

Religion: What is it?

Byron A. Ellis - March 11, 2009



The American Heritage College Dictionary defines religion as a “belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe.” It also notes that it is the acceptance of a higher power. However, what does the Bible say religion is?

A review of the New International Version and the King James versions of the Holy Bible show five references to religion in the New Testament and none in the Old Testament. In Acts 26:4-6; the apostle Paul identifies religion as a sect practiced by Pharisees. In Galatians 1: 11, Paul proclaims that the gospel that he preached is not according to man, rather it is a revelation of Jesus Christ. And, in Galatians 1: 14, he states that religion is a tradition of his fathers. Thus, Paul views religion as a tradition.

In James 1-26, the apostle James states that if anyone considers himself religious and does not have a tight rein on his tongue, his religion is worthless. Thus, like Paul, James identifies religion with man. And, he asserts that “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).”

Unfortunately, many religious scholars, pastors, and lay people identify religion with God. Therefore, when their actions or religion are improper, many associates them and their religion with God.

Thomas Idinopulos in his article entitled “What is religion?” says, “We don’t exactly know what we mean by the word, religion.” Religion, nonetheless, is man’s attempt to reach a god, by using human constructs and imagery that reflects self. For instance, the hierarchy and imagery of a given religion usually reflects the traits of its founders. Thus, the founders tend to construct godly images in their likeness to demonstrate their lineage to god.

Unlike religion, which is man attempting to reach a god, Christ teaches that God reaches mankind through his son Jesus, the Christ. Thus, following Christ is not a tradition, although many denominations have tried to make it a tradition. For true believers, following the son of God leads to salvation.

Jesus Christ is the bridge, the sacrificial lamb, between man and God. Jesus asserts in John 14:6, that no one comes to the Father without accepting Him as Lord and Savior; in acceptance, there is a transformation from an old self to a new self that reflects Christ.

Religion is incapable of bridging man and God. It is merely a humanistic construct used by man to assign value to themselves and their traditions. Thus, the meaning and definitions of religion varies with people and time. Moreover, because the basis of religion is tradition, there is a multiplicity of religions reflecting different traditions and human constructs.

God's laws, however, are invariant, unchanging in place and time. Therefore, we perform a disservice to God and mankind when we associate religious traditions with God.

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