

Palisades Community Bible Church

Online Sunday School

What Is Religion?

February 20, 2021

OOOOH! Risky Subject!

You've probably heard that, in polite company, one never discusses politics or religion. Why is that? Is it because everyone has a different opinion? Is it because some folks defend their position and attack other positions? Is it because some people become very excited, and it bothers everyone else? Probably. Perhaps, WORSE, is that nobody really knows right from wrong in those discussions, so all there is to the conversation is opinions flailing back and forth.

Where does truth come in? Where does right and wrong come in? When do we address it? Do you care about truth? Consider this conversation found in the Bible. Jesus had been falsely accused of trying to overthrow the government, was arrested, beaten, and taken to the Roman ruler; Pilate. After hearing the charge, Pilate questions Jesus;

"Then You are a king!" Pilate said.

"You say that I am a king," Jesus answered. "For this reason, I was born, and have come into the world; to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice."

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. And having said this, he went out again to the Jews and told them, "I find no basis for a charge against Him." John 18: 37-38

Jesus did not attempt to answer Pilate's question. He knew Pilate did NOT "belong to the truth." Here, we find two perspectives on TRUTH. Jesus says He was born, and came into the world, to tell people the truth. Then, he says;

"Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

When, Pilate said; **"What is truth?"**, he minimized it and, therefore, minimized Jesus. We have a clear demonstration that Pilate did not "belong to the truth." If he had, he would not have scoffed at Jesus' words. Rather, Pilate would have asked something like; 'tell me this truth.'

The truth was of no consequence to Pilate, nor was a man whose life testified to the truth. Pilate was the supreme ruler of that region – regardless of truth, what HE SAID was the law! Therefore, he went before Jesus’ accusers and told them; “I find no basis for a charge...” To Pilate, it was no more than shooing a fly. Jesus was insignificant to him. But, what opportunity did Pilate miss? What was just before him....on his knees, bleeding from being flogged and wearing a mock crown of thorns? Jesus’ only reply was that the purpose for His life was to tell the truth. Pilate swept Him away like dust on the floor.

I almost did the same thing with my car: I was driving along, and a warning light came on; “Low Tire Pressure.” I thought; “I don’t need a gadget to tell me about my tires.” A few miles later, it dinged and indicated that the pressure was even lower. So, I stopped and looked. One tire was almost flat! Thank goodness I did not get on the highway and drive 60 mph with a flat tire! All that ‘dumb gadget’ could do was tell me the truth (the pressure in my tire). It was up to me to pay attention, or ignore it.

It’s extremely rare that a person can hear/see something they’ve never before experienced and not pass immediate judgment based on their own prejudices.

“The first reaction to truth is hatred.” Tertullian

Think about this; if you believe something that is not correct, and someone shows you the truth....are you a loser, or a winner? Knowledge is power. Let’s spend a few minutes to become more powerful.

Let’s Define Religion

How often do we use words we’ve never even looked up? Webster’s defines “religion” as; the service and worship of god or the supernatural. Commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance. A system of beliefs. To make this much simpler:

Religion is man’s effort to reach up to god.

Religion is what people think, believe and act upon, as a way of reaching god. Concentrate on the “man’s effort” part. Most religious folks follow their religion as a group; such as a church, synagogue, mosque, etc. Now, the building in which

the religious people meet is often called by these names, and the group of people is also referred to by these names. After all, the building is not the religion, it's what the people inside do.

Please focus on the last phrase; 'it's what the people inside do.' A Religion is what people DO. Religion is NOT God, nor the supreme deity, nor the esteemed philosophy. The religion is what the followers engage in to honor, follow, learn about, worship, etc., the focus of their religion.

Whether folks are devoted to the creator of the universe; "God," or devoted to a particular person who has a 'revelation' or unique ideas, or devoted to a set of ideals such as preserving nature, or science, or personal freedoms, etc., the 'religion' is what the people do and practice to honor the focal point of their religion. Here are some descriptors that are typical of most organized religions:

- The ideas, beliefs and practices are the same – regardless what outside groups may hold dear
- It's a social gathering/place where like individuals fit together as a group – a culture
- The family is usually revered and supported in these settings
- There is teaching/learning that goes on
- There is an identity as a group
- There is social support for individuals who experience difficult times
- It is accepted that the lives of all who frequent the gatherings are improved in many ways
- People learn about, and are drawn closer to that which they worship
- Leaving the religion strips one of its benefits

So far, what I've shared is nothing more than anthropology; the study of human beings. Hang in there, it'll get meaty very quickly. But, to this point, one may be asking this question;

Aren't All Religions Basically The Same?

Studies of the history of civilizations reveal that every people group has had some form of religion. The primary evidences of these religious pursuits are; burial of

the dead, worship sites, religious artifacts (carvings, statues, paintings, etc.) and recorded activities and practices (cave drawings, hieroglyphics, etc.).

Perhaps the most important social benefit of religion is it imparts social order (laws, rules, practices, etc.). By establishing a “morality,” a common understanding of what is good/bad, right/wrong, etc., religion helps a social group cooperate and succeed. A god, idol, ideal, etc., is usually revered because it communicates such social guidelines.

As societies advanced, many of the monarchs through ancient history (Pharaohs, Kings, Caesars, etc.) held themselves before the people as gods who must be revered, worshipped and obeyed. They made laws that organized and governed society. Often, likenesses of their images were worshipped by the masses. As an example:

3 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. (a cubit was 18-20” depending on its application)

4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, “Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do:

5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace.” Daniel 3

This is all just more Anthropology. However, If I were Satan, and I wanted to convert as many followers to my religion, I would design a college course that presents all religions as basically the same. I would compare even the most disparate examples of religious practices and show that each has so many similarities that they are nothing more than different flavors of ice cream. Whether chocolate, strawberry or vanilla, all are ice cream, and all accomplish the same end.

To make it really attractive, I’d make sure this course is worth 3 full credits and never give homework; participation earns an A. That, dear reader, is what so many secular colleges in the nation call their “Introduction to World Religion 1.01.” A core teaching of the course is this; ‘since all religions are basically the

same, it is narrow minded, arrogant and dogmatic to assert that there is ANY belief system that is more “true” or “correct” than any of the others’....and THAT is on the final exam.

“All roads lead to heaven.”

The final assumption of such a course would be that, regardless of your chosen religion, your good intentions will lead you to your ‘god.’ What is good for the collective is good for the individual. Whatever ‘god’ is sitting atop the mountain, any road that points upward will get you there. If you disagree, or claim that there is a “true or correct” religion to the exclusion of all others, you are a wrong.

In truth, every “religion” actually IS very similar, as long as we hold to the interpretation that religion is man’s effort to reach up to God. They are not, however, all ‘ice cream’, regardless of flavor. Buddhism, for example, does not identify a god at all – rather, it is about reincarnation, and one’s good works in this life lead to a higher life form in the next. Hinduism has thousands of ‘gods’ making it impossible to determine whether one is ice cream, or hot sauce, so one’s good works must appease all these gods at the same time. Atheism is a religion that asserts there is no god, yet to believe this requires far greater “faith” than belief in God. In Atheism, “morality” is defined by the individual and a ‘good person’ (according to yourself) is all you need to be...therefore, YOU are the god of the religion of atheism.

The Similarity In Man-Made Religions

As you continue becoming more powerful with knowledge, focus on two ideas; man’s efforts to reach god, and man-made religion.

While many religions have true differences, there is ONE KEY SIMILARITY in all man-made efforts to reach up to god: **GOOD WORKS**. All man-made religions are focused on the ‘believer’s’ efforts to prove that s/he is good enough to be approved by god, thus earning an eternal reward (afterlife, etc.).

Logical Conclusion: If the focus of the religion is a ‘god’ that accepts man’s good works, each man-made religion must, then, have a unique ‘god’ of its own. Therefore, each “religion” has designed its own ‘god,’ as well as a unique process

for appealing to this 'god'. This makes every man-made religion unique, and different from all others! However, what is common to all is that "good works" are essential for approaching their god.

The prescription for the god of Islam to accept one's 'good works' is entirely different from that of Daoism, and different from Shintoism, etc. "Good Works", as prescribed by the religion, are key to success within that religion.

"Religion is the opiate of the masses." Karl Marx

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions" Henry G. Bohn

If one's good works is what is necessary to reach the god of one's religion, then it is possible to change the nature of those good works to serve changes in the society. For example, behaviors 200 years ago that might get a follower rejected, punished, or put to death, may be fully acceptable, today. In a man-made religion, rationalization and evolution are commonplace.

In fact, it may well be said that the more a religion focuses on the good works of man to reach its god, the more man-made their god must be. This holds true for even denominations within religions.

And, Now, The Difference!

Anthropologists study the fact that all civilizations have/had religion. Most societies benefit from it in similar ways. However, they don't give much more than lip service to the fact that man's effort to reach god comes from a sincere search for "MEANING." Humans have always searched for answers to these questions;

- **What is my origin?** (Where did I come from?)
- **What is my purpose?** (What is the meaning of life? Why am I here?)
- **What is morality?** (How am I to live?)
- **What is my destiny?** (What is beyond this life? Is there more for me than this?)

Whether sitting on a hilltop overlooking one's flock of sheep 5,000 year ago, or taking the elevator to a penthouse office in the city, these questions are

ubiquitous to the human mind. Every human ponders them in some way. And, she/he most often looks to some kind of religion in order to satisfy these quandaries. Most man-made religions are very attractive; they are designed to satisfy the desires of the human heart, and draw people in who have good intentions, but lack discernment.

There is ONLY ONE belief system that addresses all four of these issues. In order for the answers to these questions to be valid, they must be true, individually, and true in total. Each answer must be true, and all four answers must combine into a true statement. Otherwise, we invoke the law of non-contradiction; A thing cannot be, and not be, at the same time.

Law of Non-Contradiction: propositions that contradict cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time

All four of these answers only exist, in truth, in Christianity. Let's see how;

What is my origin?

God – the everlasting creator from before time and throughout eternity, created you:

“Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over ^{is}all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Genesis 1: 26-27

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Genesis 2: 7

Out of love, God created man and woman. He created us in His image and put us on this earth for a purpose. Man was not first, a tadpole, then a fish, then a lizard, then a monkey. Mankind was created in his/her entirety, and in this form, by God. God knew you and loved you before he formed you:

“But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles,” Galations 1: 15-16a

God gave humans His image, His likeness, His characteristics – uniquely above all else that he had created. When you look in the mirror, ask; “Who’s image is on me?” It is God’s! When you look at a child, ask; “Why do I love so much?” It is because God wants you to love as He loves.

What Is My Purpose?

God did not create you out of random chance. When He created the first man; Adam, He gave him a job to do;

“Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it.” Genesis 2: 15

God has a purpose for your life, as well;

“For those whom He foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Romans 8:29

God created us to love us, and so that we may love Him. As with any father, God desires to show love to his children, and he desires that His children love Him in return...freely; not out of obligation, under duress, or for a reward. God knew you before He formed you, and he set you in a place that requires your specific qualities to fill His purpose for you and others.

“Only fear the Lord (respect him) and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.” 1 Samuel 12:24

“I glorified you (God) on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” John 17: 4

“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,” Psalm 8: 4-6

What is Morality?

Webster's defines 'Moral': of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior: conforming to a standard of right behavior. OK, WHO'S morality? That's today's question.

In fact, it has been man's question through history. Shall I conform to a morality according to a man-made religion based on prescribed activities that earn me acceptance? Or, shall I follow a morality that is above man – that supersedes man? Even today, in many cultures, homosexuality is a capital offense. An unfaithful wife may be stoned to death. A child may be put to death for dishonoring the family. Is not such punishment even more immoral than the offense?

In our society, we see the boundaries of morality shifting dramatically. What once was illegal, or considered taboo, are now legal and widely accepted. In a man-made religion, evolution of morality is commonplace.

So, how am I to live? What morality is right...true? Our nation's founders wrestled with this exact dilemma. When they set out to "...form a more perfect union..." they needed a set of moral guidelines that were above all of humanity, and which could not be impeached by human standards. They turned to the creator of mankind.

First, God is supreme above all creation; he is holy, flawless, and pure. God does not change...ever:

"For I am the Lord, I do not change" Malachi 3:6

God's moral standard flows from His unchanging nature. Because God's nature is perfect and holy, He cannot sin, so His standard is objective. It is impossible for God to contradict Himself or act inconsistently with His own nature. So, when God gives a command, or states a moral absolute, it flows from His own moral perfection. For example, it is against God's character to lie, steal, covet, murder, etc., and so he cannot. Therefore, God has set those standards for us.

"if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself." 2 Timothy 2:13

“Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.” Hebrews 6: 17-18

So, the morality set in God’s word, the Bible is **His** perfect standard, not man’s. We are to love Him enough to strive to live according to it. Not that we EARN His love, but that He already loves us and we desire to return that love.

Therefore, when Pilate asked, or a professor asks; “What is truth?” the answer is easy: God is truth. Even if both mock the answer, the truth stands....the man will pass away.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. Nor is He served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth;....”

Act 17:24-26a

See the difference? The living God of the universe created humans in order to love them. He also provides a system for humans to be accepted by, and in relationship with, God. NONE of this is the work of man!! Man cannot make a flower or a fish. Nor can man resolve his own sin. **No good works on man’s part can erase sin or please God.** Only God, himself, can provide the way of salvation for man.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2: 1-2a & 8-9

In contrast to man-made religions, Christianity is the full measure of God’s love which created you, God’s love which justifies you, and God’s love which propels you into eternity.

“He (God) reached down from heaven and rescued me; He drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemies, from those who hated me and were too strong for me.

They attacked me at a moment when I was in distress, but the LORD supported me.

He led me to a place of safety; He rescued me because He delights in me.”

Psalm 18: 16-19

What Is My Destiny?

Once I reach the end of my days, is there anything afterward? What is there on the other side of what I can perceive? Every human in history has had to deal with this. Where shall we turn for the answer? Shall we go to a religion that is man-made – a perishable god made by perishable hands? Or, shall we look to that which is everlasting?

“Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made.” Isaiah 2: 8

Perhaps you’d rather choose the God who created all of life. You might look to the God who created you, and loved you before you drew breath - the God who resurrected 8 people from the dead as witnesses recorded in the Bible. Perhaps you’ll look to the God who has performed miracle after miracle for the purpose of demonstrating that He, alone is the living God of all creation. Perhaps you’d look to God’s son, Jesus, who fulfilled over 350 prophecies, and who also performed many miracles to prove who he is.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” 2 Corinthians 5:1

“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.” Philippians 3:20-21

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” John 10:28

What Shall I Do With This?

Consider this; EVERY single founder of the religions of the world – in all of humanity, in all of history – is dead, except for TWO. You can visit their bones, in their graves: Muhammed, Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, Zoroaster, Brahma, etc., are all dead. Even all the major Christian cult leaders are dead.

Two founders of religions are yet alive: Jesus Christ and Satan. They have been alive since creation and are alive today. Jesus Christ is the ONLY founder of a belief system that died so that His followers could have eternal life and then, was raised back to life, and lives today. This makes Christianity uniquely different from every other religion in history, and its claims, teachings, history, etc., are the most well-documented as true.

“that He (God) worked in Christ when He raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”

Ephesians 1:20-21

The single faith system that is set apart from all others is Christianity, which is God reaching down to mankind, and providing a way of salvation into eternal life that man cannot provide for himself. God honors good works, but the works of man’s hands are insufficient for salvation....only Jesus’ sacrifice resolves sin.

Christianity is NOT man’s effort to reach God for His love, it is **God reaching down to man** out of love.

“God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” 1 John 4:14

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation (the act of gaining favor) for our sins. 1 John 4:10

Jesus did it for us. Not by our works, but by trusting in His.

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” John 3:36

When God created us in His image, He included freedom of choice. Mankind has the free choice to concoct his own religion, or to follow his creator.

Knowledge is power. Make a decision.