

# Can we choose our religion?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Columnist

After a conversation with Frank Goldsmith of Carolina Jews for Justice, my thoughts were all over the map of faith, and secularism. It stirred up some long-fermenting thoughts and questions.

Frank told me a little of his remarkable story, growing up Methodist and attending a Presbyterian college but always feeling a pull toward Judaism. After graduation, he attended Quaker meetings for a time before making the decision to become "officially" Jewish.

He explains this emergence from his family roots not so much as a theological decision but as a rational choice to associate with Judaism and its historic foundation in family, community and social justice.

Frank is a member of Congregation Beth Israel in Asheville which was formerly part of the Conservative branch of Judaism and now refers to itself as a "traditional egalitarian synagogue."

When Rabbi Justin Goldstein is away, Frank is one of the congregants who sometimes leads services or gives the Saturday morning sermon. He occasionally teaches classes instructing members how to chant portions of Hebrew scripture.

In his work with Carolina Jews for Justice, Frank is guided by passages including, "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20), "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:17) and one I took to heart as a chaplain, "[The Lord] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

Frank's years as a civil rights lawyer provided opportunities to put these ancient words into contemporary practice. In his way of thinking, justice is how we bring about "less suffering" to live out the "golden rule" taught by many traditions.

Carolina Jews for Justice was founded in 2013 as both an advocacy and educational organization. Members take traditional Jewish ethical teachings and apply them to racial and economic justice, voter engagement, immigration and sanctuary issues as well as something they call "inclusive community" — seeking pragmatic ways for people to move beyond bigotry, the "phobias" (such as Islamophobia) and expand interfaith connections.

As the organization states, "We care. We act." The commitment is to a faith that "means action, not merely belief."



Frank Goldsmith



Justin Goldstein

This part of the conversation got me thinking about two questions that touch on religion itself: What if faith was more about compassion and justice than beliefs? And what if we could actually choose our religion?

That second question sounds nonsensical because it's often assumed that we consciously choose our faith. But do we?

Raised in a Protestant Christian church, I was taught only one faith. As a teen, I chose to be confirmed as a Protestant Christian because Protestant Christianity was the only thing on the menu. No surprise that I "chose" it.

To their credit, some preachers told me the old analogy: "If you were born in a garage, that doesn't make you a car; since you were born in America, or born in the Church, that doesn't make you a Christian." That made us smile and made some sense.

What they didn't tell me was that wherever I was born, in whatever family I was born into, there is a world of choices when it comes to faith.

Needless to say, no one in church would have ever suggested I could choose "none of the above."

In her survey of religious history, "Strange Gods: A Secular History of Conversion," Susan Jacoby bluntly writes, "The varieties of religious experience on display in the American spiritual bazaar are luxury goods, to be tried on and taken home without obliging the consumer to incur any of the costs attached to religious conversion."

In other words, we're spoiled with a kind of Walmart of faith, with too many products, too many choices. Is that why many simply choose the first thing they see on the shelf?

Circling back to the first question, what if faith wasn't really about beliefs but actions? Frank agreed that even Jesus seemed more interested in how we live than what we believe. Like all observant Jews, the Nazarene rabbi emphasized the ethics of Hebrew tradition, teaching that faith, as originally intended, calls for: "doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly."

Justice is hard, it takes consistent effort and a lifetime of perseverance. As a chaplain with prisoners in detention facilities I saw "The System" work at times, and I saw where it was terribly broken.

We can imagine what would happen if Carolina Jews for Justice joined with other religious as well as secular organizations to "do justice" in NC and across the land. Carolina Jews for Justice also advocates for "environmental justice." Shouldn't that be a basic concern for everyone?

Whether we feel it's a divine duty or an ethical imperative, justice just seems right.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.*