

Is Christianity a Religion?

by Sebastian R Fama

It is not uncommon to hear Protestants say that Christianity, unlike Judaism, is not a religion. They say that it is a relationship with God; therefore, rituals are unnecessary. Religion, they say, is man's attempt to reach or define God. One Protestant pastor said: "Religion is a set of man-made do's and don'ts in order to appease God." I must admit, I am at a loss as to where these definitions come from.

I looked up the word religion in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Here is what I found:

1. The belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers, regarded as creating and governing the universe.
2. A particular variety of such belief, especially when organized into a system of doctrine and practice.
3. A set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader.

When you think about it, all of Protestantism can fall neatly under this definition. So why is there a dispute here? It seems to be a variation of a familiar theme. Under the Old Covenant, rituals were required. Under the New Covenant, according to them, rituals are no longer needed. Since Christianity (New Covenant) superseded Judaism, (Old Covenant) Christianity (their version) is the proper way to worship God. Since Catholicism employs rituals, it is obviously not Christian.

But what does the Bible have to say about all of this? In James 1:26-27 we read the following: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's **religion** is vain. **Religion** that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

When James calls Christianity a religion, he is commenting on its nature. The Greek word that is translated into "religion" is *threskeia* (θρησκεία). *Threskeia* means ceremonial observance, which is what a ritual is. This is the same word used by Paul to describe Judaism in Acts 26:5. If rituals have no place in Christianity, why does the Word of God refer to it in ritualistic terms? Of course, Christianity is more than just a bunch of rituals. Our friends are correct when they say that Christianity, when done right, involves having a personal relationship with God. But that does not negate the fact that the Word of God refers to Christianity as a religion that involves ritual. And that is exactly what the Catholic Church is.