

**WHATEVER IS, IS—
AND GOD IS THERE!**

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Start with Reality

One of the most reliable and undeniable benefits of true religious commitment is that it stops us from useless complaints about what ought to be, what should have happened, what is fair and not fair; and turns us back to face what actually *is*. Without any higher power or eternal value or set of moral imperatives, we get stuck in the mode of seeing things in terms of what it does to our own happiness or satisfaction. Religion, on the other hand, far from promising to take us out of the conflicts of life, actually promises only the presence of the Lord in and through these conflicts. Of course we should always try to make things better; but we have to start with what is actually the case, not what we wish were so.

Dump the Stereotypes

Some people really hate what they see as the results of “organized religion”. As a Catholic priest, I can say without hesitation that our Christian story needs to be presented from the perspective of “faith” rather than “religion”. Dick Westley in his book titled *Redemptive Intimacy* identified seven characteristics of “religion” which if they co-exist spell disaster for real faith. These signs are:

- 1) Relating to God out of fear
- 2) Feeling the need to appease an angry God
- 3) Relating to God out of self-interest, i.e. attempting to get him to do *our* will
- 4) Viewing ourselves as little and unworthy in God’s sight
- 5) Holding that there are two worlds, one in which we live, and another

in which God dwells

- 6) Holding that some things in the world, e.g., sex, pleasure, etc. are in themselves evil
- 7) Violating the freedom and personhood of another by doing physical or psychological harm to her “in the name of the Lord”.

Some of these characteristics probably exist in almost all believers, but if very many of them do, it is easy to feel repelled by that “religious” approach to our human situation.

Not *what* you see, but *how* you see

Always the question surfaces in our life regarding evil situations, “If God is there and God is good, why would he allow this to happen?” Who hasn’t thought that thought? “Can’t God do a better job than this?” And the response seems always to depend on where we place ourselves. Since some situations *are* bad, denial and blaming are not going to bring about anything useful. People of faith don’t have an answer that takes away the reality of suffering and evil, but we do have frameworks for seeing these things in a perspective that gives life and doesn’t cut it off. Anybody who knows the stories and adventures of the world’s leading religions will be able to deny that they see a journey and a rhythm in life. Christians name this process the Paschal Mystery: life-death-resurrection.

Who changes: God or us?

What happens is that sometimes our life is moving along on a fairly happy and predictable plane--and God seems not so distant then. What happens at other times is that our life is an unforeseen and tragic mess, filled with uncertainty, fear, suffering, and powerlessness—and God

seems very distant or even absent. So we are faced with the crucial decision on which we stake our way of living. For the Christian, as Chesterton once said, “*Everything* is all right; it is just everything *else* that is all wrong.” For the pagan, “*Everything else* is all right, but *everything* is all wrong.” Unpack this paradox. Which is it? Is there an “everything,” or is life a succession of “everything elses” with no overall meaning? One person believes that it all makes sense somehow, even if nothing in particular seems to. Another person concludes that anything you really feel is all right *is* all right; but all statements about the “everything” are unscientific, unreliable feelings, and therefore worthless.

We are all, I suspect, alternating between agnosticism and belief in an ongoing process. In all the experiences, however, the person of faith holds on to one simple and basic conviction: **Whatever is, is; and God is there.** And the next move is to ask seriously, **What is God saying here, and what is he asking me to do.** I find this framework extremely helpful.