

What Is Religion?
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“Religion” is one of the most difficult words to define today. It can mean so many different things to different people. For some, the word has a bad connotation and it’s the thing they most want to avoid. The people who express this feeling do so because they usually ascribe one or more of the following meanings to the word.

1. Religion means “fuzzy” thinking. No self-respecting twentieth century man who values scientific and intellectual accomplishments of this era could be bothered by something that obviously belongs to primitive man. Religion was only a way of explaining so-called “mysteries” of nature which today are clearly understood by natural science. Besides, you can’t “prove” anything about religion, so what good is it anyway?
2. Religion is just an excuse for a small group of people to have power over a larger group of people. All those ministers, priests and rabbis exploit honest but simple people in the name of their religion, promising them some “future” glory while they are told to sacrifice everything they own in the world. Marx was right when he said religion was the “opium of the masses.”
3. Religion is just an escape from reality. Instead of focusing man’s attention to the problems of the world, religious leaders urge their flocks to concentrate on the “soul” and other so-called “spiritual” concerns. While society is literally dying from racial strife, world conflict, pollution of the environment, religious people are off somewhere in their dozy corner muttering nonsense to a god that doesn’t even exist. Religion is irrelevant to the real needs of man and society.

On the other hand, there are more and more people today who give a very positive response to religion, some who themselves once reacted violently against it. Their reasons usually are these:

1. Religion answers man’s basic needs. The talk about modern man being so “advanced” has been clearly exposed as a myth, not only by modern psychology but by recent history: the twentieth century is full of barbarism and of world wars. Every man has certain primitive needs that must be satisfied. If men are deprived of religion then those needs go unfulfilled.
2. Religion helps to maintain the social order. Morality is the backbone of a good society, and the best source of morality is religion. Imbue people with the fear of God and they won’t go around disrupting society. It doesn’t matter what your faith is, as long as you practice it.

3. Religion is the best means toward making the world a better place to live. When social evils exist, it is the duty of all religious people to work towards their correction. Only when religious people are involved with social change can the change come about peacefully and non-violently. Religion must be above all a force for social improvement; everything else is secondary.

Now, given all these pros and cons what can we as Orthodox Christians say about religion?

First of all, we must insist that Christianity is not just “another religion.” Indeed, we may go so far as to say Christianity is not a religion. What do we mean by such a seemingly radical statement?

When Christians gather in the name of Christ they come together to celebrate a fact: namely, the Resurrection of Christ. They do not do this to satisfy their own needs nor to improve the evils of society. They do it because it is a fact of history. But a fact of history that has consequences for the whole cosmos. In witnessing to the Resurrection of Christ we witness to the regeneration of all of creation. We stand ready to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit – the fruits of this regeneration – just as the Apostles did in the upper room at Pentecost. We sing praises unto God for the marvelous works that He has accomplished for us in His Son. And no matter how magnificent or how humble the church or room where the Christians have assembled, we do this in the presence of all the saints, of those living and dead. We come together in the presence of the eternal Kingdom of God which is given here and now, and of which we partake. It is a “happening” that transcends all that the human mind can possibly imagine.

But this happening is not a blind “turn on” that obliterates our own human endeavors. Indeed, it demands our total participation, our total human response. We must become active witnesses to the light that we receive. We are called upon to be the agents of goodness and truth in the world, each of us finding his own unique way in fulfilling that call.

Christianity, then, is not a religion in any ordinary sense of the word. It can never be subordinated or put to the service of any one thing: society, personal gain, psychological needs, political parties, government, or even church authorities. On the other hand, Christians themselves are called to serve. And this is where the challenge arises.

We as members of the Church often fail in our witness to the faith. It is we in our own weak and crippled attempts to live Christianity who reduce it to a “religion.” We use our mind for everything else, but we don’t use our mind to learn about the faith. We use the excuse that it’s all one big mystery anyway – so how can you begin to understand it? The result is a very passive attitude toward the faith wherein we fail to understand fully the implications of our membership in the Church. It is time for us to stop “finking out” on our responsibilities!

If we want to be true Orthodox Christians, we must realize the mission of the Church in this world. And the mission of the Church is our mission. Much depends on us!

Without this witness, or active attitude, which is our sincere response to the faith, we may justly be considered just another “religion.”