

What Does Your Religion Really Mean To You?

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Most people who do not openly identify as either Atheist or Agnostic generally tend to identify with a particular religion or religious classification. For example, people when asked what their religious beliefs are, they may respond with something general like, "I'm Christian, I'm Jewish, I'm Muslim, I'm a Jehovah's Witness, or I'm Buddhist." Others may refer to more specific Christian based religious sects such as Catholic, Baptist, or Evangelical. Whatever "New Testament" religion or sect you may identify with, take a moment to consider the following: All "doctrine" or religious rites and customs are "man made," in that while they may be based on writings that were written after Christ was on earth, (sometimes rather loosely) they may be "*biased*," or in some cases, *blatantly erroneous!* Additionally, many while identifying with a certain religion or group, have proven to be naïve when asked to explain what their stated religion stands for, or teaches concerning various subjects or sociological issues! Although most people are not usually expected to rattle off detailed theological doctrine pertaining to their preferred religion, many so-called "*religious people*" are what could be referred to as "Blind Followers," meaning they do not have a clue as to what their purported religion actually teaches, or what is expected of them as followers of their religion! They cannot, in many cases provide Biblical references to support the religious teachings or traditions they follow. Many people identify with a church or religion simply because they "were raised" in a particular religion, not because of any personal decision, study, or commitment on their part; they in essence base their beliefs more on hearsay rather than personal study and research.

Coming from a family with heavy Catholic influence, I will use some personal observations I have made over the years of members of my own extended family that illustrate the focus of this article. ***Please understand, I am not "bashing Catholicism or any other particular religion.*** I am simply trying to show through personal experience and observations that many people that identify as a follower of a particular sect or religion, do it at a superficial level, so shallow in some cases, they are closer to being "Heathen" than they realize as opposed to being a follower of the religion they claim to follow. For Example, I have a cousin (I will call him Jake to protect his privacy) who was raised a strict Catholic... Jake went through all the Catholic rituals such as First Communion and Confirmation etc. he was an Altar Boy for years! Jake, along with five other cousins who were just as devout and involved, were always presented to me by their parents as examples of what I should be striving to be like as everyone in the family was expected to be a devoted member of the Catholic Church, without question! Many years later Jake had attended my mother's funeral service officiated by a Catholic Priest. During the service, I noticed that Jake knew exactly what to do according to Catholic ceremonial traditions. He knew when to stand - when to kneel - when to bless himself; he knew the verbal responses, and was "right on right on queue" every time! I recall being very impressed by his apparent continuing devotion to his religion as I had not seen him for years and I often wondered about how his life was affected by his strict religious upbringing. I found out after reconnecting with him shortly after the funeral via e-mail as we now resided hundreds of miles from one another!

It turned out that Cousin Jake and I did not have much in common, as I was, *and continue to be*, a very conservative Evangelical Christian. I found Jake to be an *Ultra Left Wing, Liberal Democrat*, and he seemed to have lost all interest in his religious upbringing except for regularly attending mass. *Please bear with me here; although this article is not intended to be about politics nevertheless, it is an important part of the illustration I am sharing.* While exchanging thoughts and viewpoints with Jake it became apparent that his religious upbringing had little or no influence on the person he had become. The vulgarity embedded in his responses was the first thing that got my attention; it seemed he was not willing to discuss any issues, but always viciously attacked me and any person or viewpoint I brought up that opposed his! As for Jakes viewpoint on political, social, or religious issues, they were invariably 180 degrees opposed to both the Bible

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and Catholic doctrine; I remember many times thinking to myself, “What happened to the Altar Boy?” Jake was not alone as far as straying from his religious upbringing. I learned over time that three of those other cousins I mentioned earlier, turned out to have followed a similar path, *away* from their religious upbringing. Like Jake they were all considered “Good Catholics;” they all seemed just as devout as Jake at least in their in their younger years. As adults, (to the best of my knowledge and recollection) two cousins who were brothers, died at an early age from alcohol abuse within week or two of one another. Another was in and out of prison, eventually succumbing to the effects of illegal drug use. The other two out of five cousins besides Jake went on to live a relatively normal life as far as I know.

The point of these examples is to illustrate that merely identifying with a sect or religion does not necessarily mean it will have a positive effect on one’s future. It is obvious by the examples I used thus far, that unless one makes a serious commitment to the teachings of their purported religion (assuming it is Biblically based,) and sticks with that commitment, it will more often than not have zero effect on the moral character of an individual in the long term. What was most shocking about Cousin Jake apart from the extreme vulgarity was the fact that most of his views concerning moral issues *that were clearly defined in the Bible*, were totally opposite of what one would expect from a “Moral Atheist” let alone a *Devout Catholic!* There are no doubt, “Posers” in every church and in every religion, so again, I am not singling out Catholicism; I know, or have known, many Catholic Christians as well as Agnostics claiming to be Baptists! *The key point here is that a person wearing the label of any Christian denomination does not necessarily mean that person actually is a Christian, or “Christ Follower.”* Even a casual reader of the Bible will conclude early on that Jesus was very critical of religious people, especially the religious leaders, many of whom He called hypocrites. Ultimately, the religious leaders were the ones that called for His crucifixion!

Religious people at all levels are good at “checking the boxes” pertaining to the requirements of their religion; however, consider the words of Jesus himself: **Matthew 7:21-23 (KJV)** ²¹ **Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.** ²² **Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?** ²³ **And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.** These words should get the attention of the religious and non-religious alike! What Jesus is saying in essence is that there is a definite difference between checking off the boxes pertaining to religious requirements (ie. putting on a “good show”) as opposed to being a true Christ Follower! If you feel good about yourself for following the religious requirements of whatever religion you are a part of, consider the following passage: **James 2:10 (NKJV)** ¹⁰ **For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.** God apparently does not grade on a curve; He requires perfection! Have any of us been able to “keep the whole law;” I know I have not... neither have you!

To solve this dilemma, the various religions have come up with their own (and in many cases extra-biblical) formulas for dealing with this problem. Some require a certain number of prayers be repeated as atonement for the transgression, others have more elaborate, sometimes extreme rituals in order for one to become reconciled to God again. There was a time in the early church when all it took was to make the appropriate monetary donation and you would be forgiven, “*just pay a fine and you’re good!*” Different religions have different formulas for satisfying the penalties for disobedience. This leads to another very important question... What about Jesus; what did Jesus die for if all you have to do is repeat a prayer a certain number of times, pay a monetary fine, or satisfy some other religious requirement in order to be saved from the penalty of your sins? **Romans 6:10-11 (NKJV)** ¹⁰ **For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.** ¹¹ **Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead**

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indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. If Jesus' did in fact satisfy the penalty for our sin **“once for all”** as this passage clearly states; what's with all these rituals man has come up with in order to us to get back in good standing with God when we mess up **after** we have accepted Jesus as our Savior? **John 14:6 (NKJV)** ⁶ Jesus said to him, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.** If you have come to believe this passage, the next logical question is, “Okay I believe Jesus is the answer, what must I do now in order to benefit from His sacrifice?”

Some religions will answer that question again, with a long list of requirements that you must complete in order to attain your salvation. For example, some religions put *Baptism* at the very top of the list. After that, you will have to complete various levels of religious training and participate in various rituals. If you sin in the future, there is another list of things you must do to get right with God again or as some “Protestant Religions” teach, to get your sins, “under the blood.” **What does the Bible teach?** Let us begin with what Jesus said to the thief dying on the cross right next to Him. **Luke 23:42-43 (NKJV)** ⁴² **Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."** ⁴³ **And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."** Jesus did not have him recite “The Sinners Prayer” as is popular with Protestants these days! He didn’t say, “sorry too late, you didn’t complete conformation classes.” He didn’t say, “I can’t help you... you should have gone to confession the other day.” What did He say...? **"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."** Years ago while attending a small country church, before the service I noticed a man who usually dressed very casually all dressed up in a suit and tie. I asked him, “What are you all dressed up for?” He replied, “Today is the day... I am going to accept the Lord today when they have the Alter Call. I am accepting Jesus as my Savior!” I responded to him saying, “It appears you already have accepted Jesus!” It was great that this man wanted to say he accepted Jesus in front of the whole church as confessing Jesus with your mouth is a part of it. **(Romans 10:9-10 (KJV)** ⁹ **That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.** ¹⁰ **For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.**) Jesus replied to the thief as He did because He already knew what was in his heart. The thief was in heaven with the Lord minutes after he spoke those words to Jesus; and likewise if that man in church had died before he went up before the church in his suit and tie, he too would be in heaven with the Lord. I feel that this illustration proves that religion and ritual really have little to do with your standing with God. Yes, religion can point one towards God, but some religions can also lead one away from the true God and towards a secular god; that secular god can even be in the form of the religion itself if it elevates itself above Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Going back to the example of Cousin Jake, in one of the last exchanges I had with him, **he made it clear that he believed his religion was his salvation.** *While religion is not necessarily bad in itself, it becomes bad when the people (like my cousin Jake) become convinced that their religion, with all its rules and rituals is what make them acceptable before God.* **Rules and Rituals mean little to God... it is all about His Son!** As mentioned earlier, if you break even one of God’s rules, you have in affect broken them all. Because God is perfect, He requires perfection! Jesus is the **only one** that fulfilled that requirement! **Hebrews 4:15 (NKJV)** ¹⁵ **For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.** The fact that Jake shows no evidence or even a desire to be a follower of Jesus and His teachings, this indicates that he really has no relationship with Jesus. He may know about Jesus and what He did on the cross but even the Devil knows that! **James 2:18-20 (NKJV)** ¹⁸ **But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works."** Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ **You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons**

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believe--and tremble! ²⁰ But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

You can be the most religious person on the planet, you can perform all the rituals, keep all the rules; but what good is all that, if you ignore, or go against the teachings of God and His Word? What good is it if the Bible teaches, “Thou Shall Not Murder,” and you condone and or commit murder? (**Think about where that commandment may fit within our modern society**) What happens if you die in an accident on your way to confession? Do you go to Hell because of that one un-confessed sin? Those seeking God, who are led to believe that Jesus’ sacrifice was not sufficient, are usually the ones who tend to be the most religious. These are people who either have never read, or have chosen to ignore God’s Word, “**For the death that He (Jesus) died, He died to sin once for all...**” One of last things Jesus said as He died on the cross says it all: **John 19:30 (NKJV) ³⁰ So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. What did He mean when He said, "It is finished?"** Jesus was referring to the death penalty for sin, the penalty (that we deserved) He satisfied by His sacrifice! All the religious rules and regulations up to that point and to this day were never were able to keep us reconciled to God. However, now we can be totally restored into fellowship with God, it’s a free gift to us; **all we have to do is accept it!**

So, back to the title of this article: **What Does Your Religion Really Mean To You?** Are you participating in, or practicing a religion in order to be reconciled to God? Does it make you “feel better about yourself” when you perform your various rituals? As mentioned earlier, some religions or denominations can, and will help you find God. However, if your religion adds to, or subtracts from what took place on the cross, beware! Religion by itself was never able to redeem anyone. All that The Law and Religion accomplishes is that they show us how imperfect we are in the eyes of God. The Bible teaches that we **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, therefore God provided another way: **Hebrews 7:25-28 (NKJV) ²⁵ Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. ²⁶ For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; ²⁷ who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.** If you are honoring God through your religious practice, that is a good thing, however, if those religious practices are elevated above what Jesus accomplished on the cross, they are all in vain. **Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV) ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.** The ultimate question is not “**What does your religion really mean to you,**” but “**What does Jesus really mean to you?**” I pray that this article has opened the eyes and the hearts of all who read it.