

To start a religion, add water



Highland Views

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Columnist

Have you ever considered creating your own religion? Chances are you haven't, which is probably wise. I have my doubts that anyone in history actually sat down and decided to invent a religion. Then again, it all has to begin with someone, doesn't it?

My mind works in mysterious ways. I often ponder what it would be like to sneak back in time to the origins of things. I would probably begin with the "beginning" — the birth of the universe — though it seems highly probable there would be nothing to see.

I'd be curious to watch our sun catch fire and flame or rejoice when the first one of our species hopped down from a tree and stood up straight. The founding of the Persian, Zulu, Inca, Greek or Roman empires might be worth spying on.

Then I consider the original start-ups we call religions. We might say a religion would need to fire up with faith, but faith in what and whom?

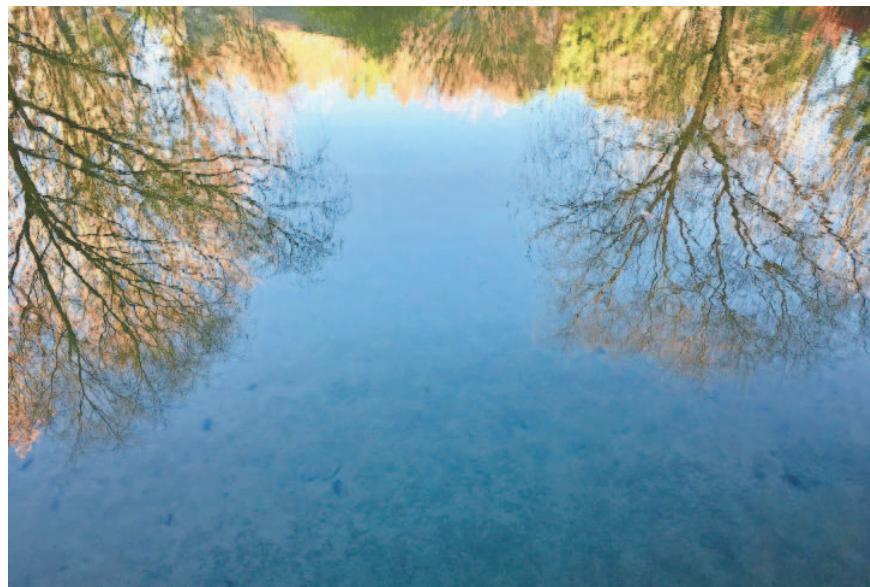
If we were standing by the Ganges about 4,000 years ago, we might observe a woman emerging from a bath. We witness someone stepping out of the forest to exclaim: You are a goddess! The woman turns to the river and bows with respect: YOU are the goddess! Somehow in this exchange, and the stories that are told about it, Hinduism is born.

What if we had climbed to the top of a mountain called Sinai and watched as a nomadic son of Egypt saw a tree hit by lightning and heard a thundering voice? Would we hear it too? If we went down among the slaves he liberated, what beliefs would we hear whispered around campfires?

We could be strolling through an Indian forest 2,500 years ago and come upon a young prince sitting on some moss under a small bodhi tree. As we quietly walk by, silent as a tiger, he wakes up ("buddha": to awaken).

In American culture, many know the Gospel stories, so we may imagine standing in the stable witnessing the nativity of a Palestinian Jewish baby. Or we may sit on the shore of a lake to hear a young rabbi call out to some fishermen to join him on a walk for a lifetime.

We can imagine these moments from legendary times because we are human just like they were. We experience our world and wonder about things we don't understand. We wonder about origins



"Pondering Reflections." CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

and how we fit into the Great Story of history.

So, how does a religion begin? I think there are common, essential ingredients with the added seasoning of good storytelling, context, time and — water.

Here are some suggested steps in creating your own religion:

- First, have a wondrously strange, out-of-the-ordinary experience.
- Convincingly tell someone else what you saw, heard, felt.
- Send the person away to tell Your Story to others.
- Gather all those who have heard Your Story and have chosen to believe the tale.
- Begin to form regular activities (rituals) that affirm Your Story — regularly repeating it.
- Encourage others to write down Your Story and pass it along as the Authoritative Version (don't write it yourself; it has more impact if others tell it and they can be responsible for handling controversies or apparent contradictions).
- A "tradition" is born as Your Published Story is passed down from person to person, generation to generation.
- Water. Somehow make sure that your religion brings people back, time and again, to water as a central symbol of The Story.

Why water? Water is a universal element in nearly all religious traditions. Rivers in India, Moses in a basket on the river, the Israelites crossing the Sea, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and "liv-

ing water," Muhammad washing for prayer, the great ocean of Buddha, the fluid Tao of China.

Humans are mostly water. We live on a planet awash with water. Water is literally what we are — our origin. Therefore, any lasting belief system will — like a waterwheel — circle back time and again to H2O.

So what if we choose to create, to grow, a new religion simply called Water? You or I have an amazing experience with water (river, waterfall, hurricane, tsunami) and live to tell Our Story.

But it's not all about us, because many others also have a personal story to tell about the same event. We, the storytellers, decide that the common element in our stories is literally, water. We decide to reverence and respect water in all forms.

There is no supernatural substitute because every amazing, wondrous story cycles back to the power of water — both creative and destructive.

If you're considering the creation of a new religion, let me know. I may just believe your soggy story, then we're on our way.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many 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. His new book, "A Freethinker's Gospel," is available from Pisgah Press.