

# True Religion

Religion is defined as “a cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, world views, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organisations, that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements.”

Yet, there is no actual consensus among scholars as to what precisely constitutes a religion.

Nearly 85% of the world’s population identifies as being religious, claiming affiliation with one of the five largest religions; [Christianity](#), [Islam](#), [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#) or forms of [folk religion](#). These different religions all have distinct rules, regulations and beliefs that form part of that particular religion.

Christianity is the world’s largest religion, with over 2.4 billion followers. Growing out of Judaism – its earliest converts were Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ in the first century – it quickly spread from Judea into Asia Minor and then further abroad. By the fourth century, Christianity had become the official state religion of the [Roman Empire](#). Christianity has, in fact, played a major role in the shaping of western civilisation.

## What Is Religion?

When the [Latin](#) word *religio* found its way into the English language as *religion*, around the 1200s, it took the meaning of “life bound by monastic vows” or monastic orders. It eventually came to distinguish the domain of the church and the domain of civil authorities.

Yet the ancient and medieval world understood the word *religio* quite differently. For the ancients, it carried a meaning of *individual virtue of worship*, never as doctrine,

practice, or actual source of knowledge. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, there is no precise equivalent of the English word *religion*. The Greek word *threskeia*, used in the New Testament, is sometimes translated as religion, however, the term was more correctly understood as 'worship', well into the medieval period.

In the Quran, the Arabic word [\*din\*](#) is often translated as religion in modern translations, but up until the mid-1600s, translators expressed *din* as law.

Religion, in itself, is a modern, western concept and it was understood in quite a different way by those who lived in the ancient world. Today, religion would perhaps be explained as a system of rules or practices governed by certain beliefs. The ancient world would have viewed this concept as *law* and saw *religion* quite differently; as the idea of worship or reverence of God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things and piety, or diligence.

## **Religion Has A Bad Reputation**

Discussion about religion is often long, complex, divisive and inconclusive. It doesn't come as any surprise that the IPSOS Global Poll released in 2017 shows that a majority of Australians (63%) believe that religion does more harm than good. Only one in four Australians say religion defines them as a person.

Religion has been much maligned – and [\*perhaps with good reason\*](#). Unfortunately, when men and women get their hands on religion, it is often for the purpose of control and manipulation of others. Many [\*terrible acts\*](#) have been committed 'in the name of religion' and supposedly with a divine blessing – yet God is often furthest from the minds of those perpetrating such acts. In reality, God is often the last priority; intolerance is the driving force behind many actions that claim permission on religious grounds.

*“Christianity itself has a long history of such intolerance, including persecution of Jews, crusades against Muslims, and the Thirty Years’ War, in which religious and nationalist rivalries combined to devastate Central Europe.” | [The New York Times](#)*

## **What Is True Religion?**

The aim of this article is not to impress on any reader the ‘rightness’ of our particular beliefs or doctrines. Whether a man or woman chooses to be religious, or not, should be a deeply personal consideration, without manipulation or coercion from others.

Rather, it is intended to be an honest examination of what ‘true religion’ should be for any committed Christian, professing belief in Jesus’ saving work and God’s divine plan for the world.

If we have accepted Jesus as our saviour, our beliefs and our practices must line up and work together in harmony. We must profess and practice true religion, not merely an inadequate form, which hasn’t touched our hearts. Timothy warns against a form of godliness, which appears righteous from the outside but in reality denies the power that godliness has to radically transform us (2 Timothy 3:2-5).

The word *religion* is only used a few times in the Bible. But the concept of religion, as it was originally understood, actually permeates the entire Bible. True religion, at its core, is about the relationship between God and ourselves and how this transforms us from the inside out.

This understanding began early on in the book of Genesis, where men began to call on the name of God (Genesis 4).

*“Now men began to worship God, not only in their closets and families, but in public and solemn assemblies. The*

worshippers of God began to distinguish themselves: so the margin reads it. 'Then began men to be called by the name of the Lord' – or, to call themselves by it. Now Cain and those that had deserted religion had built a city, and begun to declare for irreligion, and called themselves the sons of men. Those that adhered to God began to declare for Him and His worship, and called themselves the sons of God." | Benson Commentary

Another commentary has this to say:

"The name of God signifies in general 'the whole nature of God, by which He attests His personal presence in the relation into which He has entered with man, the divine self-manifestation, or the whole of that revealed side of the divine nature, which is turned towards man'. In Genesis 4, we have an account of the commencement of that worship of God which consists in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, or in the acknowledgment and celebration of the mercy and help of God. Those of the family of Seth began, by united invocation of the name of God of grace, to found and to erect the [kingdom of God](#)." – Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament

True religion – pure religion – is the acknowledgment of our need for God's mercy, our worship of Him and what He has done for us and the application of His character in our lives, because of our thankfulness.

True religion is the seamless unity of believing *and* doing and it's demonstrated throughout the Bible by countless examples of [faithful men](#) and [women](#). (Hebrews 11:1-40). It's an **active faith**, shown by both word and deed and not just empty talk.

"Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster

*before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless ('the fatherless and the widow') in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." – James 1: 26-27, MSG*

Jesus put it in another way:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Matthew 22:37-39, NIV*

And again, in Hosea:

*"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." – Hosea 6:6, BSB*

## **What True Religion Isn't**

True religion isn't rules-based or rituals-based but is instead firmly rooted in faith. Faith, in response to God's action in our lives, [alters everything about us](#); our daily relationships, our perspective on life, our interactions with family, neighbours, friends and community. When God is present and completely sovereign in our lives, when we adhere to God and declare for Him and His worship, God calls us His children and part of His family. This is religion in its purest and most true form.

God's gift of freedom is easily perverted and often squandered by men or women placing religious burdens and rituals on their fellow man. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day for exactly this, commenting that *"they tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them..."* (Matthew 23:4).

God is not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways. He is a deeply real and loving Father who invites us into a personal relationship with Him. It is always an invitation, never coercion or guilt-driven; we are given space and freedom to answer His invitation. [Through Jesus](#), we have been set free and are invited to participate in God's saving work with humanity.

How important it is for any sincere and genuine Christian to constantly promote this extraordinary message of God's grace and ensure we don't unwittingly return to a life of rule-keeping, which God finds no pleasure in.

What people need to see and experience from us is **true religion** – active, transformative and inspiring. The kind of religion that Jesus demonstrated every day.

*“Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, **then Christ died unnecessarily.**” | Galatians 2:21, MSG*

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The modern concept of the meaning behind the word religion is an abstraction that involves distinct sets of beliefs or doctrines. Its usage, in this way, began with texts from the 17th century, resulting from events such as the splitting of Christendom during the Protestant Reformation and globalisation in the age of exploration.

However, the word religion, from the Latin *religio*, meaning 'to bind', is a word which in the ancient and medieval world was used to refer to *individual virtue of worship; respect for what was sacred, and a reverence for the divine*. It described an attitude of *being* rather than *creed*.

You may be interested to read more in the article: [From Religion To Cruciformity](#).

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## The Gospel Of Good News

When we think of the gospel, we can tend to think of it in only 'New Testament' terms. We might be of the impression that the gospel was something that came about around the time of Jesus and subsequently spread throughout the world by his followers. While this is somewhat true, upon more extensive reading we learn that the message of good news is much older than we thought. Yes, it concerns Jesus but it was preached long before his actual birth. In reality, it's a message as old as time itself and its inception stretches right back to the garden of Eden. And it's a message of good news and hope for all people!

### A Little Background On The Word "Gospel"

"Good news" is the English translation of the Koine Greek word 'euangélion' (εὐαγγέλιον) (εὖ eû "good" + ἄγγελος ángelos "messenger"). In Old English, it was translated as 'gōdspel' (gōd "good" + spel "news"). The Old English term was retained as 'gospel' in Middle English Bible translations and has subsequently been carried forward into Modern English translations.

*Incidentally, our modern word, evangelise or evangelist comes from the original Greek and carries the same meaning – one who preaches or tells good news, a 'messenger of good'. The writers of the gospels are sometimes known as the Four Evangelists, for this reason.*

The message of 'good news' is taught throughout the books of

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and it's certainly no coincidence that these books are collectively known as The Gospels.

## But What Is The Good News?

The Gospel is described as "the good news of the Kingdom of God and the things which concern Jesus Christ". Jesus himself preached about the coming kingdom of God, together with John the Baptist. Later, men like Paul the Apostle and Peter continued the message of good news

*"Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God." – Mark 1:14, KJV*

*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' . . . And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom . . ."* – Matthew 4:17, 23, NIV, KJV

*"But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptised."* – Acts 8:12, HCSB

*"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!"* – Acts 28:30-31, NIV

## In The Beginning...

[God's purpose](#), from the beginning was populate earth with people He could call His family, who were like him in every way. God created humans with this in mind and established the principle of **free choice**. He wanted us to **choose** Him, to **want** to be like Him. This kind of living, that reflects a desire to honour God and manifest His character to the world



is what God calls the beginning of the kingdom of His son ([Colossians 1:13](#)).

Unfortunately, when given the choice, humanity chose wrong. We acted in a way completely foreign to God's character. Motivated by pride and selfishness and driven by impatience, we chose to "make ourselves like God" on our terms, not His. This choice, the first act of sin in the world, brought about its awful consequence – mortality, and being driven from God's presence in shame and disappointment. This is the story of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden.

## Jesus Is The Good News

Yet God didn't give up. His desire to be at one with us, to complete His purpose with humanity, was so intrinsic that He immediately put in place a plan to bridge that ravine, to heal the breach between Himself and His creation. He did not allow His purpose to be compromised by our choice. This extraordinary plan was revealed in [His son, Jesus](#).

*"Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."* – 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, BSB

The saving acts of God, due to the work of Jesus on the cross and Jesus' resurrection from the dead, bring reconciliation ("atonement") between people and God and it is a message of hope for the whole world (Luke 14:15-24). Through Jesus, we have forgiveness of sins and the blessing of God's grace.

## The Message Isn't New

It would be easy to assume that the gospel was introduced by Jesus during his earthly ministry. Yet, this message isn't new at all – it's much older than that and, in fact, Revelation 14:6 calls it 'the eternal gospel', "proclaimed to all those who dwell on earth."

In Galatians 3:8, we read the following: "Scripture foresaw that God would justify the [Gentiles](#) by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." Here, Paul is referencing a time in Abraham's life, [shortly after he left Ur](#), when God blessed him and told him the purpose He had with him.

*"I will bless those who bless you, but I will put a curse on anyone who puts a curse on you. Everyone on earth will be blessed because of you." – Genesis 12:3, CEV*

This blessing is further clarified by the words of Peter the Apostle in Act 3:28, where he was addressing the Jews, Abraham's descendants. He tells them, "You are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in your descendants shall **all the families of the earth be blessed**. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to **bless you**, in **turning away every one of you from his iniquities**." (Act 3:25-26)

Jesus Christ himself revealed that the Kingdom of God has been prepared for us for far longer than we can imagine.

*"Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." – Matthew 25:34, ESV*

God's plan of blessing has been in place since the beginning.

It was made known to Abraham and he was promised a descendant who would fulfill God's promise of blessing for the world, first to the Jewish people and then, to all peoples of the world. In this way, Abraham was able to look forward in faithful anticipation of the future when the saviour would be born, to fulfill the promise of blessing made to him. Jesus confirms this, when speaking to the Jews (who doubted he was the one who had been promised).

*"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." – John 8:56, NIV*

## **Our Purpose Is God's Purpose**

Our purpose and the reason for our creation is to be part of God's family. The good news is that through Jesus, we can be! We can become part of God's family and part of His kingdom community right now, saved through the work of Jesus. Not only that, we can look forward to a future that is full of hope and blessing, trusting in God's promise that has been established from the beginning of the world.

God has great plans for you, if you choose to accept them. The gospel message is one of hope and blessing and **everyone** is invited to take part.

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." – Jeremiah 29:11, NIV*