

Part I: Introduction

Chapter I: Religion

1. The Nature of Religion

The Bible informs us that man was created in the image of God. When he fell in sin, he did not entirely cease to be the image-bearer of the Most High. The seed of religion is still present in all men, though their sinful nature constantly reacts against it.

Missionaries testify to the presence of religion in some form or other among all the nations and tribes of the earth. It is one of the greatest blessings of mankind, though many denounce it as a curse. Not only does it touch the deepest springs of man's life, but it also controls his thoughts and feelings and desires.

But just what is religion? It is only by the study of the Word of God that we can learn to know the nature of true religion. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin and not from any word that is found in the original Hebrew or Greek of the Bible. It is found only four times in our translation of the Bible, Gal. 1:13, 14; Jas. 1:26, 27. The Old Testament defines religion as the fear of the Lord. This fear is not a feeling of dread, but of reverent regard for God akin to awe, but coupled with love and confidence. It is the response of the Old Testament believers to the revelation of the law. In the New Testament religion is a response to the gospel rather than to the law, and assumes the form of faith and godliness.

In the light of Scripture we learn to understand that religion is a relation in which man stands to God, a relation in which man is conscious of the absolute majesty and infinite power of God and of his own utter insignificance and absolute helplessness. It may be defined as a conscious and voluntary relationship to God, which expresses itself in grateful worship and loving service. The manner of this religious worship and service is not left to the arbitrary will of man, but is determined by God.

2. The Seat of Religion

There are several wrong views respecting the seat of religion in man. Some think of religion primarily as a sort of knowledge, and locate it in the intellect. Others regard it as a kind of immediate feeling of God, and find its seat in the feelings. And still others hold that it consists most of all in moral activity, and refer it to the will. However, all these views are one-sided and contrary to Scripture, which teaches us that religion is a matter of the heart. In Scripture psychology the heart is the central organ of the soul. Out of it are all the issues of life, thoughts, feelings, and desires, Prov. 4:23. Religion involves the whole man, his intellectual, his emotional, and his moral life. This is the only view that does justice to the nature of religion.

3. The Origin of Religion

Particular attention was devoted during the last fifty years to the problem of the origin of religion. Repeated attempts were made to give a natural explanation of it, but without success. Some spoke of it as an invention of cunning and deceptive priests, who regarded it as an easy source of revenue; but this explanation is entirely discredited now. Others held that it began with the worship of lifeless objects (fetishes), or with the worship of spirits, possibly the spirits of forefathers. But this is no explanation, since the question remains, How did people ever hit upon the idea of worshiping lifeless or living objects? Still others were of the opinion that religion originated in nature-worship, that is, the worship of the marvels and powers of nature, or in the widespread practice of magic. But these theories do not explain any more than the others how non-religious man ever became religious. They all start out with a man who is already religious.

The Bible gives the only reliable account of the origin of religion. It informs us of the existence of God, the only object worthy of religious worship. Moreover, it comes to us with the assurance that God, whom man could never discover with his natural powers, revealed Himself in nature and, more especially, in His divine Word, demands the worship and service of man, and also determines the worship and service that is well-pleasing to Him. And, finally, it teaches us that God created man in His own image, and

thus endowed him with a capacity to understand, and to respond to, this revelation, and engendered in him a natural urge to seek communion with God and to glorify Him.

To memorize. Scripture passages bearing on:

a. The Nature of Religion:

Deut. 10:12, 13. "And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah thy God require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and His statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good."

Ps. 111:10. "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do His commandments: His praise endures for ever."

Eccl. 12:13. "Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."

John 6:29. "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."

Acts 16:31. "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house."

b. The Seat of Religion:

Ps. 51:10. "Create in me a clean heart, God; and renew a right spirit within me." Also vs. 17. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, God, thou wilt not despise."

Prov. 4:23. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

Matt. 5:8. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

c. The Origin of Religion:

Gen. 1:27. "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him."

Deut. 4:13. "And He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten commandments."

Ezek. 36:26. "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

For Further Study of Scripture:

a. What elements of true religion are indicated in the following passages: Deut. 10:12; Eccl. 12:13; Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:8; Mark 12:33; John 3:36; 6:29; Acts 5:31; Rom. 12:1; 13:10; Jas. 1:27.

b. What forms of false religion are indicated in the following passages: Ps. 78:35, 36; Isa. 1:11-17; 58:1-5; Ezek. 33:31, 32; Matt. 6:2, 5; 7:21, 26, 27; 23:14; Luke 6:2; 13:14; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:20; 2 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:16; Jas. 2:15, 16; 3:10.

c. Name six instances of true religion. Gen. 4:4-8; 12:1-8; 15:17; 18:22-33; Ex. 3:2-22; Deut. 32:33; 2 Kings 18:3-7; 19:14-19; Dan. 6:4-22; Luke 2:25-35; 2:36, 37; 7:1-10; 2 Tim. 1:5.

Questions for Review:

1. Is religion limited to certain tribes and nations?
2. How can we learn to know the real nature of true religion?
3. What terms are used in the Old and New Testament to describe religion?
4. How would you define religion?
5. What mistaken notions are there as to the seat of religion in man?
6. What is the center of the religious life according to Scripture?
7. What different explanations have been given of the origin of religion?
8. What is the only satisfactory explanation?