

Time for an awakening and revival of reason



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

During the so-called "Second Great Awakening" in the 19th Century, crowds were drawn to tent revival meetings across the country. Revivalists like Charles Finney and Francis Asbury preached hellfire or holiness though they also believed "in the ability of humans to turn away from sinful behavior and embrace moral action" (nationalhumanitiescenter.org). People flocked to "camp meetings," gatherings that could last for a week, where thousands were converted to evangelical Christianity. Some of the first camp meetings were held in Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio by Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians.

Some of the fervent energy that emerged from the reviving, or awakening, was channeled into direct involvement with human service (though they would call it God's service). Many be-

lievers eventually became active in temperance, abolition and women's rights. Unfortunately, many others were "revived and awakened" into a smaller, exclusive tent with a more personalistic religion, often ignoring or supporting social sickness like slavery.

This period of our history also saw a flowering of freethought. Scholar Holly Jackson writes: "As mainstream Americans flocked into the Christian churches, radicals were coming out" ("American Radicals"). Reformers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton (who had her own conversion to reason after a tent revival), free-thinking Quakers like Lucretia Mott and firebrands like William Lloyd Garrison (who claimed Jesus was his model for activism), took a very different approach to religion and faith. These "Come Outers" felt religious institutions were not only too restrictive, they were part of the problems that plagued society. Because of their freethinking heresy, they "seceded" from the Church and were branded "infidels" and sometimes "atheists."

This turbulent time in U.S. history came to mind while reading several BBC stories of current events. One thousand

trees are being cut down to restore the spire of the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris that burned in 2019. People were arrested in Nigeria because they refused to fast during the holy month of Ramadan. In India, millions crowded into the Ganges River for the religious festival of Kumbh Mela, fueling the spread of the virus while "purifying" in the polluted waters of the river.

Doesn't it make you wonder if it's time for a revival of reason? This is not a call to end religion or to urge more "come outers" to leave their traditions. At the very least these stories, current and past, ought to raise serious questions and "walk into the tensions" between Reason and Religion. Of course there are many reasonable people of faith who practice their religion with a rational outlook. Perhaps a revival of reason would energize more reasonably religious folks to speak out more, to present an "awakening" of revived and relevant faith to help rather than hinder social progress. Who invites us to a bigger tent?

Many of those early reformers held Anti-Sabbath Conventions to protest Sunday laws that imposed restrictions

on the rights of citizens to enjoy faith-free weekends (or simply relax, play games or find entertainment after Sunday services). Speakers at these conventions could be very eccentric yet they all felt that religion should not be forced on anyone. They understood the truth that religious liberty includes the freedom to choose when, where and if it's good to practice one's faith. Allowing one religion to dictate when people should worship and when they can enjoy recreation - and what is appropriate for their leisure time - is giving a religion the power of policing our lives. The Anti-Sabbath reformers were determined to stand with laborers, secular or religious, who worked five or six days a week and wanted Sundays to be free to choose how to spend time with their families, in church or otherwise.

Holly Jackson describes the dramatic scene in 1790s Philadelphia when a Methodist church decided Black congregants could no longer sit in sanctuary pews but had to gather in the segregated balcony. Absalom Jones, a Black leader, was on his knees praying when

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he was forcefully removed. All the Black worshippers stood and walked out. Many of these “comeouters” didn’t leave their faith but went on to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.). Jackson calls defiant and decisive actions like these a “tradition of righteous separation.”

One Sabbath convention in 1840 Boston was an “oddball assembly” of come-inners and come-outers, the converted and de-converted, yet these people were united by reform, reason and responsibility to work together for the benefit of the whole community and country. They thought people should be free to follow the rules within their own circles of belief while not expanding those rules to inflict unreasonable laws on everyone else.

A conversion to common sense and a revival of reason would be good for all of us.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker’s Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.