

Do you Sometimes Think the Institutional Church is a Bad Thing?

Let's Hear it for The Church (yes, I mean the Organisation)

Recently, I've been doing research into a work of Christian art which has involved delving into late-19th/early 20th century religious ideas, particularly those held by the intelligentsia, Progressive thought, which saw itself as 'scientific' (rather than the beliefs and ideas of Christian believers and worshippers).

In particular, there was the powerful influence of Frenchman Ernest Renan (1823-92). His *Vie de Jesus*, though first published in 1867, went into many editions, and was translated into many languages. His idea (and it was very much the thinking of the age, going far beyond any one man or nation) was that 19th century Progress would lead, before long, to the 'mythical', supernatural, and miraculous elements of religion – such as the divinity, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus – being sloughed off, and us being left with what really mattered, the moral and ethical teaching of Jesus (and other religious leaders).

Moral Progress, together with that of education, science, and humanist ethics, would bring about something like a state of perfection on this earth, without the kind of end-of-the-age scenario that had always been part of orthodox Christianity. Central to this view was the idea that 'organised religion', the institutional Church, with its spirit-crushing dogma and repression of new knowledge, would wither and die, but Christian ethics - such as those Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount - would remain; they were Christianity's important gift to us, but were soon corrupted by the rise of a repressive institution. (Many Christian theologians and thinkers were essentially of this opinion, of course, and re-interpreted Christian eschatology as a this-worldly realisation of the Kingdom).

This kind of thinking (though World War I did much to destroy the idea of civilisation's inevitable Progress) is still very much around today (only recently did I hear of a young man who was much attracted to Christianity, and its ethical ideals – but scorned the prospect of getting too close to The Church, and its dogma). I would suggest (as I did to that young man) that you really can't have what I call Stand-Alone Ethics, that Christian ideals and ethical principles are only known to us – also Jesus, and the Sermon on the Mount are only known to us - because an organisation came into existence that recorded Jesus's teaching, and guarded its interpretation and – above all – transmission to us, centuries later.

Without something we call the institutional Church coming into existence, there would be no Christians today, nor Christian teaching; such things would just be a curiosity of history, known only to a few scholars. The history of the world, and particularly that of Europe and the West, would have been very different (if, indeed, they had come into existence, in any form we would recognise, at all). Of course the Church has, and can, behave very badly (it is made up of people – fallen, sinful, corruptible), but having no such thing would have been disastrous.

March 2016