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## Friendly Freethinker: proudly proclaiming personal piety in public

By Chris Highland  
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A photo of yet another football team kneeling for prayer on the gridiron got me thinking again about “showy faith.” I couldn’t tell if these were Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist players ... just kidding. When we see a team kneeling in a circle, we know right away which flag of faith they are waving (apparently a locker room prayer isn’t sufficient). Performative prayer, like spotlighted spirituality, is a form of flaunting faith. A person appears to announce: “See how much faith I have,” or gives the impression they have a need to proudly proclaim their belief in front of crowds and cameras. I’m not suggesting their faith is insincere or that they are always conscious of the performance, but it does make me wonder if religious faith is meant to be on stage, especially centerstage.

You might be thinking: “Come on. It’s just kid’s being kids; it’s a tradition.” I get that. But, who taught them this way of expressing faith, and why? Adults showed them this was an appropriate expression of “real faith.” By the way, if it is a tradition, how does their religion teach that way to show they believe? (for example, Jesus warned against public prayer). Do they need an audience, or an audience of

one: God? Kneeling in prayer, in uniform, on the field, may even give the impression a specific God cheers for a specific team.

The way I see it, if you want to show me what you believe, maybe don't kneel in public, don't pull out a Bible and quote verses, or preach at me. Lots of words; lots of "proof of believing," but what have I learned about you and your beliefs? That you like to show it off? That you're better than the rest of us? That your mission from God is more important than learning about my views, or takes priority over listening to what I have to say?

My father was a very pious man. He went to church every Sunday, read his Bible at bedtime, and prayed before every meal. Grace at dinnertime was fine, but as a teen, I remember my discomfort, even embarrassment, when dad would bow his head, fold his hands, and pray in a restaurant. Thankfully, it was a silent prayer. I'm happy to say I never saw him preaching his faith to anyone.

I spoke with an elderly gentleman holding a sign outside a women's clinic. The homemade poster simply stated: "Respect Life." I told him I thought his sign, and the quiet manner in which he expressed his viewpoint, seemed a respectful way to stand for his faith. As we talked, it was clear we were on different sides of the fence about healthcare choices. It was a calm and cordial conversation, even as I explained there are many reasons a woman comes into the clinic, and she may have difficult personal decisions to make that are not our business. Respecting life has to include the women too. He seemed to agree. Clearly he is committed to his faith without a need to get in anyone's face.

You could say this man is also being a "show off." Compared to many others, who stand nearby shouting God's judgment on vulnerable women, the older man stands a silent witness to his personal belief. Yes, it still preaches at patients, but I was impressed he wasn't screaming shame and throwing scripture verses like stones.

How is a person's chosen faith shown to others? In my view, if someone shows kindness and respect to others, listens and learns more than talks or preaches, I can respect that. If someone genuinely cares about others, serving those in need, takes action without asking for a reward here or in some heaven above, I can admire the beliefs that guide their actions. If they have to tell everyone they help about their faith (or wear it on their shirt or hat), using their service for evangelism, they lose my respect and admiration.

Emotional display of faith has a long history in the Church. "Go into all the world" and "make disciples of all nations," Jesus instructed his disciples 2000 years ago. Ever since, there have been zealous believers who feel it's their calling to "make" more followers, sometimes by personal performance piety, sometimes at the edge of a sword. It can be deeply troubling for these preachers when so much of the world doesn't see things the same way, or believe in God in a similar way. So, time and again, they turn to performance: "See how much I believe!" Yet, so unconvincing. If one has to shout from their stage, expecting everyone to be a responsive audience, we might ask if this is anything more than acting.