

Cafeteria Christians and food-fights in the New South



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

"For the first time in my life I don't want anyone to know I'm a believer." Writer Margaret Renkl makes this honest statement in her essay, "The Passion of Southern Christians" ("Graceland, at Last"). Because of the rancorous political divides in the country, Renkl is saddened to witness the prickly paradox of her fellow Southerners. Hospitality and helping others during disasters is endemic in "her people" (born in Alabama, she lives in Nashville), but so is a continuing struggle with equality and justice—in truly "welcoming the stranger." Renkl feels the tension: "Partly this divide comes down to scale: you can love a human being and still fear the group that person belongs to."

Several poignant examples make this tension clearer. Renkl writes of her grandmother in Alabama who joined her neighbors in welcoming two men who just moved into the area. They brought dishes of food and warm hospitality. But would these neighbors support gay marriage? "Not a chance," she writes. Then she describes a continuing education class her friend attended. The

class was an equal mix of native-born Americans and immigrant-Americans. Everyone got along very well, laughing and learning together. After a national election, Renkl's friend said: "I think half my class might have just voted to deport the other half."

Stories and experiences like these can lead to the conclusion that Southern churchgoers are hypocritical. No wonder Renkl doesn't want to be too open about her religious faith. For many people today, the term "Christian" doesn't bring to mind an image with positive or attractive qualities.

Margaret Renkl and her husband are "cradle Catholics" but a family member calls them "cafeteria Catholics" since, as they see it, the Renkl's pick and choose the beliefs that suit them. Yet, Renkl feels many Christians choose to ignore clear teachings of Jesus to care for "the least of these sisters and brothers." She uses the classic terms "redemption," "repentance" and "resurrection" but adds "resistance." She is heartened to see that "every day a resistance is growing that I would not have imagined possible, a coalition of people on the left and the right who have never before seen themselves as allies." She refers to the political sphere, but religion plays such a critical role in so much of the tug of war, the struggle to resist from whatever side often feels like a food fight in a middle school lunchroom.

Aren't we all in one great religious cafeteria? All through my school years, cafeterias were noisy places where anyone could freely select their favorite meals, trays slid onto tables where jokes and jello were shared along with mashed potatoes and a mash-up of gossip and grousing. Some grapes or peas were thrown, but for the most part kids simply connected with friends, enjoyed the variety of tastes and re-charged their energy. The chaotic cacophony of the cafeteria was one time of the day, outside the classroom, when our humanity mashed together in a messy but marvelous way.

As Renkl writes: "In working together [or eating together], I hope we'll end up with a better nation, caring for the least among us and loving our neighbors as ourselves." This is echoed in another essay, "Christians Need a New Right-to-Life Movement," where she offers a creative and hopeful example of the life-giving cooperative relationships that cross divisions. "Room in the Inn" is a collaborative effort in her hometown of Nashville. Winter to spring, "nearly two hundred congregations of many faiths" shelter and share food with people seeking a home, a place to belong.

"At least since Martin Luther ... Christians have disagreed on what Jesus calls them to do in the name of faith. There are nearly thirty-four thousand Christian denominations worldwide" which

doesn't include American Christians not on any church rolls. Renkl doesn't mention disagreements beginning in the earliest years of the new religion. Paul, Peter and other pious pugilists disputed the best way to lead, who would be included, faith with or without works, etc. The early Christian community wasn't much of a unified circle of believers.

Renkl speaks of "lively Christian debate" which can be healthy ... if people so choose. Yet, if the rest of us see little more than divisive debate, dogmatic disagreements and self-righteousness, "Christian" will have less meaning, less connection to the essential instructions and compassionate life of the Founder of the Faith (or have much relevance to an ethical life).

Food-fights among the faithful can be distracting, even entertaining, but I doubt that's what believing people want to model for the world. In the great cafeteria we are free to choose, taste and share, to dish up dissension or serve up true hospitality.

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.