Nine signs you’ve broken free from religion…and why that’s a good thing.
by Jack Dunigan

You just might have lost your religion if:

**You notice you are increasingly inclined to let things happen rather than make them happen.**Religious people always seem to be so stressed. They have, through indoctrination or assimilation with other religious people, developed a sense of what the world should be like and if it isn’t, they want it changed. Now I am not suggesting that we simply roll over for anything. I am, however, suggesting that we just might not have to change everything. The mantra “Live and Let Live” has somehow been rewritten by religious types to propose that we “Live and Make Live.” Some things are not going to change. I know it may be annoying, but even Jesus said that the poor we would always have with us. My vote for the person clearest example of this is the character played by Barbara Streisand in “The Way We Were.” She was always upset that something somewhere was not right and drove herself and everyone who tried to associate with her to distraction because she just could not accept the principle of imperfectability which says that we live in an imperfect world and while we can make some things better, we cannot make most things better. People who have to make things happen are, by the way, captured by their own sense of power. It is, in its most stringent manifestations, delusional. If you are not so concerned any more about changing so many things and if you can accept others and other circumstances as they come and go, you just might have lost your religion

**You find yourself engaging in frequent attacks of smiling.** Remember Karl Malden as the sour fire and brimstone preacher in Polyanna? Well, multiply him by a factor of a million and you have religion in practice. How did the “good news” which we Christians call the Gospel become such bad news? If it’s such good news why do so many of its adherents look so unhappy. I wrote a lot about this in my series “How to be happy for the rest of your life.” In a capsule, it means that you have come to be at peace with yourself, with others, and with the, wait for it, *self-imposed demands of being what you are not and cannot ever be*. If the essence of the gospel is love, acceptance, and forgiveness, well then let’s start right here right now. When I pastored I would ask the congregation to do this at some point during the service. “Stand up everyone,” I asked. “Turn to someone near you and tell them God loves you and I’m workin’ on it.” The fact that you are the undeserving recipient of God’s love (or probably anyone else’s love too) is indisputable. That should put a smile on your face. The fact that you are accepted by God and others not because of who you are but because of what He and those others feel should widen that smile. The fact that you are forgiven because of the generosity and dare I say it, the grace given without restriction, should make the smile on your face permanent. If you can recognize those three things and let them change your very countenance, you, my friend, have lost your religion.

**You begin to experience feelings of being connected with others not because you are alike but because… but because you are in love.** Religious people are invariably compulsive people. That’s why they fall so easily into the rituals of religious systems. (The religious systems are not at fault, by the way. It is the reasons why some engage in them and what happens to them because they do that is the problem.) And that’s one reason why they get so upset when their systems are challenged. Things just have to be the way they think they ought to be (see #1 above). It is the mechanics of relationships that tend to overwhelm all else. Religious people then connect with and associate with like-minded people and tend to move away from relationships that are too diverse. When you start to acknowledge that it is not consensus but commitment that holds us together, when you can connect with people not because you are alike, but because you are in love, you have lost your religion.

**You find yourself experiencing frequent overwhelming episodes of appreciation.** One of the most religious groups I ever encountered was a church in central Arizona. They were not particularly devout but they were religious (there is a difference!) Through a series of events I found myself as their pastor. For the month of November, and as a lead-up to the Thanksgiving holiday, I challenged the congregation to engage in 30 days of thanks. For one month I asked them to forsake complaining, griping, ingratitude. I challenged that in 30 days they and anyone around them would find life a completely different experience. Within hours I started getting phone calls doing what? Complaining. “We should be allowed to complain!” they , well, complained. It did not stop. They simply refused because in their world there was just too many things wrong and someone had to know about it. Blanket statements smack of stereotypes and I will risk the ire of some readers, but religious people are not grateful people. If you find yourself caring less about what isn’t right and being simply appreciative of those who love you, put up with you, associate with you, you have lost your religion.

**You have lost interest in conflict.** Coming into Page, Arizona, there is a long curving stretch of road where there sits one church then another. The locals call the road Church Row and for good reason. It seems when Martin Luther founded Protestantism, many have been protesting one thing or another ever since.  Religious people are battling people. Religious documents – the Bible, the Torah, the Koran and others have been dissected, analyzed, explained, defended, and fought about. The religious experience has become a battle over who is right. People who lose their religion realize they don’t have to be right. They just want to be real. They long for an authenticity uncluttered and uncomplicated by striving over interpretations of documents no one can ever fully explain or understand. (No, they can’t. I know religious types think they can, but they can’t. If the depths of Deity are unfathomable how can anyone be so presumptuous as to claim they can fathom them. I’ll say it again. They can’t.) And it is not important.

Further, the battles being fought by so many so often are the result of unresolved anger, resentment, fear, and hurt. Conflict makes interesting reading but it makes for miserable living. Dona nobis pacem – grant us peace – rises to the top of things non-religious people desire for.

**You have lost interest in interpreting the actions of others.** Pop psychology sells a lot of books. Lots and lots. It has made most of us de facto analysts. If you’re religious, you have probably already figured out why people do what they do…and are probably ready to let them know. One must ask the question as to why it is necessary or even important to know why some do what they do? If you would really rather just live and let live, then you are losing your religion.

**You just don’t care about judging others anymore.** I had finished delivering my sermon at a church in Toronto. Sitting on the platform after the service concluded, I was privileged to speak with several members of that church. One came up and took a seat next to me.

“Tell me,” he began.

Now I’ve been in the business long enough to know what will follow an opening statement like that and it is never positive.

“During your message,” he continued, “you mentioned a movie.”

“Yes, you are right. I did.”

“Do you go to movies?” he probed.

“Not often, but occasionally.”

He then drew himself up straight in his chair and sniffed. Yes, he really did sniff.

“I don’t go to movies.”

“Well, good for you.”

He wasn’t going to let this go, so he continued. “Do you have a television?”

Never being one to waffle, I figured I might as well pour it on. “Actually, we have five of them.”

He sniffed again. “I don’t have a television.”

“Well,” I said again, “good for you.”

Some time later I was seated across the table with the church’s pastor. When I told him what happened, he told me that the fellow jumps all guest speakers over something. Then the pastor revealed that the man does not go to movies nor does he watch television. He is, however, a wife beater.

When you’ve lost your religion, what another does or does not do simply does not matter anymore. Everyone has issues they feel are righteous and tend to consider theirs to be more righteous than anyone else’s.

**You don’t need or want to judge yourself anymore.** Most of us walk the ridge above a slippery slope. One slight variation from the path and down we tumble. We wage war every day with the memories of things we did or didn’t do, said or didn’t say. Pastor David Fritsche wrote a powerfully phrased perspective on this. When considering what he would do differently if he had his life to do over again, he wrote that what he did he did using the best knowledge and insight he had at the time so he probably wouldn’t do anything differently. [(Read it here.)](http://www.dimensionsofgrace.org/2013/04/15/he-leads-me-beside-the-still-waters/)

It’s true, you know? Regrets get you nowhere. Neither does doubt. Disparaging who you are won’t go very far either. Religious people fight a lot of battles, many of them internal. I think one reason religion attracts so many people and conversely why so many people are attracted to religion is that it offers resolution to those internal doubts if you just follow the rules. By following those rules they expect to gain heaven, paradise, Elysium, Hades, or one of the other names the afterlife has been labeled through the centuries. There is something in religious people that assures them that because they do certain things, the inward issues will be compensated for. There are two problems with that way of life, with that way of thinking.

First, your life revolves around failure, mistakes, shortcomings, and issues. You have become the point about which everything is measured, validated, and qualified. Mark Twain said it well. “If heaven is gained by merit, your dog will get in and you won’t.”

People who have lost their religion have discovered the fallacy of that course. If you can become comfortable in your own skin, can smile at mistakes and failures, then move on, you have lost your religion.

**You are gaining the ability to love…and live… without expecting anything in return.** Religious people are obliging people. For them everything is a transaction. In every encounter, even religious ones, their actions are supposed to result in some compensation. I wrote a piece about anonymous giving a few weeks ago which touches on this subject. [(Read it here.)](https://jackdunigan.com/why-we-should-give-and-not-let-anyone-know)

Then there is the issue of bargaining with God and with just about everyone else. A long series of trade-offs ensues. Day to day actions are filled with “if then’s,” those often unspoken but nearly always present contracts whereby your behavior will result in some obligation on another’s part. Gangsters do this unapologetically. The rest of us may be less skilled but no less committed to its practice.

When you participate in another’s life expecting not one thing in return, you have abandoned religion.

Now, I wrote earlier that un-religious people are not necessarily less devout. Religion does not guarantee spirituality, indeed it often works against it. The indicators of either are seldom the same. The world has a very large religious population, almost all of it organized. Spiritual people can be found within those groups. More of them can be found without.

How did you measure up? Have you abandoned religion? Would you even consider doing so?

If you have persevered this far, you have figured out that I am neither an agnostic nor an atheist. I do believe, however, that religion as most people practice it, crowds out true spirituality, displacing it with systems of rules, regulations, rites, and rituals. The laws of physics say that two masses cannot occupy the same space at the same time and too often it comes down to just that. We either are religious or spiritual but seldom both.

Visiting a close friend one evening, I noticed a hubbub of activity across the street from his house which happened to be the home of another friend. I asked my first friend what was going one. He informed me that the people were being forced out of their home and had to move that night.

“Aren’t we going to go help?” I asked.

“No, can’t. Gotta go to Bible study tonight.”

It doesn’t get much plainer than that. The object of religion, certainly Christianity is to make us better, more caring, more sacrificial, more engaged people. “Can’t. Gotta go to a Bible study.” Sigh!

Learning about God is not even in the ballpark with knowing God. Studying how to respond to the implications of the religion is not the same as actually doing it.

Perhaps, just perhaps we could use a few less religious people and a whole lot more spiritual ones.

Thanks for reading. Let me know what you think, ok?