

Why Religion?

A Letter to a friend from Father Jim Brand
Catholic Truth Society No.do0439 (1971)

MY DEAR FRANK,

It is very possible that you have been thinking along the same lines as myself and many young people today. We all have similar problems; we are very keen to be authentic, to be and become ourselves, to fulfil all that we have, to need the room in which to breathe and to be of some constructive use to the human race. We see that there is so little unity, love, justice and peace around us. Some are doing so well and some have nothing; there are banquets in one place and starvation in another; power and weakness live together on the same earth. We are anxious that we might be able to do our bit to make the world a safer and happier place, and so we try to avoid the same traps that previous generations met. But we seem to be so impotent to do anything. How can one person do anything in so large a world when even the political and economic experts seem to be beaten by events? What use am I among so many? There is so little time to think and to do anything since everything goes at such a pace. Life used to be measured by the seasons, and now our measure is the fraction of a second. What used to change slowly is now racing; everything seems to be on the move; how are we to keep up with events?

A mixed record

One of the first things that should be changed is religion. This is the considered opinion of many young friends of mine. With this I agree entirely. What dismays me is that 'the old time religion' concept (if it's good enough for Moses, it is good enough for me) has tended to hog the whole concept of religion. (Surely we are New Testament people and are beyond 'an eye for an eye'.) Because we find some religious attitudes so intolerable and bad for man and humankind (and here I have chosen my words deliberately), we tend to cast aside the whole concept of religion as out of date, something which may belong to adolescent mankind, but no longer relevant to the Master of the Universe. This is a very great pity, partly because it is a disservice to the true idea of religion, and is an underestimation of what is in man, and partly because it leaves the immature and inadequate in sole custody of things religious.

It is surely true that much evil in the history of the human race has masqueraded under the name of religion. Our Lord was not unaware of this when he cursed the Pharisees for not doing what they preached and for heaping laws on the people without lifting a finger to help them. The Christian Churches have had their moments when the peace and forgiveness of Christ were hard to find - inquisitions, state interference and patronage, religious intolerance and offences against the freedom of the individual, crusades and 'holy' wars. (Mind you, it would be so much better if there was less prejudice and pre-conceived ignorance and much more authentic knowledge of these historical incidents.)

Our Lord said 'It is by their fruit that you will know them', and I do not blame many young people if they have taken a look at religion and said 'I don't like it'. Is religion going to church to listen to

sermons delivered in a disgraceful way to a captive audience? Is religion being 'churchy'? God forbid! Save us from those whose sole religious experience is to save their own souls by never seeing Christ in their neighbour and whose prayer seems to be 'My Father, who art in heaven'. Save us from those teachers who treat religion as another subject in the school curriculum, to be treated as the Cinderella of the syllabus, or, worse still, to be rammed down the throats of their pupils with threats of temporal or eternal sanctions if anyone should vomit anything back. How many have left school saying 'No more Latin, no more French and no more boring and irrelevant doctrine'? Save us from the religion that is good for children and suppressive for adults. We may produce spiritual Farex or baby food, but men need steak. Some find religion very superstitious and many psychological problems like fear and scruples are so often the preserve of the so-called 'religious people'.

An apologia?

I have been asked to send you some of my thoughts on this. Whether you agree with me or not, I would be very glad to learn from what you think and from your experiences. If you would like to write to me, care of the C.T.S. (the address is Catholic Truth Society, 38 Eccleston Square, London SW1, United Kingdom), I would be delighted to write back straight away. After all, religious experience is not confined to the few - it is the experience of most young people and it is for us to share our experiences and troubles so that our knowledge of the truth may increase. Surely God is such that he is never able to be exhausted and no person nor institution can claim to have solved the mystery of God. I was asked to call my letter 'Why Religion?' This is no puzzling title; as I have hinted, many could wax eloquent on the subject 'Why no religion?', and I fear that many might be put off from what is good, valid and contemporary because of the abuses of the true and valuable ideas of religion. Some may be frightened that religion makes one less of a person.

Please be patient while I think out this problem. I am not trying to write an apologia for the subject. You would hardly expect a man to write an apology for the wife he loves. Moreover it is hard to describe to another an experience or a way of living, for that is what it is all about. Religion is not knowledge, it is a relationship with God in others; it is love and a living thing; something that is always a new experience; and these things cannot be confined to 5,000 words; or rather, when love is confined, it dies. Love is essentially a living relationship which cannot be boxed up. According to St John, God is love, and if we think we have solved God and explained him away, our idea of God is bound to die, and so we have the 'Death of God' philosophies of today.

If religion makes us less human, it is false; if it makes one less of a realist, it is a dream. Here we have the first point that I find helpful. We are living today!

Now is the hour that is most real; yesterday is past, tomorrow is yet to come, and if it does it will be a synthesis of today and the past. Religion made up of happy memories alone, or one that builds treasures in the next world with nothing done today, is a chimera.

Man the paradox

We are beginning to get some idea of the size and ages of the universes, and the more we know the more we realize what a small creature a man is, perhaps only six feet tall and twelve stone in weight; how small is a human life of sixty years compared to the apparent ages of the dead rocks! An individual might seem so insignificant when in some parts of London he could be dead for more than three days without the neighbours noticing. Psalm 8 asks: 'What is man?' Why should he put on airs and graces and strut the earth as if his existence is all-important? He cannot survive for six

days without water; the limits of temperature and pressure that he can tolerate are very narrow; he takes for granted the ozone layer which protects him from harmful solar radiation; and so on. And why did he emerge at all? It is rather a shock to 'know' that we exist only because a few hundred thousand years ago some 'ape-man' happened to find an 'ape-woman' vaguely attractive! We seem to be products of the elusive laws of chance and the capricious phenomenon of transmutation. We live today on the death of the many species of yesterday. We live 'on tick' all the time. There are many who are dead and the world goes on - and why did we emerge at all? It is sobering to mull over the numerous chance events that led to my particular conception and birth; the chance way we have made certain friends and been brought up in the family we have and so have been formed by an enormous number of different influences which have made us what we are.

But my friends are quick to see that despite the smallness of man and his life compared to the seeming millions of light years and geological aeons, there never was, there is not, and there never will be, another 'I'. The uniqueness of the individual, the infinite depth and richness of the human person, is something we find so refreshing today when so many of us are known by a national insurance number; when in London so many are packed into so small a space, and yet it is the loneliest place in the world. The individual is unique and must never be snuffed out. That is why I have addressed this letter to you - to share these ideas, and I would love to hear what your experience has been. Religion is not knowledge, it is a relationship, and you can have no relationship without persons, and for that matter you can have no personal development without relationships. That is why I find it so helpful to learn more of what a person is, and to see the wonderful variety and value in the human person.

Knowing about God and knowing him

Some people are very hard to get to know. One can remain 'in the slips' but they are the only persons who can show their hand. Some will shut up like a clam once someone gets too near. Others are an open book. But finally we can say that a man is knowable only if and when and as far as he opens himself and gives something of himself to another. We can know plenty about someone without knowing them. Take a good look at someone's room. The books show that he is an engineer, the photographs tell about his wife and family, his age, his captaincy of the football team, etc.

But no matter what I know about him, I would never know him personally unless he told me about himself and a personal relationship developed. To communicate what is inside us we use words, signs, deaf-and-dumb language, perhaps telepathy. But whatever we do we are always human and in space and time.

By looking about the world and his experiences, man throughout the whole of his history has been wondering. Why? How? When? What? Science and technology have developed from the earliest moment that man made a spark. Neil Armstrong referred to the insatiable thirst for man to discover. He went on to say that the debate is obviously about priorities and not about man's infinite capacity to search. In every people from the beginning there have been signs that man asking questions has had a philosophy of one sort or another, an outlook on his existence and environment; he has seen himself in relation to his milieu. He has also seen himself as not the answer to many questions; he has had to rely on many people and things, the sun, rivers, etc. These men were certainly realists. The Egyptians would have been hungry and thirsty without the Nile. They were willing to give credit where credit is due. The Greek thinkers came to a very good idea of the source of all things. These are signs of real religion.

I hinted earlier that you would not know someone unless they opened up; even more, you would not know that someone loved you unless they told you in some way or another, because their love is theirs and nobody else's. We cannot love by proxy. We say 'Give her my love', not 'Love her for me'. As I am a person, the most important thing is my love for another. Now, although the Greeks seemed to know so much about God, it never crossed their minds that God was a lover. He had not spoken to them personally; he had not told them.

Since God is outside space and time, he has no mouth and is therefore unable to communicate with us in a way that would do us justice. (I do not think that we have an inbuilt antenna in our make-up that is tuned to purely spiritual impulses from the Almighty. That is spooky and we are not angels.) If, therefore, God wanted us to know him and to have a familiar and personal relationship with him, he had to come out of his silence.

In any love relationship someone had to make a first move, or nothing would have happened, and there is nothing more frustrating if there is no response! Therefore, if God freely wished to have this personal relationship with man he had to come into our world and speak in history; he had to come into our dimensions of space and time, he had to take his place in our human world. As far as I know, no man has ever come by stork; any visitor from outer space could not be man. We are only here because of our parents, and so on back through 'all the stages of evolution', if you like. It is like a queue, no queue-barging. Therefore, for God to share in our human milieu it was necessary for the human race to offer to God something of itself, its own humanity. It was a woman who said: 'You can come in here'. It was Mary who gave on behalf of the human race what only the human race could provide, something of itself.

You cannot put thumb-screws on anyone and get them to say 'I love you'. To any initiative there must be a free response, and therefore in the person of Mary the human race was consulted, and freely our Lady accepted the invitation to follow the will of God. Whether our Lady understood at the time the significance of her motherhood is another matter. Is it human to understand always the meanings of things and to see the final significance of events? We cannot always see what fruit will arise tomorrow from today's action. But my response and yours to God calling us to his friendship and peace is something that we alone with his help can do. It is something that we must ask God's help for and we must brace ourselves to 'climb every mountain and to ford every stream'. Our Lord said 'Seek and you will find'. God helps those who help themselves. 'Ask and you shall receive' - no asking will be in vain since without God we are only heading for the grave.

Life to the full

From the moon, the earth looks small and seems to have its own unity and compactness; it is into this compactness that God has ventured. We have to be careful to see God in all things, otherwise we are in danger of a God playing with his creation like a toy. We must not make God in man's image and likeness. God is all 'other'. This was the Hebrew idea of God; he is quite other compared to man. As we are prone to disillusion and collapse, God is strong and faithful. If man relies on himself alone, the human race becomes one big self-centred and introverted corporate personality. Our strength is not to rely only on our weakness but on His strength, not on our infidelity but on God's fidelity. After all, whether I recognize God or not, whether I respect him or not, I know that he is faithful and will not take time off from his love of all men. We must see God within all things - since all things are most eloquent about the Lord of Creation. However, man is not satisfied with things; the only way for man to develop is by personal interaction with other persons. Therefore,

when I say that God has ventured in a new way into the world, I wish to suggest that God has personally been experienced among man in history. We would wish to expect that this personal interaction of God should contain elements that are in the greatest and best of man's interests. This is in fact the case. Our Lord came with messages that are as relevant today as at any time: unity, love and peace - based not only on man's feeble attempts which are often tinged with self-interest, but based on the God whose goodness all creation and the spirit of man reflect.

Unity because God came to found one family with God as its Father, one family which will recognize the dignity and value of all its members. We have one God, and one Father of us all - no colour, no class, no particular nation or people, no male or female, no slave or free person. All men whoever they are have this common value because of their uniqueness as an image of God. Every man is called to give his own personal and individual response which only the individual can give. I have mentioned that we cannot love by proxy. Only you and I can give God our love and, if we do not do this, no one in the whole history of the universes can do this for us. One might well ask how are we to know how to love God who is 'out there'? We might well ask: If we were left only to our own ideas one person's guess would be as good as any other's.

But here we have the historical fact. We believe that William the Conqueror landed in 1066, because we rely on witnesses; we were not there. The moon is not made of cream cheese; we know this not because we have travelled there but because we rely on the astronauts and N.A.S.A. officials and we trust them not to deceive us. If our Lord was to be truly a man and not spook he had to come in space and time. He had to come at a certain place and at a certain time. Someone who spans the centuries would be a will-o'-the-wisp.

But his message was to be for all men, the one family of mankind, God's United Nation. He therefore had to rely on witnesses who saw, heard and touched the content and meaning of his message and saw all that was done. These were the men who were so profoundly affected by the Lord that they fell in love with him and this transformed their lives. Surely it is no fairy tale that changed Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalen and all those who found what our Lord called 'this pearl of great price'. The Apostles found in Christ the secret of all things and a motive for a new form of life, and this secret was now to be an open invitation to all men that they might live a new life - unselfish and open to all, free and not a slave to any law except the law of love.

Our Lord said that his 'yoke is sweet and his burden light'. We were to be given the fullest meaning of our existence, and the Resurrection of Christ was the sign that we are not to end with death and we are not to lament over the deceased as the rest of the world does, with no hope to live by. After all, the normal lot of all things in the universe is to die so that others may live. Trees are living on the humus of past leaves; there can be no spring without a previous autumn. Species could not develop without the survival of the fittest and so the death of the weak. Left to ourselves we would follow the lot of all other living things in the universe. It is all very well to say that my body might lie mouldering in the grave and my soul would go marching on. I don't very much like the idea of being just a soul. I am much too earthy and human to split myself up like that. All I know is that I have known vital and living persons and now I know that they are dead, and seem to be unable to relate or to love because they do not seem to be living now.

If Christ remained dead, what hope would there be for us? He would have been a great man, no doubt. His character and teaching are outstanding; but he would have been quite unknown - a man who died a slave's death in some remote province of the Roman Empire. His revolution would have

never got off the ground - at least not with the poor material he seemed to work with, a few unimpressive friends. The first thing that constantly appears in the central message of the Gospel is that Christ is not dead, he is living now, that we are not following a corpse but that the law of death and despair has been reversed and there is hope for us all. In fact, eternal life has already begun. However, this must not make us careless of our difficulties and the sadness in others and the misery of the world. We can take no short cuts. If our Master had a rough passage in his life while trying to do his Father's will, what of us? We can hardly expect an easier time. In any case, if anyone is going to be concerned for others as Christ was, one is bound to suffer with those who suffer. If we are going to offer ourselves to others in friendship and general availability we become most vulnerable, and we will certainly be hurt. But is this not in a good cause? Christ gave himself for all those he met; the whole Gospel story is one of a man who was completely available for all, and yet he was cut off. Therefore our confidence in him must not take away from our concern for the suffering in the world; precisely the opposite should be true. Christ was angry and dismayed at the suffering he found, and we are to be as concerned to alleviate the suffering of any man wherever we find it.

Christ as Model and Way

We mentioned that our Lord was human, a man like us in all things (except sin, as we are told). St Paul suggests that he emptied himself of his divinity, in order to become like us. Therefore he had to lead his own life as a human, as we have to lead ours as humans. It seems most unreasonable to imagine that the child in the manger, in his human nature as a mere child in the manger knew all Euclidean geometry. As man, our Lord had to develop like anyone else. He, as a Jew, had to pore over the Old Testament to try to find the will of God for him in the Book of God's Word. What Christ became as a human person depended to a very great extent on what he received from others: his family and his friends. We can see a development in his own awareness as a man of what his mission was to be. We see him using different methods of relating to individuals; his availability; his deep concern for all he met; his impatience of all that was unjust; his association with those who were poor and exploited; his concern that men should lead a fulfilled and useful life. It happened that such concern and such a genuine message and way of life met with hostility from those in authority. Christ's honesty was too incisive and revealing for the shady life of some men. Like so many great men of principle, this could only mean one thing: curtains for him. However, despite the fact that Christ went through terrible and painful trials to his faith in himself and his mission and work, and seemed to meet with such failure during his life - and he even died feeling abandoned by his Father - yet he was 'obedient' to what he had to do and did not falter. It is because he followed his conscience right through to the end that God raised him up to become the source of strength for all men who wish to follow him. He had to live his life, and we have to live ours. He cannot live ours, and we cannot live his. Each life is a new creation - for most of us it is something still in the future that is unfolding and being created by our interaction with others. However, we can say that Christ is Man-for-Us. He is God in action showing us the pattern of what it should be to go about such a thing as a human life - and no one is going to tell me that the Sermon on the Mount is irrelevant or out of date.

God's presence as Man for us and the Resurrection of the Crucified Christ are unique in recorded history. The teaching of Christ has never been equalled; no one else that we know of has ever summed up in themselves such patent holiness and maturity. As the Jews of the time said: 'We have never seen the likes of this'.

Giving credit where credit is due

If Christ is the pattern of God's plan for man, perhaps it would be of help to look at Christ's religious attitudes. There is one thing that is absolutely clear: he had no time for anything that smacked of hypocrisy, insincerity and lack of realism. He made no bones about himself. He stated categorically that all he was had been received from his Father, and yet he did not put on any false humility. He asked us to learn from him because he was humble. It is worth dwelling on this particular point for a moment, I think. A call to be 'humble' is not very British and may put many good people off religion. To be humble is to be a realist - anything else smacks of Uriah Heep. A realist will accept himself and others as they are, but he will also give credit where credit is due. Our Lord saw that he was the Father's gift - all that he had received came from the Father - and he also saw that his being and work were not just for himself, but he had to work to produce fruit. The gifts that he had received were for others. Because our Lord saw himself as gift and recognized what he had received, he was supremely free to be available for others with none of the psychological hang-ups that we so often experience. Humility is the truth and our Lord referred to himself as the Truth. Therefore we find our Lord experiencing a deep personal and intimate relationship with his Father, because he was aware of his Sonship and so he was able to respond to the Father's gift of himself. He saw no contradiction in his service of the Father and the service of men. His heart was big enough to see the Father in others. His whole life was one directed to do the will of his Father - partly in prayer and very much in action.

As a believing Jew our Lord followed what was entailed by the Jewish Law which came from God, but he was at pains to point out that sometimes man can throw his own laws at others as if they were the laws of God. For this he had no time. He was also outraged that men should mistake the letter of the law for the spirit of the law. It is not the keeping of the law which renders a man worthy in God's eyes, but the spirit with which he keeps it. The Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath. Our Lord reacted violently against the abuse of religious practices; when he caught them in the temple selling and bartering; when he saw that they were more interested in the minutiae of the law rather than their way of life. Some were more interested in their ritual washings rather than what they said and thought. He pointed out that even if they do not wash their vessels, whatever goes into the mouth will eventually arrive at the sewer without harming a man, but what does harm a man is what comes out of his mouth - lies, deceit, etc. There were arguments as to where one should worship (on this high place or that). Our Lord points out that it is not the place that matters, but how we worship - whether the whole thing is a false act or whether it is a real and true thing, whether it is with great outward gestures or in the heart or spirit. Our Lord complained that many honoured God with their lips but their heart was far from him. These are some of the things against which our Lord reacted.

There are also many positive examples of what our Lord showed as worship of the Father, which is true religion, because it is real and because it is to give credit where credit is due. He said that if we love him, we will be loved by the Father, and therefore to honour Christ is to honour the Father. But Christ wishes to associate himself with all men, especially with the weak and those who suffer. The Beatitudes are a wonderful summary of the sort of things that give great credit to Christ and to his Father, because those who try to live in that way are in fact making Christ the model of their lives.

Those who please God are those who use their talents and gifts, those who produce some fruit, those who try to do the will of the Father. It is not those who say 'Lord, Lord' who will enter the Kingdom of heaven; those who are safe; those who are always first in the queue for the sacraments and yet who have done nothing for anyone. It is those who like Christ have risked themselves in

order to serve others; those who see Christ in all men and who risk being hurt because they are not consumed with self-interest but wish like Christ to be a gift to others. Therefore religion and life go together. Unfortunately we have often bandied labels around. We say that someone has three degrees, a beautiful sister and a particular religion. This idea is of a religion being a label that we carry around with us. Our religion is not something we have, it is something we are and stand for, it is a way we see the whole of reality and respond to it. Religion is sometimes associated with something that is deadly serious, nothing to do with joy, a revel in one's own sinfulness - 'the wages of sin is death' mentality. Puritans and killjoys can be good at this. I read a refreshing poster recently; it said, 'Laughter is a sign of hope; we are saved and we can afford to laugh once in a while'. We must treat ourselves lightly and with the same humour; after all, our Lord is very patient with us, if we are patient with others - and this is not possible unless we are patient with ourselves. Therefore a good test of what is worthy of the name of religion can be summed up, perhaps, by saying that it must deal with reality, it must be good for man, and it must give credit where credit is due and be honest.

The Church is not a first-class hotel for saints

One may say that the above might sound very reasonable in theory, but in practice, perhaps, there do not seem to be any religions which rise to that particular ideal. Please do not think that I am suggesting that any particular people are any different or better than any other. After all, only God is able to know what is in the heart of man. We are not always sure ourselves. It is very hard to sum oneself up. Everything we do is a mixture. We can do nothing perfectly since in this world there is nothing that is perfect. Wherever there is wheat there will be some weeds: but we believe that it is because of our weakness that we admit that we have hope in the strength of Christ. The community of those who accept Christ for what he is, are to try to be the light in the world as he was the Light from the Father. We try to live our lives in the spirit of Christ, as sons of the Father and brothers of each other. We certainly do not succeed and I cannot pretend that we do, although we should continue to try. But if we do not have this aim, then our religion is vain. Our boast is not ourselves but the goodness of God who gave us his Son as a gift.

It does not surprise me in the least that the Christian Churches have had a chequered career. Our Lord referred to himself as the bridegroom and to his community of believers as the bride. In so far as the Church is made up of people as they are, human beings who are quite normal and who like everyone else have their own difficulties in being authentic, genuine and generous, then it is not surprising that the Church's relationship with Christ has gone through all the stages that any marriage may have to pass. There may have been times when the Bride has had off days, on days, times of generosity and sacrifice, times of unfaithfulness: so also the Church. But I beg you to be merciful with us and not to judge Christ on what you see in us. We know that what is good in our Churches must come from Christ working in us all, but only too often we do not rise to the occasion. However, without trying to pass this off as of no importance, we must say that if we relied on our response, then we would have no hope; we know that our hope lies in God's faithfulness to us all and not in our infidelities. And you also, I beg, do not rely on whether we are a good advertisement for the Father who gave us his Son and for Jesus Christ, who gave us the supreme example of how to go about a life of service to his Father's will and the good of man. And most of all, I beg you not to dismiss the idea of religion because of what others have made religion. St Paul says that nothing and no one would separate him from the love of Christ. If you find that religion is a pain in the neck, it may be worth checking to see if one may not be relying too much on fallible

human beings; it may be that we have been offered an idea of religion that is all right for a child but quite inadequate for adults. Whatever we feel at the moment, I am sure that the important thing in life is to continue searching and wondering - it is when we think we have found all the answers that we begin to stagnate.

Whatever you think and whatever you reject, I hope you will follow your own nose. Some find searching too difficult sometimes and so they give up. But with or without a religion, life can be no panacea. Those who find religion as a prop on which to lean will be disappointed, since they will not grow. Moreover today, with everything on the go and structures changing, props do not seem so secure as they used to be. No one can hide behind anything now. More and more we are being invited to stand for service or for selfishness.

You realize, dear Frank, that my musings above seem fairly unsatisfactory. It is hard to be able to discuss my attitude to God and to others in a few pages. In any case, these relationships are changing all the time. If I wrote to you tomorrow, I would certainly put it in a different way. Anyhow none of us professes to have the monopoly of the Truth. I hope that if you wish, you might feel that you can write to me, tearing the above to shreds if you like. I would be very interested to know your views and the views of other young people. It is all very well our thinking we know what is good for everyone! If there is to be any communication We surely must listen to each other. There is only one God and Father of us all, but there are many gifts, and it is our job to try to share what we have so that we might try to avoid the pitfalls that the human race is so prone to fall into.

I may never meet you, but I wish you every success in whatever you set yourself to do. If you ever wish to drop me a line, I will write to you straight away. This will be a great help to me.

God bless you always.

Keep your chin up.

Yours,

JIM BRAND.
