

# WHAT IS RELIGION?

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The Oxford Dictionary defines religion thus: System of faith and worship: human recognition of superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience, and the effect of this in conduct. Religion is accordingly defined as: imbued with religion, god-fearing, devout; but also as scrupulous or conscientious. Hence if one says that one has no religion, one implies that such a person is an unscrupulous man, reckless in his moral behaviour, and not at all conscientious. If we are to be counted by non-Buddhists as cultured, we Buddhists are constrained to declare that the Buddha's Dhamma is our religion. In order to do so, we have to look for different definitions of religion.

We know that H.G. Wells expressed his view on religion thus: Religion is the central part in our education that determines our moral conduct. The famous German Philosopher Kant stated his definition of religion thus: Religion is the recognition of our moral principles as laws that must not be transgressed. This comes quite near to our conception of what religion ought to be.

In a very broad sense, religion may be defined as a body of moral and philosophical teachings, the acceptance with confidence of such a teaching, and the practice of the accepted teaching. In this sense Buddhism is a religion and the Buddhists have indeed a very noble religion to follow.

If we had asked the men from whom we have our first historical records: "What is religion?" They might have answered in accordance with Oxford Dictionary, saying that religion was the ways of worshipping the gods. By gods they would have understood the unseen powers that manage the world or at least interfere with it; by religion they would have meant the whole attitude to be taken towards these powers. There are two aspects of the Dhamma of the Buddha, that is to say as a personal religion, and on organised or institutional religion.

**PERSONAL RELIGION** means the inward veneration of one's religious teacher or teachers and the application of one's moral principles in one's daily life, without participating in the showy manifestations of the Organised Religion of the masses. Most of the educated classes belong to this category.

**ORGANISED or INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION** is the popularly practised religion of the masses, with such pomp, many ceremonies, processions and public worship. In Ceylon the Kandy Perahera, Kataragama Perahera, Temple Festivals and Public Preachings, all-night-paritta-chanting, and Alms to the monks in great numbers are typical examples of Institutional Religion. The intellectual classes seem to shun this kind of religion, but the broad masses of

the Buddhists understand only this kind of religion. Buddhism satisfies all temperaments; to the intellectual classes it gives a lofty philosophy and moral teachings that lead to enlightenment and liberation from all suffering; to the common man and woman it gives a gorgeous worship and a hope of life in heaven. Further, religion is subdivided into two main classes: revealed religion, and natural religion.

REVEALED RELIGION is one revealed by “God” through the Prophets or special messengers of “God” or son of “God”. The Hebrew, the Christian and the Moslem religions are counted as the typically revealed religions, and according to the light of the adherents of those religions, the only true religions. All three are monotheistic religions teaching but one God, though the Roman Catholic religion has yielded to the popular and more natural demand for more gods by introducing the belief in the intercession of the “Mother of God” and their Saints, the worship or adoration of the relics of the Saints, three aspects of the one God, the Mother of God, and still many other ways of approaching God and obtaining what one wants without having to ask it from the “One God”.

NATURAL RELIGION or rather Natural Religions are, according to the Christian writers, all the other manifestations of religion. Natural Religion has been classified under three headings:-

PHYSICAL RELIGION, the worship of natural phenomena and forces, is said to have been inspired in the primitive man by the aspect of Nature. The first forms of physical religion might have been really inspired by the awe experienced in the presence of strong natural phenomena, such as mountains, rivers, the sea, earthquake, thunderstorms, floods, and any violent changes in one’s environment. Fear with craving, and a desire to win the favour of the powers behind the natural phenomena, give rise to the belief in gods, souls, spirits and mighty divine beings, and the possibility of incurring their displeasure or winning their favour.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL RELIGION is founded on the nature of man and leads to the worship of ancestors or the First Man, or a God, who is supposed to have been the originator of the imperial family and of all men. The Japanese and the Chinese are counted as adherents of this kind of religion, in so far as they do not count as Buddhists or adherents of other systems.

PSYCHOLOGICAL RELIGION is occupied with the study of the nature of the human soul and its relation to God. Though the Hindus declare that their religion is one revealed by God or successive incarnations of God, their religion is often counted among Psychological Religions, with admixtures of other forms of Natural Religion.

Buddhism is the greatest stumbling block for the scholars of Comparative Religion, for it does not fall under any single heading of all the categories of

religions, though it contains elements of both the revealed and natural religions. It has been revealed by the Buddha, who is called The Teacher of Gods and Men. In course of time, Buddhism has assimilated elements of natural religions. We may now define Buddhism as the Truth attained and revealed by the Enlightened One and to be realised by each of us individually.

Though Freethinkers and Atheists and even Materialists at times acclaim the Buddha as one of their own, yet Buddhism is not an Atheistic Teaching, if the word atheism is used as a term of reproach and condemnation. Buddhism does not waste time in fighting against the belief in God or the gods, though, when rightly understood, it supersedes all Theistic Doctrines. Buddhism, sometimes called “Divine Atheism” may be called Supertheism or rather Supratheism.

The founders of many religions claim to have received their message from a supposed god, but the Buddha is in the scriptures of the Pali Tipitaka represented as having taught in heaven, and convinced even the “Most High Maha Brahma” of his delusion if he thinks that he is the Father of All. Though the common followers of the Enlightened One, or rather the worshippers of the Buddha, placed in this world of opposing forces, and factors, do at times expect help, collaboration and protection from the gods, and for most of them any of the gods is God for them, yet these gods are treated as lay Buddhists, disciples of Buddha, and always anxious to protect the true follower of the Enlightened One, if he needs their protection. And in the Commentaries the “devas” assume an increasingly important, benevolent and helpful role, till in later Buddhism the Buddha appears as the chief among them.

Buddhism is inspired by the aspect of suffering, and is the Path to the Liberation from all Suffering. The Buddha’s quest for Enlightenment was motivated not by fear or craving, but by the determination to solve the problem of suffering and to lead all intelligent beings to Liberation and Enlightenment. If fear has any place in Buddhism, it is the abhorrence of suffering; and if craving motivates religion, in Buddhism it is the striving for liberation and enlightenment that moves us to the application of the Dhamma in our daily lives. When knowing what people understand by “religion” we avoid that word and call Buddhism by the original word DHAMMA or DHARMA.