

Why Religious Institutions?

I write this as a lay person who attends religious worship services about once a month and also on the big holidays. You wouldn't describe me as overly devout. I do enjoy the sense of peace and connectivity with the rest of mankind during a worship service. However, when I sit there and look around at the other congregants, I'm struck by the comparison to my childhood. Everyone seemed to attend worship services regardless of religion at least weekly back then, whereas now there are more empty seats than occupied seats. I also observe that most of the attendees are getting older, so the bullpen situation looks weak. I understand that attendance has been declining at all religious institutions in America for some time, but the situation in Europe is reported to be even worse. Five thousand years of organized religious activity seems to be disappearing within a generation or two.

What's changed? Well, we certainly all have more stuff today. We have more and larger TVs in our houses, way more shows to watch, more and fancier cars compared to the old family car, cell phones, the Internet, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and all kinds of media on which to spend our time. There isn't enough time to keep up with all of this so we're forced to text to keep up while we're working or even driving. In addition to school, when my kids were growing up they had more activities than hours in the day. It wasn't until well into high school that they learned through experience to avoid overloading their time (which meant their parents' time too). How could you even think about going to church on Sunday when you had swim team practice or soccer practice?

All of this stuff is competition for time. Parents work all kinds of hours to afford all this stuff. And yet, when we step back and look at our society, we find something unsatisfactory and unsettling about it. The news media bombards us daily with examples of our polarization where our elected representatives can no longer compromise because "it's my way or the highway". We see the results of road rage incidents which result from the rudeness on the roads that we all experience every day. We keep hearing about increasing drug addiction and the opioid epidemic found in every part of our country and in every type of town or neighborhood. Internet apps have taken the old issue of schoolyard bullying to never before imagined levels and impacts. There's a coarseness and vulgarity in our speech that has become the norm (doesn't everyone use the f-bomb?) All of this adds up to an overall lack of civility in interactions with other people in our country. Was there ever a mass shooting a generation ago?

So I start to think about how we can change all this. I look at all of our institutions for a solution, but conclude none of them are up to the task. Our corporations are among the most successful in the world, we have a pretty good school system, plenty of great colleges and universities, modern medical institutions, one of the best militaries in the world and various levels of democratically elected government. However, none of these organizations are designed to deal with the underlying issues of our situation.

Only religious institutions teach us from earliest childhood how to get along with other people. The underlying principles of every religion provide us with an understanding of how we fit into this world and what our role is and what is expected of us in dealing with the rest of humanity. They provide us with a code of accepted and expected behavior within a culture of promoting good and positive behaviors.

Now certainly we can all point to periods in the history of various religions where their actions were less than stellar and fell short of their own teachings. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that any organizations led by human beings will have failings. However, I don't think that this is any reason for us to avoid attending the religious institutions of our choice. No, in fact, I think it's just the opposite. It is exactly the action of attendance by more individuals and their various diversities that will tend to keep any deviations from teachings in check.

By and large, religious institutions are the only inherently positive forces in our society; it's what they do. Maybe it's time we start attending religious institutions again and getting in touch with our kinder and gentler sides.

In addition to their primary role of addressing and supporting the spiritual sides of our human nature, they also run programs for the greater community at large. They run food banks to feed the needy, support homeless shelter programs, provide space for Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops and other civic organizations and raise funds for the less fortunate. All of this is accomplished with volunteer efforts. If you've ever felt the need to get involved in your community and want to help others, just contact the religious institution of your choice. They all need help and they all need willing participants. I would advocate that we all come out, meet some new people and work with our neighbors. It will help you begin to develop your spiritual needs and your need to help others and your need to be a part of it all. We all need to re-prioritize. Why not try this solution? What've you got to lose? You might just find something that's worth more to you than some of the stuff you have.