

ALEX HIMAYA

>> *Finding GRACE in a
Works-Driven Culture* >>

JESUS

hates

RELIGION



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Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, s.v. “hate,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hate>”>hate (accessed August 3, 2010).

All Greek definitions are taken from *Libronix Digital Library System*, 2001.

Foreword

"Apart from Me, you can do nothing."

—Jesus

It seems, maybe, we have forgotten that Jesus said we can do nothing without Him. Nothing.

That is why I am so grateful for a book like this—a book about Jesus. Not another dead book about religion, but one about the only Source of life that exists. Simply put, there is no definition of life apart from Jesus—He said He is life Himself. It seems, though, we act as if we can do this “Christian life thing” on our own—just work a little harder, have a bit more discipline than the next guy, etc. It’s as if we think, fundamentally, Christianity is about our effort to be like Jesus.

It’s not. That’s the opposite of good news. In fact, it’s horrible news—have you ever tried it? C. S. Lewis, in his classic work *Mere Christianity*, got it right: “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.”¹ Christianity is not about our effort to be like Jesus; it is Jesus’ effort to be Himself in us. Alex Himaya gives you an honest and compelling look at

how religion—man-made attempts to get to God—will fail you every time. And that’s why Jesus hates religion—because it keeps you from Him.

As Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola point out in *Jesus Manifesto*, Jesus didn’t even try to live His life on this earth by His own power (religion). Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself” (John 5:19 NKJV), and in another place He said, “I can of Myself do nothing” (John 5:30 NKJV). So, since Jesus could do nothing of Himself, what did He do? He said it this way, “Whatever the Father does the Son also does,” and again, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me” (John 5:19; 8:28 NIV). And finally, “Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work” (John 14:10 NIV).

Jesus lived His life through the indwelling of the Father. So do you really think that Jesus is going to tell us to live our lives any differently—that somehow we should live our lives on our own, in our own strength, and just try to copy Jesus? Are we to think that religion, which wasn’t good enough for Jesus, is somehow good enough for us? Good luck—that is the recipe for abject failure. Trying to be like Christ is not only hard; it is impossible. Only Christ can be like Christ. And

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that's the point. He indwells us. He lives in us. And He wants to live His life out through us.

We could take all the great information from all of the books on the best-seller list and put it all into practice. We could have better parenting skills, better communication in marriage, and all other kinds of self-help; but, in the end, apart from Jesus, we really can do nothing. When the life of Jesus is being lived out in us, we will be better spouses, parents, and people because His life manifestly becomes bigger than ourselves; it becomes about Jesus and His power.

We need to step out of our “*you*-niverse of religion” and into Jesus’ universe. Everything, and I mean everything, is for Him, through Him, in Him, and by Him. He must have preeminence. If we don’t allow that, the alternative is not good: we begin to unknowingly drown in the pool of religious narcissism while thinking what great swimmers we are. The “*you*-niverse of religion” is nothing more than a black hole, but thankfully Alex hasn’t written a book on religion. He has written about the only One who really matters—the all-sufficient Jesus who saves us from our sins, our mistakes, our very selves; and, yes, from our religion too.

Dr. Jerry Gillis
Lead Pastor at The Chapel at CrossPoint
Buffalo, New York

Introduction

Perhaps you picked up this book because you're appalled by the title and can't wait to tear this book apart. Or maybe the title caught your attention, and you enthusiastically agree because you've experienced religion at its worst.

I should probably state here that I am a pastor. Those of you who were already angry just blew a gasket. Keep reading.

I realize that being author of a book entitled *Jesus Hates Religion* puts me in a precarious situation. I am a pastor. My main source of income is from a church—a “religious institution.” I have spent thousands of dollars and decades of my time learning from religious institutions. It seems crazy for me to state that Jesus hates something that is the core of who I am and what I do. However, I want to offer an unbiased view of God's thoughts about religion. Before you put this book back on the shelf, please allow me to share some of my life story with you.

Living and breathing religion, since I was a teenager, may seem like the perfect recipe for a biased view of religion; but in reality, it's been a backstage pass to see religion at its best and at its worst. Throughout my journey, I've found that many like to talk about the "worst" side of religion. People are comfortable discussing great religious leaders who have publicly been humiliated for their hypocrisy. Many are quick to condemn a person who has hurt others in the name of Jesus. And many more refuse to take personal responsibility for their daily actions, Monday through Saturday, hoping that people only judge them based on their display at church Sunday morning.

I am not comfortable pretending that these things don't happen. In fact, it makes me sick to see God so grossly misrepresented. Throughout my experience with religion, I have been acquainted with people who called themselves religious, yet used their religion to hurt, reject, and betray others. I've also seen those far from God use religion (and all that goes with it) as an excuse to stiff-arm God. And that's the reason I had to write this book.

I have been hurt by religious people.

I have been betrayed by religion.

I've studied the Bible and gotten to know God on a personal level. I've found that those so-called religions

are not at all what the Bible teaches. In fact, most are a direct perversion of the true freedom God offers each person as a free gift.

My Pledge

Having said all that, here is my pledge to you:

I promise this book will not be filled exclusively with my spin on what the Bible says.

I will lay before you what the Bible has to say and let you choose for yourself.

I will go into depth exploiting the most common misinformation people equate with religion and compare it to what the Bible actually teaches.

Your Pledge

We all know the saying, “It takes two to tango.” In order for this partnership to work, I need you to promise you won’t leave me dancing alone. You as the reader also have a part to play.

Your part is two-fold. Number one, as you read this book, commit to quiet your mind and set aside all of the teachings you have heard that relate to God. I know for some of you this means looking past years and years, perhaps even a lifetime, of teachings and instructions

that have shaped your beliefs about who He is. For others of you, it means letting go of memories that have wounded and scarred your heart and have affected every decision you've made since.

I know what I'm asking isn't easy, but if you make the pledge to listen only to the Bible, you may just find the hope and the love that you've been yearning for all of these years.

Number two, you need to read the Bible for yourself. It would be hypocritical for me to tell you that reading my book will answer all of your questions. I can't and I won't promise you that. I can promise that if you read the Bible, just the Bible, you will find the hope and the answers you've been looking for. When a verse is quoted in this book, find it in your own Bible. Read the verses surrounding that verse. Read the entire chapter. Read the entire book. The Bible will not contradict itself, so use the other verses to validate and interpret what you're reading.

I would encourage you to choose the translation you're most comfortable with. I don't necessarily mean the one you or your family has always read. Choose a version you can read and understand without having to consult a dictionary, thesaurus, and college professor to translate each sentence. If you don't know which version to begin with, I recommend the *New Living Translation*.

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Most of the verses I reference in this book come from that version of the Bible because, for me, it's one of the easiest to follow and understand.

Once you've set aside your previous perceptions of God and have your Bible, then you're ready to learn about a journey that, more than likely, religion has not been able to offer you. Stick with me. This book isn't going to neatly fit into any "religion" category at your local bookstore, and I'm perfectly fine with that.

>> Chapter One >>

Abandoned by Religion

Growing up, religion was not really a predominant part of my family's life, which created a curiosity in me; so, I, honestly, tried it all—confirmation, catechism, becoming an altar boy, memorizing the Lord's Prayer, meeting early with my priest before church to pray over the bread and wine for communion, carrying the cross during worship services, attending youth camps, the works. I've been a Coptic, a Catholic, an Episcopalian, and a Baptist.

My dad is full-blooded Egyptian, born and raised in Cairo. My mom was raised in the hills of Fletcher, North Carolina. Talk about crazy family reunions! I have full-blooded Arab cousins on one side, who dress to impress at every social event [think prom], and a cousin from the other side of my family, who built all of his furniture out of PVC pipe. Despite being Egyptian,

my dad wasn't Muslim as some would assume. He was Coptic, which is similar to Catholicism, but with a lot more tradition. It is the Orthodox Christian Church of Egypt.

Since Coptics aren't as common in America, my family attended an Episcopal church—sort of. We were there for the important religious holidays, but that was about it. I made up for my lack of church attendance by attending an all-boys Catholic high school. During my junior year, the school switched to coed for which we were all grateful.

I played the religion game throughout my teenage years, but the first time I started to doubt the validity of the rules—the dos and don'ts I was expected to follow—was in junior high. Even though I participated in every religious duty I was eligible for at that age, I still felt something was missing. So I began a double life. When I was in church, I was dressed in my finest and my behavior stood as a shining example for all the younger boys. However, when I wasn't at church, I was searching for answers in the wrong places. The moment I realized my experience of being immersed in religion had only left me empty and discouraged, I walked away.

It wasn't the shortcut to peace and happiness I was anticipating. Why? I'm human. I make mistakes. Many times I strayed from the path. After graduation, I went

to a religious university, but my life still strayed down the wrong paths of religion and left me hoping beyond reason that things were going to magically work themselves out when I got older.

I don't hate religion because of what it did to me. I hate it because of what it didn't do. I hate what it has done to others. And most of all, I hate when it leaves out the truth about Jesus and what God has to offer. In fact, that's why Jesus hates religion too. It's missing all the good stuff.

The End of the Game

It took me many years, many mistakes, and many hurts before I came to the understanding and convictions that I embrace today. My own emptiness, accompanied by the disillusionment of my friends,, made me realize something wasn't right. There had to be a different answer. There had to be a better way. There had to be some good that came out of the Bible—otherwise why would its stories be repeated in so many cultures? Why would so many people still follow it thousands of years after it was written? Why would so many give their lives defending it?

I cleared my head and started from scratch. I put aside everything I had been taught about God, the

Bible, and religion. I decided to focus on one source—the Bible. I didn't want anyone else's opinions or interpretations tainting my experience. I wanted to know what the Bible said when someone else wasn't telling me what it said. I wanted to let the Bible tell me what the Bible says.

As I studied and searched the Scriptures, I found a plan and purpose that no one had shown me before. I found a way to God that didn't involve any good works, good behavior, or impossible dos and don'ts. I found that knowing, trusting, and following God had little to do with me and everything to do with God.

There was only one step that God required of me. Acceptance. As simple as accepting a present and claiming ownership, I found that my connection with God is a gift I choose to accept or reject.

That's it. No more. No less.

People have tried to add to or delete from that truth in their own search for God. And when humans add to or delete from the Bible, it's no longer truth.

We've all been hurt, and we've all hurt others. But I now understand that it wasn't God's design for us to experience all of this rejection and pain in the name of religion.

I can only begin to imagine the tears, the agony, and the betrayal that the readers of this book could list for

me. It's not easy to trust in a God who sees all of this hurt happening; but let me show you what I've found in the Bible. More importantly, let me just show you the Bible, and let the Bible speak for itself.

The Beginning of Truth

I truly believe that with a little of your trust and time, this book could potentially point you to answers that religious people have been falling short to provide for thousands of years.

I believe there is a God—a good God, a God who loves and accepts you just as you are. I also believe that the truth about who He is has been severely tainted by religion and religious people. I'm not presuming I can change your mind, but I am offering you a voice that's willing to acknowledge the hurt that's resulted from religion, and I'm laying before you an open conversation about the why, the how, and the what God has to say about it.

Don't trust me. Trust God, and let Him speak for Himself.

Study Questions

1. How has religion impacted your life?
2. What are you expecting you'll find in the following pages?
3. What is or has been the foundation of truth in your life?

>> Chapter Two >>

Culture and Religion

When I began working on what was originally a sermon series, that I preached in 2009, that later evolved into this book, my church posted a billboard that simply stated, “www.jesushatesreligion.com.” Immediately a flood of opinions ranging from curious support to extreme disgust filled the message board. Some people were compelled to weigh in with their definitions of the word *religion* and how it had either positively or negatively affected their lives. Others suggested outrage that a church, which they equated with religion, would put the name *Jesus* in the same sentence with *hate*.

Whatever statement is made about religion, it becomes a polarizing discussion. Feelings and conversations about religion occur at both ends of a very wide spectrum. On one end, you have people who won’t

even discuss religion; on the other end of the spectrum, you've got people going to war over it; and somewhere in the middle, you have people hurt and betrayed by the role religion played in their lives. Regardless, the things that people do and say in the name of *God* added to the things that people do and say in the name of *religion* is enough to fully fund entire news networks all over the globe.

Religion Defined

As I mentioned before, it appears contradictory to write this book as a pastor trying to explain why Jesus hates religion. The word *religion* occurs somewhere between five and seven times in the Bible depending on the translation. In *The Message* it appears 162 times. Do a search on the word *religion* in *The Message* on the Internet. About twenty-five occurrences in, you will get the message, so to speak. In almost all of them the connotation is negative. The one reference that is clearly presented in a positive light is James 1:27, which talks about pure religion that cares for widows and orphans.

Religion began in the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve tried to make coverings for themselves out of fig leaves, a bloodless sacrifice. It continued with the offering of Cain in Genesis 4. These were the first man-made attempts to get back to God. So, as we begin on

this journey, I feel it is vital that I give you my working definition of religion. The religion I am referring to, when I declare that Jesus hates religion, is a man-made path to God.

The Bible clearly lays out a design and plan for a perfect God to be able to have a relationship with an imperfect person. That plan is, by design, a path that only God could have made available to man. Man, in his imperfection, is not capable of creating a path that successfully reaches God.

Throughout history, well-meaning, intelligent, religious leaders have ignored their own human limitations; consequently, they have created a wealth of dead-end, stifling, and broken religions. When people choose to follow those dead-end journeys, they find themselves feeling damaged and betrayed. When this happens, most people blame God, which results in them moving farther and farther away from Him. What they don't realize is that God had nothing to do with that journey, and ultimately they miss out on the path He did create—a path of freedom, hope, and security.

Religious leaders will try to convince you their man-made path, typically a list of “dos” and “don'ts” they choose to adhere to, is the only way for God to be experienced. The result is usually a life filled with frustration and guilt, when that journey asks for more than it provides. Generally, a person who lives a life

committed to religion will find himself on his deathbed, hoping he did enough to earn God's favor.

Fix-It Men

Religion is pride. It's a human being or a group of human beings looking at the distance between them and God, and then saying, "I can right this wrong." In other words, they believe there are ways they can be good enough—by filling their lives with love, purity, acts of kindness, social justice, etc.—to earn God's favor. They walk through life committed to avoiding predetermined "bad" things and to doing enough "good" things that they will somehow be guaranteed a seat in heaven. Ultimately, all of these little paths are arrogance because they're saying, "*I can fix that.*"

But when you get away from all of the teachings, all of the preaching, all of the performers, and when you just read the Bible, you'll find one clear message: it's not about you being "good" enough . . . it's about God being enough. Period.

Religion Church

Since most people equate church with religion, it's important to identify what the Bible actually says is

the purpose of the church. One of the purposes God intended for the church is community—a group of people, with a common purpose, doing life together. In Acts 2:42–47, the Bible describes the first New Testament church. The believers, who all held a common belief that Jesus was the Son of God and had been raised from the dead, came together, devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, shared their lives with each other, and found encouragement and support.

As humans, we all desire community. In fact, that’s why Starbucks is so successful: one of its core principles is to create a place where people can gather and converse. Starbucks has replaced the front porches and backyards of neighborhoods across America. People used to talk with their neighbors about what’s going on in their lives. Today, people meet at a café to accomplish the same purpose.

The founder of Starbucks recognized a need for community, and he built an empire fulfilling that need. Outside of cafés, today’s culture comes up short fulfilling people’s needs for community. Perhaps that’s why social networking became so popular so quickly. It fulfilled a need for community—a place where there were no strings attached and people could just do life with other people.

One of the reasons God created the church was to fulfill our need for community, yet people have

When I say that Jesus hates religion, I'm not saying that God hates the church. He loves the church. He created it! He hates the perversion of many churches that have added their own rules and standards to His genuine, honest, and simple offer of relationship.

twisted and perverted the church, to the point it has become a place for people to unite with like-minded believers, who ascribe to a common code of ethics. So, when I say that Jesus hates religion, I'm not saying that God hates the church. He loves the church. He created it! The church is the body of Christ and the bride of Christ. He hates the perversion of many churches that have added their own rules and standards

to His genuine, honest, and simple offer of relationship.

Granted, today's culture generally defines *church* as a gathering of religious people, which makes me sick because that definition is missing so much. It's so far away from what God created and purposed for the church. As a pastor, my desire is to see the people who attend church transform from a gathering of religious

people creating their own paths to God into a gathering of people who know and believe that without God nothing is possible.

I love the church. There's something very powerful in being a part of a community of Christ followers with a common purpose, and I believe there are many great churches that exist today. It is powerful when all of the people—from the pastor to the volunteers changing diapers in the nursery—are all striving toward the same purpose: a relationship with God, undefiled by man's dos and don'ts. The church is not equal to; it is greater than man-made religion.

Christians Aren't Allowed to Hate . . . Right?

After defining *religion* and *church*, it's important that I also discuss the relationship between Christians and hate. One incensed person who commented on the Jesus Hates Religion message board had this to say:

Jesus is the opposite of hate. He's everything good and pure. I realize that a lot, if not all, organized religions have lost their way, but there's no hatred in Jesus.

Another upset person recommended the web address be changed to *www.JesusPrefersChristianUnity.com*. (Yeah, that would get about three hits.)

Rewind a minute. Let's start with what *hate* means. *Hate* is defined as having an "extreme dislike" of something. Since religion is a man-made path to God, then religion is a deviation from God's purpose and plan. God clearly states in the Bible that Jesus is the only way to heaven: "Jesus told him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me'" (John 14:6).

If people, on their own, try to create ways to God, they are essentially saying they know better than God and their path is better than God's. That's pure arrogance, and what does the Bible say about arrogance?

Human pride will be humbled,
and human arrogance will be brought down.
Only the LORD will be exalted
on that day of judgment. (Isa. 2:17)

There's little room for debate that arrogance is something that God has an extreme dislike for. He hates it. It was pride that caused Lucifer to exalt himself and rebel against God's authority. Pride is what caused the fall of man, when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden. In fact, pride is one of the seven

sins that God hates and are an abomination to Him. If we really stop to think about it, pride is at the root of most of the sin we commit. So if religion, at its core, is pride and arrogance, then one can make a strong argument that Jesus hates religion.

Jesus Wasn't a Religious Leader

Jesus was not just another great teacher. He was not just a motivational speaker. He certainly did not come to start a religion, nor did He come to this earth to lead people to create their own paths to finding God. In fact, He would've hated being given the title "religious leader." Jesus' purpose was to be *the* path to God—the *only* one.

Biblical Christianity is different from religion. Plain and simple, Christianity is a relationship with God—God's way. In Jesus' day, all of the religious leaders hated Christianity because it was not religious. It didn't follow a list of dos and don'ts. It was the anti-religion. Jesus welcomed anybody and everybody with open arms. He didn't discriminate against imperfect people. In fact, He

In Jesus' day, all of the religious leaders hated Christianity because it was not religious.

chose to surround Himself with the very same people that the religious leaders condemned and shunned:

Later, Levi held a banquet in his home with Jesus as the guest of honor. Many of Levi's fellow tax collectors and other guests also ate with them. But the Pharisees and their teachers of religious law complained bitterly to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with such scum?"

Jesus answered them, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent." (Luke 5:29–32)

If religion is man making a path to God, Christianity is understanding the path is already made—through a relationship with Jesus. It's the only way.

Religion loses sight of the goal. Contrary to what most religious leaders would tell you, the focus of religion is the deeds that move you toward or away from the destination. The focus of religion is not God. The focus of religion is being good. But if you look at the word *good* and take out the letters *g-o-d*, you're left with something that looks a lot like a zero, and it is worth about that much too. Nothing. That's what good is without God. Nothing.

Choose Your Adventure

Christianity is not about being good. Good works have nothing to do with whether or not God accepts you. Yet religious leaders around the world are mobilizing armies of believers, who think that performing enough good works, which vary from religion to religion, is the only way for God to accept them.

One of the most common ways a religion is formed is when a person or a group of people read the Bible and decide to pick and choose the parts they like, and then, ignore the rest. Everyone loves to hear about God's forgiveness and mercy; yet because society has taught us to believe achievements validate our success, most find it hard to accept that a perfect God could have any love for an imperfect person who has done no good.

The Bible has a simple message. God loved us when we were imperfect and made a way to connect to Him, despite our imperfections. When this simple message has been altered or removed from the equation, what's left is a group of people trying to forge a path toward God. Some people never find a group, so they trek on alone. The result is a life bound by cynicism, guilt, disappointment, and hatred—which is so far away from the life and message of Jesus Christ. So far away.

Jesus came to accomplish something entirely different than that. Look at the words that He uses to

describe His mission on earth: *seek, save, deliver, break, heal* (Luke 19:10; Matt. 6:13 (NIV); 8:7). Jesus stood against the bondage of religion, and Satan and the religious people of His day hated Him for it.

Jesus' purpose was never about conforming to this, that, and the other. His message was always about transformation. Jesus was never about what was forbidden; He was always about freedom.

Jesus was never about what was forbidden; He was always about freedom.

Take a moment to step back and look at your experience with God. Evaluate your current path. Consider the paths you have followed. If you've been raised in a religious environment, give yourself a chance to sift through the opinions and teachings you've grown up with.

- Has your experience with God been about the “dos” and the “don’ts”?
- Are you on a path that was decided for you by people you trusted, but it feels more like bondage?
- Have you completely abandoned all paths because you've seen the end results, and you have no desire whatsoever to be a part of that?

- Have you been blinded by hurt and betrayal?
- Have you been crushed by “the church”?
- Have you lost all desire to even find a path?

Or are you on a path that God and God alone has created—a path you stepped onto naked and without anything to contribute? Has your walk with God been a constant reminder that without Him, none of this is possible?

For my part, I am going to boast about nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate. Can’t you see the central issue in all this? It is not what you and I do. . . . It is what God is doing, and he is creating something totally new, a free life! All who walk by this standard are the true Israel of God—his chosen people. (Gal. 6:14–16 *The Message*)

A Culture of Success

If you’ve been raised in today’s culture, you have been bombarded with messages that indicate that your value is defined by successes and achievements. It

begins from the moment your parents cheer your first steps and continues in the form of grades, pay scales, and material possessions. Over and over we are inundated with slogans like, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again,” “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps,” and “Practice makes perfect.” Ultimately, the fruit of living in an achievement-based society is a high value on self-sufficiency. In fact, we honor it.

But God wants to see what it is we cannot accomplish, and then He wants us to accept it as a gift from Him. Culture has always dictated that we must have something to offer God, but God offers His achievements (achievements we are not capable of accomplishing without Him) to accept as our own. And as we dig further into what religion today has become, we’ll see how culture has crept in and perverted our definition of religion from God’s offer of relationship.

Study Questions

1. How do you define religion?
2. How was Jesus a “religious leader”? How was He not a “religious leader”?
3. How would you describe Jesus’ mission here on earth?