

The Futility of Religion

We are all religious in one way or another

It has often been said that man is incurably religious. Take a look at almost any culture and you will find pervasive religious symbols and traditions. People who say they are not religious don't understand themselves.

The Bible says that man was created an immortal soul (Genesis 2:7). The quest, "Who am I?" stems from an innate recognition that there is "something more". According to the Bible, we are made in God's image, made for relationship with Him. The quest for the Eternal is universal. It is germane to appreciating the true meaning of life. But that quest is not open-ended. All religions are not the same, despite what universalists want us to believe. Truth does not fit designer religion. We cannot create the real God in our image, tailor-make Him to meet our personal requirements or tastes. When we try to do so we are left with finite shapes of gold, silver, stone or wood, impotent, devoid of life, lacking relationship, unable to satisfy the inner hunger for relationship. Only when we give our hearts and lives to the God-man Jesus Christ can we find enduring satisfaction and spiritual fulfillment.

As I have traveled around the world I have seen this reality constantly. In Thailand, Buddhists prostrate themselves before gilt statues and paintings garlanded with flowers and surrounded with candles and the smoke and smell of incense. In India, the faithful kneel on mats and bow obediently towards Mecca. Crowds of Hindu devotees follow images of Shiva and Ganesh through dusty streets to a loud cacophony of music. Political events in Japan are attended by Shinto ceremonies.

When people confuse religion with the real thing

One of the most overt forms of religious expression in the West is Easter Week, or Semana Santa, in the southern of Spanish city of Seville where I lived for two years.

Seville has an impressive collection of historical sights, including its Cathedral, the largest Gothic building and third largest church, in the world. This massive edifice took more than one hundred years to build. It was constructed on the site of the Almoravid mosque, which was demolished, leaving no more than a minaret, built in 1198, known today as La Giralda. Originally paved internally in such a way that the ruler could ascend to the top and look out over his subjects, without having to humble himself by getting off his horse, this beautiful tower is still open to tourists. From near the summit, beneath the huge bells that sound out all over the old city and a figure serving as a wind vane (hence the name "Giralda, from *girar*, or turn), it is possible to gaze out over the entire city and the languid Guadalquivir River.

The interior of the cathedral contains 44 chapels, mahogany choir stalls, a stunning high altar with gold and silver plundered from the New World (most of it brought back to Spain through this very city), a treasury filled with gold and the bones and other relics belonging to a number of "saints", priceless religious artworks, statues, icons and a tomb said to contain the remains of Christopher Columbus'. To give the reader a sense of the size of the church, the Seville electricity company, Sevillana de Electricidad, installed a new lighting system in preparation for Expo 92, costing more than one million American dollars. The church is an impressive structure and attracts visitors from all over the world.

The Cathedral is not just a tourist site. It is also the centre-point of festivities during Easter Week, as processions leave local parish churches, walk to its front door, exit from the rear and return to their respective parishes, often taking an entire night to do so. In the 17th century Cardinal Niño de Guevara decreed in a rule of ordinances that the shortest possible route should be taken. What this means, however, is that the entire city is given over to the religious processions for a full week of every year.

Early in the 16th century, when the Catholic Church decided to present the *Passion of Christ* to the people of Seville, many of who were uneducated, in an easily understandable way, they commissioned huge wooden figures of Jesus, Mary and popular saints by artists of the time. Those figures were carried in processions by penitents parading together in and out of their major churches as an act of devotion. The realism of this representation proved enduring and Semana Santa celebrations became a permanent feature of Easter in Seville, Malaga and other cities and towns throughout Andalusia.

Today, Easter Week is the most important and visible celebration in the entire country. Festivities begin with the Domingo de Ramos (Palm Sunday) and end with Lunes de Pascua (Easter Monday). It is a celebration of religious passion and the whole country comes alive. Whilst Semana Santa celebrations attract hundreds of thousands of tourists, the forms and traditions are equally about how Spaniards demonstrate their commitment to religion, regardless of spectators.

It is hard to describe the passion and the mood on the streets. Everywhere, one can see enormous religious icons and symbols of faith being carried by the faithful. In Seville alone, there are over 100 such images, often the central figures above altars of large churches. Semana Santa has to be experienced first-hand to be fully appreciated and no words can adequately describe the emotions.

On the night of Easter Thursday there are more than a million people on the streets of the city centre watching the processions. Some stay all night, silently observing the passage of one image after another, at times breaking out into passionate wails or spontaneous songs (known as *saetas*) accompanied by tears.

Ahead of each procession comes a group of *Nazarenos*, in long gowns with hoods. Behind them, in silent procession, walk hundreds of *Penitents*, with crosses or candles over their shoulders, then the figures of the Saints, mounted in structures known as "*pasos*", carried by *Costaleros*, each of whom has to carry a weight of up to 100 kg. All you can see are their shoes (or bare feet). They belong to brotherhoods based in the local parishes. There are such brotherhoods, or *Cofradias* in Seville.

The most impressive *paso* is the image of the Macarena, the local Virgin Mary, accompanied by more than 2,000 people, many in period costume, including Roman soldiers. Crowds of people walk backwards at the same speed as the approaching virgin, which keeps pace with the slow but steady beat of a drum. Other band members periodically launch into strident, high pitched music.

For the people of Seville the appearance of "their" Virgin Mary is the climax. Members of the adoring crowd gaze up at the face of the virgin, with veneration and adoration. As she slowly passes, illuminated by hundreds of candles, looking down on the crowd with humility, pathos and holy appeal, she almost appears real. Members of the crowds cast flowers over her; others call out her name and tears flow unashamedly down their cheeks.

Each *paso* is on the streets for 14 hours; when a procession finishes (back at the parish church where the image normally resides) and the bearers emerge from underneath, the backs of their necks and shoulders are raw and bleeding. The blood and weariness are their gift to the Virgin, their hope of receiving some blessing for their penitence and faithfulness.

Each city and town in Andalucia has its own accent on the celebrations. Nevertheless, they all portray life, colour, culture, music and dance, with deep religious meaning.

In major cities such as Malaga, the processions go on for miles and last until the early hours of the morning, every day through the Easter week. Children as young as 3 or 4 take part and crowds swell into hundreds of thousands.

What about Biblical faith?

Where does Biblical faith enter the equation? The objects of devotion during *Semana Santa* are visible, tangible, recognisable. Some of the images are haunting. The essence of the event can easily be captured on film and taken home by visitors. Here, it is possible to observe Sevillanos at worship, without having to enter a church building. Once *Semana Santa* is over and the obligations to religious process satisfied, the city prepares to let its hair down in the annual *Feria de Abril*, or April Fair, where wine, women and song are celebrated anew. Yet, religious show aside, there is no sense that God has been

touched, that people have even been focused on Him. The problem of man-made religion is that the Living God is invariably left out of the picture.

The object of Biblical faith is Jesus Christ. Anything less than relationship with Him is ineffectual. Religion finishes the act and moves on to other things. Faith informs and influences our entire lives, attitudes, relationships and decisions. If God lives in a temple, a shrine, an altar or an event, we are on our own when we turn and walk away. The event is defined in terms of time and place. If our Christianity is to be real, it must be capable of moving from celebration and form to the mundanity of the quotidian, our everyday lives and circumstances. After all, we are not just flesh and blood entities, but shaped for eternity.