

RELIGION VS. RELATIONSHIP

Carissimi,

Is “religion” to be understood as somehow opposed to an authentic “relationship” with our Lord Jesus Christ?

The notion does have currency in certain strains of evangelical, pentecostal and fundamentalist protestantism. An older associated view eschews “organized” or “institutional” religion in favor of a “private” or “personal” relationship with God. This is a cover for subjectivism.

On the other side of the Pond, post-Christian Europeans, fancying themselves sophisticatedly open-minded, are fond of saying they are “spiritual but not religious.” This view makes me recall an encounter I had once at an exclusive art show in Provence. There stood I, non-chalantly holding a glass of exquisite French wine as I contemplated one of the interestingly incomprehensible exhibits. The very *artiste* herself was at my side, no doubt eager to discover what the curious curate (*moi*) would have to say about it all, when I dared to broach the forbidden topic, “But what does it *mean*?” Her answer was dreamy in a right-brained way, “*Ça ne signifie rien.*” That is to say, “*It means nothing.*” Precisely.

These notions are based upon a deep misunderstanding of what “religion” is and means. I suppose there are adherents of every religion who assiduously attend to rites, customs and practices but are lacking in true devotion. Jesus Himself admonished the Pharisees for being “whitened sepulchres on the outside, but inside, dead men’s bones.” Thus the word *pharisaical*. We have them in the Catholic Church: witness the debacle of pro-abortion “Catholic” politicians presenting themselves for Holy Communion.

Should one conclude from these bad examples that religion is the problem? Jesus Himself performed religious rituals, like getting baptized and reading in the synagogue. Jesus Himself instituted religious rites, like baptism and the Mass (at the Last Supper).

Religion in itself is a consequence of belief in God. The word comes from the Latin *religare*, “to bind, or bind back.” It simply means that man, recognizing that God exists, seeks to acknowledge this reality through appropriate and fitting acts. One cannot dichotomize “religion and relationship” without doing violence to the very meaning of the words; as well as ignoring the lived reality of religions since the dawn of history.

Every relationship is acknowledged and nurtured precisely through specific acts and signs. For example, what kind of husband would contend that he has a relationship with his wife, but never performs any outward signs acknowledging such? Rather, he talks to her; he dines with her; he gives her flowers; he celebrates special days with her; he spends time with her; he gives her gifts; he sacrifices for her. The list could go on and on. Actually saying “I love you” is an imperative for a functional relationship, as any communication-starved spouse can attest to.

The point is that this sort of behavior on a human level is universally seen as fitting and indeed necessary precisely to foster the *relationship*. Why would our relationship with God Almighty not involve analogous actions, or *rituals*, if you will?

Of course we could debate the value of this or that ritual of a given religion – but that is another question altogether.

The point is that in these situations the actions themselves are not the problem, but rather the interior lack of corresponding love & devotion. The two must go together. Likewise with religious acts. Religion is in fact the *manifestation* of the relationship. It is also a part of the virtue of *justice* – giving to another what is owed. Thus it is a *lack of virtue* to repudiate what is owed to our Creator, viz., worship manifested in religion.

So it’s not logical to set religion against a relationship with God. The far more important question to solve is, “Which is the true religion?”

Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam,

-Don Francesco