

**"Can One Go to Church And Not Believe?"**



*Part III of the 2025 Lenten Sermon Series  
"What is the Value and Importance of Being Religious?"*

This is now the third in a sermon series which I have been preaching this Lent, exploring what, if any, value or importance there is in being a "religious" person in today's world. Last week I suggested that being "religious" or "spiritual" is a biological and genetic part of what it means to be a human, that we have these unique abilities to remove ourselves from the immediate objective reality of our lives, and imagine alternative scenarios, different possibilities, and even other

worlds, which has, of course, led to science, literature, and religion. And so, not surprisingly every known human civilization in the world has had some kind of science, literature, and organized religion, they all go together from our ability to imagine different possibilities. So, we have an inherent ability for religious thinking, which of course, eventually leads to some kind of formation of religious creeds and doctrines, and also not surprisingly, to our subsequent questioning and doubting of those creeds and doctrines!

Thus, all of us here today do not necessarily agree with all the creeds and doctrines of this church. I certainly don't! You need only to re-read online my Trinity Sunday sermons for the last five years to see my personal struggles! And I am not sure that most of us here could even articulate what the creeds and doctrines of the Episcopal Church really are or what they really mean! Thus, creedal agreement is certainly not what brings us together here!

And so I was intrigued by an article written by the contemporary British philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah in response to a reader's simple question to him: "*Can I Go to Church When I Don't Believe?*" The reader, we learn, grew up in the Catholic tradition, but after obtaining several university degrees – including one in religion – it became clear to him that Jesus wasn't divine and that the cobbling together of the

Bible in the fourth century was a consummate work of spin-doctoring, as he put it. He has about 20 arguments in defense of this, not the least of which is Christ's inefficacy, he says. After 2,000 years, his followers have split into thousands of different sects, many of whom have shot and killed members of rival Christian sects, think of Northern Ireland or World War II. That doesn't seem to the reader to be the way an omnipotent deity should operate --- though he does seem much harder on God in this matter than on mankind's part in all of this.

But boy, oh, boy, does the reader love the artistic output of Christianity; Bach's B-minor Mass, the Fauré Requiem, St. Paul's Cathedral in London - all of these lift his spirit, he writes. He loves a beautiful Christian worship service. Where else do you hear an organ like that, he asks? Actors, he notes, talk about 'working from the outside in,' in which a physical position unlocks one's inner emotions. And for this reader, kneeling does exactly that for him. He doesn't pray when he kneels in church, but the act creates a sense of humility and gratitude. It does him good, he says, to sit, to stand, and to kneel together with others. There's that lovely sense of community in this, he writes.

He'll never be converted, he declares. So, he wonders if he is lying when he turns up at a Christian service and recites the Creed and sings the hymns as lustily as anyone else. Is he

hurting anyone by doing this? Is it, for want of a better word, he asks, a sin?

Appiah responds to the reader's question by observing that a church clearly represents a confluence of different practices, beliefs, and community, and its congregants will be drawn there for all sorts of different reasons. No doubt you're participating today in these services at St. John's in a different frame of mind from many others who are here. Still Christians have long been aware of the aesthetic appeal of our tradition's art, and music, and architecture, and liturgy – an aspect of the "way of beauty" as Pope Francis calls it. Something in his tradition resonated with the reader, as I hope it does with us as we worship together, though what exactly it is that resonates with us is probably somewhat different from person to person. My former Spanish-speaking congregation in Bridgeport loved walking into the church on Sunday mornings to the beat of their Latin band playing in the corner, while my Haitian congregation had their own drum corps playing when they arrived, and my English-speaking congregation, composed mostly of immigrants from the Caribbean, were moved by the sound of their steel drums. For others it may be Gregorian chant or Renaissance polyphonic church anthems or a modern rock band in a progressive Evangelical church or Taizé music or even the simple act of standing and singing congregational hymns together, where

all of us are actually breathing together with one another in doing so. Sometimes it is the Medieval architecture that resonates with us or the familiar liturgy of our youth, but as for reciting the Nicene Creed, Appiah writes, you might inquire what exactly your neighbors on the pew next to you think it actually means for the Son to be of one substance with the Father, to consubstantial as the Creed puts it. Most likely they will be dumbfounded by the question!

Of course, you could always visit churches like those of the Unitarian Universalists, Appiah continues, that explicitly reject creeds and that expect some members of the congregation to be atheists. They have hymns, too, Appiah noted. Or there is a group in England called the Sunday Assembly, a secular community that aims to provide a sense of unity and shared experience similar to a traditional church service. It was founded in London in 2013 and now boasts about 60 different congregations. They hold gatherings on Sunday mornings, often in a deconsecrated church or similar venue that include singing, listening to speakers, poetry, and personal stories. They promote community involvement, personal connection, and celebrating life, but there is absolutely no mention of God or any religious rituals in their gatherings. AA meetings have a similar reputation for being churchlike in the sharing of personal stories, the rehearsing the particulars of the Big

Book, and having fellowship afterwards. Yoga groups too are somewhat churchlike in their gatherings, I'm told. So even those who often declare that they are not "religious," often seem to be involved in churchlike activities.

But if the 'way of beauty' leads you to the Catholic services of your upbringing, you shouldn't feel as if you don't belong, Appiah responds, however deep your doubts. There's no saying what a service means to any one of its participants. So, your presence and involvement can hardly be taken as a declaration of any particular creedal commitment. If the issue of faith comes up, you can freely tell your fellow congregants, 'I'm not really a believer, but I love these services,' Appiah writes. They're unlikely to object to your being there. Some of them might be in your exact same situation; and others might hope that your attendance could, contrary to your expectations, change your mind about the faith. Many clerics advocate 'meeting people where they are.' They will acknowledge that you're appreciating God's work in your own faltering way.

Part of the reason people are attracted to organized religion is that its rituals though - the standing, sitting, and kneeling in unison, the singing, the listening to emotionally inspiring sermons, the sights and sounds of churches, like the whispered prayers, the flickering candles, the smell of polished wood, and altar flowers, and even incense - these trigger the

brain's endorphin system. This endorphin system is the mechanism that underpins social bonding in all primates, including humans. Like opiates, endorphins produce a sense of bliss, calmness, warmth, relaxation, and trust bordering on ecstasy, while also elevating our pain thresholds. In addition to these hedonic benefits, Appiah writes, endorphins trigger the release of natural killer cells, part of the body's immune system.

Endorphins also reinforce the bonding of friendships and, through that, allow us to create supportive groups of like-minded individuals, who often open up with one another about their personal struggles and concerns, which can then lead to more "religious" conversations that become in time small religious gatherings or congregations of some kind or another. This effect seems to be especially strong in the context of rituals, as has been shown experimentally in religious services in the UK and Brazil. It seems, therefore, that religions evolved to reinforce this sense of community cohesion, something that's extremely important to our wellbeing and survival as a species, giving us a sense of identity and social bonding as we ponder the meaning of life and the mysteries of the universe, though we may in the end disagree with one another in these discussions, and then splinter off into hundreds of different opposing views.

Our natural community size, scientists say - the size of our personal social network, like the number of friends we have on Facebook, for example - is also part of a relationship between group size and brain size in primates. Each primate species has a characteristic group size determined by the size of its brain. For humans, that is about 150 people, say the scientists. And so not surprisingly, this is also the average size of most personal social networks (the total number of extended family and friends with whom you have meaningful relationships), but it also turns out to be the optimal size for religious congregations. Studies have shown that if a congregation is smaller than about 100, it puts a heavy burden on the membership; and if it is above about 200, it becomes increasingly prone to divisiveness. This seems to explain why big religions are so susceptible to fragmentation - constantly throwing up small sects (typically of a few hundred people at most) built round some opposing leader whose wayward beliefs the hierarchy often desperately tries to contain.

Thus, a penchant for organized religion and group size is again simply part of our biological inheritance, and one can certainly be encouraged to tinker with different religions and practices to see what best suites or resonates with us at the time, that is, one can certainly attend church and not believe everything one imagines that church stands for!



But what happens, one might ask, if someone doesn't attend church at all, or any other small group or religious-like gathering? What happens to us as if isolate ourselves from one another, and defiantly strike out on our own, all by ourselves? Here lies the Great American Myth of Being Independent, the so-called myth of rugged individualism, which is so especially prevalent in this country, and which, just so happens to be the topic for next week's sermon. Amen.