

Organized religion: Are we better off with or without it?

There is a lot of negative talk on the universalist forums about the institutional church and what is sometimes derisively referred to as “religion.” The institutional aspects of Christianity are associated with religious dogma, as opposed to the so-called spiritual aspects of the gospel and the unadulterated message of Christ, which is to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. In this context, the letter of the law is contrasted with the spirit of the law. Our freedom in Christ is contrasted with the restrictions of legalism. Orthodoxy is sometimes viewed as man-made religion, as opposed to the simplicity of the true message of Jesus and His early followers.

While it is true that many atrocities have been committed in the name of religion, nevertheless, religion has been a great stabilizing force in society throughout the centuries. It has been a great force for good. To say that the institutional aspects of organized religion are a bad thing would be tantamount to saying that all human governments are bad. Just as there are good and bad governmental systems, so it is with organized religion. Even much maligned Islamic fundamentalism has been for the most part a stabilizing force for good. Most forms of governance, both religious and secular, provide order and prevent the forces of evil from reaching their fullest expression. Are some forms of government and religion better than others? Of course! None are perfect.

Here’s the question. Are we better off to seek reforms within existing systems or to overthrow them entirely? Are we better off with, or without, organized religion? In recent years, as I embraced Christian universalism, I found myself becoming very resentful of many aspects of organized Christianity, especially the negative, fundamentalist variety. But here’s the other side of the coin. I must ask myself, what would life be like for me and my two daughters and their families, were it not our upbringing in a fundamentalist, evangelical environment? My moral and ethical values, as well as those of my family, were powerfully and irrevocably shaped by my Christian upbringing. When I was young, I was at church pretty much every time the doors were open. My social life revolved almost exclusively around my church affiliations. Sure, the negative aspects of fundamentalist theology created much doubt and frustration, but I thank God every day for the positive aspects of this experience. There is no telling what mischief I might have gotten into had it not been for the influence of my Christian upbringing, not to mention the ripple effect this would have had on my family.

For this reason, I would prefer to reform the church from within, rather than forsake organized religion altogether. When I look back on my life and my religious upbringing and realize how wonderfully my children have turned out, and their families, I have absolutely no regrets. I am here reminded of the words of Jesus to Peter in Matthew 16:18: *“And I also say to you that you are a rock, and upon this bed-rock I will build My church—and the gates of Hades will not prevail-against it.”*