

All institutions are

KICKING COWS but some of them give **MILK**

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

God & I are more interested in people's piety than in anything else about them, so I usually inquire of this when meeting strangers. (By piety, I mean inward soul-orientation & outward, including institutional, praxis.) As it's been my practice for 56 years (ie, ever since becoming more interested in piety than in anything else) to ask, in these words or other words to this effect, "What, may I ask, is your religion?" I have stored in my synapses thousands of responses, almost none of them offputting.

Responses, in order of frequency:

1 "In my childhood, I attended the _____ church (or synagogue or temple or meeting), but now I'm a member of _____."

2 "As a kid I went to the _____, but I haven't gone regularly anywhere since."

3 "I'm not religious, never have been, but I do believe in God."

NOTICE:

All the responses are institution-conscious. #1 has religious institution as part of personal identity, though further conversation is needed to discover the degree of institutional participation. #2 is ex-institutional. And #3 is non-institutional....Any more responses? Of course, but these are the three most frequent. And also of course, these three are nuanced in many directions.

ONE CONCLUSION:

Religion as institution is in the mind of most Americans when asked, out of the blue, *What, may I ask, is your religion?* Almost everybody thinks religious institutions are important, though not all live what they think important.

Important, yes, but **necessary**? I try to get my responders to speak of their inward piety, but most of them flee to religion's outwardness, many of them to reject it: "I'm a Christian, but I don't go to church. You don't have to go to church to be a Christian." When I insist that you do, since church-going is the only distinctive thing Christians do, most of these answerers, their usual defense penetrated, become irritated, defensive, sometimes even hostile. **Anti-institutionalism** is rampant in our country, & especially religious anti-institutionalism.

What did Ramakrishna mean by his analogy (in this Thinksheet's title), put various ways, when disciples asked him why they should pay any attention to religious institutions, when, they said, "All we need do is follow you"? Do your own ruminating on his response. I'll finish this page with some of mine:

1 R. goes to the heart of the usual objection to institutional religion, viz that it's more trouble than it's worth. So much kicking going on! Clericalism & anticlericalism, laicism & antilaicism. Fights over coteries & group decision-making, especially hiring/firing & budgets.

2 R. raises the question, what is the worth of religious institutions? Extraneously they may have a tranquilizing effect on the populace, but that cannot secure their worth to participants, though it may to potentates. Indeed, in R.'s own country, institutional religion often is destabilizing, as right now Hindu fanatics are attacking mosques built on property where formerly was a Hindu temple (or even occupying a refurbished temple).

3 Participants who want milk, the spiritual nurture that can come through religious institutions, notice that the cow kicks, but pay greater attention to the udder.

4 When Goodwife Loree was a small child, her preschool chore was to milk a non-kicking cow or two: kicking cows are for bigger girls & boys to milk. But when it comes to religious institutions, there are no nonkicking ones: that's R.'s **realism**, which includes staying away from dry kicking cows.

5 R. avoids **cynicism**, the sneer that no cows (no religious institutions) give milk, feed the soul & society's spiritual needs.