



An Interview with John Pavlovitz,

author ***IF GOD IS GOOD, DON'T BE A JERK: Finding Faith That Makes Us Better Humans***

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- 1. This is your fifth book. You've written about religion and politics and race and grief, and all sorts of social justice issues. What fueled the creation of this particular book at this particular time?**

As a person of faith and longtime minister, I looked around in the Spring of 2020 (just as the pandemic was beginning and I was starting to write the book I'd ended to write), and it was particularly disheartening to realize that nearly every ugliness here in America: from the violent parade of white nationalism to the defiant anti-mask pandemic-deniers to the propagators of an abject election fraud lie to the suppressors of the voices and votes of people of color—was coming largely from white people professing to be Christians. I quickly put aside the book I originally thought I'd be writing, and leaned into the grief of this realization and spoke from a more emotionally-connected place, which became a much more personal journey and yet somehow a more hopeful one.

- 2. Why has abortion become such a pivotal issue for Conservative Christians, seemingly far less important than education or healthcare or systemic racism, all of which should be "pro-life" concerns?**

I think abortion is a relatively clean form of activism. By opposing abortion, religious people can feel the intoxicating, easy high of self-righteousness and moral virtue—without having to actually love or help people they don't like. That's because embryos can be idealized into something pleasant and palatable, devoid of any of the messy characteristics they find undesirable in actual walking-around human beings. They aren't yet gay or Muslim or liberal or Black or poor or atheist, and so affinity with them is uncomplicated, solidarity with them does not cross the lines of their tribalism.

- 3. Why does religion, which should be a source of love, compassion, and equity, often seem to create movements that are actually antithetical to such things?**

Far too many churches and ministers rely on fear to motivate the faithful in their communities, conditioning people to believe there is always an adversary coming, always a threat, always a war to be waged. It is a theology that requires urgency. Pressing into people's phobias and prejudices, religion often creates a narrative that there is an encroaching enemy and keeping religious people always in a battle posture. Combine that leveraged fear with the desperate need for community that will move people to compromise a great deal in order to remain there, and you have spiritual environments that easily turn toxic.

4. What does organized Christianity look like in 50 years? Will the Church still be relevant?

The idea of spiritual community needing a geographic location or fixed structure to exist is becoming a thing of the past, which is actually great news, because it means we're letting the massive, ineffable idea of God out of the rigid box of a building for an hour on Sunday. This outgrowing of the religion of many of our childhoods is paving the way for what we're seeing more and more—which are unpredictable, open, disparate communities of people less concerned about defending a strict set of doctrines and more interested in bringing equity, justice, and healing wherever they happen to be.

5. Why did you choose to title the book 'If God is Love, Don't Be a Jerk'? Why not, 'If God is Love, Love People'?

Well, I think that's partly my slightly subversive sense of humor taking over, but it's also the fact that my aspirations for humanity in general have become a bit more pedestrian in recent years! So, I'm seeing this massive expression of religion that seems so devoid of empathy and so characterized by cruelty, that I've felt the need to start smaller, to basically say: "I don't need you to be fully loving or completely kind, I'd just like us to work on doing no harm, and start there." Not being a jerk, is about continually examining your heart and being aware of your motives, and doing all you can not to injure or hinder other people.

6. With all the division, partisan politics, and religious tribalism we're experiencing, what do you see as the greatest reason for hope?

At a speaking event, I asked that question and a gentleman took the microphone and said, "John, I have two newsfeeds in my life. One is Twitter and Facebook and the news, and that will always show me division and hatred and urgent crises. If I look only at that newsfeed I will easily grow hopeless." He continued, "But there is another newsfeed, and it's in the community where I live, where there are people whose names and faces and stories and know; people doing incredible, compassionate, generous work that will never trend nationally." He said, "If I spend time looking at that newsfeed, hope comes easily."

I think that's what helps keep me hopeful: Paying attention to the big and distant things where I don't have all that much power, but not letting them keep me from the small and close things which I have incredible agency to impact.