

Giving Up Religion for Lent

A few years ago, one of my seminary colleagues wrote an article in which he stated he was giving up God for Lent. Actually, I think he meant he was giving up his *ideas* about God. See, like all of us, my friend has ideas about God—how God feels about certain people and issues, for example. As John Shelby Spong reminds us, however, “God” is the human word we use for something/someone we simply cannot explain. Scripture also reminds us that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, and God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). So, while I believe it is normal and healthy to speculate and debate our feelings and ideas about God, holding too tightly to these feelings and speculations as the ultimate truth for all people in all times can be—and has been--unhealthy and hurtful to us and to others. So put it all together, and voila--my friend’s somewhat different Lenten discipline.

Giving up religion, on the other hand, is a whole other issue—at least to me.

In his book, “Jesus for the Non-Religious,” Spong shares his belief that all religions of the world were originally formed in a search for security. As humanity evolved and became aware of--among other things--our finitude, we began the search for the Source of all the power of life and death we saw around us. Eventually we developed what we now call “religions” to explain this phenomena, as well as in an effort to secure the favor of the Source of that power and the guarantee of a pleasant afterlife.

Today, there is still plenty of mystery in our world and beyond to explore and debate—including the mystery many of us call “God.” At the same time, we have learned that much of what our ancestors feared as punishments and blessings from God were the results of things like viruses, weather patterns, genetics, human error and skill, etc. Unfortunately, however, in many of its forms religion is still used as a fear-based vehicle of control. Rather than seeing the world’s religions as various paths to explore what theologian Paul Tillich called “the Ground of Being” (God), some practitioners of these same religions have used their “ultimate truths” to denigrate, humiliate, abuse and otherwise exclude those who disagree with them. Even some faith communities who do not participate in these behaviors seem to operate more from a “survivalist” mentality that lives in the past, rather than allowing their faith, practices, and structures to continually evolve so they may address the challenges of an ever-evolving culture.

Jesus didn’t seem to be a big fan of stagnant, institutionalized religion, either. While I do believe Jesus observed some of beneficial rituals and disciplines of Judaism, he did not allow himself to get caught up in the unhealthy, exclusionary and retrograde expressions of the institutional form of his beautiful, expressive religion. Jesus--while maintaining the integrity of the core message of his faith—reinterpreted that message for the evolving culture of his time.

So, after prayer, meditation, and study, I think I’ll give up religion for Lent. Who knows? Maybe I’ll give up religion for good. And before anyone panics, I am **NOT** referring to the type of religion that encourages exploration, growth, and responsibility through study, ritual, and community life. I am, however, referring to an unhealthy institutionalized form of religion that focuses on survival to the exclusion of spiritual growth and the evolution of faith and culture.

Who knows? If we can lose the unhealthy expressions of religion, maybe we will eventually “find” God. Let’s just not be surprised if God shows up in some really weird places.

Peace,
Pastor Danny