

FAITH & RELIGION

by JIM O'KEEFE

In a talk to the Catholic Care North East

It is quite possible to 'have' faith, and not be involved in 'religion'. Faith is the word we use to describe how we make sense of who we are in relationship to where we are and what we're doing. Religion is more the collection of customs, traditions, beliefs, rules and forms of worship which characterise our relationship with our God and how God affects our lives. For all of us here, our faith is influenced by God and our 'religious' tradition. But generally speaking, 'faith' need not even imply a belief in God. It is fair to say that communism, consumerism, socialism, egalitarianism, etc., can be forms of 'faith', because they all help people make sense of who they are in relationship to others.

I believe that it is very important for us to reflect on the difference between 'Faith' and 'Religion', particularly because I suspect that Roman Catholics have been brought up with the idea that the two words mean the same. They may mean the same for some people, but it is certainly not the case that they mean the same for everyone. It is quite possible, for example, for someone to stop 'practising' their 'religion', but to continue making sense of their lives - to continue being in relationship with God and other people, to continue being 'faithful',

When Brian Keenan was interviewed after his four and a half years in captivity as a hostage in Beirut, he was asked if he was a 'religious' man. He answered:

'I am not and never was religious in terms of an institutional Church. But in the days when I was kept locked up alone, I found that one cannot keep the mind alive

by talking just to oneself. If you are asking me did I pray, the answer is yes. If you ask me am I religious then no'.

In his book 'Towards a Civilisation of Love' Cardinal Hume reflects on this same distinction and says;

'It is important to remember the value of what we do each day. If we are aware of this then we escape from the trap of seeing some activities as spiritually worthwhile (such as attendance in church or prayer) and others as entirely secular with no relationship to God, save to avoid displeasing him by sin. To live in the light of that dichotomy is to have failed to appreciate one of the most important consequences of the incarnation.'

Faith is really the word we use to describe the way we make sense of who we are and what we do. The way we make sense of things changes as we grow, as we are subjected to new questions, as we are challenged by people or circumstances. Our faith changes when we meet a crisis which challenges our presently held beliefs - when we come face to face with personal suffering, bereavement, loss, failing in love etc. In these 'ordinary' circumstances of our lives our faith is tested and refined. Faith is that 'way of knowing' which brings order and coherence into life.

I am sure that this is one of the problems Jesus had with the religious leaders of his time. They wanted to maintain a religious system, and he wanted them to reflect on their faith. Jesus heartily condemns the way the leaders would put heavy burdens on the backs of people and not enable them to carry them. Jesus is also (particularly in Matthew's Gospel) trying to move the people on from the past - 'You have heard how it was said of old... but I say..' Jesus wanted the people to expand their ideas of what 'faith' would include, he wanted them to develop, to grow, to break down barriers between people, to love their enemies, to become more open to other people and their needs. The Beatitudes are all 'becoming' words.