

What is a Religion?

America is religiously pluralistic. Among Americans this just seems to be common knowledge. But, what is a religion? How are we using the term? This is an important question for Christians to consider as we interact with the world around us. It is also important for us because there are those from within who even say things like, “I want to be spiritual, but not religious.” We want to make sure we are all on the same page.

Dr. Paul J. Griffiths, Warren Professor of Catholic Theology at Duke Divinity School, has this helpful description of a religion; “*A religion is, for those who will have it (or, better, are had by it), principally an account.*”¹ From this account we might learn how the world came to be. Or who god is. In short, the account orders the way things are for us.

As Christians in America we face increasing questions regarding the relation of Christianity and Islam, or Christianity and Buddhism. Griffiths himself holds a degree from Oxford in Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy, and a Ph.D in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. So we can be confident that his description of religion encompasses more than Christian priority. I think Griffiths hopes to have us “religious” people taking our own accounts seriously, as well as the accounts of others. Brushing aside differences by equivocation is unhelpful. Not to mention, it makes the equivocator the origin of a newer account. That is to say, making the claim that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all the same account (religion) is to make a new claim about the way things are, and therefore give a new account, and therefore originate a new religion. So, as Christians we are particularly occupied with *OUR* account, the Christian religion, and what flows from it and how we are had by it. Then we are also concerned about the account of others.

Now, I will briefly treat the claim and desire of being “spiritual but not religious”. Already the oxymoronic nature of this claim must be clear based on Griffiths’ description of religion. Christianity is an account of the way things are. It makes claims about the Spiritual life of the people that are had by the Christian account. That is to say, “spirituality” flows out of the Christian religion and is not an isolated thing from it. It is impossible, therefore, to be “spiritual but not religious” if one is a Christian.

There are several ways to interpret the phrase “spiritual but not religious”. When people use this phrase I think they are hoping to communicate something other than a desire for a new religious account. I think they are simply expressing their dislike of older ceremony and tradition, commonly called liturgy and corporate prayer. In this way the claim “spiritual but not religious” is nothing more than a statement of personal preference mingled with acute judgment. The judgment is that this newer updated expression of the faith is saturated with spirituality whereas the older religious expressions are not. Of course, when pushed, the people claiming to be “spiritual but not religious” retreat to the arena of personal preference. When asked to give a rationale as to why their “spirituality” is more spiritual and therefore preferable to the “spirituality” of religion, the individuals usually retreat even deeper into their own personal preferences and finally confess, “This is just what I think/feel/believe.” In the end, I see this as nothing more than an ancient problem facing humanity, original sin. Original sin is the bondage we humans have to constructing accounts (religions) rooted in our selves, rather than be had by an account we had no hand in constructing but that we ourselves flow from. To say it another way, we humans are always wanting to be gods.

¹ Paul J. Griffiths. *The Properly Christian Response to Religious Plurality*, (Anglican Theological Review LXXIX 1997) 3.