

Questioning Another Person's Faith Sermon

February, 19, 2016

According to one high-profile individual this week, for “a religious leader to question a person’s faith is disgraceful.” As soon as I heard that, I thought, “Well, there’s my sermon for this week!” For a religious leader to question a person’s faith is apparently disgraceful. As a religious leader, I had to address this because I think it addresses a core issue of faith communities today.

What is faith? Some religions are faith-based and some involve elements of faith. By this I mean that for some religions, faith is an essential element whereas for others faith forms part of the tradition but is not a deciding point. Islam, for example, literally means “submission” and involves the submission of the individual’s belief into that of Allah and Allah’s one unique prophet. To be a Muslim and not to believe in such a thing is an oxymoron. If a person does not have faith in Allah but calls themselves a Muslim, then they have profoundly misunderstood something about Islam. Islam is absolutely rooted in faith.

What about in Judaism? Well, it’s very easy, particularly in Reform Judaism, to say that faith is not important and it’s only *mitzvah*, commandment or action, that counts. But there has to be something that distinguishes the Jewish community from any other social justice network doing good deeds. And I think that what distinguishes us is a spiritual element. Now I’m not going to clarify what that spiritual element may be because I think that to do so would be the antithesis of Jewish spirituality, which is to be *yisrael*, to struggle with God, and to allow a wide difference of understandings of divinity within our community. But I think a basic acknowledgement of some sense of spirituality as a basis for action is part of Judaism. After all, the word *mitzvah* doesn’t mean good deed, it means “commandment,” and a commandment needs a commander. So in Judaism I would suggest that we have faith in some Divine driving force, or some Divine comforting force, however we understand that, which we usually name God, as the basis of our Judaism. So, that’s having faith but it’s far less concrete and fundamental than the faith of a Muslim, for example.

Christianity is, as far as I can tell – and I’m happy to be corrected if I’m wrong here – more similar to Islam in terms of faith than it is to Judaism. To be a Christian means to believe in the divinity of Jesus. Again, there’s a wide number of ways to interpret that, including taking Jesus not as a historical figure but as a metaphor, but there is a clear basis in faith.

And I would agree that it is very difficult to question someone's faith. After all, how do we know what someone is truly thinking? Faith is an individualised inner world. It is a way of orienting our thoughts. So how could someone possibly comment on our faith? Thankfully, there is a way because actions speak louder than words, or thoughts, or inner faith. So the question that we have to ask is whether a person's actions are consistent with their faith.

When individuals commit acts of violence in Judaism's name we don't generally say, "That's not Judaism," but rather, "that's not *our understanding* of Judaism." We say this because Judaism has a very wide range of ethical practices in Torah, from the lofty "Love your neighbour as yourself," (Lev. 19:18) to the commandment to utterly wipe out the inhabitants of the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1, 20:16). When someone commits violence in the name of Judaism and quotes Torah, we can argue with their interpretation but we have to reluctantly admit that they are entitled to it. That is the blessing and the curse of the clear pluralism inherent in Jewish exegesis. We can say, "That's not how I understand Judaism," but we cannot say, "That's not Judaism," unless their interpretation is so religiously egregious or incoherent that it clearly falls outside of Judaism. What we can say, perhaps, is "That is an intolerant reading of Judaism," or "That is a reading of Judaism that says more about the person's intolerance than it does of Judaism." Those would also be fair comments. But we cannot say, "That's not Judaism."

So, when the Pope, of all people, says that "a person who thinks only about building walls and not of building bridges is not Christian," we have to ask ourselves the question as to whether or not he's entitled to say that. The answer, as far as I can see, is yes, he is, because there is a profound difference between Judaism and Christianity. As I read both religions, Christianity has a loftier ethic than Judaism, one which I personally struggle with in terms of real-world living. For example, where Judaism talks not of not committing adultery, the Christian Bible describes how even looking at a woman lustfully is committing adultery. Where Judaism permits a pre-emptive strike if someone is about to hit you, the Book of Luke says, "If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also" (Luke 6:24). Where Judaism allows you to reclaim stolen property, Christianity says that "if someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them either" (ibid.). And that's fine. If you want to live your life that way, that's a very lofty aim. But it is deliberately counter-cultural to a degree that far surpasses that of Judaism. It means behaving in a way that is different to most other people. Christianity has a code of ethics that almost completely transcends the self. Judaism has a code of ethics that starts in the self and that develops into ethics for the other. So, there's an essential difference as far as I see it. And that difference

means, as far as I understand Christianity, that it is actually much easier to say what is and what is not Christian behaviour. The figure of Jesus in the Christian Bible is totally selfless. He teaches his followers to act selflessly continuously. Even when he is dying, he asks for forgiveness of those who are killing him. So to be a Christian is to be totally selfless, or to try to be. So the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics is entirely entitled to call out behaviour that is selfish as not being Christian.

The backlash that the Pope faced for his comment was as predictable as it was ignorant. Firstly, Donald Trump – the not very oblique target of the Pope's original comment – said that for “a religious leader to question a person's faith is disgraceful.” But the Pope wasn't questioning Trump's faith, he was questioning his Christian practice. And there's a very big difference. Christianity is, as I mentioned before, based firmly in faith but, just like Judaism, that faith has to lead to action. Pope Francis never questioned anyone's inner relationship with God, he questioned their interpretation of Christianity, he questioned how they implement their faith. In theory, inner faith and outer practice should be unified but they're often not. That's what makes us human. The things that we believe are often not unified with the things that we do. That's why religions like Judaism and Christianity involve a profound sense of atonement or repentance.

The Pope's statement is therefore an important one. He said “A person who thinks only about building walls and not of building bridges is not Christian.” That's a perfectly fair statement. A person who seeks only to divide instead to unify is not a Christian. It's not even that their actions don't unite with their thoughts – their very thoughts are not even Christian. A Christian is not a divider, but a unifier. Their modus operandi is not hatred or mistrust, but unequivocal love. That's a perfectly fair statement about Christianity. Now, had Trump wanted, he could have replied by saying, “Obviously he's not talking about me because I seek to build bridges as well as walls.” But he didn't. Instead, he attacked the Pope as being disgraceful. And in so doing, he completely proved the Pope to be right.

It wasn't only Trump himself who attacked the Pope. Robert Jeffress, pastor of a megachurch and contributor to Fox News, said that the Pope “needs to ask Donald Trump's forgiveness for making such an outlandish statement.” He said that he believed that “the Pope is confused between the role of the Church, which is to show compassion, and the role of government, which is to uphold order and protect its citizens.” Jeffress' statement is startlingly ignorant. When a candidate for political office touts their Christian credentials, when they wave a Bible in front of voters, when they talk of Christianity openly in their political speeches, they immediately lose any right to divide their politics from their religion when it suits.

Jeffress wasn't the only person this week to say that the Pope should keep religion out of politics. Never mind that these very same people love to bring religion *into* politics when it suits them – with marriage equality or with abortion rights. THEN they cannot hold back from how important it is to bring religion into the amoral or even immoral political realm.

But now there's a new sheriff in town and he's not having any of hypocrisy, and that's important for all of us. For the first time in recent memory, when people have been openly abusing Christianity, subverting it for their own political gains, sullyng it with their squalid petty divisive policies, the leader of the largest group of Christians in the world has stood up and said, "Make a choice – be Christian or be a hater. If you choose to be a hater, you are no longer a Christian." And it's a glorious statement that's relevant for Jews as much as for Christians because it gives people of true faith courage once more. It's all rather like Tevye reaching his threshold. It's good to bend, it's good to be flexible, but after a while how far do you bend before you snap? With declining numbers in faith communities all around the world – (which, interestingly, is not a trend reflected in the membership of this community, by the way) – perhaps the world's most prominent religious leader has essentially said, "It's more important to remain authentic than it is to try to please everyone."

That's a lesson most clergy learn very early on but often forget once they get into the pulpit because bums on seats – otherwise known in our case as Jews in pews – count. Services feel nicer when there are more people. Bills get paid when there are more fee-paying members. And so boundaries bend and stretch just to keep people happy. What I hear in what Pope Francis said this week is a reminder to me and to all members of faith communities not to focus on that. Instead, he's saying, be authentic. Be faithful to your religious community and its truest, most positive and Godly message. Remember that the best of religion, the true centre of religion, is a unifying message, not a dividing one. And remember that religion doesn't serve political purposes and isn't piecemeal – it's a life endeavour and a total way of being. And, finally, remember that faith communities are rediscovering their sense of pride and their voice and aren't going to be silenced if you take their name in vain. That is all a message that is as appropriate for our Jewish community as it is for Christian communities.

So this week we learn that we need to remember what makes our Judaism – our Reform Judaism – authentic. We learn to be faithful to our core message and values, and to accept that while we try to include everyone, we won't always be able to. And we learn to make our Judaism a total life choice and commitment, and

not just something for the weekend. May God guide us in that learning and in our rediscovery of authentic, life-committing Judaism and let us say, Amen.