

COFFEE AND FAITH
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The Reverend John Buerk

I like coffee – it's in the genes. My German great grandmother drank seven cups a day – and she lived to be 98. I've had delicious French coffee – the best German coffee – I've had coffee in Istanbul, and Damascus, and Cairo. And I know all the nuances related to coffee brewing – from the beans, to the quality of the water, to how you store the beans, to whether or not you should grind just before you brew the coffee – to what kind of a coffee maker you use, to how hot you should keep it once it's made – not to mention how long it will stay fresh.

Well, I want to tell you that when all is said and done, there are only two things that really make a difference in a cup of coffee – one is how much you pay for the coffee and the other is how much coffee you use relative to the number of cups you are brewing – bearing in mind the exceptional insight of that great Swede Carl Sandberg who noted that, **“there is no such thing as strong coffee, there are only weak men.”**

And over the years I've observed that coffee and religion have a lot in common. First, there is the main ingredient – the coffee. And in the case of religion – there is theology. Second, you have to consider how the coffee is served – hot – cold – or luke warm – not unlike religion. Third there is the amount of water you use relative to the cups of coffee you want to brew. And in religion you have the issue of how substantive your message is – is it to the point and is it focused – does it have depth?

Then there is the question of how you brew the coffee. In religion, is it presented in big buildings or small buildings? Stately buildings or contemporary sanctuaries with all that one expects from a modern auditorium – things like comfortable seats and air-conditioning.

And then there is the question of what you serve the coffee in – is it a mug, or fine china. And so it is with religion – is it served en mass with pop music or in a more sophisticated way with some Gregorian chant thrown in?

Now this doesn't mean that things are inflexible – or that everyone has the same taste. You know that there are varieties in taste. And a lot of taste depends on what you grew up with. If you were served weak coffee at home, you won't like a strong brew. Are you used to your coffee being served in a mug or in a cup with a saucer.

But don't be fooled – wanting a cup and saucer may not be because you are refined. My Irish grandfather wanted a saucer so that he could pour his coffee into to cool it off, and then he drank the coffee from the saucer.

Well I want to tell you that when all is said and done there are really only two things that count in religion just as there are only two things that really matter when you make coffee. One is theology and the other is how much water you use in brewing the dogmas of the faith.

And again, if you go for inexpensive coffee – it will not have much body. Just as if you don't have questioning as part of your religion, you will have a shallow faith. You will find that issues and perspectives are presented in a simplistic way. Things are black or white – you are in or you are out – you believe what you are told or you won't make it through the pearly gates.

You are so opposed to abortion that you bomb clinics and murder doctors.

You are so uncomfortable with sexual issues that you box yourself in not realizing that sexual values reflect cultural patterns which change depending on circumstances. For instance the Bible accepts concubines. When King David was near the end of his days and they had trouble keeping him warm, they put some virgins in bed with him to see if it would help.

People are selective in saying that homosexuality is wrong because the Bible says so, but skip over the negative things Jesus said about divorce.

Faith must be alive and relevant and it must be substantive. If you don't have substance to your faith, you think that God is on your side no matter what the issue is. And, you forget Lincoln saying that he was more worried about his country being on God's side than God being on its side.

By way of contrast, a rich brew of theology provides you with all the flavor you want in your faith. And good religious thinking does the same. Krister Stendahl – the former Dean of Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Stockholm noted that when you find a truth in another religious tradition, it doesn't mean you have to subtract one from your own.

And so it goes – taste varies - if you grew up in a big church, you might find a small congregation lacking. If you grew up in a large congregation a small one might be lacking. But there are exceptions to this generalization – sometimes people from small churches gravitate to the big churches – the mega-churches – if you will – because they feel secure when they are surrounded by so many people who think like they do. Throw in a coffee shop and you can really draw a crowd.

There are other things to consider in religion as well – just as there are in brewing coffee. What do the clergy wear – how long is the sermon – does the sermon have substance? Can you sing the hymns – does the choir hit the right notes? Do the pews have cushions? Can you hear what is being said?

On and on it goes, and when it comes to Jesus, he didn't even know what coffee or tea were – they weren't part of this culinary milieu - no, Jesus drank wine.

And so do we - only it gets changed and because it is changed – so are we. And that change makes us realize that we only live when our lives are livable - and our lives are livable only when we learn to love one another as Jesus taught us.