

On being religious

By [Diane Roth](#)

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Some time ago, I had a conversation with a woman from my congregation in which she revealed that she might not attend worship the next Sunday, but that her husband and her daughter would probably go.

"You know," she said, "he's just more....."

"Religious," I said.

"...than I am." She didn't seem to mind much that I had ended her sentence for her. And I said the word "religious" with warmth toward her husband and with no judgment implied toward her.

I realized later that what I meant by "religious" was nothing more and nothing less than that it seemed to me that he genuinely enjoyed coming to worship.

I confess that, by this definition, I am religious. Ever since I was a little girl, I have enjoyed coming to church. I liked singing the songs. I liked saying the prayers. I enjoyed reading along with the lessons, printed on the back of the bulletin. My pastor preached short sermons, so that was a plus, too. I went through periods of time when I rebelled against or doubted some of what church meant or did, but I always enjoyed going.

I have taken a few short sabbaticals from Sunday attendance, but have not spent long periods away from worship, even during periods of deep doubt. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to spend Sunday mornings doing something else. Sometimes I think it would have been helpful if I had spent more time away from worship.

Now, I wasn't born yesterday. I know that there are more definitions of the word "religious" than the one I offered. I remember reading a book in college called *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*. It was clear from that book that "being religious" was not a good thing. I believe that the author equated being religious

with doing things in order to curry favor with God. But Christians don't need to *do things* to curry favor with God because Jesus has always done everything. So, we don't need to be religious.

While I look back now and still appreciate this author's emphasis on grace and living in trust, I find his definition of "religious" sort of troublesome now. It's probably because in the book, the author contrasts Christianity with all other religions, to the detriment of the other religions.

I realize, though, that there are other issues with the word "religious," some of them having to do with people who claim to be religious. There are the people who go to church on Sunday morning, and then go out to eat and don't tip the waitstaff. There are the people who go to church on Sunday morning, and work hard to keep other people out of their church, or out of their neighborhood. So the word "religious" has come to mean "closed-minded, bigoted, hateful." Or, it has come to mean someone who outwardly practices, but whose heart is not in it. It's somewhat understandable that some people have come to prefer the word "spiritual." It may seem a kinder, gentler word. (However, it may not be. I have been told once or twice that I am "not spiritual enough." You can beat another person up with any word, if you want to. Sometimes "spiritual" people can be mean, too.)

Still, I think we will miss something if the word "religious" goes away. For one thing, to be religious is to practice a particular faith. Sometimes this becomes confused with practicing in a closed-minded way. I think you can be religious and appreciate your own faith tradition without being closed-minded. And then there's the public aspect of being religious: you know, going to church. If you are religious, you are willing to "go public," in a way. At the foundation, for Christians, this means public worship, where we get together with other people, and say certain creeds together and sing particular hymns, even though there are as many days when we doubt as there are when we believe.

What does it mean to be religious? Is it simply enjoying going to worship? Is it an external practice with or without an inner core? Is it narrow-minded bigotry, reciting creeds?

This is what James says: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

So, I admit it. In a way, I am religious. I like worshipping. I like singing those weird songs and I like praying together with large groups of people. And I aspire to be religious in that other way, the way that James writes about: in welcoming, feeding and caring for those who are hungry, poor and left out, in whatever way.

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