

# Is honesty honored in our faith and freethought communities?



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Benjamin Franklin famously quipped, "Where liberty is, there is my country." His fellow freethinking friend, Thomas Paine, responded, "Where liberty is not, there is my country." We can imagine old Ben nodding with a smile of some agreement. Both were champions of liberty, in government, thinking and faith. A true revolutionary resides in the midst of the tensions, the dissents, identifying with those who struggle for freedom and living the struggle alongside them. In other words, change often begins from within.

Could we say the same of church, or religion in general? One may say, "Where liberty is, there is my congregation." They feel free to live as they see fit and believe as they choose. Another may say, "Where liberty is not, there is my congregation." They take their stand as an "insider," within the community or institution, with a vision to work for change, progress, even liberation.

Close women friends who are in a committed relationship told us they are not free to be open about their partnership in their places of work. One works for the government, the other is a public school teacher. We heard and felt the

sadness and the fear. That these two good people cannot truly be themselves in their workplaces is disheartening. This honest revelation of private personal pain made me wonder how much easier they could perform at their jobs if they could be open; how much freer the workplace would be; how much healthier we all would be knowing that people who serve our communities could be authentic – fully who they are.

These friends identify as "spiritual" people with an interest in matters of faith. As far as I know they are not members of any church right now. Yet, they are loving, caring, compassionate and intelligent people. Is there no liberating congregation or community for them?

When I left the Church, ministry and faith, it wasn't just about feeling hurt or uncomfortable in congregations. It was choosing to be fully honest with myself and my former faith community. I chose to be myself and speak freely what I believed or did not believe.

Many I hear from who have left feel the same sense of liberation – liberty – that I have felt. Many others choose to remain in their congregations where their views are unpopular and it doesn't seem wise to express what they honestly think or believe.

During the years I was a chaplain among urban refugees ("homeless"). I heard story after story about the fear of honesty. If a woman told her employer she was living in her car she might be

fired. If a man revealed to his family that he was sleeping in a tent, they might turn their backs on him. Poverty can be a cruel address for shame. Meeting people at that fearful, painful residence taught me not to assume to know much about anyone else's "real life." That may sound rather counter-intuitive for a chaplain, but once you make it your life to step into the swirling whirlpool of honesty/dishonesty, you learn to recognize the disguises, the masks necessary for coping, survival, sanity. And you understand.

Yet, you resist it – at least anyone with a conscience and sense of compassion resists. The revolutionary nature of justice always leaves us unsettled, unbalanced, uneasy – truth is unmasked. How can we feel settled when so many seek a safe place to call home? How can we call ourselves balanced when there's so much imbalance? How can we feel completely at ease when dis-ease is a way of life for countless others?

Which brings me back to church. I looked at a congregation's website and it told me the hours they are open, and "Closed." I joked to Carol, "God's House is never closed." She laughed, then grew pensive. We know too many people who feel that every day the church is closed to them – the persons they truly are – or their workplace, their community or their family is cluelessly closed. If they dare to be honest, they risk it all.

The word honest comes from the



**Welcoming places (northern California)**

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word "honor." Do we honor honesty? Even when it makes us uncomfortable, confronts us with an uncomfortable truth or threatens a change or even a revolution in our thinking, our beliefs, our lives, our community? I think we need to be honest about that.

Sitting outside I observed a large, blooming Rose of Sharon tree. Small beetles were crawling on the flowers, then tiny bees followed by honey bees and bumblebees. Butterflies flitted around, then hummingbirds. All attracted by the same sustaining, welcoming branches. All a part of the same colorful community, the same branching congregation.

Franklin and Paine were both right, weren't they?

*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.*