

Can a secular person be a Christian?



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

The short answer: No. That's my opinion. The longer answer: Maybe, depending on how we define "Christian." Even longer answer: Why would a secularist want to be identified or associated with that name?

Midway through a class I was teaching, a student came up to ask a question prefaced with, "I don't know, you might be a Christian." I smiled as he continued his inquiry.

This is, in part, what I mean by "building bridges not walls" between people of faith and secular folks. It's fairly clear from what I write and teach, and spelled out in my bio pages, that I'm a freethinking humanist—a secular person who does not believe in a supernatural of any kind. So, how is it a person who attends one of my classes on freethinkers in history can come away wondering if I'm a believer or a Christian?

I don't try to hide my views ("Highland Views"!).

Yet, I like to create space in classrooms, lectures, columns, essays, books, for honest discussion about issues of faith and secularism.

After another class I was teaching, a gentleman approached to ask, "Can you tell me what Humanism is?" He saw the word in my bio and heard me mention that the freethinkers we were studying were "humanistic" in their outlook. I gave him a brief summary and references to investigate.

Wilma Dykeman once wrote, "Wherever your universe may be it will be unworthy if it is ignorant or indifferent or contemptuous of other places" ("Explorations"). We might say the same of one's faith. How worthy is a belief that is ignorant, indifferent or contemptuous of other beliefs? Though it's natural to value our "universe" – our place – as well as our nationality, ethnicity or beliefs, it makes more sense to place value on gaining knowledge and maybe appreciation for other "universes." We may soon find we live in the same universe, though we are so different in many ways.

A man who lived with his dog in a small trailer behind a construction site was grateful I spent time with him and gave him some assistance. When we sat to talk about his situation he spoke of his fervent faith.

asking me what I believed. I explained I was a Christian minister, though as an interfaith chaplain, representing the compassion of many faiths, and not exclusive in my beliefs. He grew agitated, questioning whether I was really a Christian. I wasn't "his kind" of Christian. It became apparent that he gave more weight to my beliefs than the help I gave him.

Christian faith, like any faith, can be unworthy when it becomes exclusive, smug, self-centered, self-righteous. Unworthy faith is swift in judgment and slow to understand it is one perspective, one opinion, among many.

This is the primary reason I think a secular person cannot be a Christian, not in any traditional sense. Secular means the present natural world without assuming another supernatural world or reality. Secularism does not accept a god. Then again, if "Christian" means following the basic ethical teachings of Jesus, and orthodox beliefs are not required, perhaps a humanistic person could call themselves a Christian. There have been, after all, "Christian Humanists" (like Erasmus). However, this gets confusing very fast.

One of the reasons Christianity is so splintered into

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sects and fractured into factions is that people play “free and loose” with the definitions. Fundamentalist to Progressive, Orthodox to Heterodox, the Christian “family” has a long history of in-fighting. If we were to bring Christianity into a counseling session, conversation would rapidly devolve into “We follow Jesus” versus “No, WE follow Jesus!” As the old saying goes: how can anyone be right when everybody’s wrong.

Jesus was definitely not secular – at least those who

wrote his story didn’t see him that way. They acknowledged he was a human being in the present secular world, but he was “more than human,” praying to his “father in heaven,” performing miracles and speaking of the afterlife – Fundamentalists and Evangelicals join him, as the Son of God, on that side of faith. Yet, he also seemed primarily concerned with present world problems and issues—poverty, injustice, religious bigotry, violence – and “progressive Christians” side with him as the Son of Man.

Who’s right? A secular person really doesn’t care. Nothing matters, including faith, if it has no relationship with the world we live in, with an array of divergent perspectives and huge social and environmental

issues.

James Baldwin described the tension of holding two ideas in mind that are in opposition. “Acceptance ... of life as it is, and [people] as they are” while at the same time “one must never ... accept [injustice] (“Notes of a Native Son”).

Maybe Religion will always present that tension.

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.