

Pastor and atheist discuss some finer points



Highland Views

Chris Highland

Guest columnist

Several years ago I read a letter in the New York Times from a minister I knew in my former denomination. Her letter was in response to a piece by secular writer Susan Jacoby who was reflecting on suffering, grief, death and hope. This clergy colleague penned some good reflections yet I felt a little balance was in order, so I wrote her a note.

Jacoby's article addressed the fact that many people in our culture and communities do not turn to faith in times of tragedy. Hurting, grieving people are frequently offered little more than "divine presence" and heavenly hope. Jacoby was investigating the question whether there is an equally good alternative response to suffering and death other than faith. I explained that I thought this was a valuable point – that these are not merely faith issues, but human issues. I agreed with Jacoby's assertion that a non-theistic perspective can and does provide another meaningful, positive choice.

I agreed with the pastor's comment that some atheists have blindspots when it comes to religious believers and their experience. I suggested we could learn more from each other and wider religious knowledge is sorely lacking in the church as well.

Concerning her statement that most atheists she has spoken with have rejected religion because of a childhood tragedy, I ventured to guess her conversations with non-believers were limited. I suggested she speak with more representatives of unbelievers since, as I see and hear it, many of us choose to leave faith for a variety of very adult and very rational reasons.

In her NYT letter the pastor explained that when she discussed faith with atheists she asked, "Tell me more about the God you don't believe in." This is a common approach taken by more liberal clergy who are waiting at the ready to respond, "Ah-ha, I don't believe in that God either!" I told the pastor that not believing in any notion of the supernatural or a divine being beyond the natural world describes the secular viewpoint, at least mine. It's not about rejecting a "bearded guy in the sky," a "god of judgment" or creeds and bibles. Those might be factors in choosing not to believe, but not the foundational reasons for atheism.

Turning the question around, I might ask the pastor to "Tell me about the God you do believe in." If she says "Love," "Grace" or "Justice," I would smile and say, those are qualities or actions that don't require a God, so why choose God and why just one God from one religion?

At one point in her letter the pastor states that atheism is not rooted in empathy and is "nothing more" than a lack of belief. That seemed off base to me. My



Choosing where to focus. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

pushback was that this "reflects some prejudice and begs more experience." I pointed to my years of service among people often excluded from or judged by religious communities. Empathy came naturally to me. I was a Christian minister during much of that time, but my interfaith work helped me evolve my views in a more secular way, until faith became unnecessary – I wasn't against faith, I just didn't need it any longer.

When the pastor questioned Jacoby's view that faith includes some belief in the afterlife, I said that is indeed true for most religions. Though some in the "progressive" religious community dismiss a definitive view of the afterlife (or even an anthropomorphic – human-like – god), that circles back to the question non-religious people ask: Then why have faith at all?

I appreciated the pastor's assertion that her congregation is "welcoming" to atheists. She told me there are self-identified atheists who attend church. My comment to her was that I wonder how fully welcome these folks feel in her church. Do they feel the freedom to speak up about why they don't believe and how they can be just as good and ethical as baptized members?

This led to some final questions I had for the pastor. I wondered aloud, "What if ethical people with or without faith could put theological issues aside long enough to collaborate and cooperate to create something that could truly be called 'community'?" Since the pastor said she was "dedicated to working for a world of justice and peace for all people," I happily suggested the church could acknowledge the fact that this dedication is not limited to her church or faith itself.

Lastly, I thanked her for her letter and offered to share some time on a Sunday morning to have a dialogue with her and the congregation about these issues that were stirred up by her provocative letter.

Unfortunately, she didn't take me up on that. I wonder who would?

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.