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Jesus without the church?

Joe Ferullo | Apr. 20, 2012 NCR Today

Would the "real Jesus" flourish without all the distracting interference of institutional religion to block his true message? A fascinating and concise article online [1] at *The New York Times* says: nice idea, but, well, no.

Notre Dame philosophy professor Gary Gutting responds in the *Times* to Andrew Suillivan's *Newsweek* cover story [2] titled "Forget the Church, Follow Jesus." Sullivan -- like so many before him struggling to find a path to the real Jesus -- advises fellow seekers to push the church aside and just focus on Jesus' words, especially the Sermon on the Mount.

But, as Gutting writes, it just isn't that simple. Jesus spoke often in a language that required interpretation. No one, Gutting says, can really live out the Sermon all the time, every time. Can anyone really turn the other cheek always? Does anyone literally never give a thought for tomorrow?

The trick, he says, is finding how to incorporate this message into our everyday lives -- how to use these words as a foundation for living in a material world.

And that's a task that has occupied the minds of men for more than 2,000 years. As Gutting writes, Aquinas went back to the ancient Greeks for help, and more secular thinkers like Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill interpreted Christ's ethos for a good life in ways accessible to less-religious people. Throughout this journey, the church has been at the center, "sustaining the traditions of thought and practice that transformed Jesus' passionate but enigmatic teachings into coherent and fruitful moral visions," Gutting writes.

To try to find Jesus unmoored from this tradition is to find yourself lost at sea.

"In this sense," Gutting says, "to forget the church is to forget Jesus."

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Links:
[1] http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/returning-to-the-sermon-on-the-mount/
[2] http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/04/01/andrew-sullivan-christianity-in-crisis.html