  
REALITY OR FANTASY?"**

**A Sermon by  
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**Scripture Reference: Matthew 26:36-44**

Several years ago during the Christmas holidays a college student made an appointment to come and talk with me. She had grown up in our church and came from one of our most active and influential families. I realized from the moment she stepped into my office that she was bearing a heavy load of anxiety, and it did not take her long to get to the point of her visit. She had come formally to request that her name be removed from our church role, and when I asked her why she was taking such a step, she explained it this way: "I was raised to believe that God created man, but after a great deal of thought and study I have come to the conclusion that it is the other way around. It is man who has created God! It appears to me that religion is nothing but fantasy and illusion. Men do not necessarily believe what is

true. They believe what they want to believe. They make up their doctrines out of their own desires. I don't mean to embarrass you as a minister, but I honestly think that religion is just a game of make-believe. It is spoofing on a grand scale, and I can no longer in good conscience be part of such an enterprise."

I think she was a little surprised when I did not fall right out of my chair and faint at such an accusation. However, I was really not all that surprised, for you see, the charge that she was leveling against religious experience is an old and familiar one. It has been pervasive in every era of history. In fact, she and I began to acknowledge together the many places where this objection to religion can be found. For example, it is highly visible in the discipline of modern psychology. Sigmund Freud has wielded an incredible influence here, and his evaluation of religion can be summed up in the one word "illusion." In fact, his definitive book on this subject is entitled: The Future of an Illusion. He saw religion as the composite dreams of mankind — those things men wish were true but are not. He wrote it off as the infantile notion that the universe should be run for one's own benefit and defined maturity as the willingness to lay aside such childishness and resign one's self stoically to a very different kind of universe. This objection can also be found in the realm of philosophy. Back in 1841 a writer named Ludwig Feuerbach shocked the whole continent of Europe with a book entitled The Essence of Christianity. His main thesis was that "man is the beginning, the center, and the end of all religion." He attempted to show that every Christian doctrine is actually rooted in human desire rather than in Divine reality. For example, men were baffled and confused by the mystery of life, so they made up the idea of a Creator-God to account for things. Men felt lonely and worthless, so they pictured this God as a Father who loved them. They experienced guilt, so they concocted the idea of forgiveness. They were overwhelmed by life, so they dreamed up the idea of Providence. Men dreaded the thought of non-existence, so they created the doctrine of immortality. On and on Feuerbach went, showing that theology is really anthropology and that the Christian religion is nothing more than the frustrated hopes of man projected on a cosmic screen. This understanding of

religion is also very prominent in contemporary literature. One of the main motifs in Eugene O'Neill's plays is that illusion is the only thing that makes human life bearable, and he defined religion as a supreme form of such illusion. He has a character in one of his plays sum it up perfectly by saying; "Religion is nothing but a chloroform mask into which the weak and unhappy stick their faces."

I acknowledged then, with my friend, that this idea of man creating God is both very old and quite pervasive in our culture, and I went on to acknowledge that it was no peripheral charge. If what she and all these others were saying is true, it does invalidate the religious enterprise. If religion is, in fact, rooted only in the subjective and not in the objective, then it has little more practical consequence than the childish exercise of building air castles. Such an accusation is an ultimate threat to religion, for if it is correct, it means that we are really wasting our time here this morning in church, for what we are doing is nothing more than what is described by the title of the old song "You Tell Me Your Dream, I'll Tell You Mine."

Given, then, its pervasiveness and its seriousness, what is the Christian to say to this charge of illusionism? What defense can be given to this massive attack aimed at the heart of Christian experience? As I shared with that young collegian that day, I first of all drew a distinction between "religion-in-general" and the Christian religion in particular. I pointed out to her that if one were speaking of the former; that is, the infinite variety of experiences that men have claimed to have under the name of religion, then I would concede that there is some truth in her objection. Let's face it — much that passes under the name of religion is simply the wishes of men objectified. There is no denying that again and again religion has become a means of escape and a way of retreating from the hard world of actuality into a more comfortable world of fantasy. Many times men have chosen what they wish were true over what is true and sanctified this process in the name of religion. I remember very distinctly going to a revival meeting when I was a child and hearing the guest musician introduce his solo that evening by telling how it had come to be written. It seemed that an evangelist was

riding on a train and began to talk to the one who was sitting beside him. This young man turned out to be an agnostic and proceeded to attack the Christian religion along the lines about which we have just been speaking. He characterized the evangelist as a dreamer, claiming that his religious doctrines had no rootage in reality outside himself. The young man got off the train before the evangelist, and as this one was mulling over their conversation, he was inspired to write a song, which the musician began to sing. And do you know what the title was? — "If I'm Dreaming, Let Me Dream On". Even as a child, I remember being offended by this kind of soft-headedness. My own impulse was that if I were in fact dreaming, I wanted to be waked up. This willingness to remain in self-chosen illusion rather than to confront "things-as-they-are" seems to me to be weakness, not strength. Yet I admitted to this young woman that many people had sinned against truth and reality in this way and had done so, sadly, in the name of religion. Therefore, if you are talking about every kind of experience that has transpired under the canopy called "religion", there is an element of truth in this charge.

However, I went on to say that if one is talking about authentic Christian experience; namely, those kinds of encounters that grow out of the Biblical tradition, it is another matter altogether. Here is a form of religious experience that is hardly susceptible to these charges. As a way of substantiating this claim, I asked my young friend to consider three pieces of evidence that relate to this problem of illusionism.

The first of these is the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth Himself. As one listens to what this One had to say and observes the way He went about His life, you do not get the impression of a person who was using religion as a retreat from reality. It does not appear that He was making things up in order to find a way to escape from life's hardship. In point of fact, the very opposite seems the case — Jesus' troubles did not create His religion; His religion created His troubles! Instead of being a way into ease and comfort, His religion thrust Him into the midst of conflict and caused Him to do things that made His life harder rather than easier. Take for example His act of cleansing the temple in Jerusalem. It was His religious

commitment that caused Him to challenge an institution that had grown sick and distorted. It was His vision of the love of God for all people that drove Him to challenge the structure of limited love that had turned the court of the Gentiles into a place for the money-changers. Jesus' whole life seemed to be animated by a vision of God that caused Him to challenge His culture rather than to opt out of it for comfort. The demands of His God cut squarely across the path of easy self-interest. In fact, how can one look at the experience of Gethsemane where Jesus sobbed out the words: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done," and then say that this is a religion of wishful thinking? Jesus' religion did not consist of selfish desires projected upon a cosmic scene. It was rather a process of answering a costly imperative that broke in from beyond. I repeat: You can hardly account for Jesus' religion by looking at His troubles. It is more nearly true to account for His troubles by looking to His religion. And this is not illusionism!

A second piece of evidence is the experience of the apostle Paul. Second only to Jesus Himself, this man has left an indelible imprint on Christianity, for his letters constitute a large part of our original document. And once again, I ask you: does his experience appear to be a process of making up a religion to suit himself? To answer this question adequately, one needs to recall Paul's situation before he became a Christian. He was a zealous young Jew, a rising theologian, and a man destined to become the leader of his race and first century Judaism. When some of his fellow Jews began to follow a crucified Carpenter named Jesus of Nazareth, Paul was greatly threatened by this heresy and turned with all the fury of his soul to stamp it out. He was extremely anxious to preserve the religion of his fathers against this new attack. But in carrying out such a mission, he had an earth-shaking encounter on the road to Damascus. And I ask you: Was what he discovered there the thing that he had always hoped was true? To the contrary, what he encountered there must have been the last thing in the world he wanted to learn; namely, that this Jesus was the Messiah and that the Christians and not his own people were closer to the truth. This insight called for Paul to recast his whole existence. It involved changing his religion, his place of status,

his family connections — everything — which is hardly the sort of thing weak and selfish men do when they are projecting out of their own desires. However, Paul did make this shift, and his life thereafter was very different than what it could have been had he remained a Jewish leader. He was reduced to having to make tents for a living and to argue in the synagogues on the side. He lived the rest of his days as a part of a despised minority when he could have known preeminence as a Jewish leader. And I ask honestly: does this sound like religion that is wishful thinking? Had Paul been following his own desires, surely he would have remained a Jew.

The third piece of evidence one needs to examine is an appeal to one's own experience. Let us ask ourselves honestly: if we set about to make up a religion of our own, would it come out identical to what one finds in the Christian religion? If I were answering this question, I would have to respond negatively, for a religion to suit my own convenience would have more indulgence than imperative in it. Specifically, if I were making up a religion, I would certainly never put anything in it about "loving my enemy" or "forgiving seventy times seven" or "returning good for evil" or "turning the other cheek." If I were making up a religion to suit myself, there would be no judgement, no call for self-sacrifice, or no demand to love my neighbor as myself. What I am saying is that there are demands in Christianity that do cut across the grain of our selfishness. It does offer hope and peace and joy, but on very different terms than our flabby self-interest would dictate. Therefore, to write Christianity off as nothing but the projected wishes of weak and unhappy men is simply to shut one's eyes to the facts. There is much here that no indulgent nature would ever concoct.

Here, then, is how I replied to my friend about this charge that man has created God rather than God man. If you are talking about "religion-in-general," there is an element of truth in it, for many of the experiences that have passed under the name of religion are obviously self-serving. However, if you are talking about that religion that emanates from the events of Biblical revelation, I do not think the charge is valid. Just look at Jesus Himself. His troubles did not create His religion; His religion created His trou-



bles. He wound up on a cross, hardly the place a weak escapist would will Himself to be! Look at Saint Paul. It was his religion that prompted him to give up security and status for a life of suffering and involvement. And ask yourself the question: If you were making up a religion to conform to your own selfish ideas, would it be identical with what you encounter in the pages of the New Testament? I hardly think so. This is why, then, authentic Christian experience has always been more a response to "things-as-they-are" than an embrace of fantasy. In the Christian religion we are confronted by realities other than ourselves that break in upon us, and our choice is either to accept reality and respond to it or to reject it and to move in the direction of illusion. This is illustrated very vividly in the experience of C. S. Lewis, who I deem to be the most significant Christian convert in the twentieth century. As a young English professor at Oxford, He was a sophisticated agnostic with a thousand reasons for not believing that Christianity was true. However, as he moved on through life, he reports that he sensed a pursuing Presence much like Francis Thompson's "hound of heaven," and everything seemed to betray him — the books he read, the friends he encountered, and his own contemplation. He finally reached the point in all honesty where he had to face the possibility that the Christian religion might be true to the real. He reports at that juncture that his attitude was not "Oh, I hope it is true, but I am afraid it is not." It was rather "I am afraid it is true, but I hope it is not." Selfish man that he was, he wanted to be left alone, to have his own way, he did not want to be interfered with. But it was precisely this wishful desire of his own that was threatened by the Christian possibility! Then finally one night, the mystery Himself, the living God — the God of Abraham and Issac and Jacob — happened to him overwhelmingly, and Lewis decided to enter the Kingdom. However, by his own definition, this act was not an embrace of selfish fantasy, but a surrender to "the-God-of-things-as-they-are." This is always a mark of Chirstian experience at its authentic best. It is the moment when we, with the gods that we have made, come face to face with the God who has made us. It is a response to Reality other than ourselves rather than the projection of our wishes from within.

Therefore, in my own mind, one question is settled. Whatever else you say about it, Christianity cannot be written off as man-made fantasy. It has the character of that which we do not create encountering us. But this raises a further question: What about you and your religion? Is it a reality that has broken in upon you from without, or is it something you have put together out of your own desires? The God you serve — is He the One who created you, or the one you have created?

Well . . . ?

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