

12 Resolutions for people of faith

By Andrew T. Gerns, *The Morning Call*, December 31, 2005



Looking back on 2005, religion and religious people were in the news a lot. Much of it was not good. Here is a short list of divisive things people did in the name of their faith.

A famous television evangelist endorsed the assassination of the president of Venezuela; other television commentators invented a war on Christmas and then defended us with vigor; there has been the continuing battle within the Christian churches over the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the full life of the church and in society; and, oh, let's not forget the battle royal over evolution and intelligent design in the public schools. And these are just a few things within my own tradition.

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Looking at all this, I have a lot of sympathy for the majority of Americans who routinely separate their spirituality from religion.

Spirituality is seen by many as what we privately believe and how we individually live it out, while religion is the organized stuff that seems to line up people behind causes. I don't believe the two are so easily separated.

While people are wise to want to stay at arm's length away from the abuses, it is also very hard to mature and grow in one's faith alone. One's spirituality cannot really leaven and change us if we are entirely by ourselves. As long as people live in community, and as long as people seek meaning for their lives, then individual spirituality and corporate religion will mix it up.

And no matter how hard we try, our faith — any faith — has public dimensions. It is what we do with what we believe together and separately that really matters.

As we move into the new year, I think that as a Christian minister it might be a good thing to make some resolutions that will help us think about how we use our religious faith and how our beliefs affect

both our own souls and our relationships.

I am not just talking about the usual vices, but about the public side of spiritual life. Maybe we people of faith — whether one considers oneself religious or not — can make some New Year's resolutions that, if lived by, might make having faith less a source of contention and pride and more a source of hope and power.

Now, let's be honest. If your New Year's resolutions are at all like mine, then these are resolves that are filled with hope and good intentions that will soon fall to hard reality.

I know I should eat less and exercise more, but somehow I always manage to get these two backwards. Of course, all religious people can resolve to pray more and worry less — something I also tend to reverse!

We all have things in our lives that we would like to do better. These are behaviors that must be cultivated into habit. So here is my list of New Year's resolutions for religious people; it could be longer, but the year has only 365 days:

1. I will allow my religion to change me, rather than make my religion bless what I already know. I will also be less worried about telling other people how to correct how they should live.

2. I will not use my religion as a channel for my anger; instead, I will allow my faith to open my heart to joy.

3. I will allow my faith to help me engage people I would just as soon avoid such as the poor, the suffering, the sick and the imprisoned.

4. I will give up having to be certain about everything. God will always know more than I do anyway.

5. I will not confuse my patriotism with my faith and I will be wary of people who try to manipulate religion for a political end.

6. At the same time, I will not be surprised or discouraged when the powerful resist the insight and critique of people of faith.

7. I will admit that when I am passionate about something it is hard to sort out what is coming from God and what is coming from me.

8. I will work for something good even though it is more exciting to fight against something bad.

9. I will remember that religious discourse is necessary and healthy as long as it is a dialogue between seekers.

10. I will value my neighbors' faith story and style of believing especially when it is different from my own.

11. I will stop assuming that faith and fun are contradictory.

12. I will go gently on myself and fellow believers when we fall short of our high ideals because God is much more patient with us than we are with ourselves.

Thomas Merton wrote that while we seek to do God's will, we really don't know how.

He believed that even in our ignorance just the desire to please God pleases God. This insight is both a challenge and a freedom.

It is a challenge because we cannot take our obedience to God for granted. It is a freedom, because God knows our relationship, while certain is also experimental. We are learning as we go. Where we get into trouble is when we begin to use our faith defensively or belligerently or as a barrier to growth.

I am certain that my religious resolutions will only go so far. When pressed, I will fall back on what I know — I will get the proportions of prayer and worry backwards, no doubt — but that fact does not mean that our faith is not working on us to change us. I believe that God is in that process. God has given us the capacity to believe because God knows we can do more and do better, and God has given us the capacity to change because God is easier on us than we are on ourselves.

Call me naïve, but I believe that, with God's help, we are only a few resolutions away from a holy, blessed, creative and compassionate New Year.

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