

Pastor's Corner

Is religion a bad word?

BY FR. THEOPHAN BUCK

Have you ever heard someone say that they are spiritual and not religious? Have you ever been asked if you had a personal relationship with Jesus? In much of modern Christianity there has developed an understanding that religion and spirituality are mutually exclusive. In short, "religion" is bad; "relationship/spirituality" is good.

This supposed conflict between religion and spirituality or religion and relationship was recently thrust into the limelight when Jefferson Bethke put out his spoken word video "Why I hate religion but love Jesus" on YouTube. More recently, just in time for Easter, an article was published in Newsweek entitled "Forget the Church, Follow Jesus" by Andrew Sullivan. The thesis of these two men was the same: religion is bad, spirituality or personal relationship is good.

For many modern Christians the word "religious" is synonymous with hypocrisy, institutions, and organized formalistic Church structures from bygone eras. Religion is looked at as a hindrance to true and authentic spirituality. A "real" Christian is often contrasted with someone who attends an "organized religion." Many people, in an attempt to be more spiritually authentic, have shunned confessional Christianity and instead have joined non-denominational denominations. Others in avoidance of "religion" have termed themselves "simply Christians," again somehow separate from those who embrace any form of Christianity which has strong beliefs and practices.

Is a "personal relationship" with Jesus Christ something opposed to religion? Can one be spiritual without being religious? Historically, spirituality has never been seen as somehow in opposition to religion. In fact, before this last century the terms religious and spiritual were used interchangeably, and it wasn't because people didn't have personal relationships with God. Is it possible that the word "religion" has been redefined and made into something that it has never meant?



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Apart from the cultural baggage that has been projected onto the word "religion" "religion" actually has a real meaning. The word "religion" comes from Latin and means "reconnection" (re + ligio). Reconnection and reconciliation are exactly what our Lord Jesus Christ came to do. As Christians we are called to be "ministers of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). In other words, we are called to reconnect people to God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The dictionary defines "religion" as "the service and worship of God or the supernatural, commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance, the body of persons adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices." If these dictionary definitions are correct, then it means that all Christians are inherently religious because to be an authentic Christian it requires commitment, devotion, religious faith and observances. In fact, we could accuse our Lord of being religious. After all, our Lord was a practicing Jew who fulfilled the law, went to Synagogue and went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

In the Scriptures the Apostle James reveals the real issue with religion when he says "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:26-27). In James' view "religion" is not the problem. False and "useless" religion is a problem. Hypocrisy and spiritual delusion are problems. However, religion that is "pure and undefiled;" authentic religion which has actions corresponding to its teachings, this is to be encouraged. St. James is encouraging the early Christians to be truly religious by following the true and pure religion.

Is it possible that the word religion isn't actually a bad word at all? Is it possible that Christians are actually called to be religious, that is to have commitment, belief, faith and devotion to Christ? Words have meanings. One cannot be spiritual without being religious just as one cannot have a personal relationship with God and not be religious. May God bless us to shun all hypocrisy and nominalism and embrace "pure and undefiled" religion with all of its commitment, devotions and worship. Most of all, may God bless us to (re-ligio), that is to reconnect to God through our savior Jesus Christ.

The Pastor's Corner is sponsored by the Monroe County Ministerial Association. Father Theophan Buck is the pastor of St. Innocent Orthodox Christian Church in Bolingbroke.