

# Hitchhiking along the journey of friendship and faith



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

Upon graduating from college with a degree in Religion and Philosophy—and a head-full of heavy thoughts—I stuffed a backpack and caught a 747 to wander Europe for three months (the first time to fly in a Boeing plane built by my father). My friend John flew to Germany with me. Then he took a train to Berlin and I set out to travel by thumb, hitchhiking to Switzerland, Italy, Spain and France. An incredible experience with indelible memories for a lifetime.

John and I knew each other from junior high and also from later Bible study groups. He was from a Catholic family and I grew up Protestant, but we found common interest in a similar evangelical sort of faith. We were both fascinated by digging out “biblical truths” from the rocky and slippery landscapes of ancient texts. John and I lost contact for many years before reconnecting. I had gone into ministry and, following service in the Air Force, he became a commercial airline pilot. Now, added to our

early shared history, we can freely and openly discuss family, politics and religion. Since I’m continually interested in finding out how a person’s faith position shifts through the years, I asked John to map out his current views. His honesty is compelling, and of course invites some questions from a freethinking humanist.

“I still call myself a Christian,” John writes. “I’ve played some mental gymnastics in the past to see if I could convince (prove to) myself that God doesn’t exist, trying to be as honest with myself as possible.” I’ve always known John to be a curious and questioning person. He goes on to say: “The scientific method is not the way to go. No way to test the hypothesis, God exists, God does not exist. No way to even design a test, one that can be repeated with the same outcomes.” He’s got my attention, since I think the basic approach of science is precisely what is called for in matters of belief. Then he states: “If I say there is no God, then a whole set of problems for me pop up. Probably the same ones that man has been struggling with for ages: Where did all this come from?”

John seems to be wrestling with the notion of “design” in nature. “I acknowledge that the house I live in was built by someone. No way did it spontaneously

erect itself. Now, life in all its forms is vastly more complex than a house, so I can’t say it somehow brought itself into existence. That’s kind of how I reason these things.” OK, but I wonder how the Christian God is necessary to explain our Cosmic House? John continues: “I used to think atheists were not being completely honest with themselves because they certainly must have the same questions that I have. But I don’t believe that now. Some people (decent people whom I like and respect) do believe that there was once nothing and then it sprang into existence.” He senses that the old teaching “Out of nothing, nothing is produced” (Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit) “seems to be something we all know intuitively.” I’m with John in this line of thought, yet he circles back to the faith of our family and youth. For him, “The Christian or Jewish God is an altogether different matter. That’s really a faith issue. In other words, maybe everyone can believe in God but not a specific faith system.” There’s a lot to unpack in these lines! Interesting that he’s weighing something we know by intuition, as opposed to something known only by faith. Could there be a balance? I appreciate where he goes with this reasoning. He’s open to the possibility that people can choose diverse systems of belief.

I’m curious though, if the existence of the Christian God (as I see it, quite different from the Jewish God) is “really a faith issue,” then what happens to the rational, evidence-based tools he uses with everything else, such as his car, his house, or, I presume, other gods?

John responds to my question about church, explaining he doesn’t attend any services since he has found an “unhealthy” amount of “legalism” in some churches. He says he’s moving away from a “rigid interpretation” of the Bible and has grown skeptical of the concept of revelation as a kind of “radio transmission” into the headphones of any believer, in biblical history or our own time.

After all these years, I find my friend’s intellectual investigations have been traveling companions on his personal faith journey. I respect that, and will certainly take him up on his invitation to talk further “over a beer one of these days.”

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" ([www.chighland.com](http://www.chighland.com)).*