

Identifying "Catholics" and weaponizing mysteries

June 21st 2021

By Thomas O'Loughlin | United Kingdom



Some theological notes on religion, right belief and the essence of belonging

Mention the name of any religion and the first reaction of contemporary, western, first world and secular society people will be to ask about its content: what do they believe?

The emphasis is, at once, on a list of ideas about the universe, human life, purpose and what, if anything, is beyond the universe.

Once I have such a list, I can then tick the ones I also accept and a cross off those I consider weird, wrong or simply crazy.

Interestingly, this is the same way we approach various philosophies, political systems or any number of off-the-shelf spirituality books.

The world is a marketplace of various beliefs and you can either buy the "whole package" (a whole religion with every one of its beliefs -- if you can list them all); the "lite version" (what you take as the key items you can believe and then skip the bits that look silly or awkward or just too complicated); or you can have the "pick & choose" selection that you make to order.

Ticking all the boxes

Few ever question the idea that, for example, if you wish to be a Catholic, then it's key that you sign-up to "all the Catholic beliefs".

Moreover, people sometimes say "I am no longer a Catholic" or "I could not be a Catholic" because "I no longer" or "cannot believe X, Y. or Z.

This focus on beliefs – statements that demand acceptance – is not only reinforced by our culture of ideologies, but by a long history of the western Churches fighting over which is the exact beliefs and statements of beliefs that are declared orthodox.

All this fighting, and this emphasis on having the right set of beliefs, makes it ever harder to distinguish between a religion and a philosophy, or between a religion and a political party.

Indeed, for many Christians today the notion of a "party line" is almost identical with "orthodoxy" and with belonging to a religion. A good example of this would be some Catholics, including some bishops, in the United States.

This confusion is demonstrated in that they conduct debates or discussions with their fellow Christians – their brothers and sisters in the Christ (if they listen to Paul or the liturgy) – with the same venom, bitterness and suspicion that they conduct their party politics.

While I might condemn such animosity-driven politics that damages the public forum and the common good, I am scandalized when I find the same style being used in the name of Christianity or Catholicism.

It is another instance of what I call "the Sin of Cain": sibling rising against sibling, made worse because it is done in the name of the God who is Father of each of us.

But is there any other way to view a religion?

Where do I belong?

Religion is also a means of belonging, it gives me a home with others so that I can share a vision, help and be helped, and affirm with others all that is part and parcel of my humanity.

I need, we all need, to belong more than we need a box of doctrines or set of beliefs. If I do not belong, my humanity is enfeebled.

I need to exercise care for others and I need the care of others. Cut off, I wither.

While we might find *Robinson Crusoe* a good read, and there is a streak of devil-take-the-hindmost individualism in our culture, it is actually a vision of horror. We really are social animals!

During these COVID-19 lockdowns we have started to discover this as a reality in a way that we could not have imagined a year ago.

On the one hand, people's mental health is suffering when they are cut off from others. They know just how much they need to be with others (and zoom and skype and facetime are poor substitutes), and they need to know that they are not forgotten.

We need to belong!



The full verse reads: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are."

On the other hand, we have discovered the joy and energy that comes from looking out for other another. Knowing that, somehow, we all belong to one another, We are, each of us, the keeper of our sisters and brothers.

We want to be able to know that there is an "us" and that we are working together. And – working with people we might never have met before [COVID-19](#) – that belonging to the human family is more important than divisions caused by lists of beliefs that can set us at loggerheads.

Perhaps we need now to think of religion as belonging before we think of it as believing?

Frightening consequences of truly belonging

This is, of course, a frightening prospect for many people. They love the idea that, for example, the Catholic Church is a monolith. Unflinching it stands there – and there are clear lines indicating who is "in" and who is "out".

This attracts many who see themselves as the great champions of faith and it appeals to those who want the Catholic Church as their enemy – and an enemy that is monolith is an easy target. Both sides see a very close link between religion and social control and cohesion.

However, the Church is first and foremost a place of belonging: we are welcomed into the Church at baptism. We become a brother or a sister of both the Christ and of one another – look at how we address one another at our formal gatherings – and we become daughters and sons of the Father in heaven – look at how we pray: "Our Father..."

It is as this community, this Church, that we profess our faith: it is our common vision, hope, and commitment. It is not a series of questions on a form such as we might get at a customs barrier where you are excluded if you do not tick the right boxes.

Once one begins to think of the Church as a place of belonging, then the fireworks begin.

It must be a community of welcoming and acceptance that works together. It must be a community that puts forgiveness and reconciliation close to its center.

So a sacrament of reconciliation makes sense, but not if reconciliation and healing are seen as "payback time" or a moral rectitude test. Such a community must have healing at its center, but not if that is seen as a re-modelling to a standard issue.

And we must work together because belonging must be an awareness of all our human bonds and belongings.

Consequently...

Will this be a "home" where every race will be made to feel valued? Will Black Lives Matter in this place – along with people of every other color? We might glibly say "yes" but we are less than 200 years since we Catholics defended slavery as acceptable within the divine plan!

Will this be a place where we accept people as they are? "Yes" comes the resounding answer. But will the gay couple see their love as valued in this community as that of the straight couple?

What about the couple that are each divorced from their former partners and are willing to join up with us so that we have a common pilgrimage of faith?

Will they have a place at our table where they can share the loaf and cup of the Lord with us as siblings? We all know too many clergy and groups who have used the Lord's Supper as if it were a reward for rule keeping rather than food to help us travel on together.

And will we work together for humanity and the health of the planet? Again, "it goes without saying" is our response! But what about our being willing to change lifestyles and helping one another in putting pressure on governments for this?

The people of the covenant

Belonging sounds so sweet: it rapidly becomes the challenge to faith that is far more demanding than any ticking of credal boxes.

Faith can sound so much like an ideology that we can pervert to communities that make suffering humanity welcome into stifling agenda-driven parties.

Our history – back to the time of Abraham – is not that of God revealing secrets to us but of his making a covenant with us.

Jesus is not a guru. He never wrote a book to convey his ideas. Nor did he have a party-line.

Jesus is the one whom we look back to as making us a new people: children of the Father.

So in Christianity, as in Judaism, belonging is what is fundamental.

***Thomas O'Loughlin** is a presbyter of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor-emeritus of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest book is *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Liturgical Press, 2019).*

Source: <https://international.la-croix.com/>