

## WHY MY FAITH IS PERSONAL, BUT NOT PRIVATE

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There is a popular and prevailing opinion that matters of religious belief are private. The implication is that people of faith are to keep their private piety to themselves. Democracy simultaneously enshrines the dignity of each human to hold their own opinion, and also anchors our sense that no one else can push their opinion on us. However, I wonder whether the relation of my faith to the world fits these categories.

In the midst of this discussion the words 'private' and 'personal' are used interchangeably, as if they both mean the same thing. But I'm not sure that they do. It seems to me that while I can maintain a personal faith, it is enormously difficult to keep it private.

### **Why my faith must necessarily be personal**

When God speaks what he offers is himself. Before the laws and commands; before the requirement and the judgments, God Almighty offers himself for relationship with us.

God is personal. We know this, in part, because God's presence in creation reaches its climax with the incarnation: the physically present person of God – the divine Son from all eternity. Not only does the personally present incarnate Son direct us to engage personally with him, he also reveals that within the Trinitarian God, the three persons have loved and gloried in one another for all eternity.

God is personal in himself, and God is personal toward us. God's desire is to save a people to be his very own. Thus Christian faith is immediately communal. This collective identity in no way diminishes our individual relationship with God, and yet many instances of relationship language in the Bible are collective in nature.

My faith in this God necessitates a personal response. I cannot rightly relate by mere absorption of facts or recital of dogma, neither can I present myself for ritual and thereby imagine myself fully connected to God.

As God makes the personal offer, I respond with personal faith. My belief in God and the resulting activity, both stillness and busyness, flow from my personhood. Christianity is not an added feature, retro-fitted to who I am, rather my personhood has been transformed so that relatedness to God has become foundational to my very person. For this reason my faith is, and has to be, personal.

## **Why no one benefits when my faith is private**

The supposed synonym of personal is private. Yet tracing the origin of this word reveals that it emerged in the context of what it is not. The private is removed from public affairs. Used in the past to identify people who did not hold public office, it is related to the word 'deprive'. Where 'personal' speaks of who I am, 'private' speaks of where I am.

There are two difficulties I see when we persist in using 'private' to describe the nature of faith in God. The first of these is the difficulty caused in public conversations. If we allow that my faith is both personal and private, then the very foundation of who I am is not available for public interactions. The central reason why I behave the way I do is supposed to remain private. My rationale for decisions will remain hidden and you will be left confused about my action. Because my faith is personal, I will find it very hard to keep it private. Even if I cannot speak directly of it, it will be writ large in what I do, and do not do.

It seems to me that this makes public conversation poorer. If people of faith are limited in their relating, if they are unable to make public the reasons and convictions that lie behind their actions and ideas then we are left with an incomplete picture of our society.

The second difficulty I see is the integrity problem. By insisting that faith is both personal and private we have created a disjuncture between who I am inwardly and who I am outwardly. When I keep my faith only for private moments, I am forced to create a public persona, which is not truly who I am. You are no longer able to be confident that 'what you see, is what you get'. And I don't want to play games in which I try to connect with you in ways that you will find acceptable. I want to be who I am – confident that you can cope with that.

I think we can draw a line between what we mean by personal and what we mean by private. And because there is daylight between what these adjectives are expressing, I think we can enrich our public conversation by making faith a personal and not private matter.

By The Reverend **Jonathan Holt**