

What is your vocabulary of faith?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Vocabulary: "The body of words used in a particular language." Thus saith the authoritative (?) computer dictionary. A word from Webster's: "For many people, the word 'vocabulary' is primarily associated with the number of words that a person knows; one either has a large or a small vocabulary. But the word has many shades of meaning and is nicely representative of the nuanced and multi-hued nature of so much of the English lexicon."

How many words do we know? How many words do we commonly use? How many words do we use, or misuse? When do our words fail us? "The word has many shades of meaning."

Perhaps nowhere in our use of language are words more shaded, nuanced and questionable than in matters of religious belief or faith. Do we really know the meaning of the words we use, such as "God," "spirit," "sacred," "holy," "divine," "spiritual" or even the word "faith" itself? The history of religion may give us clues to answering that, similar to Webster's clue: the "many-hued nature" of meanings. In other words, we need to regularly interrogate the words we use, and others use, to investigate meanings, contexts, personal experiences. It's complicated; never simple. We can't assume to know what people mean when they say "God" or any other multi-faceted word that becomes a chameleon in cultures throughout our multifarious world.

I went back to watch Michael Shermer's "Baloney Detection Kit" on YouTube. He's the editor of Skeptic magazine and host of the Science Salon Podcast. Skeptics can be annoying people because they're constantly asking



Blue Ridge Parkway CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

questions, probing and practicing an active skepticism. A good skeptic, like a good scientist or philosopher, does not accept truth claims or beliefs at face value, especially the ones that appear nonsensical. An honest, reasonable, thinking person has skepticism in their mental toolbox.

I like how Shermer handles "baloney," defined as, "foolish or deceptive talk; nonsense." Most of it comes back to evidence and honesty. Does someone see, hear, believe something because they want to, or because they've examined the evidence and made rational conclusions? There's a spectrum of claims, as Shermer points out. From the obvious nonsense of "psychic powers" to the well-proven assertions of evolution and the human-cause of the climate crisis. Yet, as he makes clear, people might say: "Why should we believe you skeptics?" His response is emphatic:

"You shouldn't!" Scientists, skeptics, philosophers are always open to the critics and questions. This is why, for instance, evolutionary theories are constantly being studied, tested, challenged and, no surprise, "adapted" as understanding of our evolution "evolves." Science is not threatened by skeptics, it welcomes and encourages verification. On the other hand, religious faith can be more sensitive and defensive.

The question, "What do you mean by that?" is a good discussion starter – critically important and incredibly useful. If we can explain what we mean when we use certain words, remaining open to skeptical inquiry, we have no need for defensive posturing.

I'm talking about critical thinking, but also critical speaking. Not "critical" as in criticizing, but wisely hesitant, "holding our tongue" when speaking

about things, using terms that we – if truly honest – don't really understand. What is Life, Truth, Goodness? Interesting to inquire and discuss, but can we do much more than make "working definitions" or "tentative conclusions"?

There are many people who want us to use "their" words with "their" definitions. They act like dictionaries of the divine. We can't fall into that trap. Our vocabularies need to consist of terms we have a good sense about, even words we suspect we don't fully understand but they're useful to us.

Are we willing to let some words go when they've become too loaded or lost their meaning? If they're no longer useful, don't enhance communication or actually do nothing more than cause dispute and division, it may be time to delete the words from our vocabulary.

Yes, words "serve" or they do not. We do not serve them; we use them, building our vocabulary of useful words that express what we truly want to say. If we are giving our own spin to a word we should be honest and clear about that. I don't use the word "God" anymore for that reason—it's been "spun" so much it makes the world dizzy; everyone knows, or thinks they know, what it means, and, everyone, in their heart of hearts, knows that they don't know.

Is this complex, complicated and a bit convoluted? Sure is. And needs to be. If we want to communicate, and communicate well, effectively, it takes work—consistent, concerted effort to make our vocabulary living, relevant, meaningful.

But don't take my word for it. You might detect some baloney.

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.