

WHAT IS RELIGION?

THE NATURE OF RELIGION:

What is religion? At the present time there are over fifty different definitions of religion! The word is only mentioned in three places in the Scriptures, viz. Acts 26: 5 (the religion of the Pharisees), Gal.1: 13-14 (the "Jew's religion" - KJV) and Jas.1: 26-27 (vain religion and true religion). It is generally broadly described as "*man's belief concerning deity which expresses itself in worship and service*". It has nothing to do with salvation or being saved.

Religion is primarily a matter of the heart, not the intellect, will or emotions. It operates basically by faith and stems from the fact that man is made in the image of God and has within himself a "God-consciousness" which expresses itself in religious forms. Religion can also be said to be "*man's attempt to please or find God*" or, "*man's attempt to make himself acceptable to God*". In this respect it differs from faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in that in the incarnation, it was God who came to find and save lost man! This is why true Biblical Christianity is not a religion but a *personal relationship with God though Jesus Christ!* The Bible tells us plainly that it is impossible to please God through religious observances or works while we are separated from Him by sin (Isa.1:10-18). Hence, all the greatest religious acts in the world are futile in pleasing God or bringing us closer to Him if we are not cleansed from our sin by the blood of Christ.

THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION:

Ever since man's first attempt to placate God by making himself acceptable through covering himself with fig-leaves in the Garden of Eden, there has been a steady evolution of religious forms. Numerous theories concerning the origin of religious ideas in man have been propounded down through the ages by non-Christians but none of these can do full justice to the subject. It is only in the Biblical account of the fall of man and his separation from God because of sin that the nature and origin of religion makes any sense. Nevertheless, some of these theories will be outlined in order to illustrate the futility of ignoring the Biblical record:

A) The immanent explanation of religion:

Religion is a purely human phenomenon determined by and for man, to serve a purpose for himself as an individual or for his society, e.g.

1. *Emile Durkheim's* sociological theory in which the ritual of religion provides the spiritual solidarity which keeps a society together.
2. *Karl Marx's* view that religion is the "opiate of the people", used by the middle-class to exploit and suppress the working-class.
3. *Charles Darwin's* view that knowledge is power and that witch-doctors and priests use their power to their own advantage by exploiting the ignorance and superstitions of their minions.

4. *Ludwig Feuerbach's* theory that the gods are projections of human wishes and desires so that if man had no desires there would be no gods or religion.
5. *Sigmund Freud's* view that religion is an illusion caused by man's "Oedipus complex" in that the mother, who is the first object of love for a child, must be replaced by the stranger father-image. God is projected as the mighty Father who dispels the dangers of nature.
6. *William James's* and *Rudolph Otto's* theory that religion is man's experience of the "holy" – his reaction to that which is awesome to him.

None of the above explanations is satisfactory because they all start out with a man who is already religious! In fact, some of them are downright ridiculous and could not possibly be entertained by any sane-thinking person.

B) The transcendental-philosophical explanation of religion:

Religions result from the meeting of the human by the divine. This encounter may take place in:

1. The moral consciousness (*Immanuel Kant*),
2. The aesthetic, i.e. feelings (*Friedrich Schleiermacher*), or
3. The reason (*Hegel*).

Here again, we cannot escape starting with a man who already has religious inclinations! The fact that so many different theories are proffered to try to explain the origin of religion tells us that none of them can possibly be true, because each one can be contradicted or refuted by another.

C) The Biblical explanation of religion:

The Bible does not give a detailed account of the origin of religion any more than it gives an account of the origin of man's political institutions, for the simple reason that it is not concerned with these things. However, the origin of religion can be inferred from the Scriptures as follows:

1. Man was made in God's image (Gen.1:27). Therefore, man has a sense of God - he knows that there is a God who is greater than himself.
2. Man became separated from God through sin (Gen.3:22-24). When Adam fell the first thing he did was to make himself a covering of fig leaves in a desperate attempt to make himself acceptable to God (Gen.3:7). This was the first religious act in the human race, but Adam was so aware of its insufficiency that when God appeared, he hid himself (Gen.3:10). His religious act could not rid him of the guilt of sin.
3. Early man was well acquainted with God, but over time and as men spread over the earth, their knowledge of God became distorted and corrupted because of increasing sinfulness. Eventually they replaced the true God with images and the truth about God with myths (Rom.1:21-25).
4. When Christ came to bring men back to God and deliver them from the bondage of their religions, those who placed their faith in Him became known as "Christians" (Acts 11:26). However, it was not long before the Christian message was attacked,

distorted and corrupted by the enemies of God, both from within the Church by false Christians as well as from without the Church by Jewish religious leaders and pagan philosophers (e.g. Acts 20:29-30; II Tim.2:17-18; II Pet.3:16; Jude 4).

5. Satan continues to deceive men today by continually stirring up new religious ideas or distortions of the Christian message. Hence, religions and cults continue to evolve as men are forever learning but never able to come to the knowledge of the truth (II Tim.3:7). Hence, there is no truth in the saying that "All religions lead to God". The truth is that they all lead *away* from God, for Jesus Christ is the *only* way to God.

CONCLUSION:

Religion, then, is the result of man's sin. If man had not sinned there would have been no need for religion because he would still be in relationship with God. Religion is, therefore, man's vain attempt to re-establish his relationship with God. The fact that there are so many religions tells us that none of them can offer any hope to men. There is only One who can re-establish man's relationship with God and that is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is God Himself manifested in the flesh (I Tim.3:16) and Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jhn.14:6).

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
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Questions:

1. Do all religions lead to God or do they lead away from Him? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Can religion save anyone from sin? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What was the first religious act (according to the Bible) and by whom was it committed?
4. What would be a good definition of religion from a Biblical perspective?