

Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha at the brewery



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I have pictured this “spiritual summit” for years and, after discussing a definition of religion with colleagues, I imagined this lively scene in a brewery near you.

We join a group of wise teachers sharing refreshments and begin by asking what they’re drinking. Moses says he’s fine with red wine; Jesus says he’ll try a dark, nutty ale; Muhammad asks for a sip of cider (not hard) and when they all turn to Buddha he simply smiles (later, we notice him tasting from each glass).

Once they’re all feeling relaxed we start right off with a Big One: “If there is a God, who or what are we talking about?” Moses jumps right in with a story (no one seems surprised). “I hiked up a mountain and saw lightning strike a small tree; I thought I heard a voice – it kind of crackled and popped – so I leaned close, singeing my beard. “Who are you?,” I asked. “I Am,” seemed to be the reply. At least that’s what I think the voice said.” Muhammad glances at Jesus, raising his eyebrow. Jesus nods and takes a long breath. Buddha is attentive and smiles again.

Jesus picks up on my followup question: “How do you know that was ‘God’ and not the wind, the high elevation, the wine you had with dinner the night before?” Moses shakes his head, “I’d only heard about a god from my family and teachers. This one seemed very different from their divinity. I felt warm by that flame and the voice gave me courage to speak to my people and bring them the message I heard.” Muhammad asks, “What message did you hear?” Moses closes his eyes, “It’s complicated. I ended up carrying down a heavy piece of stone with letters on it, telling us to follow the ‘I Am’ wherever it leads. Most people were unconvinced. To tell the truth, I wasn’t really sure what was expected, or what happened up there.”

Buddha finally orders – seltzer water with extra lemon.

“A voice came to me as well,” offers Muhammad. “And me!” interrupts Jesus, before apologizing. Muhammad continues: “I was in a cave feeling lonely, wondering if I would always be a camel-driver with the caravans. I heard a whisper in the dark and it told me to ‘Recite’ but I didn’t understand. I didn’t know how to write (Moses and Jesus nod in agreement: “We

couldn’t write either”) but I could remember and tell the story or repeat the words. So that’s how the Qur’an – ‘that which is recited’ – was given to me. I can’t explain it; I heard the name ‘Allah’ – a desert tribal name for ‘the god’ – and the voice wanted me to repeat the words and lead those who believed the story.”

Eyes turn to Jesus, who has a foam mustache. Everyone laughs. Wiping his mouth, he describes a similar experience in the wilderness. “I was in the Judean desert and heard a whispering voice that sounded like my father who died when I was younger. It didn’t say much but told me I should teach people, telling them something good, that each person was valuable and life can be meaningful. I walked back to town and when I started to speak I felt like it was just what people needed to hear.”

Buddha calls the bartender over, ordering a berry-flavored IPA. The others wrinkle their noses and shrug.

With no apparent conclusive answer to my question, I throw out the next one: “Sorry, gentlemen, but I don’t think I know anything more about a god than I did before, but maybe you can tell me if there is a supernatural reality or place somewhere?”

Moses almost spills his wine. “Somewhere! Why do people always have a place in mind when these things come up? People say it’s ‘over here,’ ‘over there,’ up, down, behind, beyond ... I know the earth is spinning through space, but let’s not make ourselves dizzy!” We hold our glasses without drinking. “I don’t think there is any ‘super’ anything outside this amazingly beautiful natural world. That voice I heard came from a living thing high on a mountain – a tree, alight with hot fire. My beard got burned. That’s not in some other world. ‘I Am’ is the existence of all things everywhere. Maybe we can’t say much more about it ... I know I won’t!”

All heads are nodding now ... except Buddha’s. He has a puzzled and curious look on his face as he stares into his mug and slowly speaks: “My friends ... this is ... really Good!”

We sit still, sipping in silence. With warm eyes, gentle smiles and deep breaths, each stands, nods, bows, and quietly walks out. I sense we would meet again.

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.