

Good religion: Mark 12:38-40

“Are you scribes gone awry?” Jesus asks us. “Have you got good religion?”

by [Otis Moss III](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue



Dutch plate with scene of the widow's mite. Anonymous, 1662.

Have you got good religion? Enslaved Africans in the antebellum South asked this question when they created a spiritual that offers a poignant and penetrating perspective on the state of Western Christianity. The famous line from “Have You Got Good Religion?” is a critique of Americanized Christianity. “Good religion,” or religion rooted in love, justice, hope, forgiveness and grace, is the core of the narrative that enslaved Africans believed was the heart of the gospel. But the world of the antebellum South painted a different picture for these people. Bad religion

was the mantra of the day. America witnessed religion heavy in ritual and doctrine but anemic in living out love, justice and forgiveness. The narrative of liberation clearly demonstrated and preached in the gospel was nowhere to be found.

Pious figures clothed in ecclesiastical garb haunted the memory of those slaves, African Americans whom W. E. B. DuBois described as “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. . . . One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.” These noncitizens raised an important civic and theological question through the phrase “good religion.” The song served as a public and private critique of society, warning the community not to become an “antebellum scribe.” Have you got good religion?

This question of “good religion” haunts Mark 12 just as it haunted the spirits of enslaved Africans. Mark creates a mosaic of Jesus as a redactor of the marginalized and living Midrash of interpretation. The Jesus painted on the mural of Mark’s canvas is uneasy about ritual without soul and tradition without love. On observing the sabbath, for example, he taught that “the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” He speaks now as he spoke then. The nonconformist, radical and loving Hebrew presented by Mark forces us modern and postmodern Christians to review our location in the text—especially if we’ve become comfortable with the merging of the market with ministry. Are we the scribes Jesus warns his community about?

Our culture has become intimate with a strange, pious and prosperity-centered gospel. Anyone can turn on the television and witness modern scribes preaching a peculiar Puritan virtue and then shifting to a market-driven theology of blessings flowing from cars, houses and clothes. The modern minister seeks “respect in the marketplace” just as the scribes in Mark’s text seek “the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.” The CEO/pastor of today echoes more of “think and grow rich” than “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor.”

These postmodern ministers are like the scribes in Mark’s text—all are casualties of a cultural war. The empire of Rome and the culture of the empire colored the lives of all who lived in Palestine. The scribes did not seek this position with the goal of becoming elite and ethically suspect clergy. But life under Roman rule slowly eroded the boundaries created by the culture of the Torah. A life committed to the community, culture and a creative encounter with God was quietly replaced by

patronage.

The scribes' actions are not unfamiliar. The need for respect and the desire for special attention was a common activity demonstrated by politicians and military personal connected to the empire. The faith community reflected the values of the empire instead of the empire reflecting the values of the faith community. But the language of caution presented by Jesus was designed to challenge the faith community to wrestle with its value system. How do those who handle the holy writ deal with the ethical mandate of their vocation? This is where the ancient text and the modern context crossed paths. Jesus warned the community not about the vocation of the scribes, but about the values adopted by scribes. The actions implied in looking for the best seats and wearing one's sacred garments for prestige and power were rooted in values antithetical to Torah teaching. A new "rabbi" had taken over the religious community—a rabbi obsessed with power and flirting with a mistress named respectability.

Scholars Walter Brueggemann and Bruce C. Birch both talk about the Torah community as an alternative way of being in an uncertain world of exile and a shifting moral compass. The values of love, mercy and justice were to be the dominant themes within the prophetic tradition, themes that offset the elusive moral landscape. Mark places Jesus in the middle of this tradition and casts him as a reclamer and interpreter of the prophetic texts. His challenge? To address a faith community that lived with the rise of an empire that the world hadn't seen the likes of since Egyptians ruled as a superpower before the birth of Moses.

This brief lectionary reading gives us a new opportunity to reflect as individuals as well as to raise the question within our faith communities: "Are you scribes gone awry?" Jesus asks us. "Have you got good religion?" Is your religion rooted in empire values and false images of power? Is your religion an exploiter of the poor, abuser of women, castigator of children? Does your religion support the oppressor and abandon the marginalized?

Is your faith slowly being eroded by your encounter with an empire? The enslaved community always answered the question with the words "Certainly, Lord," but are you able to answer the question with such certainty? Have you got good religion?