

Should we hate religion? (Bev Cooke)

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There was a lot of talk in January about Jefferson Bethke's "Why I hate religion but love Jesus" spoken word video. Since it was posted on January 14, it's been viewed over twenty million times on Youtube. A lot of Orthodox (and other Christians) have responded to it. Not one of those responses - not even the one for which I wrote the script - actually acknowledges that Jefferson Bethke might have a point.



Jefferson Bethke

In an interview after the release of the video, Mr. Bethke said "If you went through the entire poem and replaced the word *religion* with either *legalism* or *self-righteousness* or *hypocrisy*, it would have not changed my intention or the heart of that poem whatsoever. To me, those words are interchangeable." [italics are his]

If the accusation didn't have a smidgen of truth to it, would we be reacting the way we are? No. There would have been universal puzzlement about where this guy got this idea and what he was talking about, and then it would have been forgotten. Instead, the video went viral and has generated thousands of responses, ranging from home-made videos that are painful in their poetry, prose and theology (what there is of it), to a thoughtful, considered reaction like Father Andrew Stephen Damick's blog post which, for all it takes Jeff seriously and responds mostly respectfully, still shows an undercurrent of that stung reaction of "what! How dare you!" sensitivity we feel when a sore spot gets bumped. So are we, individual Christians, legalistic, hypocritical and self righteous? Is the church – both our church and the entire Christian faith – legalistic, hidebound, rigid, judgmental and unloving?

Institutions tend toward rigidity

Human institutions, whether we're talking about the Church, hospitals, universities, governments or businesses put rules, bureaucracy and protocols in place to help them function smoothly and effectively. The question is: effective for whom? And the answer, more often than not, is effective for the institution.

The larger the institution, the more people the institution has to deal with, the more necessary it is to have rules and procedures in place that will enable the institution to assist the greatest number in the most efficient way. All too often however, the rules and procedures can get in the way of what the institution is supposed to do, and the churches or hospitals or universities actually hurt the people they are supposed to be helping.

The church's purpose is to be the Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, to provide the sacraments, a community and corporate worship. As the fathers, and Mr. Bethke, have noted the Church is also a hospital to minister to the broken and diseased. Which is all of us.

We forget that because Jesus started the church, and because the Holy Spirit is a part of the Body of Christ, there is also human component to the Church – the bureaucratic 'institution' of church, of organized religion with doctrine, dogma and rules. Humans are fallen, we know this. We struggle between striving for theosis and our sinful fallen passions. Our institutions, including the church, reflect our fallen human nature and do tend toward the legalistic, hidebound, rigid, judgmental and unloving side of human nature. This shouldn't be a surprise when the humans who run the institution of the church are that way a lot of the time.

But of all institutions, the Church can least afford to be the things Jefferson Bethke accuses us of. Our theology is focused on the reality of theosis. Because of that, we tend to concentrate on Jesus's perfection and our distance from that perfection.

Our faith actively encourages us to compare ourselves to Christ rather than to each other. Our faith constantly reminds us that we are unworthy, we are faithless, we are fallen and we do not in any way deserve the bountiful love, mercy and salvation that Christ offers us. The church also encourages us to fast, pray, read Scripture, confess and partake of the sacraments in an effort to master our weaknesses and passions, to keep the door of our souls open to God and His healing love and mercy. Considering the pride and the tendency to judgment and the lack of humility that a lot of us struggle with, it's a very good thing our faith does this.

But (and here's where the Enemy sneaks past what little humility we have) because we're so open about how awful we are, and how passionate and how sinful, we Orthodox tend to assume that our weaknesses and failings and, yes, sinful actions, ought to be – not overlooked exactly, but maybe passed by? Because we're so open about how awful we are. See, we Orthodox tend to say (without ever actually saying it) “Hey – you don't have to tell me I'm a hypocrite. I know my sins and I already know it. Don't I say how unworthy I am every day I say my prayers? Every time I come to church for Vespers or Liturgy? So I know this, you don't have to tell me. Go look at your own sins and leave my judgment to God.”

What is judgement anyway?



The Last Judgement by Jean Cousin

Let's stop and look at "judgment" for a minute. Do the Orthodox, Mr. Bethke and our secular culture mean the same thing when we say "I ain't judgin' I'm just sayin'"? I don't think so. Judging, in today's culture, isn't what Orthodox mean when we think about Luke 6:37 "Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven." For the Orthodox, judgment is God's job. We fallen humans don't decide who is "good" or "bad", who is saved and who is condemned, who is a sheep and who is a goat. That's God's prerogative, and His alone. His judgment is a judgment of person, soul, not a judgment of action or behaviour. God has made that very clear to us.

Judging an action, however, is something entirely different. If I say to someone that throwing the a stone at a neighbour is bad, that robbing a bank is evil, or getting drunk every night is a bad thing to do, I'm not judging a person - I'm judging their actions. Saying a behaviour is bad doesn't say the person who exhibits that

behaviour is a bad or evil person, and it certainly doesn't say they're condemned to hell forever.

But today people, both religious and secular, think of judgment in a different light – they conflate a judgement of action and a judgment of person, so that if I say throwing a rock at someone is a bad thing to do, I have somehow attacked their person, the very essence of who they are, and have said that their actions are themselves, and so they are bad people (and probably condemned to hell) for having thrown a rock at someone. So people cry out, “Don't judge!” when someone says something negative about their actions, or the actions of their group. We aren't supposed to say that throwing rocks at people is a bad thing to do, or that taking money from your company is a bad action, or that taking drugs or drinking to excess are bad behaviours.

But if saying something is bad is judging, then it follows that saying something good is also judging. In fact, the dictionary definition of the verb ‘to judge’, is neutral. “To form a judgment or opinion of; decide upon critically, to decide or settle authoritatively; to infer, think, or hold as an opinion; conclude about or assess.” To judge simply means to hold an opinion. It doesn't say anything about whether the opinion is positive or negative. If I praise the job someone's done on feeding the poor, I'm judging their action just as much as when I say that stealing from their boss in order to feed those poor was an awful thing to do.

But the only time we hear “don't judge” is when the judgment is negative. So what people are really saying when they say “don't judge” is “don't ever say anything bad about me, my actions or my being. Only say positive things.” By this definition, if we wish to truly abstain from judgement, we say nothing at all about anyone or anything.

What does all this have to do with religion and Jesus?

So, how does this relate to Jefferson Bethke and his rap poem? It's simple. He is judging. And he's judging not only by saying our actions are bad, wrong and hurtful, he's also daring to say we're condemned. To this man, we are the goats of Matthew 25:32, 33. What he says is this: “...the problem with religion is that it never gets to the core, it's just behaviour modification, like a long list of chores.”

I would suggest that by his own theology and by Orthodox theology, what he's saying is that because we are “religious” as opposed to having given our hearts to God, we aren't repentant. Our seemingly pious behaviour, to him, is just that, a façade. Underneath, Mr. Bethke implies, in our hearts and our nous, we are no more willing to be Christlike than Satan is. That sounds to me like a condemnation

of person rather than action.

But Mr. Bethke is looking in from the outside – of our church and each of us. He doesn't know if we, the people in the Church, the members of Christ's body and bride, are repentant and remorseful and begging forgiveness. What Mr. Bethke forgot was that at the heart of any religion, and especially at the heart of the Christian religion, you find people and God.

I won't argue that many of us who are "in religion" struggle with hypocrisy, with saying we believe one thing when our actions seem to be exactly what we condemn. Legalism is a problem for some of us – when we feel insecure, when we're frightened, when the walls around our heart are so thick and strong that we can't make a door for Jesus, we take refuge in the rules. Mr. Bethke doesn't know our hearts, he can't, anymore than you can know the heart of the person next to you, or my heart.

But I ask again: If there wasn't a smidgen of truth to this charge, would we be so defensive about it? Would we be reacting with the outrage and the carefully loving response of pointing out just where he's wrong? Especially when it comes to levelling this charge at the institution of the church? I don't think so.

If our personal and corporate sins and sinful behaviour hurt others, and they have, then we have to pay attention to his charges. We, collectively, can't act like this. The church can't allow its hierarchs to deal drugs, embezzle money, abuse the laity, act against the canons and ecumenical council decisions, and then try to cover up immoral and illegal behaviour. The Orthodox church has done all of these things – not just historically, but in modern times. And if our church is, at least in some respects, hidebound, legalistic and hypocritical then we need to repent, collectively, as the Church, the Body of Christ and change our ways – again, collectively, as an institution.

If we don't, if we simply take refuge in pointing out where Jefferson Bethke's theology is wrong, if we simply point out what Jesus, and the church he founded, tell us what is proper behaviour collectively as well as individually, then Mr. Bethke's judgment of us is correct. Collectively we are condemned. If we say to those we've hurt, "it's okay, we've got it covered," or worse, "trust in your church, we know what we're doing and all is okay" or worst of all, "you are not to question or challenge the Church in any way" then we aren't the Body of Christ, and we aren't his Bride.

We have to stop assuming that because we're taught to focus on our sins that we, collectively, as a Church, don't need to be told by outsiders (or by our brothers and

sisters) that we're sinning or that we don't need to respond to their charges with love and humility and a repentant heart and attitude. If we don't repent, if the heart of the Church doesn't meet its head and aspire collectively as strongly to theosis as we do as individuals, then we are exactly what both Jesus and Jefferson Bethke accuse us of being: whited sepulchres, caskets sprayed with perfume. If we refuse to hear the cries of those we've hurt, both inside and outside the Body of Christ, then our religion is simply behaviour modification, a long list of chores. We have to examine ourselves, find the sin and repent of it, as the Body of Christ.

Bev. Cooke is an Orthodox Christian. Her two books, [Keeper of the Light](#) and [Royal Monastic](#), are published by [Conciliar Press](#). Alexander Press released her Akathist to St. Mary of Egypt last January, and she also writes for the Orthodox Christian Network. She can be found on Facebook as [Bev. Cooke, writer](#) and her blog is bevnaabbeyscriptorium.wordpress.com.