

What is Religion?

Religion has many enemies and critics. But what is religion?

The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach, 4th Ed by Hood, Hill and Spilka thinks that religion is too complex to define for there are many different forms so they look at three broad factors that religion does for people. So they talk about not what religion is but what it does.

They think the three factors are

The need for attribution - they attribute the things that happen to some power perhaps the power of the supernatural perhaps God. This is linked to the godly understanding of the meaning of existence.

The need for control - submitting to God's will is just another way of feeling in control in fact the strongest way. It is a myth that people trying to force control are the strongest egoists. It is too self-defeating and risky for it to be that. Everybody knows. Active control and passive control are different forms of control - the latter needs no action except assuming that the future is already controlled for us by God or as good as. So passive control depends on actively deciding to make that assumption. You make passive control real control by the power of accepting. People may see control by praying a lot for a change. But in fact just saying, "God your will be done", is another way of getting control through prayer. This attitude is a coping mechanism - its about feeling control even if there is no real control.

The need for sociality - you want to be social with your God and others who worship it. Or it may be a social group that does not talk so much about the transcendent. I would suggest that religion needs to be a form of government. Authority has to come into for something has to keep the group working. A social group needs rules.

This is not far from the view that each religion has more or less "family resemblances." Cardinal Newman famously said, "Only Catholicism has them all and so is the only reliable example of what a religion is."

The definition of religion we will be using here is, a system of worship and commandments and beliefs that are claimed to be revealed by a being or beings who are more powerful than which results in a community being formed in line with those principles.

This definition is a good one and it is clear. We need to get it right for we have to consider separation between religion and the state and to muddy what religion means muddies the boundaries.

Can a secularist accept this definition? What if you end up treating Buddhism as a secular force because it does not fit this definition? So what? The definition is perfect for a secularist. The Catholic definition is this, "Religion is a system of worship and commandments and beliefs that are [not just claimed!] revealed by God which results in a community being formed in line with those principles." Secularism has to oppose that definition. Secularism is not complete neutrality with religion. It is neutral where possible.

Religion is a system of supernaturally originated doctrine and worship. A religion is not the people who claim to be its members. If religious people are bad it is better to blame their faith and their concept of God or the divine and not them.

Could be that you should oppose not religion but superstition? Yes. Religion is hard to define but superstition is easy. And any system be it non-religious or religious can have superstitions in it.

The only religion, if any, should be humanity itself.

A religion as a whole should never be described as good. The individuals in a religion do good but that has nothing to do with the religion being good or bad. It has to do with them.

A belief system is a belief itself. Beliefs or errors have no rights. It is the people that hold them that have the rights.

Everybody who is in a bad or dodgy religion makes the excuse, "If I stay I can maybe help improve it." That is all it is - an excuse. And even more so when the religion proclaims absolute values - things you must do at any price.

If you pick and choose what you like or think is true out of your religions doctrines while ignoring or dismissing the rest then you expose yourself as one who does not understand his or her obligations to the religion or who purposely lies that

you belong in a religion you treat like a café menu. You cannot ask to be taken seriously. You are no advertisement for the religion and no religion even if fake deserves that.

I will not be a religious cherry-picker - a member of a religion who just discards the official religious teachings they don't like. It is not about what I like but about what is true. Will honour myself in being honest. I will not drop honesty for the sake of appearing to be a true member of the faith. It serves only to make the religion look good and me look bad.

If you are better than your religion, then leave it. It's hard enough to be fabulous! If you are numbered as part of a religion you are part of the problem.

Idolatry, the worship of a false or untrue God or service to a false or merely man-made religion, is not bad just because it is an error but because it is putting your heart in the wrong place.

When I feel that I have called up and fed the good in me, I feel I am doing the only thing I can do. I have to change me. I take the credit for the goodness that results instead of ascribing it to divine agency.

If you wittingly or unwittingly promote and serve and be part of a man-made religion, then as it is man-made it has no inherent immunity to teaching and devising evil. Thus its members have a collective responsibility for all the bad things it does. It cannot take credit at all for the good they do. They do it because they are good and not because they are religious. The more implausible the religion is the worse you make yourself by being part of it.

There are many belief systems. To adopt one means you vow to regard it as right and the others as containing much error.

Reza Aslan says that religion is language. It involves language yes but it is more than just language. Language involves rules so religion then is rules for even if it is more than language there can be no religion unless religious language is there first.

A religion to be a religion has to claim truthfully to be set up by a divine element. Otherwise it is just a man-man social construct.

Some of the traits of religion can be said to be spiritual. But when all the traits are there together you have religion. Religion does involve some kind of belief in the word of those who say they know what God wants you to believe.