

FORIS
WORKING GROUP
REPORT
October 2021

**Why People Need
Religious Institutions and
Why Religious Institutions Need
Freedom**

Introduction

The Religious Freedom Institute's (RFI) Freedom of Religious Institutions in Society (FORIS) Project is a three-year initiative funded by the John Templeton Foundation that aims to clarify the meaning and value of institutional religious freedom, examine how it is faring globally, and explore why it is worthy of public concern.

FORIS seeks to advance scholarship, inform policymakers, and influence cultural understandings on institutional religious freedom in the United States and around the world. Religious liberty is not an individual right alone, but rather includes the right of religious communities to gather in synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, and other houses of worship. Freedom of religion also includes the right of faith communities to establish religious institutions such as schools, hospitals, ministries to the poor, universities, and countless others that seek to embody the teachings of their respective religious traditions. Institutional religious freedom encompasses this full range of congregational and organizational expressions of religious faith. FORIS critically engages with both the proper meaning and scope of that freedom as well as its contributions to a society's common good.

About the Religious Freedom Institute

A non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., RFI is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security. RFI seeks to advance religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

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I. Introduction

This report explores the grounds on which religious institutions merit robust freedom in their doctrines, internal organization, and presence in society. The contours of human nature and human flourishing feature prominently in the analysis. The report recounts the experiences of one of our authors while he was in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing these matters into sharper focus. Ultimately, this report provides an account of religious institutions as integral to human fulfillment.

Conceiving of religion as natural to human beings and essential for human communities, the report also views religion as profoundly social. These elements of religion become apparent when one reflects on the constituent components of religious practice observed across faith traditions through time.

The report then proceeds to examine the interplay between religion and society. It highlights the implications of the proposition that the origin of human society was born not of economic necessity or agricultural advancement but rather out of a desire for communal religious devotion. Building upon these elements, the report stresses that religious institutions are not marginal or incidental features of religion but rather constitute an essential exercise of it.

To understand more fully why and how people need religious institutions in order to participate in the basic goods of community and religion, it is necessary to review another feature of philosophical anthropology often ignored in political debates and policy discussions: the bodily

nature of human beings. It is this theme to which the report turns next. Human embodiment means simply that we are not pure spirits and cannot be reduced to our intellectual or volitional capacities. Attempts to promote the goods of religion and community in ways that focus exclusively on the intellectual, mental, spiritual, or otherwise interior aspects of persons will be radically incomplete.

Building on this vital theme of human embodiment, the report presents religious institutions as embodied expressions of faith with the capacity to be healing agents in the face of social forces in modern societies, which tend to isolate and fragment our lives.

The report concludes with two complementary arguments. First, religious institutions are a genuine public good and, second, securing their freedom can be a critical antidote to the social divisions rampant in the West, Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and beyond. Though it may seem paradoxical to many, strengthening religious institutions by securing their freedom in full can be an important countervailing force to the divisive tribalism of our time.

II. Religious Institutions and Human Beings

Discussions of institutional religious freedom can often seem legalistic and bloodless. But, as Joseph Raz has pointed out, individuals have an interest in being a part of groups and institutions because they constitute “a way of referring to individual interests which arise out of the individuals’ membership in communities.”¹ U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito made a similar point in his majority opinion in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* when he wrote: “[a] corporation is simply a form of organization used by human beings to achieve desired ends...”² Alito further argued, “protecting the free-exercise rights of corporations like Hobby Lobby... protects the religious liberty of the humans who own and control those companies.”³

Religious institutions are comprised of members, workers, shareholders, funders, and supporters. They serve individuals, families, and communities. While an institution itself may properly have both legal and moral rights and freedoms, it is

not the institution itself that is either happy or sad, empowered or distraught. Rather, the members and supporters of religious institutions are the ones who partake in those experiences. They are also the ones who will suffer if the organization that they formed and continue to serve is denied religious freedom. The denial of proper freedom to a religious institution unavoidably denies the dignity of those within it. Likewise, crushing a religious institution deeply harms the lives of the people who live within its orbit and depend on it.

In the following section, one of the report’s authors, Timothy Shah, provides an extended reflection on the nature and value of religion and religious institutions in society in the midst of a public health crisis. His observations and insights are based on his experiences living in Bangalore, India, for extended periods during the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. Religious Institutions in a COVID-Confined World

Amidst the pervasive caution and constraints due to COVID-19, we frequently think and talk about governments and politicians, so frequently that politics has tragically become for many an almost 24/7 spectator sport played out on Twitter, Facebook, and cable news. When not focused on politics, we think and talk about our individual selves, watch shows on Netflix, and join Zoom meetings. These are only a few examples of common activities we pursue to help us achieve some kind of personal equilibrium during extended periods of social isolation.

We seem to live in a depopulated space, which, perhaps paradoxically, ends up being inhabited only by a political world, which is preoccupied with governments, and a private world of families or isolated individuals, which revolves around addressing our immediate needs. Religious communities—churches, temples, mosques, and others—seem a distant reality.

However, strangely, or perhaps appropriately for someone who was the architect of a research project on the freedom of religious institutions in society, I

can see only one thing through the window in front of my desk in my home office in Bangalore—a religious institution made manifest and tangible in the form of a living, breathing, and active faith-based community organization. This religious institution is my closest neighbor. I can see its large compound and complex of buildings, including a community hall for religious services and prayer meetings, a school that serves the mostly poor children of the surrounding low-income northeastern Bangalore neighborhood, and residential hostels providing shelter for abandoned or neglected children. From my vantage point, I can also almost make out the community clinic that rounds out the organization's panoply of department "units."

Though it has many parts, this proximate religious institution is a unified operation or, perhaps to speak more accurately, resembles a single organism. While many public and private organizations have ceased in-person operations, this institution's many parts have operated in a highly intense and coordinated way ever since the COVID crisis hit India in early 2020. Though lockdowns shuttered the nearby school, teachers and volunteers, including two of my own children, mobilized to provide instruction online and raised funds to provide smartphones to children whose families did not already own one. Members of the spiritual staff, medical team, and the social welfare unit have worked together to provide hot meals as well as other rations to thousands of poor families in the community, many of whom had suffered a massive loss of employment and critical income because of the pandemic. The religious institution's medical team also worked with municipal

authorities to arrange for aggressive and periodic COVID testing to protect the elderly living in the compound and care for the vulnerable children who often come to the hostels after having suffered years of neglect or being under-nourished.

In early January of 2021, the organization's medical team began working more extensively with state and local officials to provide the Oxford/Astra-Zeneca COVID vaccine to thousands of people in the surrounding area. This occurred because the religious institution that is my neighbor is well-established and trusted. It has operated for more than 50 years and was in fact chosen by state and local government officials to serve as the primary point for implementing the first wave of the vaccination campaign in our sector of Bangalore.

During a period that has felt eerily and painfully disembodied, a time largely restricted to endless Zoom meetings or WhatsApp conversations, my institutional neighbor was a vital and robust, "embodied community." Its existence points to a distinctly important aspect of human social reality, which is quite apart from both my family's private world and the turbulent political world.

It has long been fashionable for inhabitants of the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) world—to bemoan the evils or irrelevance of "organized religion."⁴ In contradiction to the narrow conceptions held by certain denizens of modern Western societies, here was a religious entity that was a flesh-and-blood hub of genuine human interaction and an agent of compassion able to work effectively in the broader community

precisely because—and only because—it was *organized*. My neighbor was a radical counterpoint and an oasis in an otherwise bare and disincarnate environment precisely because it was much more than a vaguely “religious” or “spiritual” enterprise. It was a pulsating embodiment of genuine community and an indispensable lifeline for thousands precisely because it was something that to many Western ears sounds decidedly un-sexy, dreary, and even oppressive or sterile: a religious *institution*.

Though sticklers for mask-wearing and social-distancing, the organization’s leaders and staff were in many ways the hands, feet, legs, arms, and even heart of our neighborhood. They provided real human contact and relationships. They were not trying to be heroic, nor would people in the community think of them as particularly saintly. Much of the time, they are, like most of us and like virtually all of the world’s governments and “experts,” out of their depth and many steps behind a rapidly accelerating and shape-shifting crisis. They did not always know what they were doing. In that sense, they were much like Dr. Rieux in Camus’s novel *La Peste*. Dr. Rieux insists on describing his decision to remain in a plague-infested environment to treat the sick and the dying in modest terms: “There’s no question of heroism in all this. It’s a matter of integrity. That’s an idea which may make some people laugh, but the only means of fighting a plague is integrity.”⁵ For Dr. Rieux as for my immediate neighbor, the integrity of maintaining a simple presence is the central thing.

For example, the fact that this particular religious institution maintained a continuous presence with some leaders and staff always available in my

neighborhood even at the height of successive lockdowns, meant that many poor and desperate people had *someplace* to go for simple help, food, comfort, and advice. My neighbor is present for the community—a genuine neighbor to its neighbors—because it maintains an institutional presence. It can help and care because it has a tangible form through its people, buildings, and a panoply of services offered in a particular place at a particular time for this and other needs.

Other religious communities nearby also made their presence felt in the reality of this microcosm of a bustling city within India, which includes multiple religious institutions. The mosque no more than two hundred yards northeast of our house has never ceased to send forth the call to prayer, five times every day, and to broadcast on Fridays the imam’s impassioned preaching and, sometimes, singing. On December 8, 2020—the Feast of the Immaculate Conception—St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, standing only a few hundred yards to the east, began to broadcast by loudspeaker at seven o’clock every evening an instrumental version of “Immaculate Mary.” The melody would recall to my mind its well-known verses: “*Immaculate Mary, thy praises we sing, / Thou reignst now in Heaven with Jesus our King. / Ave, Ave, Ave Maria! Ave, Ave, Ave Maria!*” When I was so often living inside my head or in the disembodied online world, these sounds from outside were like messages from a wider, higher, and more real world, which kept prompting me to turn outward and upward.

Of course, these various religious institutions had not sprung up suddenly out of nowhere. They had been around for

years. But during a period so lacking in concrete human community outside my immediate family, these religious institutions persistently made themselves visible and audible, day in and day out. Their constant physical presence, independent of my willing or the narrow aperture of the Internet, made them more important than ever. A dimension of human reality, one often in the background as a result of our busy and at times frenetic everyday affairs, came suddenly and dramatically into the foreground.

During the pandemic, many people, like myself, came to appreciate more fully the importance of religious institutions, not only by virtue of their presence, but also (and especially), by virtue of the painful absence of public gatherings in these religious institutions. In particular, the suspension of religious services and other face-to-face gatherings for weeks and months at a time for millions of people in many parts of the world created a void qualitatively different from the loss following missed outings to movie theaters or restaurants. As Harvard professor of public health Tyler VanderWeele wrote early in the pandemic:

There is loss of spiritual good that comes from religious services; there is loss of communal life; there is arguably also a loss of physical and mental health and well-being associated with not meeting. Numerous recent rigorous studies have suggested relatively strong associations between participation in religious services with greater longevity, less depression, less suicide, greater meaning, greater generosity, greater civic engagement, and numerous other outcomes. Of all the various aspects of

religion and spirituality, it appears moreover to be religious service attendance that is most predictive of these.... [From the suspension of religious services] [t]here are real losses... and these must be acknowledged.⁶

IV. The Need for Religious Institutions: Lessons During COVID-19

The COVID crisis has highlighted long-standing questions. Do human beings need religious institutions and, if so, why? What might religious institutions *qua* institutions contribute to the lives of human beings that non-institutional or merely private, spiritual religion does not and cannot provide?

Further, in a time of increasingly intense political tribalism, polarization, and the weaponization of identities, strong and independent religious institutions are both castigated as potential accelerants of hatred and division and lauded as potential agents of healing and reconciliation. As such, especially given the current ideological polarization in the United States and elsewhere, can we develop compromises that preserve and strengthen the ability of religious institutions to make distinctive contributions to the common good, while also securing and advancing other, perhaps competing policy objectives? The COVID-19 pandemic did not create these questions, but it has made them more acute and even unavoidable.

From the vantage point of residents of northeast Bangalore, religious institutions are “super-providers” of critically important goods and services in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. To others around the world, they can seem to serve as irresponsible “super-spreaders” of the virus. In India, early in the pandemic, the Muslim organization, Tablighi Jamaat, was alleged to be illicitly holding events that spread the virus to large numbers of people.⁷ In South Korea, public ire focused on an unusual Christian movement, Shincheonji, which was allegedly a “plague-spreader”

responsible for the first outbreak of COVID-19 in the country.⁸

In the United States, churches have been blamed for the spread of the virus even if their contribution was not large. For example, the *New York Times* ran an op-ed titled, “The Road to Coronavirus Hell Was Paved by Evangelicals.” Later the headline was changed to the milder, but still tendentious, “The Religious Right’s Hostility to Science Is Crippling Our Coronavirus Response.”⁹ The *New York Times* published another article titled, “Churches Emerge as Major Source of Coronavirus Cases.” However, the article traced only 650 cases to churches. Meanwhile on July 8, 2020, the day that this piece was published, the total number of reported cases in the United States stood at 2,923,432.¹⁰ In sum, the article traced only 0.022% of U.S. cases to churches, which in this statistical regard appears to hardly qualify as a “major source.” On the other hand, the actual number of cases spread in and by churches is undoubtedly much higher since the article could not survey all of America’s 300,000 congregations, and the source of many cases cannot be known. Notwithstanding, this headline too was a tendentious one and unfairly scapegoated religion for the spread of the virus. Consequently, the headline was eventually changed to “Churches Were Eager to Reopen. Now They Are Confronting Coronavirus Cases.”¹¹ It should be added that the *New York Times* has also carried defenses of churches in its op-ed pages, including Alan Cross’ “What Churches Really Think About Opening Up.”¹²

It is abundantly clear, then, that many of the accusations against religious institutions and communities were overstated and overblown.¹³ At the same time, however, it is also clear that some religious communities might have behaved irresponsibly and could have contributed to the spread of COVID-19.¹⁴ In other words, the very coronavirus crisis that prompted some religious institutions and communities to care for their neighbors with such compassion also raised serious and unavoidable questions about how much freedom religious institutions and communities should enjoy to carry out some of their characteristic activities.

Although it is tempting to begin with reasons to restrict religious institutions,

experiences during the pandemic in Bangalore and countless other cities around the world point in the opposite direction. Religious institutions are demonstrably effective in providing a wide array of basic health and welfare services that the devastating effects of the pandemic have made more essential than ever—especially for the poor, the elderly, and the young. More profoundly, the current crisis has dramatically underscored the significance of a spiritually meaningful and embodied community of the kind that strong religious institutions are uniquely able to provide. In today's increasingly atomized and dangerously divided world, there may be no greater public policy priority and no greater "essential service."

V. Religion is Natural

People need religious institutions because of the concrete goods and services they provide, such as food or healthcare, which they may not realistically be able to acquire by any other means. However, the human impulse to develop and embrace religious institutions and communities runs deeper than the urgent need for the provision of material goods they so often provide. People are inherently social and spiritual—or "naturally religious"—in the sense that their basic human capacities and tendencies lead them not only to try to apply their intellects in search of a better understanding of transcendent reality, whatever that reality may be, but also to harmonize their lives with that reality as best they can.¹⁵

These human tendencies are not merely empirically verifiable facts of human behavior in the way that it is a biological fact

that ants live in colonies. It is readily apparent that a life devoid of society, friendship, or community—which are social goods that religious institutions effectively provide—would be a much less fulfilling life. To say that no man is an island is not to say that it is literally *impossible* to live alone or that natural impulses always compel human beings to form human communities in the way that natural impulses compel, for example, bees to create hives. It is rather to say that a life without real and sustained community is *a life that lacks a central ingredient of complete or integral human fulfillment*.¹⁶

COVID-19 has given millions of people an opportunity to test for themselves the proposition that human community, including face-to-face interaction and mutual presence, is an essential ingredient of human happiness. The loneliness

resulting from the absence of physical human contact is devastating on multiple levels. We have learned at an experiential level what a mountain of data has already demonstrated: that human beings cannot live without face-to-face community.¹⁷ The “virtual” communities provided by Facebook, Zoom, and other online tools are no more than an unsatisfying simulacrum.¹⁸ Similarly, a life devoid of any reflective interest in the deepest and widest horizons of being as such, and in our place in the universe, is a life that would be damaged and deficient in a significant and irreplaceable way. Socrates’ dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living” succinctly expresses this truth: to fail to examine ultimate reality and try to align one’s life with that reality is not just to suffer a quantitative lack of all the facts about the universe we might wish to know, like losing one or two volumes of an encyclopedia. It is to miss a *qualitatively distinct opportunity*: the chance to live a life that runs with—rather than in ignorance of, or worse,

against—the grain of the universe and of reality itself.¹⁹ These two basic elements of philosophical anthropology, that human beings are inherently social and inherently religious, yield two important conclusions of theoretical sociology. The first of these is that human beings have almost invariably organized their religious lives in social ways. Though it may often be lost on those of us who are shaped by the individualism of Western societies, which pride themselves on respect for interior conscience and “sincere” or authentic belief, religion is inevitably social and “political” in the Aristotelian sense. For Aristotle, human beings are political animals because the faculty of reason and the moral language of justice and injustice that we share with fellow human beings make it possible and desirable for us to join together in partnership for the sake of just and beneficial ends. Accordingly, we are able to grasp the intelligibility and attractiveness of these ends and to work in common to pursue them, even across deep differences.

VI. Religion is Social

While human beings naturally join together in pursuit of the good and the just, we also join together in pursuit of the transcendent and the holy. Throughout history, spiritual and religious experiences, even at their most numinous and mystical, have seldom been purely solipsistic. Instead, precisely when our spiritual apprehensions are most intense, both the intrinsic significance of these apprehensions and our intrinsically social nature impel us to communicate and share these apprehensions with our fellow human beings. Once successfully communicated and received by others, as they so often have been throughout human history, these spiritual apprehensions soon

become the shared objects and aspirations of whole communities. After all, as Leon Kass reminds us, one man’s experience of a spiritual encounter with God through a burning bush that never burned up culminated in the creation of a people, a nation, and a community of faith.²⁰

“Religion” is an interconnected set of beliefs and practices through which people answer the grand questions of life by seeking to live in relationship to the ultimate power(s) that ground reality and become present to them in the real circumstances of their lives. We do this most characteristically through worship and similar practices arising from

our search for a connection with the divine. Consequently, religion typically involves related rituals, a community, and a moral code grounded in the sacred realm.²¹ Contrary to the pithy formulation of Anglican Archbishop William Temple that “[y]our religion is what you do with your solitude,” sociologist Christian Smith emphasizes that religion is fundamentally a matter of religious practices.²² Even profoundly individual religious experiences are fundamentally rooted in religious institutions and the shared traditions of religious communities.

This social quality of religion becomes apparent when one reflects on the constituent components of religious practice across religious traditions and communities. Many scholars have observed that religion has three primary dimensions: words, works, and worship—or creed, code, and cult. The religions we know, even the most basic, include: verbal articulation of beliefs and core message, some teaching about morality or behavior towards other human beings, and some form of ritual devotion to the divine or transcendent.²³

Each of these dimensions is intrinsically social. Religious doctrines and creeds are nearly always developed by communities of believers for the sake of clarifying and transmitting religious teaching for the benefit of others, whether one’s own religious community or those outside that community. Creeds are inherently social, often developed to create or consolidate collective religious understanding. Similarly, the moral codes or good works prescribed by religion are also social, designed to foster relationships and promote a society’s common good in accord with religious truths. The cults or rituals of worship

prescribed by religion are also social, designed to foster relationships and promote a society’s common good in accord with religious truths. The cults or rituals of worship prescribed by most religions are also nearly always communal and social, such that they often cannot be performed by lone individuals: note, for example, baptism in Christianity, ritual circumcision in Judaism, and *zakat* (alms-giving) in Islam. Each of these practices presupposes some form of community. Even religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which may be somewhat less “congregational” in their regular forms of worship and organization, generally prescribe or encourage forms of devotion that are social or communal. These include *dharshan*, or “audience,” with a god or spiritual leader for a Hindu. *Dharshan* generally must take place in a temple or shrine in the company of other devotees even though it might be possible to worship that same god in one’s private *puja* room at home.

Even in its soteriological or “salvation” dimension, the social nature or tendency of religion is apparent. As Stephen Prothero has shown, the major world religions conceive of the ultimate goal of salvation or liberation in remarkably different and sometimes incompatible terms. Yet, as Prothero also suggests, it might seem that these understandings of salvation or liberation are individual rather than social.²⁴ Single souls, not communities, find their place in God’s presence or apart from it; single souls achieve *moksha* or liberation; and single souls achieve permanent release from the otherwise endless cycle of births and deaths.

What is just as striking, however, is that

virtually all major conceptions of salvation rely on the teaching of great spiritual masters who have come before and have passed on their insights. Often, one can achieve the goal of salvation only by following the spiritual instruction and experience they have recorded and left behind. Furthermore, in many cases, the spiritual help and prayers of others are understood as not merely helpful but as indispensable to the achievement of salvation, however differently that salvation or liberation may be understood from religion to religion. Finally, in several religions, particularly in Christianity and Judaism, the very content of salvation is conceived in terms of a “heavenly kingdom,” a communal enjoyment of God and heavenly beatitude in the company of angels and saints.²⁵ Even from a soteriological perspective, religion is profoundly social.

From whatever perspective, then, and no matter what dimension of the sacred

one might choose to privilege—whether the creedal, moral, devotional, or soteriological—religion appears to be not just accidentally but essentially social and communal. If the view that human beings are by their nature political animals is a true statement of philosophical anthropology, then the view that religion is by nature a social reality of humankind is an equally true statement of philosophical theology, religious sociology, and anthropology. The duty of human beings to honor the transcendent as best they can is one that people have long understood as one that cannot be discharged by solitary individuals but only within various forms of community or “partnership.” Here, “partnership” is understood in the Aristotelian sense of the word as a form of human relationality that emerges when human beings act on the basis of reason and choice to coordinate their thinking and acting in order to together identify and achieve intelligible ends or goods.²⁶

VII. Religion and Society

Recent discoveries concerning the origins of human communal life also highlight religion’s key role in human development. Historians and anthropologists have long thought that economic necessity or the development of sophisticated agricultural techniques was a prerequisite to the earliest formation of stable human settlements. Now, they are not so sure. Archaeological investigation at Göbekli Tepe in what is now Turkey’s southeastern Anatolian region strongly suggests that the original impetus for the formation of some of the earliest known human settlements approximately twelve thousand years ago was spiritual or religious.

Indeed, the evidence found at Göbekli Tepe suggests that a sacred site of worship was so popular that it became the nucleus of the first known human city, one apparently established some seven thousand years before the great pyramids of Egypt. In other words, and further suggesting the essentially social nature of religion, there is evidence that religious cult and ritual assumed organized and communal form at the very dawn of human history. The primordially social and institutional quality of religion ultimately appears to have served as the cornerstone of organized human community. From the evidence at Göbekli Tepe, archaeologists conclude that

a temple site anchored the subsequent construction of settlements and enabled more systematic agricultural production. The city did not produce the temple, it seems, but “[t]he temple begat the city.”²⁷

A second feature of political sociology that follows from philosophical anthropology is that human beings have tended to organize their social and communal lives in religious ways. If religion tends towards the social, it also appears that the social tends towards the religious.

Echoing Aristotle’s observation that the peak of human social organization, the *polis*, is the most profound of all human artifacts, Emile Durkheim claimed that human society in its highest forms is virtually co-extensive with the sacred. According to such a sociological understanding, the more organized and enduring a human community becomes, the more it assumes sacred and religious dimensions. Consequently, virtually every society, no matter how ostensibly secular, appears to develop a corresponding set of sacred rituals, liturgies, and even—as Robert Bellah, following Rousseau, observed—a “civil religion.” The social cannot help but become sacred in at least some ways or, in other words, the political cannot help but assume at least some religious dimensions.²⁸ It should be acknowledged at this juncture that according to many religious traditions, human communities (including the political community) can only ever achieve some resemblance to the transcendent source or sources of all that is sacred. The truly sacred, thus, can never be fully subsumed into any human community, no matter how enduring.

Nevertheless, if a human community or

society as such appears to assume a spiritual significance as well as religious features, we might inquire why this phenomenon occurs. Is this a contingent phenomenon, peculiar only to certain kinds of pre-modern or non-Western societies, or is it deeply rooted in some integral aspect of human affairs and consequently perennial?

Several considerations support the idea that the religious dimension of human communities is rooted in profound and abiding features of human life. One is that the ruling authority required to organize human communities is at once so necessary and so fragile that people have often thought it necessary to invoke a “higher power,” such as the Mandate of Heaven or Divine Right, to justify and to explain this authority. A second is that true human community and friendship involve a dedication to the good and flourishing of another, and to the community as a whole, that appears to have some divine quality. Such self-sacrifice is precisely what is most characteristic of God or the gods in many religious traditions. A third reason is that the good of the community, especially a large political community, bears a divine resemblance in its sheer comprehensiveness and breadth. Thomas Aquinas articulates this third reason, as well as the second reason, when he observes that:

[I]t belongs to the love which should exist between human persons that one should seek and preserve the good of even one single human being; but how much better and more godlike [*divinius*] that this should be shown for a whole people and for a plurality of city-states [*civitates*]. Or: it is lovable that this be

shown for one single city-state [civitas], but much more godlike that it be shown for the whole people embracing many city-states [civitates]. 'More godlike' because more in the likeness of God, who is the universal cause of all goods.²⁹

The intrinsically religious significance of human community is a frequent theme in the world's religious traditions. In Hindu theology, the concept of *advaita*, which means "not two," represents the non-dual and ultimately unified nature of all reality. Any true human community or society represents and participates in this higher plane of reality to the extent that it overcomes disunity or duality. In Christian theology, any true society or communion of human persons reflects at least to some extent the nature of God, who is understood not as a simple unity but as Trinity—a perfect and consummately loving communion of three persons. According to this Christian understanding of the triune nature of God, the mutual love of the three divine persons, their society, is so perfect that they enjoy a unity that is even deeper and greater than a singular or mathematical unity. If God is a community—the consummate and perfectly unified community—then any community or society of persons can be "religious" and bear a divine resemblance to the loving community that is God. In Taoism also, the metaphysical and the moral meet. At the center of the universal order and the center of human relationship is, or ought to be, harmony and the absence of conflict and willful struggle.³⁰

In short, to be a human being is to be more than a social animal and more than a religious animal. Human beings are by nature socio-religious animals—social

because religious, and religious because social. We simultaneously seek to participate in true interpersonal communion and true reconciliation with ultimate reality. This is not to say that the basic human good of religion and the basic human good of community, or friendship or society, are essentially the same good. They are distinct, and each is a dimension of human fulfillment that is irreplaceable in the sense of being irreducible to some other basic good. However, these distinct goods bleed into each other. Each tends to point towards the other.

VIII. Religious Institutions as Essential

The social nature of religion means that religious institutions are not contingent features of this or that local context. They are not optional and exotic sociological phenomena whose passing we need not miss, or even notice much, if the oft-predicted secularization of humankind were ever to take place. They are also much more than a class of non-governmental organizations providing certain kinds of instrumental “services” in a spiritual style. Instead, religious institutions ought to be seen as a necessary expression of the essentially socio-religious character of human beings.

Religious institutions contribute extensively to the well-being of their societies. For example, the following statistics documenting Catholic educational and humanitarian activities from the latest aggregate reporting year (2020) support this point:

Catholic schools and education: In the field of education, the Catholic Church runs 73,164 kindergartens with 7,376,858 pupils; 103,146 primary schools with 35,011,999 pupils; 49,541 secondary schools with 19,307,298 pupils. The Church also cares for 2,251,600 high school pupils, and 3,707,559 university students.³²

Catholic charity and healthcare centers: Charity and healthcare centers run in the world by the Church include: 5,192 hospitals, most of them in Africa (1,404) and America (1,365); 15,481 dispensaries, mainly in Africa, (5,427), America (4,269); 577 Care Homes for people with leprosy, mainly in Asia (316)

and Africa (209); 15,423 Homes for the elderly, or the chronically ill or people with a disability, mainly in Europe (8,123) and America (3,692); 9,295 orphanages, mainly in Asia (3,197) and in Europe (2,278); 10,747 creches, mainly in Asia (3,013) and America (2,992); 12,515 marriage counselling centers, mainly in Europe (5,624) and America (4,332); 3,225 social rehabilitation centers and 31,091 other kinds of institutions.”³³

Apart from such direct services, religious institutions also give the deeply rooted socio-religious nature of human beings a concrete, organized, and public form. They embody the fundamental human interests in being religious and in being social in an integrated manner. To the extent that religious institutions actualize the distinct but conjoined spiritual and social dimensions of human life, their existence is essential.

IX. Embodied Persons and Embodied Religion

The social and communal dimensions of human life need not necessarily assume a formal, institutional character. A lunch club meeting at the same restaurant at the same time every week over many years enjoys coherence and stability over time while still being informal or non-institutional. However, its objective is the gathering itself, which has its own value, but that objective is distinct from coming together in an organized way to achieve a basic human good beyond the mere act of gathering. To more fully understand why and how human persons need religious institutions in order to participate in the basic goods of community and religion, it is necessary to briefly discuss another feature of philosophical anthropology that is often ignored in political debates and policy discussions: the bodily nature of human persons.

As Christian Smith has argued, “[h]uman persons are... always *embodied*.”³⁴ Our embodiment means simply that we are not pure spirits and cannot be reduced to our intellectual or volitional capacities. We are not ghosts in machines. We are neither essentially rational wills nor merely conscious minds that happen to inhabit physical bodies. Nor is it quite right to say that we *have* our bodies or use our bodies as mere instruments to serve what is most “truly” or “essentially” human about us; i.e., our reason or our soul or our “identity.” This is why everyone who has had the misfortune of being exposed to the relevant technology knows that an online “meeting” is not a real meeting, a virtual “classroom” is not a real classroom, and a social media “community” is not a real community.

None of these considerations resolve the fundamental mystery of how the material dimensions of human nature, such as our brains, interact with our apparently immaterial dimensions, such as reason and consciousness. It is simply to say, as Smith argues, that “[h]uman beings are always unified beings of existent duality. They are all the time both material body and immaterial ‘soul’ existent in singular unity....”³⁴ This integrated, anthropological understanding makes sense of much of our subjective experience and has implications for public policy, including issues of religious freedom.

As some feminist thinkers, as well as phenomenological philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have long emphasized, to be an embodied human person is not to *have* a body but to *be* a body.³⁵ This means that we can fully instantiate the goods of religion and community only as flesh-and-blood bodies. In other words, trying to promote the goods of religion and community in a way that is exclusively intellectual, mental, spiritual, or otherwise interior is guaranteed to be fragmented and radically incomplete.

X. Embodied Religious Community as a Public Good

Thanks to an abundance of social science scholarship, we know that religious institutions contribute a wide range of goods and services in societies all across the world, particularly in the areas of education, health, and relief and development. Religious people and their institutions provide care for the poor and marginalized in countless ways. Religious institutions are often present when other institutions, such as state agencies, are absent. However, as important and often indispensable as these measurable and quantifiable goods and services are, religious institutions also contribute an “essential service” that is even more fundamental and distinctive.

Perhaps the most important public or political role religious institutions play can be found in their pursuit of ends that are not at all political in one sense and yet are profoundly political in another sense—namely, cultivating and facilitating embodied forms of religious community or spiritual society. Religious institutions not only carry traditions of transcendent meaning, but they also incarnate and embody these traditions in ways that are appropriate and necessary in light of the embodied nature of human persons. They do so by mediating and communicating the implications and importance of these traditions to flesh-and-blood spiritual beings using flesh-and-blood material instruments: the ministers, members, and employees of religious institutions. When religious institutions fail to practice what they preach, their mission to embody their teachings, their very reason for being, is deeply undermined.

At their best, religious institutions embody

what they teach and contribute indispensably to the flourishing of embodied human persons by providing material signs of transcendence. For example, religious institutions create and display religious art forms and construct buildings for religious worship and activities. Indeed, three of the most stunning architectural wonders of the world and perhaps the world’s most beautiful buildings—the Mezquita de Córdoba, the Taj Mahal, and the Cathedral at Chartres—are religious structures. Indeed, these magnificent samples of human architecture are themselves religious institutions. Though uncommon in their beauty, they reveal and represent what religious institutions are at their best. Many religious institutions by their steady presence and physical beauty constitute outward and material signs of transcendent spiritual grace. Apart from the services they provide or the economic contributions they make, our neighborhoods and cityscapes would suffer incalculably without these tangible signs of spiritual realities.

Religious institutions are also carriers of embodied community. In and of themselves, religious institutions such as mosques, temples, and churches may not necessarily be close-knit communities. However, they consistently organize physical rituals touching the range of our senses and provide physical spaces that are often capacious, beautiful, and inviting. The many wondrous and tangible institutional manifestations of religion not only point people to the transcendent but also to each other as proper objects of love and care. Few institutions bring together people who are otherwise perfect strangers and may

differ greatly in class, race, or ethnicity and foster among them at least a modicum of embodied community the way that religious institutions do. They do this both by building what Robert Putnam terms “bonding social capital” among their own adherents or members and also by building what he terms “bridging social capital” with

their neighbors, particularly their needy neighbors.³⁶ When religious institutions assume these roles, as signs of transcendence and carriers of community, they help make it possible for embodied human persons to participate in the fundamental and public goods of religion and community.

XI. Conclusion: Institutional Religious Freedoms as an Antidote to Social Divisions

The inescapable and immediate importance of religious institutions becomes especially apparent when states and other influential social actors try to eliminate or manipulate them, preventing them from serving their proper purposes or destroying them altogether. When states politicize religious institutions and force them to serve narrow ideological agendas, these institutions suffer a radical loss of identity and purpose. They lose the authority and capacity to point to transcendent truth in a convincing way, and they cease to cultivate genuine embodied community. Indeed, many of the assertive religious or secular nationalist ideologies we currently see surging around the world are doomed attempts to cultivate an illusion of community and shared identity through thin, ersatz “imagined communities” (which tend to serve political agendas rather than contribute to genuine religious purposes or goods).

Though it may seem paradoxical to many, one essential antidote to the dangerous and divisive tribalisms of our time is the strengthening of religious institutions and the embodied local religious communities they instantiate and promote. Dangerous tribalists, populists, and radical secularists find their most willing recruits among

people who lack an anchor in an embodied local community. If a major goal of our time is to depolarize our politics and rebuild a shared commitment to the common good, then safeguarding and encouraging religious institutions, which are proven carriers of our deepest shared values and most robust forms of community, should be an urgent public policy priority.

XII. Endnotes

1. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 208. See also Ronald J. Colombo, *The First Amendment and the Business Corporation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57.
2. *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014), 18, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/13-354_olp1.pdf.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.
4. For a helpful introduction to the concept and particularities of the “WEIRD” world, see Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).
5. I thank Miriam Shah for alerting me to the quotation and for providing the English translation of Camus’ original French text: “Il ne s’agit pas d’héroïsme dans tout cela. Il s’agit d’honnêteté. C’est une idée qui peut faire rire, mais la seule façon de lutter contre la peste, c’est l’honnêteté.” Albert Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: Folio, 1972), 150.
6. Tyler J. VanderWeele, “Love of Neighbor During a Pandemic: Navigating the Competing Goods of Religious Gatherings and Physical Health,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 59 (May 2020): 2196–2202, doi:10.1007/s10943-020-01031-6.
7. Jeffrey Gettleman, Kai Schultz, and Suhasini Raj, “Virus Fans Religious Hatred in India, Leading to Violence Against Muslims,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2020, Section A, p. 6. Also available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/world/asia/india-coronavirus-muslims-bigotry.html> (last accessed on January 26, 2021).
8. For a recent discussion—and also a debunking—of many of the claims surrounding Shincheonji’s alleged role in spreading Covid-19, see Massimo Introvigne, “Shincheonji’s Chairman Lee Not Guilty of Breaking Virus Law: The Decision,” *Bitter Winter*, January 25, 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/shincheonjis-chairman-lee-not-guilty-of-breaking-virus-law/>; last accessed on January 26, 2021.
9. Katherine Stewart, “The Religious Right’s Hostility to Science Is Crippling Our Coronavirus Response,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/opinion/coronavirus-trump-evangelicals.html?algo=top_conversion&fallback=false&imp_id=326562499&imp_id=451782574&action=click&module=trending&pg_type=Article®ion=Footer.
10. “Number of cumulative cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the United States from January 22 to July 28, 2020, by day,” *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1103185/cumulative-coronavirus-covid19-cases-number-us-by-day/> (accessed July 28, 2020).
11. Kate Conger, Jack Healy, and Lucy Tompkins, “Churches Were Eager to Reopen. Now They Are Confronting Coronavirus Cases,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/coronavirus-churches-outbreaks.html?smid=url-share>. If one googles “Churches Emerge as Major Source of Coronavirus Cases” the search will bring up this article, which can be found at the top of the search results. Also see Ed Stetzer, “Churches, Coronavirus, and The New York Times,” *Christianity Today*, July 8, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210622084223/https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/july/churches-coronavirus-new-york-times-churches-are-taking.html>.
12. Alan Cross, “What Churches Really Think About Opening Up,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/14/opinion/coronavirus-churches.html>.

- 13.** For example, as noted above (supra note 7), sociologist Massimo Introvigne has argued that the allegations against the Shincheonji Christian movement in South Korea as a “plague-spreader” were largely unfounded. Likewise, judicial investigations and judgments in India have concluded that the vilification of Tablighi Jamaat as an irresponsible spreader of COVID-19 was unjustified and have largely vindicated the Muslim organization: see Ziya Us Salam, “Tablighi Jamaat: Vindicated, finally,” *Frontline*, September 25, 2020, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/vindicated-finally/article32516103.ece>; last accessed on January 26, 2021.
- 14.** For a reasonably judicious discussion of some of the serious failings of religious leaders and communities in the early months of the pandemic (along with some of their positive contributions), see Kali Robinson, “How Are Major Religions Responding to the Coronavirus?” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/how-are-major-religions-responding-coronavirus> (last accessed on January 26, 2021). See also Paul Marshall, “Political Theology and Church Restrictions”—which was a part of a virtual conference titled “Law, Religion, and Coronavirus in the United States: A Six-Month Assessment,” October 2, 2020, Emory Law School et al., <https://canopyforum.org/2020/10/02/political-theology-and-church-restrictions/>.
- 15.** For a careful social-scientific treatment, rooted in critical realism and personalism, of how and why human beings are naturally religious, see Christian Smith, “Are Human Beings Naturally Religious?” in Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman, eds., *Homo Religiosus? Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 35–54.
- 16.** The locus classicus of the idea that friendship is an essential component of the highest and most complete form of human fulfillment (eudaimonia) is Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VIII and IX (1155a1–1172a16). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle develops a many-sided account of why “friendship ... is most necessary for our life” (1155a1–3). For a concise modern treatment of friendship and “community” as a basic human good, see John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 134–160.
- 17.** See, for example, the recent monograph by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy: *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* (New York, NY: Harper Wave, 2020). Dr. Murthy previously served as the Surgeon General of the United States under President Barack Obama. He again serves as Surgeon General in President Joseph Biden’s administration.
- 18.** The failure of Internet “community” to provide real community is the focus of the following, incisive monograph: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, 3rd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2017).
- 19.** Christopher Tollefsen, “Religious Liberty, Human Dignity, and Human Goods,” in Timothy Samuel Shah and Jack Friedman, eds., *Homo Religiosus?: Exploring the Roots of Religion and Religious Freedom in Human Experience* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 230–242.
- 20.** Leon Kass, *Founding God’s Nation: Reading Exodus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).
- 21.** We echo Daniel Philpott’s cogent reflections on the nature and definition of religion in his *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 20–27.
- 22.** Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
- 23.** I owe this tripartite understanding of the constituent elements of religion to Peter Kreeft’s *Between One Faith and Another: Engaging Conversations on the World’s Great Religions* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2017). Kreeft’s monograph is a remarkably insightful, informative, and readable introduction to comparative religion.

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26. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, chapter i.
27. See Charles Mann, “The Birth of Religion,” *National Geographic* (June 2011), passim, but particularly page 39.
28. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027022>.
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30. “Taoism: The Power of Nature's Way” in Kreeft, *Between One Faith and Another*, Chapter 7.
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33. Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 63; emphasis in the original.
34. Ibid.
35. For a survey of feminist perspectives on human embodiment and its significance, see Joan C. Chrisler and Ingrid Johnston-Robledo, *Woman's Embodied Self: Feminist Perspectives on Identity and Image* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2018), 3–14. For a helpful discussion of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment and how it grounds a deeper appreciation of the importance of affective, embodied, and ritual religious practices, see Jack Williams, “Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Philosophy of Religion,” *Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 2020): 1–20, doi:10.1017/S003441251900074X.
36. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Revised and Updated (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).



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