

## **Some Words About...**

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### ***Threskeia (religion)***

The Greek word *threskeia* meant “religion.” It could be applied to any organized system of acts and words involving an interaction with supernatural beings. Myths usually constituted the theology of such religions. Sacrifice, offerings, and prayers were the elements of human approach and response. A priesthood prescribed, conveyed, and organized worship of the supernatural objects.

#### ***Antiquities***

In the *Antiquities* Josephus says that Isaac had “zeal for God’s religion” (1, 222). And in describing Matthias’s revolt against sacrificing to the Emperor, Josephus says Matthias would never abandon his native religion. Matthias says, “Whoever has zeal for our country’s laws and the religion of God, follow me” (12, 269-71). The *Wisdom of Solomon* declares that idolatrous religion is first and last the cause of all evil (*Wisdom* 14:27).

#### **New Testament**

In *Acts* 26:5 Paul tells Agrippa, “I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee.” Paul deliberately states his case as one involving religion. Festus had told Agrippa that the whole Jewish community had demanded Paul’s death but that he had found nothing against him. He obviously thought that Agrippa with his Jewish connections could make more sense out of the matter. For his part, Paul, speaking as one Jew to another, rested his defense on their common understanding of religion and would never include political, social, or legal arguments.

Paul, writing to the *Colossians*, warns them against the many attractive invitations to apostasy which pseudo-philosophical and esoteric teachings presented. These abounded in the first century both in the form of oriental extravagances and as Graeco-Roman philosophical schools. At one point, he warns them (2:18), “Don’t let anyone trick you into voluntary humiliation and a religion of messengers (or “angels”).” A religion of messengers can be more popular than the religion of Almighty God because it deals with subjective states rather than with objective truths. Whether the messengers are plastic saints or dynamic orators, they evoke a response in terms of the moods and desires, the need for hope and reassurance, of the devotee. The *Jonestown, Guyana* tragedy in 1978 is an example. A religion of messengers can be disastrous.

James sets up a contrast, saying, “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but lead their hearts astray, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep themselves uncorrupted by the world” (1:26-27). His statement is in the *Wisdom* tradition and applies universally regardless of what one’s religion is. He points out that just any old religion is not necessarily a good thing. But he assumes that religion is more than mysticism, more than an organized ritual involving contact with supernatural forces.

The orgies of certain cults in the first century, like devil worship in our day, would not be considered religion then and should not be dignified by the term religion today. James was speaking as a Christian and was specifically writing to Christians, but he understood the purposes of God as applying to every person.

Accordingly, religion is to be considered a response to God which entails conforming life to the highest standards attainable. For the Christian this will be found in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Other religions have their philosophical, ethical, and sectarian ideals and to be truly religious their followers must live according to those ideals.

## **Today**

We often hear people speaking of different religions as “faiths.” Thus, meetings of Christian and non-Christian organizations are called interfaith conferences. This reflects the importance of Christian influence in such meetings. Properly, they should be called interreligious conferences. Worldwide, to most religions, “faith” in the sense of trusting a loving God is unknown, and “faith” in the sense of personal belief is irrelevant. Even “belief” in the Christian sense is nonexistent; for most religions belief is a matter of accepting the attitudes and practices that have been inculcated and disseminated by cults or culture.

Religions generally tend to subordinate the individual to the forms, aims, and policies of organizational entities. Perfect obedience and careful performance is expected. Christianity relates the individual to a person who so loves each individual that he made an incomprehensible sacrifice to save that particular one from sin and from death.

As Paul pointed out to Agrippa, Christianity began as a religion. It has continued to be a religion for 2,000 years despite attempts to change it into a political dominion, or an ethical influence, or a social club. As was once said, Christianity is theo-ultimate and Christo-centric. It is not what Christians do or even what Christians believe but what God has done that determines the character of Christianity.

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