**Verses we believe that are not in the Bible**

I sat across the table from my Aunt Ruby. We had been discussing my work with a Native American tribe. Her main objection seemed to be the perceived lack of hygiene. In defense, when a people live in primitive conditions in the desert where every drop of water must be hauled from sources often many miles away, it isn’t customary to take daily showers.

Sensing she was losing the argument, she decided to quote Scripture. “After all,” she argued, “The Bible says that cleanliness is next to godliness.”

“Actually,” I responded. “The Bible does not say that.”

“Well,” she persisted.  “It ought to.”

And therein lies the problem. There are too many things we believe ought to be mandated by religion but actually aren’t there. They are or have been extrapolated from opinion and cultures long since passed, reactions to acts and behaviors reasoned to be unacceptable by someone somewhere and given the equivalence of a divine mandate.

I’m not sure how it happened or when it happened, perhaps it’s always been that way but it seems so much of the Christian church has become best known for what it is against more than what it is for, at least the most visible and vocal part of it. It seems that religious people are the most easily and readily offended people in the world.

Perhaps it is just the nature of religion to define itself by being exclusive of certain behaviors. After all, religion is the device employed throughout the centuries to control large segments of the population, explain the unexplainable, know the unknowable, and fathom the unfathomable.

In compiling my list of things that bother too many religious people…but shouldn’t, I understand that it does not reflect the views of every religious person. I also realize that some might be bothered by the list itself, but a little self-scrutiny is sometimes of value. And I know that views change over time. What bothered some at one time might no longer hold the same degree of antipathy. After all, people do grow and change. Most mellow over time.

So, here’s my list. I’d like to see your list. Leave a comment at the end and let others see what you’ve heard objections to.

**1. Smoking tobacco.** Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest pastors and evangelists of modern history smoked cigars, expensive ones. Someone once asked him if he thought it was wrong for Christians to smoke. “Only when they smoke to excess,” was his reply. When they pressed him on what exactly did he think constituted excess, he replied, “Two cigars at one time.” I am often asked if I think that Christians who smoke can go to heaven. My answer? “Yes, probably sooner than others.” If you’re gonna pick on smoking because it is habit-forming and unhealthy then you’d better line up white sugar, processed flour, and most other things we feed ourselves with. Can a person go to heaven if they eat ice cream? Yes, probably… well, you fill in the answer.

**2. Rock and roll music**. It seems that in order to be accepted as really “Christian” the music needs to be about twenty or thirty years out of date. I remember when Bill Gaither’s music was considered too far out there. One devout believer even told me that anything other than hymns was doggerel. Doggerel! He really believes that anything newer than the 19th century is a  low or trivial form of verse most often used in burlesque (look the word doggerel up, that’s what it means). Really? This again points to the acculturation of faith, that it really has very little to do with what might be acceptable to God and more about what one finds culturally comfortable.

**3. Drinking beer or wine.** Now before I tackle this one, let me say that I drink neither and it’s not for any religious reason. And let me say that I am distinguishing drinking beer or wine from being drunk. One does not need to lead to another. Like anything that can be a problem, if you can’t handle it, don’t do it. But many people can, perhaps most. In most cultures of the world, the partaking of wine or beer is common and normal, even among Christians. In the US, where culture has been welcomed into the church as doctrine, it bothers some people when it needn’t. Not even the Bible supports total abstinence from wine or beer. No, it doesn’t. There’s an old joke that says you always take two Baptists with you when you go fishing because if you take only one he will drink all your beer. There’s another old joke that says Catholics don’t recognize Lutherans, Lutherans don’t recognize Baptists, and Baptists don’t recognize each other in a liquor store. It’s more accepted than you think but that doesn’t stop some from voicing their opposition to it publicly even if privately it might be a different matter.

**4. Any version of the Bible except the King James Version.** This one is really incredible. It seems there are those who believe that God speaks with thee’s and thou’s, that He and his associates use outdated sentence construction and obsolete words. I mean, really, I thought this battle had been won when just a few weeks ago I saw an email sent to a contemporary author who had written a historic book about Jesus. The writer of the email condemned the book’s author for not insisting that the KJV is the only acceptable Bible. It should reassure you to know what when the KJV first came out the Christians of that day rejected it, preferring the more comfortable and historic Geneva version. This one is so silly and so patently demonstrative of ignorance I considered not including it in my list, but the conviction persists.

**5. Tattoos.** I don’t have any, don’t want any. But I don’t care if you do. Too much of what is insisted upon in Christian religion is really only culture.  Someone once asked Moral Majority Founder Rev. Jerry Falwell if he thought God wanted his people to be physically fit. His response? And I quote, “I don’t think God gives a flip either way.” Tattoos? Well, I think Falwell’s answer applies here, too.

**6. People who believe differently about what the Bible teaches.** No one has a lock on the truth. No one! But almost every religious person thinks they do. The myth of orthodoxy perpetuates because it is the nature of religion to convince its adherents that what they believe is more accurate, more faithful, more consistent and therefore more acceptable and more powerful than others. Not everyone can be correct all the time…neither can they be incorrect all the time. In actuality, the claim to orthodoxy is always built upon a spurious source – that the Bible is a closed book somehow gathered through the millennia and preserved to be the complete window into spiritual things. In fact, the Bible is not a closed book. I propose, it is not a book of doctrine at all. Instead, it records the pursuit of thousands of people who, over the course of centuries, endeavored to know the unknowable and what they encountered in trying to find their own way spiritually. It is less a pattern than it is an anthology of what others tried and believed. A key tenet of the Christian faith is the unchanging nature of God, but if that is really held, it becomes difficult to explain how and why our relationship to a spiritual being has radically evolved over time. No self-respecting Israelite would have any idea or connection with the God most Christians speak of these days nor would a Christian of the second century. Indeed, looking at the Bible with a close-up lens, something done in just about every Bible study on the planet, is actually counterproductive unless that study is clarified by a thorough understanding of the times in which a particular passage was written of. Why? Because of the pervasive effects of culture on our understanding. I propose a different approach which I will explain at the conclusion of this article.

Want an example? Here’s one that illustrates this point and #4. There is a big religious industry built around going to heaven and moving in to the mansion promised in the Bible. All of that is built entirely on the passage in John 14:2 which says, in the King James Bible, “In my Father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you.” So well-meaning folks have grabbed that and built a comprehensive ideology on the mansion we will get inside the pearly gates (another misunderstood passage). A “mansion” as it would have been understood in the days of King James meant an apartment. Just look closely now at some of the Masterpiece Mystery programs filmed in England and you will often see an apartment building with a name like Clarington Mansions. Yet here in the US we use the word mansion to mean a grand estate like Tara in Gone With The Wind. When a person who lived in the time of King James heard that verse, it made perfect sense to him. God has prepared a place for him to dwell. Since most people lived as serfs on large landed estates, the idea that when one passed from this life he got to live with the Lord of the manor in His big house made sense and held great appeal. But what it meant in that culture does not mean what it does in this culture. Nonetheless, we have elevated our cultural perspective over the clear message of Scripture, something which is done over and over and over.

The Bible cannot and should not be used that way. Look at it instead as the account of sincere and limited people like you and I trying to make sense of the world and our place in it. If we look at the Bible in that light, it should reassure us that our pursuit of God and spiritual things will of necessity be limited by our context, intelligence, education, powers of reason and willingness to use them, and the times in which we live...but that does not mean the use of those powers is futile or unwarranted. Which brings up the next thing that bothers too many religious people.

**7. Thinking.** Somehow somewhere along the way it became religiously acceptable and considered to be spiritually keen to disconnect the powers of reason. If, as is so fervently avowed, we are made in the image of God, is our mind and the powers endowed us by the skills of reason and thinking necessarily to be divorced from our senses? Certainly not! But to hear it in many circles, whenever a challenge is made, the response is often that human thinking cannot comprehend God. The same argument is used whenever anyone dares articulate the anomalies of belief and the inconsistencies it promotes. If someone rejects discussion because human thinking is somehow illegitimate, then whatever the person who suggests rejection is also suspect. Why? Because he or she thought of it. Thinking and spirituality are not antitheses.

If God cannot stand up to sound judgment and serious scrutiny, then one must seriously question the claim to Deity and omniscience that the name God implies. Frankly, it’s a petty god that cannot endure examination and challenge. No, the denial of thinking and the thought process is little more than laziness made appealing because it’s been packaged in a religious wrapper. It dissuades us from wrestling with the powerful contradictions and conflicts of faith and life. For example, when World Vision announced that they would permit married couples of the same sex to work in their organization, many so-called Christians withdrew their support. Now, they did not obviously think that through. Their support fed, clothed, and educated children. How, in God’s name, could a thinking person turn their back on children because somewhere along the way someone might be committed to someone else in a manner the donor found unacceptable? And how can they possibly justify hard-heartedness and a lack of compassion in the name of a loving and compassionate God? Well, actually, they cannot. They did not think it through because religion is anti-reason and anti-intellectual. It is the residence of laziness and thoughtlessness.

**8. Non-Christians who use the Bible against religious people.** This is related to #7. Think about it. It isn’t non-Christians who claim the Bible is a life guide. Religious people do. It is completely logical that religious people be held to the standards they espouse. Any annoyance that such comparisons are made is completely unjustified. If one accepts the standards of religion as the validating factor of life, then one lives…and dies…by them. If you’re gonna live in a glass house, well you had better be prepared to dodge stones.

**9. Just about anything they don’t understand and don’t care to think very long about.** Religious people, whose intended object is an eternal God bigger than the universe and grander than all creation, almost inevitably end up taking a micro-view of themselves and each other. They begin to elevate what most often amounts to trivial things into the realm of eternal importance. Do you really think that a God who exists outside of time, whose domain extends from one end of the universe (if there is even such an end) to the other really cares if you smoke a cigarette, have a tattoo, or attend a church on Saturday or Sunday? That, my friends, is the problem with religion.

**What religion does to you**

It trivializes life.

It takes the grand and glorious mystery of spirituality and eternity and sends it on trifling pursuits.  Instead of engagement on every level of the mysteries of life and living, of our role as builders of civilization and proponents of the human experience wherein the world is better because we’ve made a genuine and significant contribution, we substitute instead silly debates and contentious rancor of interpretations of some word or series of words. We focus on what in the end are nothing more than preferences and culturally approved peer pressure.

You’re wearing an earring? Well, then you cannot possibly be “right” with God. You said “damn,” well, you’d better repent or you will spend eternity in hell. You smoke? Well, obviously your life is not going to be approved of God.

I am sad to report that I have heard all of those statements and many more come out of the mouths of religious people time and time again. And they were spoken with such rancor and condescension you could scarcely believe a so-called Christian could say them.

But they did. It bothered them…but it shouldn’t. God is way bigger than all this. Shouldn’t we be too?