

Is there an invasion of humanism?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

A tiny iridescent beetle crawled up to my lunch plate while I was eating outside. It seemed to be driven by curiosity as well as hunger. It was gone before I could get a magnifying glass. The next day, while eating lunch in the same place, a larger beetle fell on its back near to where I stood. When it righted itself, glistening green and gold, I could see that it might be the parent of the smaller one. It flew away before I could get a good photo.

Some lessons I learn over and over because I suppose I need to learn them. What's Nature doing around me, nearby? Natural things simply living, or trying to – each one exhibiting some form of beauty, something to cause a moment of wonder and awe.

This reflects a viewpoint of naturalism – Nature is central and we aren't. We are a part of this chaotic order we call Nature, but not the center or most important part. I think most of us know that, though we often act like we are the superior species and our life counts for more than these small creatures who share the homeplanet.

What comes to mind is how religious beliefs place a kind of lens over our vision. How we see the world can be determined by what we choose to place between us and "what's out there." The lens may be the proverbial "rose-colored glasses" or a stained-glass rose window in a cathedral. The largest lens of course is our worldview, the mental screen we fix our eyes on, a glass which could serve as a mirror or microscope to look deeper into ourselves.

In her disturbing new book, "The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism," Katherine Stewart presents us with a wide lens to see something we may not wish to see (I'm guessing the best books do precisely that). Stewart reveals the people, plans and programs of those who want to save our world, presumably



Nature crawling closer. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

from itself; those whose primary goal is to wield enough power to assure we all participate in the salvation they offer.

Stewart quotes a pastor in Southern California who warns fellow ministers of "an invasion of humanism ... Our schools, our laws, our Senate is full of humanism, brothers, and I feel an outrage." The preacher calls for them to rise up and fight this terrible threat.

Many years past, I too felt that fearfulness, warning others of the dark forces that were taking over the world and needed to be resisted and overcome. In those days, my answer, the

cure, the most powerful weapon, was faith. But not any faith. THE faith. My faith.

The enemy was Satan of course, but he stayed in the shadows, while the darkness was all around in other religions, secularism, humanism. With time I became less guarded – my faith was maturing. I learned to be curious about "the enemy." Who were these people I feared so much? What were the beliefs, the lenses, they saw the world through?

When you are seeking power over others, through law books or holy

books, it's risky to look through the lenses of others, through their eyes. This is why those who worship power like to be protected behind thick walls preferably with lots of stained-glass windows. When you believe your glasses give you the best focus to see the world as it "really is," you may neglect to look outside, you might forget not everyone can, or should, see the way you see. People have different prescriptions. Is there one cure for myopia?

As Stewart notes, there are large numbers of people in faith communities who stand for pluralism and equality. They believe in shared power without one "superior" faith dominating. These folks look back down the long tunnel of history to those who gave birth to their faith, especially the original teaching of wisdom, before the "artificial additives" of theologies and creeds. These believers envision a diverse community built on compassion, cooperation and collaboration.

I'm no humanist evangelist, but I think this is where humanism can be helpful for the most basic reason: it's inclusive of perspectives, welcoming the variety of lenses including microscope and telescopes, secular and spiritual. Humanism is concerned with clear, rational vision. Like science and philosophy, it offers an expansive viewpoint from which to see many vistas, and doesn't restrict the vision. A humanist outlook might respectfully suggest a person has their telescope backward or an incorrect prescription on their glasses. Yet the goal is not to see everything in the same way, but to see the same world with the same issues to focus on together.

An "invasion of humanism" sounds rather natural when seen in this fearless light.

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. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.