

What Makes the Catholic Faith Unique?

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The Catholic faith is utterly unique—because it is so much like so many other religious and philosophical traditions. Many people get confused by this paradox but the strenuous efforts of the debunkers to reduce Jesus to the level of every other religious figure is itself the firmest testimony to that fact. That’s why, while you constantly run across books and news articles that Jesus is “nothing but” a rehash of Osiris or Mithra, you never see excited news stories announcing that Zeus is very much the same sort of thing as Janus or Athena is pretty much the same thing as Isis. Nobody wastes time trying to prove that Greek legends of an afterlife were like Egyptian legends of an afterlife. It is only in the... what’s the word I’m looking for?... *unique* case of Jesus that massive amounts of energy are spent trying to prove that there is nothing unique about Jesus.

Yet Jesus remains Himself and the relationship of Jesus to the other religious traditions of the world is unique because Jesus is, in fact, unique. The best human teachers of wisdom are, at their best, like him, but He is like nobody else, because he is both true man and true God. All that is truly human is, to that degree, rooted in Jesus who is truly human. Indeed, there is no thing that does not come from God. Even the devil himself, insofar as he possesses existence, will and power owes those good things to God. He can never achieve total independence from God because he would thereby cease to exist. Evil always depends on God. God never depends on evil.

This is reflected in the way the Catholic faith relates to all the other religious and philosophical traditions in the world. Since all truth is God’s truth, it follows that any truth and any goodness to be found anywhere in creation owes its existence to God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This means that there is no such thing as a religious or philosophical tradition that cannot, somehow, find some commonality with the Catholic faith—though that commonality in no way implies indifferentism—the bogus notion that one religious tradition is the same as another and all are pretty much the same as the Catholic faith. This popular lie of modernity is precisely what the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Catholic faith offends—and it is why so many different voices in our culture are constantly laboring to deny that uniqueness of Jesus and his one holy Catholic and apostolic Church. For the truth is, the Catholic faith, like Jesus Christ, makes unique claims about itself. It is, in a word, the Church in which the fullness of the deposit of faith subsists.

So how do we reconcile the seemingly contradictory notions that the Church shares something in common with all the religions and philosophies of the world *and* that the Church is like nothing else in the world?

By recognizing that these claims are complementary, not contradictory. In fact, they are rooted in two sayings of Jesus:

1. Matthew 12:30: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (which the Church, the body of Christ, has always understood to imply that "Outside the Church, there is no salvation"), and;
2. Mark 9:40: "He who is not against us is for us" (which the Church has always wisely understood to mean "We don't know where 'outside the Church' is).

This leads to two things. The first is the practical command of Jesus to not judge others. That command does not mean "Be a moral imbecile and pretend that nobody ever says, thinks or does evil." Rather, it means "Don't pretend you know somebody's soul or eternal destiny." You know neither. So fight crime and jail criminals. But also pray and hope for the salvation of the sinner, and work toward that end.

The second thing these verses lead to is the Church's understanding of the hierarchy of truths and the Church's awareness that her uniqueness necessarily involves her with all the human belief systems of the world.

Let's take an extreme example: the Catholic Church and Satanism. "What fellowship has Christ with Belial?" asks St. Paul (2 Corinthians 6:15). Well, none. But commonality is not fellowship. Churchill and Hitler agreed in common that World War II would determine the fate of Europe for centuries to come. That doesn't mean they were drinking buddies. Similarly, Satanism and the Catholic Church both acknowledge the reality that Satan exists and that he is in rebellion against the living God. In this, they actually have more in common than, say, an atheist who denies the existence of God and Satan altogether. At the same time, a Catholic is a fool if, in rejecting the wiles of the devil, he rejects the truth the devil is misusing or refuses to love the human being the devil has deceived.

Or again, take paganism. The ethnocentric Judaism of first century Jerusalem tended to assume that pagans were simply contemptible idolators and that any

Jew who associated with them was equally contemptible (note, for instance, the reaction of the mob to St. Paul in Acts 22:21-22).

St. Paul, being a Catholic, takes a different path. As a Jew, he grants the truth of the Jewish critique of pagans (that is, worshippers of gods other than the God of Abraham) that they were "futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (cf. Romans 1:21-23). But he also sees something else: that God had "allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:16-17). More than this, he tells the pagans that all they sought, intuited and guessed at in their own religious traditions concerning the One, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful was found in the One, True, Good, and Beautiful God who has now revealed himself definitively in Jesus Christ. So he tells them, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23).

Catholic Christianity has continued to take this approach with paganism in all its immense variety ever since, affirming and correcting what is of God there while rejecting what is not. So, for instance, we find Christians taking pagan customs like Christmas trees, wedding rings and Easter eggs and filling them with Christian content. We see Christians like St. Thomas Aquinas or the Fathers of the Early Church making use of the thought of Plato and Aristotle or the medical science of Galen, subjecting it to the gospel and creating the vast intellectual treasure (and scientific revolution) of Catholic Europe. This habit of affirming what can be affirmed in common with all people of good will is what lies behind *Nostra Aetate's* remarks about the two great systems of eastern pagan thought, Hinduism and Buddhism:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.

Generally, Catholics have had little trouble with this approach. It boils down to this: where non-Catholic religions or philosophies affirm what the Church

dogmatically affirms or deny what the Church dogmatically denies, they are right. Where they affirm what the Church dogmatically denies or deny what the Church dogmatically affirms they are wrong. In between, there can be room for growth in understanding. The idea is that $2+2=4$, no matter who is saying it. It is also that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and therefore reflect some of His glory, even when they are deeply damaged by sin. For although God has entrusted the fullness of his revelation to the Church in Jesus Christ, he has not utterly denied it to those outside his Church.

Thus, even something like atheism will also get a searching evaluation from the Church and what is human (and therefore intended for salvation in Christ) in that system of thought will get its just due from the Church. So, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI will write sympathetically that, “The atheism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is—in its origins and aims—a type of moralism: a protest against the injustices of the world and of world history” (*Spees Salvi* 42). This claim is a million miles away from the common cheap dismissal of atheism as “godless immorality” or the supposition that rejection of belief in God cuts the atheist off from any commonality with Catholic teaching. On the contrary, the Holy Father understands that atheism is typically *intensely* moralistic: full of rage against injustice, oppression and wrong that both Old Testament prophets and saints of the Church have felt. It approaches the problem of evil with deep seriousness and a burning sense of anger—an anger that cannot be accounted for in the purely materialist world of the atheist.

But because Benedict is a Catholic, he can also see the fundamental self-contradiction at work in the heart of atheistic moralism:

If in the face of this world's suffering, protest against God is understandable, the claim that humanity can and must do what no God actually does or is able to do is both presumptuous and intrinsically false. It is no accident that this idea has led to the greatest forms of cruelty and violations of justice; rather, it is grounded in the intrinsic falsity of the claim. A world which has to create its own justice is a world without hope. No one and nothing can answer for centuries of suffering. No one and nothing can guarantee that the cynicism of power—whatever beguiling ideological mask it adopts—will cease to dominate the world.

The atheist is like the man cutting off the branch he is sitting on. He is right to hate sin. But when he hates it so much that he hates the Creator of the sinner, he

destroys the basis of his entire protest. When he cuts off the branch upon which he sits he is “cast forth as a branch and withers” (John 15:6)

Oddly, God-hating atheists like Christopher Hitchens (who once wrote of Mother Teresa “I wish there was a hell for the bitch to go to”) have found a warm welcome in some Catholic circles. For instance, Michael Novak writes that “Christopher Hitchens is a treasure”. How has this oddity come to pass? Because in a post-9/11 world, some Catholics cut atheism more slack when the atheist (like Hitchens) directs his fire at Islam. Conversely, many Catholics condemn the Magisterium’s allegedly “wishy washy” treatment of Islam in *Nostra Aetate*:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.

The reality, however, is that this is, once again, an example of the Church affirming what can be affirmed in common with another religious tradition. It is not an example of the Church pretending that “We’re all saying the same thing” or “Muslims are saved by Islam”. Catholic teaching is acutely aware, for instance, that Islam (though it rightly hails Jesus as a prophet and even honors Mary as great and holy) radically rejects the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and that Mary conceived him by the Holy Ghost. Islam therefore, of course, errs by rejecting Jesus’ salvific death for the sins of the world.

Some Catholics see in this an opportunity to deny that Islam does not worship the God of Abraham at all. But if this were true, we would also be forced to say that Jews (who likewise deny the deity of Jesus and his saving death and resurrection) worship another god. That, however, is denied by Jesus himself, who tells us that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22) and Whose apostles remind us that the Jews have been entrusted with the oracles of God (Romans 3:1-2). It is to the God of the Jews—the God of Abraham—that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all look for salvation.

That said, the relationship of the Church to Judaism is different from its relationship to Islam. Our Tradition has elements of commonality with both, but with the Jews we share a unique *continuity* as well. As Paul famously points out in Romans 11, Old Testament Israel is the olive tree and Gentile Christians are the branches who have been grafted on to that tree. The revelation that God began in the Old Testament is completed and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So every Catholic is a “spiritual Semite”, as Pope Pius XI put it and the Church is properly understood as the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). But Jews and Muslims have, in various ways, a defective understanding of Who that God is, precisely because they have, for various reasons, rejected faith in Jesus as Son of God and Savior. This is why Catholics are obliged to bear witness to the truth of Jesus where we differ, even while acknowledging where we agree.

Beyond mere agreement that God is the God of Abraham or trust that the Old Testament (but not the Quran) is the inspired word of God there is our relationship with all those non-Catholic religious traditions which accept, in some way or other, that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the Savior of the world. At the outer fringes of such groups are sects like Mormonism or the Jehovah’s Witnesses. These are groups which share much of Jewish and Christian moral teaching but have radically different understandings of who God is. Mormonism, for instance, is polytheistic, understanding the Trinity to be three gods and (bizarrely) God the Father to be a man who graduated to godhood. It is “Christian” in that it acknowledges Jesus as “Son of God” in some sense. But it is so remote from ordinary Christian Trinitarian belief that the Church does not even recognize the validity of Mormon baptism. Similarly, Jehovah’s Witnesses are essentially a rehash of the ancient Arian heresy, which denies that Jesus is God and reduces him to a creature. Various other heretical movements from the early centuries of the Church (now mostly extinct) distort Catholic teaching in other ways, but all of them share some sort of conviction that Jesus is, in some sense, more than a mere mortal prophet. Once again, insofar as they affirm this, they agree with the Church more than they agree with

Judaism or Islam. But they fail to go far enough by embracing orthodox Trinitarian teaching.

When we come to the communities born from the Reformation and the various splinterings and subdivisions that follow it, we find the Church using a different kind of language to speak of these groups. The technical term for them is “ecclesial bodies”, not Churches. What’s the difference? One word: Eucharist.

Most Protestant denominations believe in the faith described by the Apostles or Nicene creed (though a given Protestant ecclesial body might never profess and even disdain the use of creeds in favor of “Scripture alone”). But when it comes to their core beliefs, most Protestant groups affirm with Catholics the belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit who is One God in three persons. They acknowledge that Jesus is God and Savior of the world. They acknowledge the reality of the forgiveness of sins by the saving death and resurrection of Christ, and (usually) the necessity of baptism, though not necessarily its regenerative power. Therefore the Church, again affirming what can be affirmed in common, says:

it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body, and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.

Moreover, some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.
(Unitatis Redintegratio 3)

There is, of course, enormous diversity of belief and practice in the various Protestantisms which space denies us the chance to discuss here. But what marks all these ecclesial bodies is that they do not retain a valid priesthood in succession from the apostles and therefore they do not have a valid Eucharist. And because of this they are less closely united with the Catholic Church than the apostolic communions (such as the Eastern Orthodox) who do retain valid Holy Orders and therefore do celebrate a valid Eucharist and other sacraments.

When we reach the Eastern Orthodox and other apostolic Churches we are now looking at a nearly full glass. This is why both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have expressed such interest in fostering good relations with our Eastern brethren and the hope for reunion and a Church that breathes “with both lungs”. Here we find agreement about a huge amount (particularly in comparison to other religious traditions): the authority of apostolic tradition, of Scripture, of bishops, the reality of sacramental grace, of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, of apostolic succession, the moral teaching of the Church, the veneration of and devotion to the Mother of God and the saints, and even many of the customs and a great deal more are held in common by East and West.

But of course, there are serious differences as well that cannot be papered over. The place of the Pope in the life of the Church, the relationship of the Church to contemporary culture, the liturgical traditions in the various communions, the sundry historical wrongs, both real and perceived, on both sides of the Great Schism and many other issues continue to bedevil conversation between East and West. It’s almost as though, in religion, as in music, the two notes that are closest together create jarring discord.

Of course, the fact that the Church affirms what can be affirmed in common with non-Catholic traditions does not mean the Church is universalist or believes that all will certainly be saved or are “all saying the same thing”. Precisely the point of the Church’s hierarchy of truths is to find the commonality and the distinctions from the Church’s teaching. But the hope always is that in Christ Jesus, the unique Savior of the whole world, the unique Catholic Church He founded will be all things to all, that as many as possible may be saved (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The Church, knowing that “we are bound by the sacraments, but God is not bound” (CCC 1257) does not presume to judge those outside of visible communion with her and hopes for the salvation of each person through the secret working of the Spirit of Jesus (as he saved the unbaptized Good Thief, for instance). But precisely because she is bound by the sacraments to proclaim the fullness of the gospel, she never ceases to call the whole human race into closer communion with her in the hope that, as the prophet Isaiah put it, “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:9).

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