

Is Christianity a Religion?

by Sebastian R Fama

It is not uncommon to hear Protestants say that Christianity, unlike Judaism, is not a religion it is a relationship with Jesus Christ. Religion, they say, is man's attempt to seek God's approval on his own strength. One Protestant pastor said: "Religion is a set of man-made dos 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.

All of Protestantism can fall neatly under these definitions. So why is there a problem? They would say, under the Old Covenant, rituals were required. Under the New Covenant, rituals are no longer needed. Since Christianity superseded Judaism, Christianity is the proper way to worship God.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 a series 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. Curiously enough, our Protestant friends baptize new believers. Isn't baptism a ritual? Is that a meaningless religious practice?

As for the charge of "man seeking to please God on his own strength," that too is false. A ritual, (the Mass or a sacrament), is not something we do to earn our way to heaven. It is a place where we go to receive grace. Grace that enables us to be who God wants us to be. The resultant strength is God's, not man's. The grace received in the sacraments allows God to work through us. Thus, the work of salvation is accomplished solely by Jesus. Conclusion, Christianity is a religion. A religion in which we have a relationship with Jesus Christ.