

What If He'd Become the Rev. Jimmy Carter?

Ken Briggs | Mar. 27, 2014 NCR Today

What if Jimmy Carter had sought a career in the church rather than politics? His appearances on prime television shows promoting his book this week, including a memorable, slightly out of character guest shot on Stephen Colbert in which he wanly suggests joining the Catholic church, raises the question.

His political legacy continues to suffer heavy criticism; would a career in religion had a different income? There's good reason to think it would have been.

First, the former President has won great acclaim for programs and initiatives that have a distinct religious flavor. As President, the one thing for which he's consistently praised is his powerful advocacy of human rights in every part of his foreign relations. Out of office, he has pioneered an extraordinary role as promoter of Habitat for Humanity, the Carter Center for justice, religious reformer and author of several well-regarded books on the relationship of the Bible to everyday problems.

He has become a model of the Protestant spirit by insisting on reform of the churches he's called home, most notably the Southern Baptist Convention in which he was raised. He left that denomination when he couldn't reconcile its biblical literalism and treatment of women and gays with his growing understanding of Scripture. His advocacy of African American equality moved him further still from hard right evangelicalism. Over the years, he has become a sophisticated scholar of the Bible and added to his already formidable grasp of theology.

Yet his role as a Christian leader willing to challenge tradition has been largely underplayed. What remains is his encrusted, Eastern Establishment reputation as a starchy, fussy, narrow minded Sunday School teacher trying to whip the White House corps into line.

If his primary energies had been devoted to reforming and renewing religious movements and establishments, perhaps he would have been blamed for the opposite: as a nagging leftist change agent way ahead of his constituents, quite the opposite of his political legacy as a stick-in-the-mud, however unfair that may be. He might have been a religious visionary who could have slowed the slide of moderate/liberal Protestantism toward the margins. Everything that mattered to him could have been played out, including his political inclinations.

His Colbert interview ran the gamut of spiritually motivated programs or ministries that Carter has undertaken, crystallizing the profound Christian nature of his life. What would it take for him to become Catholic? His response was both real and tongue-in-cheek. He'd require Pope Francis to stay in office, he said, and find it agreeable "when a female priest asks me to join her church."

Typical Carter frankness, even contrariness, in his religious consciousness, adding his voice to Catholic reform with reasonable assurance that such a decision would be possible in his lifetime.

A life in religion would have posed hardships, to be sure, and reaped nothing like the notoriety and platform he has gained from politics. But he would have been more fully in his element, with the same courage and fierce intelligence, at a time when churches are in dire need of such leaders.

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