

What does it mean to be a 'religious progressive'?



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There were times during my chaplain years that people were being told to avoid me for one reason or another. One guy was spreading the word on the street that I was getting rich off being a chaplain. Thankfully, most knew that was untrue. Another person spread the rumor that I wasn't a Christian. It was not true then, but had some truth in it. Let me explain.

It's hard to find a "true Christian." Now wait. All I'm saying is that everyone can be suspected by just about anyone else of not being a "true" this or that. One group says followers of another group are not "true believers." One faction interprets their holy book in one way, and says other interpretations are "in error." When this gets really ugly, "judge not lest ye be judged" is thrown out completely and we have a regular judge-fest with epic scripture battles where no one wins.

Growing up in the Church and studying the Bible for years, I chose to enter seminary and go on into ministry. Along the way I came to see that being a "true believer" was actually about practicing a "true way of living" based on honesty and compassion toward others. Put another way, what are creeds while someone bleeds?

I didn't hear the word "progressive" much. "Progress" as a faithful follower was moving toward deeper understanding of others and what was most needed in a troubled world. Emerging from seminary, some of us felt inspired by radical "Liberation" movements, particularly actions in Latin America often led by Catholic priests. Progress meant concern for people suffering oppres-



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Chris Highland titled this photo "Beauty, Wonder and Spirit."

sion or injustice as well as confronting restrictive forms of thinking. It was a matter of both mind and body. "Community" meant including people in poverty, but more than that, stepping aside so they could be the leaders. The most ignored voices among us may have the "good news" we most need to hear. As we saw it, this was being a "true follower of the Great Liberator — Jesus."

Here's the thing. In my mind it's pretty much meaningless to hear folks argue over who is a "true believer" in this or that faith. As great thinkers have taught, the point is action not labels. I go one step further and say that theology is too much of a distraction from what needs to be done, so I am a critic of too much "God-talk."

I recently struck up a conversation

with Jim, a colleague who calls himself a "progressive Christian." I've been asking him some questions and he's been kind enough to engage in some friendly dialogue.

He says the heart of the Christian worldview and message is "mysticism." I've been eager for more explanation of that, since he also says he does not believe in the supernatural. This has me raising eyebrows and face-palming. What?

I understand his point, that there is a thread throughout church history of individuals who felt that God and the universe were somehow one. An intimate relationship with the "divine" causes some to saturate the material world with the "spiritual." A class I once taught on mystics included Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Buddhist, Hindu and

Native American voices. Many of their thoughts seemed very close to paganism, a deep stream of thought underlying many religions. Yet, none of them ever dismissed the supernatural. For a "religion," that would make no sense.

Jim says some branches of modern science affirm this sense of interrelation. Perhaps. But why use ancient words from spiritual traditions to explain that? Science is awfully wonderful at expressing the awesome wonder of it all without using "snowflake words" (like "spirit" or "sacred") that melt when I try to hold them in my brain.

I keep wondering: What does any of this mean? You know, practically speaking, how can a reasoning person make sense of it? Perhaps it's beyond reason? If so, how can we communicate meaningfully? Calling oneself a mystic or a progressive in matters of faith sounds good, but if one has a "connection to the universe" why label that with one religion or one God?

Are you a "progressive" believer? Maybe you can help me understand a little more. Is there a "super-natural" and if so, how would we know that? If God equals Nature, why use the name "God" or claim one faith instead of another? Isn't this simply the old "anthropomorphism" — making God in our own image? How does one "pray" to Nature or "worship" the universe?

It's clear, I have many lingering questions. I guess that's one reason people warned their friends about me all those years ago. At least now I'm making some progress ... I think.

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