

Do we *really* need organized religion?

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Do we really need organized religion?

We would do well first to define ‘religion’.

Let us do so in a very basic, very general way.

Religion is the link, the connection with the Divine,
with the One whom many religious traditions call “God”.

The term comes from the Latin verb “ligare”, to bind, to connect.

Religion is the bond, the connection with the Divine.

It is that simple.

Organized religion is this connection lived in a group setting,
as a community

—which, as with all communities, will involve some leadership structure.

Do we really need organized religion?

The question for us here could very easily translate:

“Why the headache of the Church?” Oops: did I just say that?

Do we really need organized religion?

Do we *really* need organized religion?

How often does one hear, “Well, I am spiritual, but I am not religious.”

I hear it often—especially in Yoga circles, especially with ex-Catholics.

It is another way of saying “I will do God (however one may define God),
but not organized religion”.

“I will deal with the Divine, but your religion you can keep to yourself.”

“I do not need anything structured
 so to be in touch with my deeper self, and so to encounter God.”
 Why the separation between “the spiritual” and “the religious”?
 When did God and religion get divorced?
 Why the frequent distaste for organized religion?
 The question of organized religion is an important question.
 The question of the Church is an important question,
 an important and, for us, somewhat *distinct* question.

I would like first to consider organized religion in general,
 a phenomenon we can observe the world over, a universal experience.
 I would like second to consider the Church.
 In looking at the Church, we look to see if there is anything proper to the
Christian experience—in addition to that of organized religion in general—
 that makes organizing and functioning as a group—if at all—fitting.
 The latter will require reference
 to what we believe in faith about the Church.

Let us state from the outset that human beings
 gather in groups for many reasons.
 It is not difficult to observe that human beings always seem to gather
 and together form some sort of community, some sort of “body politic”.
 Humanity seems to be an assortment of societies.
 As we can all observe, hermits are an exception to the rule.

Why do they do this?

Why do human beings, as a rule, gather in groups, that is, form community?

Human beings form societies—be they large or small—for many reasons.

They do so if anything

because they are born into a small group known as the family.

This basic, foundational society is the most spontaneous of societies.

This society, the family, is about new human beings

and early nurturing of human beings—of human beings, however,

who become members of larger societies:

villages, clubs, fraternities, nations.

Why do human beings, beyond the family, become part of larger groups?

As suggested, they do so for many reasons,

the most fundamental of which is the complementarity of tasks

that allows for survival: “United we stand. Divided we fall.”

Human beings gather and join forces so as to live in this large physical

world which is both harmonious for them and also “violent” for them,

that is, which is powerful and overwhelming at times.

(we need each other to deal with such things as hurricanes!)

Human beings also join together because, in so doing, their quality of life,

their standard of living improves.

Human beings share the fruit of their varied labor,

thus expanding what they can acquire and experience.

For example: “You share some of the chocolate that you have invented.

And I will share some of the beer that I have invented!

You share the health care knowledge that you have acquired.

And I will share the gardening knowledge that I have acquired.”

There is a fundamental connectedness that we have because we are all human beings, and which develops because of basic needs and a desire for greater quality of life. And, as the connectedness, the community, develops, it necessarily becomes more structured, and the group, society, begins to express/manifest itself more properly as a group, gathered around more noble realities: political and artistic realities. The deeper things in life become the reason for community.

In the midst of the community, of this social interdependence and activity, there is the most unique of gatherings which, for each participating individual, is the most personal of experiences. It is an experience that, in a sense, combines all of the other reasons for community: basic need, greater quality of life, deeper expression. It is the experience of the Transcendent, of the Divine, of the One whom religious traditions call “God”. It is an experience that often seems to be seeking its proper place in the community. It is the most intimate experience that a human being can have.

The intimate character of this experience is such that it is generally considered a very *private* experience. This recognition we see in our own nation. Religious experience escapes any jurisdiction by the State. Religious experience is not to be managed by the State.

The only role that the State is to have
is protection of the right to religious experience.

The State must *protect the right* to worship, but cannot tread
the sacred territory of an individual's relationship with the Divine.

That is why it seems that the separation of Church and State makes sense.

The “religious”, which, in my book, in its proper sense,
is the same as spiritual—including the somehow structured community,
is eminently personal, and is beyond the political realm.

The separation of Church and State is an acknowledgment of

- the personal character of religious, spiritual experience
- the inviolability of religious, spiritual experience
- the fact that the government, by the same token,
cannot oblige such experience, cannot oblige “religiosity”.

Worshipping the One whom religious traditions call God
is not an obvious experience, is not a “given”,
as is respect for one's neighbor which can be and is translated into law.

And so we have an experience that is unbelievably personal,
which is a matter of personal choice, which, properly speaking,
escapes the jurisdiction of the State, of the government,
and yet which must be protected.

And people gather together for this experience. Why?

A cynic might say that it is to re-convince one another
of a reality that does not exist...

Well, let us presume the existence of God

—which, to some, may be a huge presumption.

Why *do* people *gather* in reference to God?

Is not our relationship with God far too intimate for that?

Why is there a *communal* expression of worship?

People certainly gather to encourage one another.

We do need encouragement when it comes to the more noble things.

And we indeed do a fair amount of emulating in our lives.

Hence the expression, as we say in French,

“Tell me whom you frequent and I will tell you who you are.”

or the more American version,

“Tell me whose company you keep, and I will tell you your name.”

If you frequent persons who eat a lot,

you will probably, eventually begin to eat a lot.

If you frequent persons who are careless and pollute,

you will probably, eventually begin to be careless and pollute.

If you frequent persons who seek God,

you will be encouraged in your search for God.

The phenomenon of imitation and social trend is an observable fact.

So, we need to be encouraged.

But is this reason enough

to gather in reference to God whom we do not see and cannot define?

Well, we also learn from one another.

We also gain from one another’s experiential insights into God.

Learning: another reason to gather as a “religious community”.

But is this reason enough?

This is all fine and true, but at least three initial, interrelated questions, nevertheless, ought to be posed:

1. Does not the presence of other persons make the religious experience more challenging? When one is trying to relate to God, the last thing one wants is other persons nearby...
2. Does religious experience (spirituality, if you will) have any external act? My rapport, my relationship with God is an affair of the heart. It is something very interior. Is not any outward expression a diminishing of this? Will not outward expression scatter me?
3. If community can be of some religious help, do we, nonetheless, reach a point where we are sufficiently strong and sufficiently insightful so to dispense with the community?

Let us answer these three question in, at least, preliminary fashion.

1. Am I compromising prayer when I burden myself with the distraction of the presence of other people?

One might think so.

Is not prayer easier and more intimate in a beautiful *quiet* setting?

While it is true that privacy, that a *quiet setting*

can help us enter more deeply into the personal,

“personal” is not the same the same as “private”.

“Personal” refers to that which stems from my person, that is, who I am deep inside.

“Private” refers to exterior circumstance and situation.

Certain exterior circumstances and situations do favor personal experiences,
but that does not make the two the same.

If “personal” not the same thing as “private”, then it may be possible
that *personal* activities be lived in *public*, i.e. *in a group*
and their personal character not be diminished.

Thus, religion, spirituality lived in a group setting
is not out of the question.

The gathering of persons for communal worship
is not necessarily counter-productive.

2. Is outward expression of prayer, in the end, distracting?

Prayer is not simply an affair of the heart, an act of the heart.

Prayer is an act of the person, the whole person.

Prayer invites the use of my body which, if a part of who I am,
should actually favor the act of prayer.

Spirituality is not spirit alone.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) says the following regarding this.

We pay God honor and reverence, not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake, because by the very fact that we revere and honor God, our mind yields to Him; wherein its perfection consists, since a thing is perfected by yielding to its superior, for instance the body is perfected by being quickened by the soul, and the air by being enlightened by the sun. Now the human mind, in order to be united to God, needs to be guided by the sensible world, since "invisible things . . . are understood by the (visible) things that are

made," as the Apostle says (Romans 1:20). Wherefore in the Divine worship it is necessary to make use of corporeal things, that man's mind may be aroused thereby, as by signs, to the spiritual acts by means of which he is united to God. (Summa Theologica)

The body translates into the visible, public realm the "spiritual acts by means of which we are united to God". In other words, we use gestures which are naturally symbolic, which rather spontaneously mean something, to adore God. Again, we do so because of the unity of the body with the soul, with the spirit.

We bow, we hold hands, stand, or sit, fold or raise hands, genuflect, etc. We also make use of symbols in our worship space that appeal to and awaken our senses and imagination and heart and mind: fire, precious metals, water, colors, clothing, etc.

3. Does the community, at some point, become obsolete when I become familiar with the Divine?
This is the most difficult of the questions...
Our body, whose use the act of prayer beckons, is the same body whereby we are in contact with one another. In other words, there is a spontaneous, natural, *de facto* association between these prayerful, religious individuals.

Thus: the heart beckons the use of the body, and the body invites the presence of others.

Still, why?

Is there another reason to worship communally?

Well, in prayer—regardless of the religious tradition—individuals discover that they issue from the same Source, and thus are linked to one another in a very simple, very fundamental way.

It seems then that the Source Itself invites the gathering,
a gathering that is concretely unified us as a group
by the bodies of the individuals.

In other words, we organize and function and express *as a body*
by means of/with our bodies.

This resulting corporate reality and identity: the religious community—
which does not eliminate individuality—
is most fully expressed in the truer reason for its formation:
communal worship.

The corporate reality is manifested and expressed
in the corporate act of worship.

Our bodies unify us in the public religious forum.

Our bodies allow us to express, as an organic, unified whole
worship for the One who is the reason/purpose for each as an individual,
thanks to whom we form a family of sorts,
all beloved creatures of the same Divine Source.

Thus, the most proper reason for organized religion is *liturgy*.

Now, this, of course, does not answer the question
which is a source of challenge and/or conflict for many persons:
the question of religious leaders, and doctrine,
and “discipline” and sweet things of that nature!

Suffice it to say for now

—until we address this somewhat in looking at the Christian church—

that the religious community, like any community,
is not a homogenous entity, but an organic whole.

A community is characterized by *unity* not *uniformity*.

A community is a communal reality whose unity
is understood analogically with the human body.

In speaking of community, we spontaneously speak of a body:

body politic, corporate body, religious body, etc.

Our understanding of reality in general proceeds in such analogical fashion.

A community is like a body.

And every *body* has a head (everybody has a head!—more or less!).

That is why most newly-formed groups first seek to establish a leader.

In community, there is always some form of *leader-ship*.

Let us now situate the Church.

Let us turn to the particular organized religion of Christianity

(more specifically, the Catholic Church),

whose members believe that God has deigned to reveal certain things.

Christians believe that that God has intervened in a special way

in the God-man, Jesus.

And he does a most marvelous thing:

in introducing individuals into the mystery of God,

he binds them to one another.

The Church is first and foremost the Mystical Body.

The Church is *essentially* the Mystical Body.

What is the Mystical Body?

Again, *body* suggests oneness, organic oneness, oneness in diversity:

the various members as one, the different members as one.

What brings about the oneness? Love. Love joins.

Love's first fruit is oneness.

In the Mystical Body, we are *joined to*, we are *one with*

Christ the Head and one another—well beyond our awareness.

If we were aware of it, we would be running to Church

(or away from Church!): it is too intense.

It is not something of which are aware, but *in which we believe*.

And we then seek to act accordingly.

The victory of divine love (joining very diverse people:

“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...”)

has been won.

It is our responsibility—in our freedom—to welcome it,

to let it take hold of us more realistically and more deeply.

And liturgy is a unique way to do this.

The Mystical Body is God's initiative.

Now, in a sense, the Mystical Body extends

beyond the visible bounds of the Church.

In a sense, it extends to all of humanity

inasmuch as God is quite freely at work in humanity.

Only in heaven will we contemplate with amazement

his merciful, creative work:

that of imbuing with his love much more than we ever imagined.

At the same time, we like to believe that there is a particular “density” to the Mystical Body there where members call upon the Head, i.e. Jesus, more explicitly.

I like to think that there is greater density where he is being called upon, (because he respects our freedom and wants a relationship of love) and where he bestows special gifts which have an objective character, (gifts that are bestowed regardless of how little those upon whom he bestows them call upon him). Again, he acts freely and generously.

Jesus, the Christ, the God-man bestows many gifts.

When you love, you shower with gifts!

For Catholics, the three greatest gifts are probably:

his Word, the Eucharist, and his mother Mary.

Now, think about when we love and bestow gifts:

we can give things that we make or purchase, we can give time, ideas...

We tend to like to give something things that, if possible, will last.

Hence, the tradition of giving things that are symbolic: mementos.

Now, imagine giving

- words that unveil a mystery
- your body
- your mother (some may be thinking, “How about my mother-*in-law*? I would love to give her to someone!”).

We believe that Jesus gives these mysterious gifts.

They are: really precious, really intimate, really lasting.

These gifts build the Mystical Body, make us church.

“May they be one” is Jesus’ powerful request from the Father.

And the new commandment, “Love one another”

—which expresses the Mystical Body, was given at the Last Supper, when Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the gift whose purpose, in communicating divine love, is the Mystical Body.

The gift of Jesus’ body, in particular, as we see at the Last Supper,
has been entrusted to the Church.

In other words, for the Eucharist, special ministers are established (we are not going to discuss here the delicate question of who can or should be priests...).

We indeed read in the Scriptures Jesus calling to himself, in a particular way, 72 disciples, then 12 disciples, whom he called “apostles”, then taking 3 with him, then choosing 1 to guide in a special way.

He calls to himself a particular group

—not because they are better or more important, but simply because he likes to make use of instruments, and, in his wisdom, they are the ones he chooses.

For what does Jesus like to make use of instruments?

Jesus likes to make use of instruments *to feed His friends*.

And what does he feed his friends?

Most intimately, he feeds his friends his body, himself: unusual!

His body is a tangible gift and he makes use of tangible hands

to render it present and to give it.

This rendering present, and the celebration and receiving of this gift, makes for what should be the peak gathering of the Christian community.

Indeed, the Church speaks of the Eucharist as a *source* and *summit*.

So why the Church?

What should one respond when confronted with the old,

“I don’t need to go to Church to pray.”

Why the Church? Because we *are* Church.

And because of the Eucharist—the gift for us to be Church,

which is *of the community* and *for the community*.

Again, the Eucharist is deeply personal but it is not just about me.

The Eucharist is not a “pit stop”.

It is an experience of the Mystical Body.

It is *Sacramental Body* for the sake of *Mystical Body*.

If I may digress regarding the Mass....

Unfortunately, Mass has become the *basic* experience,

the *only* experience most people have in the Church.

Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist, is *not* the basic experience.

It is the *peak* experience.

And if there is not much to prepare the ascent, e.g. real community life, nourishment for the mind, engaging arts, merciful outreach, meditation, etc. it is not surprising that people become disillusioned, bored, whatever.

It is difficult to focus spiritually,

i.e. on the essence of what is happening spiritually in the Mass, if

- we are not being fed in other ways
- we are not experiencing the divine life in complementary ways
- we are not *living* Church elsewhere
- we are not *a living Church* outside of Mass.

The simplicity, the somewhat repetitive nature of the Mass is fitting as a peak experience of divine love. Why? Because

1. we need to be lifted in such a way as to focus somehow on the invisible—which the Mass normally should do.
2. love beckons simplicity and a certain quietness. Indeed, the more love deepens, the quieter it becomes.

The simplicity and repetitive nature of the Mass are *not terribly fitting* as a basic introductory experience.

The Mass is designed to invite us, in a unique way—through the symbolic use of the body—to be very present, and to go beyond the visible, to make use of what is happening liturgically as a springboard to God.

But such use of the body presupposes

- being awake interiorly
- interior acts of love
- a deliberate raising of the heart and mind to God.

Otherwise, instead of presence, there is terrible absence —and increasingly so because rote, repetitive behavior can allow one to be increasingly removed, i.e. further and further away...

How many Catholics go through the motions and do not really know why there are at Mass?

Ritual, which is a beautiful expression of the Church as body, when poorly explained and lived, can do a *disservice*.

Now, as mentioned, for this experience in the Church, this experience of Church, there are particular servants: priests. Some of you may be thinking that all of this sounds fine, sounds beautiful, but the real issue, when it comes to organized religion, is the organized part, the leadership which seems to fall into control games.

It is very important to keep in focus what we have been developing: the Church in her essence, in her everlasting aspect, the Mystical Body.

Priests, the hierarchy, are particular servants of the Mystical Body.

Unfortunately, being subtle by nature —because about love and for the sake of love— our perspective on such things can easily be distorted.

Very easily we do not look with eyes of love.

Love can be overshadowed by considerations

of power and social prominence
—which, all too often, is the prism through which we look at the Church.

Now, it is true, according to what Christians believe to be revelation, that, in the midst of his ministers, Jesus established Peter a *particular* shepherd—*to feed*, to be guardian in a particular way of the feeding of the flock.

The Mystical Body, although primarily an interior reality, fittingly has a visible head, a universal shepherd, who, in the name of Jesus, i.e. in the *person* of Jesus, is to feed the flock.

This shepherd we nowadays also call *Pope*, from the Greek for “father”, suggesting a loving, caring bond.

The Pope is also called the *servant of servants*
(a title first used by Pope Saint Gregory I in the late 6th century)

a reality that a hierarchical model expresses poorly
and, in a sense, can even obscure. The Pope does not stand above.

The Pope stands *below, carrying and feeding*.

Jesus never spoke of a hierarchy. We tend to when speaking of leadership.
Jesus spoke of *shepherds, of feeding*.

Shepherds, if they are true shepherds, must, like the Good Shepherd, lay down their lives for their flock.

If somehow we could free our minds
when we think of leadership in the Church
and largely replace the top-down model with a “bottom-up” model,
we would be in a better position to express
the reality of Christian leadership, of spiritual or mystical leadership.

“Leaders” in the Church have as their primary role

to enable us to eat the spiritual foods that God, that Jesus offers.

Now, some may be thinking,

“Fine, then tell them to feed me,

but not tell me what to do in my personal life.”

The question then is that of teaching.

The teaching of the hierarchy consists primarily in pointing to the mystery of God, and highlighting the spiritual foods we believe God offers.

If their role, then, is that of feeding with *spiritual* foods,

why the involvement in *moral* issues which are complex and very personal?

Is there not an important distinction between the “spiritual” and the “moral”?

There *is*. The Church makes a distinction between “faith and morals”,

thereby acknowledging the realm of personal relationship with God,

and the realm of human interaction. And we need to discern accordingly.

We need to maintain the distinction (which does not mean *total separation*).

We come to Church to

- be fed spiritually
- hear proclaimed things that point to the hidden nature of God
- receive God as food, to receive the Eucharist.

We do not come to be told what to do.

We *are*, however, hopefully nourished in our minds as well,

so that *we* can discern what best to do.

The moral realm is a complex one, and the discernment as to

- what is most respectful of the individual and the other
- the interplay between human freedom and human rights and dignity

is an ongoing one. And there is some grey when it comes to individual situations...

The Church does speak of obedience—which makes some people cringe.

We must be careful not to project what is true of children with respect to their parents onto life in the Church.

We are to be *child-like*, that is, trusting and open to instruction.

But we are adults.

Is not obedience in the Church first obedience to *Christ*, which translates into intelligent cooperation, in which we presume that Church teaching is the fruit of much prayer and reflection?

Let me try further to situate Church teaching,
for some may be wondering what to do with teachings
that do not resonate with them.

I realize that I am walking on a tight-rope here!

The Church's teaching seeks to confirm and "crystallize" what has come to be grasped by the living Tradition.

In other words, the Church's teaching seeks to confirm and "crystallize" divine revelation, as it is received by believers.

Catholics believe that the Church has a certain teaching authority.

Authority, however, does not mean a select few who "know-it-all", while the masses wallow in ignorance.

There are certain members of the Church entrusted with the task of teaching in a special way, but it is necessarily a collaborative effort,

a collaboration with the whole Body of believers, living and deceased.

Authority is a service with a view to the end, with the end in sight.

The end is our union with God.

In teaching, the Church is engaged with particular grave responsibility, in pointing the way to our end, to our union with God.

Church teaching ought, therefore, to send me back to Jesus.

We must use Church teaching as a stepping stone to Jesus, in whose light alone we can receive and begin to understand it.

Church teaching is not an end in itself.

So what are we to do with Church teaching when we struggle with it?

Some may disagree with Church teaching.

Does this make them “cafeteria Catholics”?

I find the expression unfortunate.

Why? Because it

- does not distinguish sufficiently between faith and morals
- does not grant persons room to wrestle with issues
- suggests knowing what occurs in another heart

Only God does.

There are persons inside the Church (and outside the Church)

who are deeply in love with God who do not see eye-to-eye with the Church on certain moral issues.

Does that make them less faith-filled?

No, faith is first about God, not morals.

Faith's object is God, not morals.

It is fine to struggle with Church teaching.

But faith, at the same time, opens us, humbles us,
and makes us willing to revisit our perspective
and go further in understanding.

It is important to keep in mind that Church teaching
is given in a faith perspective, which is not a spontaneous perspective.
The Church, in its teaching, seeks to grant a faith perspective
—including on moral issues (which are first philosophical human questions).
Faith enables my mind to touch God in a new way.
Faith is a gift with which we seek, the best we can, to cooperate.

And so we need to approach Church teaching
there where we are most likely to be in a faith perspective: in prayer.
In prayer we rest in God, and learn to see with his eyes,
and can thus begin to address what is being taught in relation to him.
Church teaching is something we come to little by little.
This does not mean that we engage it
only once we have completely understood it.
This means that we must not fear struggle.
This means that we must accept that the depth of it might surpass us,
because the mystery of Jesus surpasses us.

If we are honest and truthful,
we will not only accept any struggle there may be, but we will simply,
in gratuitous fashion, seek to understand what is taught.

There is a loving obligation—given the mystery of Tradition,
 given the fact that we are not the Author of revelation.

Faith begs understanding. Faith calls for intelligent cooperation.

My relationship with Jesus incites me to try to understand Church teaching.

This quest for understanding indeed stems from my relationship with Jesus.

Now, know that, in the evening of our lives,
 we will not be judged on how well we lived
 in conformity with Church teaching.

We will be judged, as said Saint John of the Cross, on love,
 on how much we loved—God and neighbor.

But if we truly seek to love God, to love Christ,
 we come to grasp that we are bound to all those who are bound to him
 and cannot receive his light without them: the mystery of Tradition.

And so if we are truly bound to Jesus, we cannot, in all honesty,
 ignore what has been grasped by Tradition and explicated by the Church.

It is a question of intellectual honesty.

We may not agree, but we engage.

A true intention to love always implies openness
 to ideas other than our own—especially about the one we love.

Allow me to close with a pastoral principle stated in the Roman catechism,
 and re-stated in the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church, which I
 have quoted on many occasions:

“The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to
 the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief,

for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.”