

More Faith, Less Religion

By

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*“It is my contention that Nietzsche was mostly right; that while the will to power has always been present, American democracy increasingly operates within a political culture—that is, a framework of meaning—that sanctions a will to domination. This, in turn, is fueled by a political psychology of fear, anger, negation, and revenge over perceived wrongs.” — James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World**

A couple of Sundays ago in a sermon, I talked about the difference between faith and religion. I wanted to separate the good things that faith can inspire people to do apart from what their human-made religions require them to do. I wanted to stoke our imagination of a faith in which people are motivated by service, inclusion, and forgiveness rather than those who are enthralled to the all-too-often exclusive and judgmental religion that gets all the air time in our media. This distinction between faith and religion is not nearly as neat and clear as I suggested, but a lot has happened in the two weeks since I made these comparisons to make me realize that there may be more that we can learn about how to be a compassionate, forgiving people by distinguishing what faith inspires us to do rather than what religion requires us to do. And even as I tried to draw as clear a distinction between faith and religion as possible, since that sermon, the media have focus on two people who have brought faith and religion in starker contrast: Pope Francis and Kim Davis.

As the head of the Roman Catholic Church prepares for his visit to the U.S. and his address at the World Meeting of Families Mass in Philadelphia, the news has been all about how Pope Francis has confounded the expectations of the world by presenting a more compassionate face and tone from the church hierarchy and encouraging Catholics to refocus away from the culture wars to focus on the poor and on caring for the Earth. While he has not departed from any of the teachings of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis has managed to affect a loving, forgiving, inclusive tone that does not shame or demonize those who do not conform to the rules and regulations of the church. Even though he has no intention of revisiting and rethinking the church’s teachings on LGBT persons, he does not negate our presence or our humanity or cast us as villains or enemies who endanger the faith. He appears to be someone who strives mightily to live out the tenets of a faith that asks disciples to love God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strength and their neighbors as themselves. He demonstrates what it means to live faithfully rather than simply to act religiously.

In contrast, Kim Davis, the elected county clerk in Kentucky, has refused to issue marriage licenses to couples because her religion does not approve of same-sex relationships. She asserts that she has a first amendment right to deny marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples. Despite working for a government that must be neutral toward its citizens and assuming an elective position in which she must execute the laws, Davis has invoked God’s authority as the reason she cannot and will not perform the duties of her job. In her desire to act religiously at all cost, not only has Davis refused to do the job she was hired to do and execute the laws as a

duly elected official, she has asserted herself in ways that do not reflect Jesus' own admonitions to show love, to not judge, and to avoid retaliation and showy religion. I do not quibble with Davis' right to interpret Scripture and express herself religiously. I do ask her not to use her power and privilege in government to harm those she considers to be sinners and who have less power than she. I just wonder why she doesn't express herself so religiously when it comes to the divorced, the nonbeliever, or the sinner.

As Davis stubbornly refused to obey the judges order to issue the licenses and was remanded to jail for contempt of court, one religious conservative commentator (I cannot recall who because they have all been rather mean and vitriolic in their comments) declared that this confrontation is a zero sum game—that either they win and LGBT people lose or vice versa. It broke my heart to hear that conclusion. I recall the many instances where religion insisted on a zero sum outcome, where people of extreme religious practice could not summon enough love, grace, and forgiveness in light of difference and disagreement. The results are quite clear—the attack on the World Trade Center; the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church; thousands of migrants and refugees fleeing war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These examples indicated that we have a lot of religion in the world but very little faith. Pope Francis reminds us how faith can be affirming and prophetic even when religion fails to be so. Kim Davis reminds us that religion can be indistinguishable from the political actors in our culture who maintain their power by stoking fear, anger, negation, and revenge. I would rather have more faith and less religion.