

Organised Religion

In February 2023, Archbishop Eamon Martin participated in the Oxford Union debate on the motion, 'This House Would Move Beyond Organised Religion.' This is an edited version of his address opposing the motion.



Cardinal Newman once observed that if religion tends towards a 'sentiment and a taste', and if it 'is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy', then such religion becomes 'so personal' and 'so private' that we must of necessity ignore it. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* he wrote, 'Religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery.'

The hallmarks of organised religion include gathering for communal prayer, collective action, leadership, doctrine and tradition. Once these aspects are downplayed then what remains is ultimately the individual's feelings, a disparate collection of voices and a vague sense of being 'spiritual'.

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Organised religion, on the other hand, brings a coherent corpus of teaching, which is the fruit of centuries of reflection on revelation and of dialogue between faith and reason.

The principles of Catholic social doctrine, for example, set out fundamental truths about the human person and his/her destiny, while leaving latitude to individuals to pursue the common good in concrete circumstances.

Despite sustained efforts to confine it to the private sphere, organised religion continues to play a major role in local and global discourse on

the common good. It offers a challenging – hopefully prophetic – voice and provides an important balance to the uncritical acceptance of facile 'groupthink'.

Internally, its authority serves as a bulwark against privatised interpretations of religion which sometimes morph into fanatical distortions, extremism and violent fundamentalism.

In the midst of an ever-shifting consensus in society, organised religion seeks to build a stable foundation by upholding and defending fundamental values and non-negotiable ethical principles – not in a bid to stifle freedom but to protect it against moral relativism.

The Catholic Church is often excoriated in fulfilling this role, especially when she speaks in favour of the sanctity of human life or the nature of marriage, but she might equally encounter opposition when stressing the preferential option for the poor or the need for responsible stewardship of creation.

At the heart of Christianity is charity – the love for your neighbour, inspired by God's love for us. Organised religion brings added value to individual acts of charity; it has the capacity for a collective response to need; it is unafraid to assert the voice of 'the other', and to direct its members to reach beyond the confines of the self in a spirit of solidarity and common purpose.

The Church's historic commitment to founding and operating social services such as schools, hospitals and universities speaks to this communal spirit of charity, mission and often heroic outreach at the service of humanity – especially towards the poor and vulnerable, and those who cannot defend

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themselves. Gathering together in faith offers a crucial community of support and accompaniment; in moments of crisis it helps us confront together the most emotionally charged problems of life such as the mystery of suffering and the inevitability of our death.

We are not atomised individuals who have been created and then abandoned by God to plough our own furrow. Each of us is loved by God who took flesh for our sake and who wishes to share his life with us while we journey together on earth.

The Church is the vessel that gathers God's people together and communicates God's closeness to us.

It is understandable that believers become disaffected when religion is corrupted by power and institutional failings. Although all organisations have shortcomings and can fail, people are rightly shocked and disillusioned when the core values of the Gospel are undermined by infidelity, sin and sometimes even horrific crimes.

That is why organised religion must continually be open to repentance, renewal and conversion.

Religious community can only regain its attractiveness when its leaders and members are true to their calling and coherent in their witness. This is the challenge that continually lies before me and all of us in organised religion.