Everything you need to know about God and religion in 5 simple words

By Jack Dunigan

Some years ago, a friend of mine, let’s call him Les, told me of an incident at a meeting of a local car club he belonged to. His club sponsored an annual car show at a local shopping center over Labor Day weekend. The central Arizona weekend meant the weather would almost certainly be free of rain and absolutely hot. Each year many participants complained that because of the pavement, the heat was, well, hotter.

So, the club decided to change the location and the time. They moved the event to a local riverside park so the cars could park on grass not pavement. And they changed the date to the last weekend in September so it would be at least a few degrees cooler.

All went well until the discussion arose over what to call the show. Most wanted to keep the same name since it was the same club sponsoring the event and all the show’s criteria and awards structure remained the same. Others wanted to make a whole new start and give the event a new name.

My friend Les found himself defending the old name by default. Les is not a confrontational person at all. His role in the community as a businessman and his participation is a local church congregation has bestowed upon him a long history of cooperation and community-building energy. So, I’ve said that just to reinforce the point that Les was not looking for a fight. He was, and is, a great believer in tradition.

But another faction emerged which wanted a new start and a new name. As the discussion rounded the room, the new faction became increasingly hostile and their de facto spokesperson became quite agitated. Soon he was out of his chair and in Les’s face. More shouting led to more shouting until Les’s opponent suggested they continue the discussion outside where they could settle it “like real men.”

It was a stupid and boorish display unworthy of either of them. When Les told me about he was obviously disappointed that it had reached that stage and perplexed as to why anyone would get so worked up over something so trivial.

I think I can answer that.

I explained it to Les like this.

Here’s what happened and how it got to where it got. One day you were in your car minding your own business when you saw a vintage car drive by. It caught your attention and provoked your interest. “It might be nice and a lot of fun to have a car like that,” you thought. Then, you saw another and another. Soon, you decided to buy one and you did.

Sometime later, you are out minding your own business cruising the streets in your new old ride and having a great time. Then you meet someone who says something like, “Nice car. What club do you belong to?”

“No club,” you reply, “just having a good time in my car.”

“Well,” they caution you, “to really enjoy your car and get the most out of the hobby you need to belong to a club.”

You took the bait, found a club, and joined. The next thing you know, your cruising experience gets complicated. There are club meetings to attend, dues to pay, committees to join, events to plan, responsibilities to shoulder, and here’s the kicker, provoked by the club setting , politics to manipulate. “Then,” I continued, “the stakes get higher and the emotions get edgier and situations like the one you encountered crop up. Am I right?” I asked.

“Precisely. How did you know?”

“Because it happened to me. And it’s happened to countless others before.”

Ok, you’re not a classic car enthusiast so you’re wondering what this has to do with you. Well, the intended audience of my writing today is not classic car enthusiasts. It is, however, any and all who have found themselves in similar (perhaps less confrontational) circumstances as a result of their hobby, a volunteer effort for a local charity, or, and this is the real intended audience, all those who got sucked into complex world of religious institutions.

I am writing here as a veteran of the very context I am addressing. I am not a cynical outsider nor am I disgruntled insider. I am a disappointed participant in what should be the happiest and most rewarding experience ever.

Many of those who will read this are long-time friends and know I have often spoken out about the uses and abuses of religious (or volunteer or avocational) institutions. So let me tie this in with Les’s story above.

One day you’re out minding your own business and you happen to encounter the spiritual side of things. You meet someone, you find yourself looking for more meaning than you’ve known so far, you see or hear something or someone who provokes your interest in spiritual things. I am not concerned at all about your particular brand of religion. The dynamic at play here is non-sectarian. It happens to Methodists, Independents, Buddhists, and Jews. It is the dynamic, not the religious flavor that’s being served up today.

Your interest in spiritual things drives you to invest in spiritual things. You become a better person, discover some dimensions of peace and satisfaction that are new and, frankly, comforting. Then, you meet someone who asks what club, I mean church, you belong to. They assure you that to really get the most out of your religious awakening you need to belong to a local congregation.

So, you take the bait and check it out. Soon, you make it a habit. In the not too distant passage of time, you learn that there are meetings to attend, offerings and tithes to pay, committees to join, events to plan, responsibilities to shoulder, and here’s the kicker, provoked by the setting, politics to manipulate. You discover that what it appears to be is not what it is.

The dynamic changes completely. You just wanted to enjoy your new found relationship with spiritual things and bask in the warm glow of a deeper, less material way of living. It has, however, become demanding and at times, irritating. Here’s why:

An organism is a living and developing biological process that responds to the environment in which it is found. An organization is a rigid structure that forces conformity and stifles growth while at the same time claiming to be the facilitator of experience. **Spirituality is organic and dynamic. Institutions are not.** When one encounters the other, something must give way and it will not be the institution.

Institutions take on a life of their own and demand that those who populate them support the institution because the institution is worthy of support and therefore should be supported. It is circular reasoning at best. The institution becomes the foremost thing, not the people who compose it.  This is the essence of religion as opposed to spirituality. Spirituality is personal and must be personalized to the individual. Spirituality takes on different manifestations unique to the personality and perceptions of the person. Religion is institutional and demands that its participants be ***adherents***, a clever term meaning one must *support the ideas of the institution*.

See how cleverly that displaces your original expectations. You got involved in a group because you were assured *it would support YOU in your pursuit* of your hobby, your charitable interest, or your spiritual expectations. The next thing you know, *you are now required to support IT* and the whole thing is bass ackwards.

So here’s my recommendation. I used to be a proponent of regular participation in religious practice. I am no longer. When it comes to you and your well-being on every level, everything you ever need to know about spiritual things and spiritual living can be said in five simple words.

Love God.

Love each other.

Jesus said them. Jesus believed them. Jesus lived them.

Love God.

Love each other.

Well, I’ve probably said enough for one post. You probably have questions and some may have challenges. I’ll write more in my next post. Until then, I’d be interested to hear about your “car club” experiences. Leave a comment or send me an email.