

What we owe God: Recovering the virtue of religion

It is unfortunate that “religion” has become as a bad word, a source of division and hypocrisy, or, even among Christians, something that points to our own efforts over and against God’s grace.

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We are not used to thinking about owing anything to God. In many ways, **religion has become focused on “me,” going to Church therapeutically to feel good about oneself.** In reality, we owe God everything.

Religion, traditionally understood, sought to render to God the worship, homage and thanksgiving that was due to him as God, the one who made us, cares for us and saves us. In Catholic

theology, this was understood as an expression of justice, rendering a debt unto God, which is fulfilled by the virtue of religion.

A virtue refers to a habitual disposition to perform a good action, so that it becomes like second nature. Religion becomes a virtue when we have a readiness and ease in giving God what we owe him. We could never, of course, pay back all that he deserves in strict justice, although sacrifice expresses our desire to give ourselves to God, acknowledging our dependence and need to order all things to him. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, **the virtue of religion does not focus solely on worshipping and serving God, as it also directs all of our actions toward God for his glory, making our entire life religious.**

Making our entire life religious, an offering of all that we are and do, stands completely at odds with our culture's secularism. We like to keep religion tidily in the corner, as a more or less acceptable opinion or way to spend a Sunday morning. Christians can live a secular life, even if they go to church, if faith remains confined there. God does not just want an hour a week. **He wants us to live our entire lives with, in and through him.** It is not simply that God demands our attention; we desperately need him and the guidance of his grace. **Worship puts us into right relation with him by recognizing his primacy and humbly putting ourselves before him to receive his blessing.**

Although the word “religion” has long been a part of our theology and is, of course, a basic concept in world history, we have grown increasingly uncomfortable with it. “Religion” has become as a bad word, a source of division and hypocrisy, or, even among Christians, something that points to our own efforts over and against God’s grace. **Religion remains important, however, because we are spiritual beings who are also material, needing an exterior expression of our interior life, and also social beings, who cannot worship God and order life to him in isolation.** The Christian faith necessarily includes the religious worship of the Eucharist and other sacraments that enable us to relate to God in a tangible, human way.

We are also uncomfortable with religion because it seems to lead into a web of relativism, entangled in competing claims with no hope of discerning what is true or how it all fits together. **If religion is a moral virtue, a part of justice, we can say that it belongs to human nature to recognize our dependence upon God, to worship him and to order our lives to him.** Human beings have sought to do this in

various ways, although on our own we are limited and so easily fall into error.

We also manipulate religion in superstitious and idolatrous ways, subordinating religion to our own desires for control and material possessions. God's grace liberates religion, revealing the true God to us so that we can know him clearly and teaching us how to worship him rightly. The Bible expresses right religion first in the imperfect sacrifices of the Old Testament and then in the perfect offering that Christ made of himself on the Cross. Jesus unlocks the meaning and purpose of religion by showing us that what we owe God is the complete sacrifice and gift of ourselves back to him in love. Religion ultimately points to the communion that God desires to have with us.

We need to recover the virtue of religion to refocus us on the primacy of God. **His glory should shine forth in the life and liturgy of the Church; he is what is most needed in our lives and in our country.** Religion points us to God's centrality and the urgent necessity of recovering a right relation with him that will reorder our priorities.

If you are interested in reading more about this neglected virtue and how it rightly orders us to God, see Scott Hahn and Brandon McGinley's *It Is Right and Just: Why the Future of Civilization Depends on True Religion* (Emmaus, 2020), which focuses on the need to recover religion for our society, and my own recent scholarly study, *The Primacy of God: The Virtue of Religion in Catholic Theology* (Emmaus Academic, 2022), which explores the continued importance of religion for understanding human history, the spiritual life and theology.

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