

FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about Faith and Religion

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*The **second** of four excerpts from a talk given by him at the recent World Youth Day in Lisbon.*

3. Why do I Need Religion At All?

....At this point someone might say, “Well, O.K., so maybe I believe in God. But can’t I be happy without religion? I mean, what’s the point? Who needs all those rules? I can get support from all sorts of places outside of religion. So who needs it?”

The answer is yes, you can be happy without religion. I’m sure you know many people who might believe in God, but have zero interest in going to any sort of church service, much less be baptized.

So why do you need religion? Here I would like to distinguish between faith and religion. Faith is belief in God. Religion is believing in God as part of a community, with other people—believing together, worshipping together and journeying together.

Now a lot of people prefer that it just be “God and me.” And there is a certain appeal to that. It’s important to have a personal relationship with God and to explore that in depth. That’s what a lot of Jesuit spirituality is about: how to experience a one-on-one relationship with God.

But there’s a problem: As social animals we naturally want to be with other people, even if it’s difficult. That’s one reason that Jesus called a group of disciples together: not only for his own friendship but because he knew that the disciples would need one other.

Even if you look at something as simple as concerts or sporting events, you can see that we’re drawn to be together. It’s great to listen to music on your own, but isn’t it different when you’re at a concert with friends? It’s nice to celebrate your birthday by yourself, but isn’t it nicer with friends and family? We’re social animals. I mean here you are at World Youth Day! You could have stayed home, right, and just watched it streaming, right? So “God and me” denies the reality of community.

To paraphrase the American priest Isaac Hecker, the founder of the Paulist Fathers, religion helps you to connect but also to “correct.” Or rather be corrected. Because if it’s just you and God then there is no one to challenge you. Let’s say, for example, you’ve decided that it’s O.K. just to ignore poor people. You figure, as one character says in E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*, “The poor are the poor. One is sorry for them, but there it is.” And that’s the end of that.

Religion will help correct you in that. You have a whole tradition that pushes up against that. Not only of Jesus explicitly telling us to help the poor in the Gospels (Matthew 25 most bluntly) but also the tradition of Catholic social teaching and, more broadly, the Christian legacy of social justice. Or, before that, the Jewish tradition of caring for the widow and the orphan. Put more positively, religion helps you to understand more about God. Because God isn’t just at work in you: God is at work in the community, as we Catholics say, the people of God.

Here’s another way to look at the need for community. I have led several pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and we visit all the sites where Jesus was born, lived, preached, healed, died and rose from the dead. It’s amazing - life-changing really - to see places that Jesus himself saw. And at the end of each day, we have what we call “faith sharing,” where I ask people to describe something meaningful, interesting or

significant that has happened to them in the day. And the amazing thing is that people's reactions vary widely. One person will find sunrise on the Sea of Galilee a deeply moving experience; another might say, "Meh." And here you see how the Spirit is at work in different ways.

The Holy Spirit meets people where they are, and different things touch different people. But if it's just you and God and you're not in a community, then you miss out on all those different ways! You miss out on connecting with the faith lives of others and you miss out on seeing God in unfamiliar ways, and, therefore, you miss out on connecting with God in new ways.

So the community, also known as religion, helps to correct us and connect us. More basically, without religion you're missing something fundamental about God himself, or Godself, who is, you could say, a community. The Trinity is a community of love, each relating to one another. So without community you're not really encountering God.

4. Aren't all Religions the Same?

So maybe you say: "O.K., I guess it makes sense to join a community, but why would I want to join yours? Aren't they all the same anyway? Does it matter what I believe?"

And here, as much as I am all in favour of interfaith relations and ecumenism, I would say that it does matter. Let's start with Christianity.

What's the difference? Well, to begin with, unlike other world religions, Christians have a specific idea of God. We see God as a personal God. It is a God who takes an interest in what we call "salvation history." In St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, a four-week retreat where we meditate on the life of Christ, Ignatius invites us to start at the beginning of Jesus' life. The very beginning: he asks us to imagine the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - looking down on the earth and seeing everyone's needs. Ignatius asks us to imagine the Trinity looking at some people being born, others dying, others being sick, others well, people laughing and crying, but people, overall, in need of help. And the Trinity decides to send the Second Person, Jesus Christ, to join us.

When you visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, you have to enter through a rather strange opening. Originally, the entrance was huge, so large that people could ride horses into it. Then because of subsequent invasions, in order to make it more difficult to enter, the doorway was blocked off, and today it's only about four feet high, and you have to crouch or kneel to enter. So the name of the entrance is the Door of Humility.

Now that door is usually seen as relating to our humility, but I also think of God's humility, choosing to become human, choosing to become one of us, so much did God love us. This then, is not some apathetic, distant God.

So now we finally come to Jesus, because in the end, the Christian religion is not a series of rules and regulations, or philosophical or theological propositions, and certainly not about an argument with another religion about which one is better. No, it's about a person: Jesus. It's important to have rules and regulations - any human organization needs them to exist. Have any of you ever lived in a house off campus without rules? Even World Youth Day has some rules. More importantly, we need a moral code to live by. But, in the end, our faith is not about a series of laws, it's about an encounter with a person: Jesus Christ. We are invited to come to know him, to let him know us and to follow him. Not just worship him, by the way, which he never says. More basically, to follow.