RCIA & Adult Education Introduction

Welcome – all are welcome to these talks – they've been written for those who have not been a part of our church before, so we try to assume nothing at all when we start, and we slowly build – this approach is good even for us who have been Catholic a long time, because we can always gain new insights by taking a step back

Overview of the talks & structure of how they'll move forward with the talks and RCIA.

- Period of Pre-evangelization & Evangelization – focus: the need for God in our lives, the basic message of the Gospel (aka the Good News), and basics on prayer
- Rite of Acceptance (December 17)
- Period of the Catechumenate – catechesis on specifically catholic teaching: the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, the harder teachings to accept in the modern age (specifically: Mary, sin, indulgences, and teachings on sexuality), the afterlife and the four last things (Heaven, Hell, Death, Judgment)
- Rite of Sending & Rite of Election (February 18)
- Period of Purification – focus on participating in the life of the Church, talk about Catholic teaching on morality, an in depth talk on the Church, Liturgy, and Sacraments – I might add a session in here where we step through the Mass so we can understand just an inkling more of what happens in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
- Easter Triduum, the Easter Vigil, and Initiation into the Church (March 30)
- Period of Mystagogy – when you are a part of the Church and her sacramental life, grace enlightens you in a new way – we'll talk more about the history of the Church (I can and have given a whole series on this, but this'll be a *fast* run through), discipleship and stewardship and how we live it, and finally what living our faith looks like in the modern world
- Of course, I hope to end with an epic party.

In addition to these talks, I will meet individually with those who are looking at joining the church. There's a bit of information I'll need to collect and we'll need to talk about a few things one-on-one. Please make sure to sign in with your name and email and if you're looking to join the church or simply here for the talks so I can follow up with you.

Now, enough of that, let's go!

What is Religion about? Why should I care?

Several years ago, a trend swept through the internet. A young man told everyone, essentially, that he was "spiritual, not religious" and that this was really the best way to go. Obviously, as a lifelong Catholic and now as a Catholic priest, I have some issues with what this gentleman was trying to say. But it seems that the first and most important misunderstanding he might have had was of the question of religion itself. What is religion, anyway? I can point at Catholicism and say that's a religion, but what makes it a religion? Is it the people? Is it the beliefs? Is "a religion" different than "religion" generally speaking? And furthermore, why should I care about religion? What's so wrong with saying that we're spiritual, but that we aren't religious?

One of the great issues we face in discussing, well anything, is the potential of talking past each other. We do this all the time. When I counsel a couple preparing for marriage, one of the things we discuss is that we must *intentionally* work to communicate our desires and our emotions to our beloved. If we simply assume that he or she will know what we're saying, then we stand a great risk of falling into an argument about something that we agree on. It is the same any time there are apparent disagreements in society: we first need to make sure that we are talking about the same thing before we can make progress in understanding each other, and only when we understand each other can we begin to work toward whatever solution we might be seeking.

Defining the terms

The first thing we have to do is understand what we mean when we say "religion."

If we can agree to this, that we have to be talking about the same thing, then the next step is determining how define what we are talking about. I suppose we could look up terms in a dictionary, but those definitions never quite get at the whole meaning. And while they can assist us in understanding foreign concepts, words on paper cannot do justice to some things. Love may have a dictionary definition, but ask anyone who has loved to read that definition and their response will be something to the effect of, "but it's so much more."

Reality

In order to define something as enigmatic as "religion," we must take a different approach. The first premise that we will begin with to understand religion is realism. By observing reality around us, we can learn from it and build our understanding on it. So often we seek to control reality, but the truth is that reality can be our great teacher if we stop trying to control it and start trying to listen to it. When we look around reality, we begin to know things. There is a tree outside my house.I know what that tree looks like, where it is, whether it has lost its leaves. I know of this tree before I can even think about it, before I begin to say "I wonder what makes that a tree." For me, in fact, I don't really even care what makes this tree in my yard a tree, but I do care that it is there. The way that I know it is there is that I can see it, I can hear it, I can touch it. This teaches us something important. We know things by encountering them, but we know them in ways imposed by the thing. I can know a person by speaking to them, but I cannot know a tree by speaking to it. I can know my car by driving it, but I cannot drive a person.

With something like religion, though, how do we come to know that? Our experience of religion is, at its core, a question that is proposed to us: "What is the meaning of everything?" What sort of experience is this? I cannot set my eyes on it, I cannot speak to it, but I do know it. Each of us does. Each of us has this question, and each of us encounters this question differently. But we all recognize it. But even this tells us something: religion is something that springs from our very nature as human beings. Because it is something that flows from deep within us, it touches every part of our experience. While each person's encounter with this religious experience will be different, it will always be distinctly human.

When we engage this question, "What is the meaning of everything?" we will eventually recognize that there is a hunger within our hearts, a hunger which cannot be contained by anything finite. We will always want more. This desire in our hearts—a desire our modern world does a fantastic job of stifling, by the way—leads us to an important conclusion in out discussion: man is a creature with a relationship to that which is infinite. An author I particularly enjoy reading, Fr. Luigi Giussani, writes that because of this relation, "only two types of men capture entirely the grandeur of the human being: the anarchist and the authentically religious man. By nature, man is relation to the infinite: on the one hand, the anarchist affirms himself to an infinite degree, while, on the other, the authentically religious man accepts the infinite as his meaning."[1] He continues, "It is much greater and truer to love the infinite, that is, to embrace reality and being rather than to assert oneself against them. Indeed, we must recognize that man truly affirms himself only by accepting reality, so much so that, in fact, he begins to accept himself by accepting his existence, that is, a reality he has not given himself. [...] The need for goodness, justice, truth, and happiness constitutes man's ultimate identity, the profound energy with which men in all ages and of all races approach everything, enabling them to an exchange, of not only things, but also ideas, and transmit riches to each other over the distance of centuries. We are stirred as we read passages written thousands of years ago by ancient poets, and we sense that their works apply to the present in a way that our day-to-day relations do not."[2]

By acknowledging reality as the source of our education, by accepting that not only is our desire for something infinite, but that accepting that our identity is bound up in something greater than ourselves which has been given to us, we can begin to find meaning and the freedom to understand our destiny.

Reasonableness

At this point, you may be wondering: are we ever going to actually talk about religion? Yes. I promise, we are. But we have one more thing to talk about to clear the ground: reasonableness. When we act, we have to do so with reasonableness. Reasonableness is how we express our gift of reason. It's a way of acting. Consider the following story that from the author I mentioned above:

> *Suppose a friend of ours, at a time of year far from Halloween, were to appear before us decked out in the helmet and a mail of a medieval knight. To our astonished questions, he might, in all seriousness, express the fear that one of the bystanders might want to attack him and that he has prepared himself for such an eventuality. We would feel that we are faced with an abnormality. To be sure, we would not perceive our friend's attitude as reasonable.*
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> *In another instance, I might present myself before an audience and place my briefcase on a table; if I should suddenly pick up the same briefcase and, with an energetic and well-aimed throw, pitch it out the window, the audience, if no other explanation should be offered, would consider my action unreasonable.*
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> *In both of these examples, the different actions appear unreasonable because they do not allow one to glimpse possible reasons for them. However, if I should throw my briefcase after four armed men had broken into the hall with their guns drawn, the audience would wonder what was in the briefcase, and my action would not be felt to be unreasonable.*[3]

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[1] Giussani, Luigi; Zucchi, John E.. Religious Sense (p. 9). McGill-Queen's University Press. Kindle Edition.

[2] Ibid., p. 10.

[3] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

Essentially, this idea of reasonableness is demonstrated when our "behaviour shows itself to have adequate reasons."[4] That is: we have reasons for what we do, and those reasons are in proportion to the actions we take.

When we act reasonably, we act in a way that is open to reality and affirms all of it. When we are open to reality, we can also recognize that there are different ways to know things, and that this is entirely reasonable. When we do a math problem, we may know that our answer is correct. I also know that my mother would be a bit horrified, or at the very least confused, if I were to buy her flowers, bring them to her house, and stomp on them in front of her. While I don't know this in a mathematical way, I am just as certain of both of these facets of my knowledge. The idea of reasonableness can help us to understand why.

The reason I do not need a mathematical proof to know some things would freak my mom out is because we know humans differently than we know math problems, and that is a perfectly adequate reason. We can't reasonably define human behaviors using the same scientific methods we use in chemistry or math.[5] If we tried to do this, our lives would come to a standstill. We call these certainties about human behavior "moral certainties," and unlike mathematical or philosophical or scientific certainties, we would not be able to live our lives without forming moral certainties about the behavior of other people towards us. There are two important things to know about these moral certainties. First: "I will be able to be certain about you, to the extent that I pay more attention to your life, that is, that I share in your life."[6] This is why our shared life as a society is actually quite important. If I had grown up in ancient Rome, I would have very different ideas about how people are to act toward me than if I had grown up in medieval France, which are still different from how modern Americans such as us expect people to behave. If we were taken out of our community and moved somewhere else abruptly, it would take time to be certain of your place in the other community and to feel safe and welcome there. The second point: "the more powerfully one is human, the more one is able to become certain about another on the basis of only a few indications."[7] Someone who is an expert in carpentry might only need a few clues to fully understand how a fascinating piece of woodwork was created. Similarly, an expert in humanity and in the human heart will only need a few clues to comprehend the behavior of the one in front of them.

Finally, just as we can be wrong in a matter of science, philosophy, or math, we can also be wrong in judging human behavior. We would not say that an incorrect conclusion in science invalidates science as a whole, or that all philosophy must be thrown out because of the error of one method of philosophy, so we also cannot reasonably say that this human knowledge must all be thrown out due to an error. We even have a way to express this, "you were wrong, but for the right reasons."

OK. Great. But what is religion?

We've spent a lot of time clearing the ground to speak of what religion is. We've recognized that reality must be our teacher, and we must be reasonable in how we engage reality to search for the truth. We've even hinted a bit at what religion is, noting that one of the deepest questions within our hearts is "what

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[4] Ibid.

[5] See ibid., p. 18.

[6] Ibid., p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 20.

does this all mean?" When we put all of these things together, we recognize that we were made for truth, for goodness, and for the infinite, because there is simply nothing else that will satisfy, and so somehow this must figure into what it all means. We also see from all of these things that each of us will have a deeply personal experience of religion, because we learn from our experiences of reality. We are not abstract automatons: life and what it means is *personal*. "Discovering the meaning of life – or the most pertinent and important things in life – is a goal which is possible only for the individual who is involved with life seriously, its events, encounters, and problems."[8]

If we were to ask ourselves questions such as "'What is the ultimate meaning of existence?' or 'Why is there pain and death, and why, in the end, is life worth living?' Or, from another point of view: 'What does reality consist of and what is it made for?'"[9] we would recognize these as religious questions, but we would recognize that they arise from the depths of our being. We cannot avoid these questions, and we will not be satisfied with a partial answer.

The religious sense within us is what drives us to continue asking these questions, hammering until we have an answer. God is the answer to these questions. We suppress our own nature and stifle our own desires—we hobble ourselves—if we do not admit that there is an answer. But the answer to such questions must be unfathomable to us, it must remain a mystery as it is revealed to us. The insatiability of our hearts' desires demands both an infinite revelation and, paradoxically, an infinite mystery. God is the only satisfactory answer to such questions. Not the caricature of God society around us tries to pass off as God, but the God who is outside of our material universe, who is infinite and mysterious, who is responsible for creation.

From this, we can begin to understand what religion is. Religion is, in some way, our experience of grappling with the answer to these questions. Religion is what helps us to begin to understand the meaning of everything, and it helps us to come into contact with God. Every ancient religion recognized that the divine had some providential ability to provide for them. The earliest religions in history were focused on fertility, both fertility of the land and the fertility of the people, because that is what the people needed in order to survive. All of those sacrifices of animals, of crops, of other humans, were to gain favor with the divine in order to secure their providence and beneficence so that they might go on living. They understood the meaning to be continuation of their civilization.

If we look at religions, they all have at their core a particular way to answer "what does everything mean?" Another way of phrasing this question is, "what is the purpose of life?" A final re-phrasing of the question is, perhaps, the most straightforward, "What happens to me when I die?" The answer proposed by a religion reveals its core understanding of the divine. While I'm not a scholar of other religions, I have an idea of what they teach. Here's what I understand the gist of some of the more major—or at least at one time some of them were major—world religions.

- Buddhism: the goal of Buddhism is Nirvana, where suffering ceases because our individuality has faded and we become one with the universe. Individuality itself is seen to be an illusion that must be purified. This may take many lifetimes/reincarnations. (individuality lost) [5th cent. BC]

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[8] Ibid., p. 37.

[9] Ibid., p. 45.

- Zoroastrianism: lots of similarities to Judaism and Christianity: such as its monotheism, messianism, belief in free will and judgement after death, conception of heaven, hell, angels, and demons. It has Ahura Mazda who is omniscient, but not omnipotent (???). The goal of life is to bring happiness into the world, which fights against evil. Souls live forever with Ahura Mazda—universalist. (I honestly included this because of its obvious impact on Judaism, despite it only have 100-200k followers) [15th-6th century BC]
- Taoism: harmony is sought above all else. The soul can become a part of the cosmos or a sage. [8th-3rd cent. BC]
- Hinduism: the "atman" or human soul eventually is purified through many lives and becomes on with the universe (individuality lost) [5th cent. BC to 2nd cent. AD]
- Islam: submission to the will of God, similar afterlife to Christianity, but believes in predestination and that every act is decreed by God. While paradise will be a joyful place, it is all ultimately subject to the will of Allah, and it is a primarily physical happiness (the good place?) [610 AD]
- Judaism: I'll admit, because we as Christians see Judaism fulfilled in Christianity, I have trouble seeing their goal as different from ours; however, the Jewish people are called to be a light to the nations and to usher into the world the kingdom of God. Until Christianity, their view of the afterlife involved sheol and had many similarities to Canaanite religions
- Christianity: the goal is theosis/divinization—union with God—and eternal happiness is a result of this union. Our individuality is preserved and we enter into the family of God. We assist him in ruling the new heavens and the new earth.

When we understand religion, we recognize that *we are all religious*.

The reality is that we can much more easily be religious, but not spiritual. If we have an answer to "what does it all mean?" then we have a religious sense about our lives. If we have an answer to that, we haven't stifled the question, and we allow the meaning of life to shape us, then we are religious. One can follow their understood meaning of life religiously, even if it is not spiritually.

Take for example, many of our atheist brothers and sisters. Many seem to have found a meaning of life that, while a bit dark because it denies the afterlife, impels them to does what is best for the most people. We can argue about the logic of holding such a position when one denies God, but for whatever reason, that is how they understand the meaning of life. If they are honest about this meaning and live their lives in accord with it, then they are acting religiously, but they are certainly not acting spiritually.

It boils down to this: someone who professes to be a materialist—which often coincides with those who profess to be atheist or agnostic—denies that there is a spiritual component to our lives, and therefore does not act in ways intended to be spiritual. Someone who is not a materialist, by definition, recognizes that they interact with the spiritual world and acts, in some ways, spiritually. But both those who profess materialism and those who deny strict materialism necessarily have some sort of meaning in life that guides them. Even those who deny that the question of meaning exists within themselves have a sort of practical meaning that guides them—even if it is simply the maximization of physical pleasure or power or money.

Everybody has some sort of practical religious sense that guides them; thus, every person practices some sort of religion. Whether they recognize that or not is a wholly different question.

Now some might recognize that there is a religious sense within humanity, but they might object to the organization of religion. This is what many people understood the "spiritual but not religious" gentleman to be saying in his infamous video. But if you think about what I've discussed with you today, that doesn't actually work. If religions are defined by their proposed answer to the question of meaning, then by their nature they must give some sort of order, some sort of structure, some sort of organization to our lives. If we acknowledge a meaning and refuse to order our lives in accord with that meaning, we destroy ourselves. Look around us: people all over the world deny religion and a deeper meaning to life, they are practical atheistic materialists who have stifled their hearts desire for the infinite. These pitiable people are listless and unhappy. It is no wonder that we have tragically high suicide rates in western society. I may be speaking boldly here, but even more than the promise of an afterlife, we need meaning in our lives to find peace in this world. The ancient religions had terrifying afterlives, but their lives also had meaning, and so their societies were functional—to a point. Anyway, I'm getting a bit sidetracked here, but my point is simple: religion is, by necessity, organized in some way. The organization of a religion reflects its understanding of meaning and how we should live in order to have a meaningful life.

Because of our Catholic understanding of what life means and because it has been revealed to us (more on this in a few weeks), we believe that God created all things. Religion, for us, concerns giving back to him that which is due to him. At the end of this day, we give the entirety of our lives to him, but in day-to-day practice, our religious actions are those in which we render service or glory to the one who gave everything to us. For us, this means that proper religious practice is actually a type of justice. If justice is giving another what is due to them, then religion is justice to God. The ancient philosophers recognized this relationship between justice and religion too, but they got there in a bit of a different way.

This desire to give God what is due, to find favor with God in ancient religion and to grow closer to him in Catholicism, is a religious desire and is the foundation of public religious practice.
Ancient religion: hospitality extended to deity so that he might serve the people.
Christianity: the deity offers us hospitality, and we humble ourselves to accept it.

Because religion is about the biggest and most important questions, we must care.

Religion, ultimately, is about the biggest and most important questions. It helps us answer our innate need for truth, justice, and happiness. It helps us understand the meaning and purpose of our lives.

It helps us understand what happens after death. Some claim that they don't care about what happens after death. I find it particularly offensive that people will denigrate religious people who desire and afterlife, with remarks that imply the only way we can sleep at night is if we have a promise of heaven or something. These people have silenced the true longings of their hearts, perhaps out of hurt or anger or some other reason. We do not search for the sake of the search, that would be madness. We search for an answer. If there is no answer, then reality is unreasonable—but our experience with reality tells us this is not so.

We must live, intensely, in reality. Living this way, we cannot avoid the question of meaning, and we cannot avoid the religious question. Our religious sense and religious practice help us to find a path, a way to answer that question.

Date Time Topic

Sunday, October 29, 2023 at 2pm: What is Religion about? Why should I care?

Sunday, November 5, 2023 at 2pm: What makes Christianity different?

Sunday, November 12, 2023 at 2pm: Why do I need a Church?

Sunday, November 19, 2023 at 2pm: The Kerygma: the core of the Gospel

Sunday, December 3, 2023 at 2pm: Where does the Bible come from? (topics: Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, Inspiration, Divine Revelation)

Sunday, December 10, 2023 at 2pm: Catholic Stuff You Should Know (topics: Prayer, Going to Mass, Importance of Sunday, What's a Catechumen?)

Sign-in Sheet

Please sign in so we can stay in touch. If you’re not Catholic and are interested in joining the Church, please put “yes” in the RCIA column. You are under no obligation to join the Church, but if you are interested Father Matt will contact you personally to discuss the process and more details about how it works.

Name	Email Address	Cell Phone	RCIA?