

A river of respect for a living force of nature



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

The Maori people of New Zealand believe the Whanganui River is not only sacred, it is a vital part of the people (see AP News, August 15, 2022). "In 2017, New Zealand passed a groundbreaking law granting personhood status to the Whanganui River. The law declares that the river is a living whole, from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements." Bangladesh followed by granting its rivers "the same rights as people." Quite a fascinating way to protect the environment and preserve nature.

The Maori people relate to the Whanganui River as a "living force." They have a saying: "I am the river, and the river is me." For the settlements along the river, the waters are a lifeblood. "They dictate the terms for human use and occupation." The river, like the land, is a teacher, offering living lessons. Decisions in the human community have to take into consideration what is best for the environment, including the rivers. The health of the river is now a major factor

in deciding to build bridges, manage tourism or design laws governing potential threats to the river and the tribe that watches over it.

Like the Maori name for New Zealand, Aotearoa, the issue of personhood for the Whanganui River is a matter of "giving power back to the community." People still come to fish or four-wheel by the river, but there are now eyes monitoring the landscape. Treating the living ecosystem as a living being is a spiritual concept, yet science also reveals these interconnections.

One scientist was honest about his initial response to the river being designated a person. "As a scientist I always try to rely on rules and regulations to protect a river. So the personhood status was a real foreign concept to me. But what it has done is attract a lot of attention to the river, which has been really helpful in highlighting the issues."

"I'm certainly coming around to it," he adds. "I'm hoping that it really will turn the tide and help save the river."

In church groups we once sang songs like "There is a river," "River of Life" ("I've got a river of life flowing out of me"), "Peace like a river," "River Jordan." Water is a central element in many traditions, and the symbolism of flowing streams is a powerful and persistent image. "Let justice roll down like water and

righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Water must be pure because it is purifying (think baptism) but also because it is literally life-giving (and we are made of mostly water).

More than a person, some religions view rivers as divine. Hindus believe the Mother Ganges is a deity. We would think that devotion would keep rivers pure and clean, but some are still polluted. As is so often the case, there can be a muddy disconnect between belief and practice. Superstition can cause some to turn a blind eye to the earth, or other humans, while espousing a faith in a superior world somewhere beyond. This makes it easier to slip into an impure river and be carried along by a current of magical thinking. All the while, the earth suffers, which invariably means the people who depend on the land, air and water suffer as well. Most often these are vulnerable people living in poverty.

The severed relationship between religion and nature is often due to the confusing ways we anthropomorphize (humanize) nature. As with the Maori river, calling it a living being, a person, can increase the value of the river in the mind and daily life of the people. Yet, others may give human qualities to natural things and still treat them poorly, perhaps as they treat others in the same

manner. This can happen when "spiritualizing" the natural world. Other-worldly thinking and belief systems tend toward disrespect and neglect of the immediate world. The Maori have a healthier commitment to the respectful treatment of the environment—they take the sacredness seriously without disconnecting that from the tangible world they are part of.

As a young kid hiking with my family in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest, we thought nothing of drinking from a creek bubbling over boulders. As years went by we had to be more cautious about organisms and pollutants in the water. Walking in the high country of Scotland I knelt to drink from a gurgling stream that seemed as purified as the land and air. I felt fine even though upon standing I observed a herd of sheep much higher up the hillside. Oh well, I survived. Rivers can be life, life-lines, lifeblood, coursing like blood through our veins. We could learn much from the Maori.

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.