

Readings: [Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time | USCCB](#)

There are many popular objections to religion these days:

*Religion kills. Religion is child abuse. I don't believe in religion just like I don't believe in fairies. Religion is man-made so I don't believe in God. Religion promises heaven in your future just so you can be controlled in the present.*

They are becoming more and more prevalent in my own millennial generation and young adults who are leaving their childhood faith at higher rates than ever.

Since sharing my own experience with difficulties in belief these last few weeks I've gotten many people both from the community and online who listen to the homily that they have a friend, a sibling, a daughter or son, a grandson, who now rejects religion on similar grounds and are at a loss at what to do, what to say...

So, since our readings today offer the topic of religion, and since it is back to school time, in solidarity for all of our students I'd like to offer you a brief crash course on God and origin of religion through the lens of anthropology and theology with the aim at equipping you with tools to have better **reasonable** conversations with those who hold faith to be unreasonable.

So welcome back to school! Hopefully it will be engaging, informative, thought provoking, faith strengthening, and relatable. Get your thinking cap on, here we go.

I was on my first year of college during that time that I was struggling with belief in God. My academic background is evolutionary biology and anthropology so adding to this inner conflict was how in my classes, the subject of **God** and **religion** were treated as one in the same which led to big questions: *Why are there so many religions? Who is to say that the god of one religion is true over another when all of them claim to be true? Either one of them is true, all of them are true, or all of them are false.*

I recently came across a study done by a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia which is a good example of how current academia approaches the subject. He looks **religion** through the lens of cultural anthropology and his research suggests that religion emerged in society as a response to **population growth**. As groups of human communities grew larger, so did tension among the people because well, where two or more are gathered there is nothing but peace and love... YEAH RIGHT! Where two or more are gathered, the greater the chance of evil, theft, murder, unchastity, greed, malice etc... and since we are social beings who need to live in community, then there needed to be some sort of system, a mechanism, to help these new larger societies keep order and thrive without killing each other.

So people started to come up with rules and commandments for moral behavior. Occasionally they experienced unexplained natural disasters like storms, earthquakes, fires, and droughts which can be frightening if you don't know what is causing them, so they began to associate those natural disasters with the breaking of those rules, and the

logical explanation was that it must be some sort of invisible powerful entities which were causing those events as punishments for not following the commands of social order. Since humans tend to be ritualistic, rituals and sacrifices were established to keep the gods from creating these disasters and thus emerged the invention of religion and the conception of gods. He noted that the stronger the religious belief, the more united the community, and the greater chances of survival, which is why religion has become such a powerful tool for crowd control in just about every culture across history.

I don't know about you, but I find studies like these fascinating. They give reasonable explanation which make sense, and it fits almost all religions including ours. So it is not surprising that a young Catholic who might already be struggling with belief like I was runs into these studies, looks at their religious practice as nothing but rules and rituals to follow lest you be punished with hell, and thus conclude that yes, religion and God is a superstitious human invention and therefore something to be left behind. Besides, now we have science... and so many leave...

The thing is, *God* and *religion* are *not* the same thing, and that is a **necessary distinction** and separation that as people of faith we must make and help others see as well. It is when we treat the two as equals, that we find difficulties and contradictions.

First, *what is religion*. In its most basic definition, religion is a set of beliefs and rituals that emerge within cultures for reasons like the ones proposed by the psychologists from the University of British

Columbia. That is why religion seems to make part of almost every culture in every age, why there are so many of them, and why there are similarities between them. Almost all of them have moral codes. Almost all of them have creation stories. Almost all of them have a three-tier worldview: the heavens, earth, and the underworld. Almost of them have purity rituals and some sort of sacrificial component.

So, in its basic definition, yes, religion itself is a man-made concept so someone comes to you and tells you that they don't believe in God because religion is man-made, you can say with confidence: *you are right, religion is a human construct, which is a good thing that **God is not a religion***. They will look at you with surprised confusion, which leads us to **point number two in separating God from religion, *who then is God***.

Let's start with the gospel. Scripture makes a clear distinction between God and human religion. Jesus wasn't shy about harshly calling out what he called *human traditions* of the pharisees.

The pharisees were known to have many rituals. The reason is because their ancestors had experienced slavery which they interpreted as a punishment from God for not following the rules, so out of fear, they emphasized external rituals as a way to keep God happy.

Jesus wants to heal their trauma, wants to heal their confusion, their equating God with religion, and to do so makes an important distinction and emphasizes that the truth of God is found, not in religion itself, not in their rituals, but *in the human heart*. What does this mean?

In the Catholic intellectual tradition, we hold that although the origin of religion is man-made, what religion tries to achieve (*though very unsuccessfully*), which is to bring peace, hope and unity in community, that desire itself is not man made, but rather, the origin of that desire is God. St. Paul in the second reading describes this as “the word that has been planted in you.” St. Augustin described it as our hearts being restless until they rest in God. St. Thomas Aquinas described this as transcendental desires for truth, beauty, and justice.

How can we come to know God *in the heart*? We come to know the things that exist as we experience them through our senses: sight, touch, feel, smell, intellect... and we can relate to that which we know and understand. But God is different than the things that we come to know, and therefore, to know God, we need a different way of thinking, otherwise we get stuck in the question “well who created God?” God is not a being; God is being itself. God does not exist; God is existence itself.

Because this is so different then how we normally know and relate to other beings, the only way we can come to know God is not from religion, but from God own self *revelation*, meaning that God wants to be known. The way in which God reveals himself to us is through our own natural human experience and language which is twofold: our inner life, our conscience and intuition which we describe through the image of the heart, and our outer life which is language often manifest through ritual.

Because we ourselves are beings and need external language to know and be in relationship with one another, God *uses the powerful tool of religion and ritual* as a *way of communicating and establishing a relationship with us*, but is also adamant about differentiating between God in the heart and our own human tradition, because human traditions are not always godly... they can defile.

When the Pharisees failed to see this distinction, they discriminated against the vulnerable for the sake of their own appearance. When the Catholic institution did this, they called upon crusades, forced conversions. When radical Taliban leaders do this, they come out as suicide bombers... all of these acts of defilement done “*in the name of God*” when really it was just their own human invention.

That is why God is constantly defending himself, differentiating himself from our erroneous religious inclinations and at the same time, trying to use this powerful tool of religion towards something good. In the Old Testament, God begins shift commandments from things to be followed or lest you be punished, to towards following them because they will guide us in right relationship with God and one another.

This would make sense why Jesus time and time again called out the problem with religion like he does in the gospel today, and at the same time, say things he did not come to abolish the law but fulfill it. Same reason why he himself also established new rituals to be united with God... Jesus is not rejecting religion itself, transforming it as a tool for right relationship.

This is what gives religion the potential of being an actual instrument for good rather than evil. Saint Paul stressed that a “religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction...” If our religion is not moving us towards greater care and love for all humanity, especially the most vulnerable, then what we profess is not God, but merely human traditions.

**Let’s wrap it up now, how are we doing?** As Christians, we hold **that** God’s word, God’s desire to be known, is found in the person of Christ, and Christ is found in each human heart, calling and pulling us towards relationship: Love of God, neighbor, and self. Everything that we do as Catholics, all our rituals, the rules we follow, all of those only make sense when they are instruments in deepening our relationship with Christ and one another, and in doing so, is actually a powerful tool for good in the world.

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When people approach us with reasons for their rejection of God and religion, yes, be ready to give them good sound reasons for your faith, to distinguish between what religion is, and who God is, but most importantly, be ready simply be Christ to them. At the end, no one can argue with an experience of love.

+ Fr. Carlos Orozco