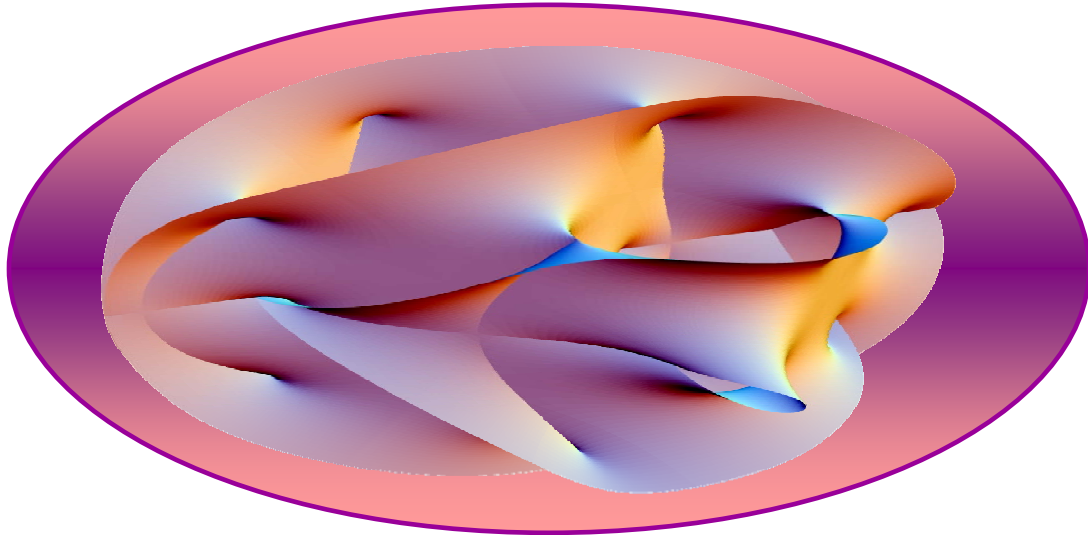


KICK THE HABIT!

(Religion Addict)



Most of us have become familiar with our society's way of referring to certain of life's most destructive behaviors. Drunkenness, habitual lying, compulsive gambling, unrestrained spending -- these and other actions are termed addictive behaviors in popular literature and by most mental health experts.

Contrary to the early fears of some, the term is not an attempt to help people avoid taking responsibility for their lives. To the contrary, it identifies a harmful component of one's lifestyle and challenges him or her to take positive steps to get free of its control.

There is certainly nothing inconsistent with Scripture in this view of human conduct. Jesus spoke of sin's power to enslave (John 8:34) and Paul wrote of a mindset that is not only hostile to God's will but incapable of obeying it (Romans 8:6-8). Sounds like what we call addictive behavior.

Know what one of the latest identified addictions is? **Religion!**

Religion addicts don't believe in God so much as they believe in some system that is supposed to deliver or manipulate Him. According to the emerging theory, there are several types of

religion addicts: lazy addicts, who leave everything to God; investment addicts, who believe they have to give something (especially money) in order to get anything from God; and churchaholics, who immerse themselves in religious activity to avoid facing painful realities.

The Pharisees in general and pre-conversion Paul in particular would make good candidates for religion addicts. They believed and taught that God was at the end of a set of legalistic requirements (cf. Philippians 3:2-6). They believed they could wring a blessing out of God by observing the detailed traditions they had evolved around Scripture.

Paul's solution to his enslavement to religious tradition and ritual was not atheism but Christ. "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (cf. Philippians 3:7-11).

Working the angles of a religious system produces frustration, intolerance, hypocrisy, and shame. The void in the human soul that can only be filled by God goes begging. Only a personal relationship with God through Christ can satisfy the urgent need for love, acceptance and security that all people feel instinctively.

Pre-Christian Paul was neither the first nor last person to be addicted to religion as a substitute for knowing God. It took the Damascus Road experience to make him realize that his version of religion was self-defeating and damning.

It is a dangerous addiction that seeks to kill the pain in one's soul with the husks of some fragile system. Christianity is not a "system" but a relationship with God through Christ. It is founded on grace, accepted by faith and lived in joy. Its addictive alternative is founded on human effort, accepted in some all-important ritual or ceremony and lived in consuming fear.

Christian faith liberates, while religion addiction enslaves. The former speaks of accountability to Jesus alone and allows great freedom and respect within a group of companion-seekers of the kingdom of God, while the latter replaces Christ's salvation

with approval by a set of human administrators/judges who negotiate one's acceptance within the group.

Are you wondering whether you might be a religion addict instead of a Christian? Here are a few questions that might help you decide . . .

Do you fear that God will turn His back on you if you do not do enough for Him?

Do you only give money to a church or ministry in order for God to bless you?

Do you often tell your spouse or children what to do without explaining your reasons, just because you know you are right?

Do you have to check with your minister or a trusted interpreter of Scripture in order to decide your position on every spiritual issue?

Do you believe you are still being punished by God for something you did a long time ago?

Do you think that if you work harder for Him, God will eventually forgive you?

An affirmative answer to even one of these questions may indicate that one is an addict to religion rather than a devotee of God. Multiple positive answers testify to a major problem.

The unfortunate irony is that people whose desire for God and motivation to do His will are strongest and the most susceptible to religion addiction.

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

As surely as there are negative, unhealthy, and addictive ways to practice religion, there is a way that is faithful to God's intention. This "pure and faultless" approach to the Christian faith generates personal fulfillment and honors Christ.

The first thing to notice about authentic religion is that it is

always relationship oriented. As opposed to seeing Christianity as a plan or system, Scripture reveals that everything reduces to two great commandments about loving God and neighbor. It is love for God that keeps one free of the world's pollutions; it is love for neighbor that makes one sensitive to people in distress. Addictive approaches to religion pile up good works and try to win acceptance; true religion accepts God's unconditional love and passes it on to others.

Second, pure religion is lived within community. The society of God called "the church" is a body of supportive and nurturing people who worship together, pray for one another and pay attention to one another's needs. Work, education, family, moral choices - all things are seen in terms of the values embraced and affirmed by the **Body of Christ**. Without being meddlesome or intrusive, believers have a reasonable sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.

Third, genuine Christian faith acts on its profession of love and community to bring about increased social justice. Widows, orphans, homeless persons, people with AIDS, crime's victims and perpetrators - no one is excluded from the love of God that is mediated through His faithful people. Because God cares about people in distress, His church ministers to them.

Fourth, the people who live their faith in such a healthy way are reassured by the indwelling Spirit of God and experience a sense of personal well-being, assurance, and peace in their daily lives. In other words, they move from the insecurity and fear of religion addiction to Christ-centered confidence. They no longer live in anxiety but trust, no longer live in fear of hell but in hope of heaven, no longer work to be accepted but rejoice in God's grace.

How sad that so many eat the empty husks of religion addiction when God meant us to know the abundance of authentic faith. But I have good news. You can kick the habit and you can kick it today!