

Isn't every child born an atheist?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

It might be a startling thought but I suppose it's obvious: No child is born a believer in any religion. Hard to imagine parents looking down at their bundle of joy and exclaiming: "Ah, there's our little (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Jew, Christian)." No one is born a baby believer, though we wouldn't know that by observing the faithfully observant.

In some traditions, sprinkling a splash of spirituality on an infant is a symbolic entrance into "the faith" (baptism, for example). In other traditions, some kind of bodily cutting is a sign of passage into piety (circumcision, for example). A ritual like communion offers the child an early taste of theological connection (some would say indoctrination). All these ceremonies mark a child (in mind and body) before the age of consent, often before they know what is happening and what the mark means. A child has little or no say in the matter.

Conversion is the most critical step for a young person. "Ye must be born again" is a powerful message that essentially proclaims that one birth — even

one baptized bath — isn't enough. Though a child may be born into a particular Family of Faith, they are compelled to make a decision — a volitional choice — to choose the right faith, which is the only faith they have been told about or told is correct.

When a child is born, their parents are the only gods they know: their protectors, their Providence. Later, when the child is old enough to understand (if they do indeed understand), the parents may shock their offspring by explaining there is a Higher Parent, a greater Mother or Father over and above the gods (adults, teachers, clergy) they have known in their life. The Almighty doesn't approve of atheists, so a child must choose. To prove they are no longer a non-believer from birth, specific required rituals or recited creeds are designed to assure the family and community a child has chosen to believe acceptable beliefs. Have they freely chosen? Has there been an honest choice?

Baptized as an infant and raised in a Protestant church, adults told me I had to "confirm and affirm" my faith through Confirmation (Communicants) classes. Completing those tests I was welcomed into the Church Family, again. Other adults from other churches convinced me my baptism and confirmation were insufficient — church membership

didn't cut it. I needed to be saved through accepting Jesus as my personal savior. I became a baby believer (which seemed like starting over, which in a way it was). Then, other adults from different churches told me being saved wasn't enough either. I had to "receive the holy spirit" and speak in strange languages. Finally, so it seemed, the Paramount Parent could adopt me as his own.

Through college and seminary I was taught a whole new way of "birthing." Believing wasn't the point at all; actions mattered more; a daily practice of compassion, working for justice, being a peacemaker, loving others — this was the true way of faith. Youthful beliefs faded over many years in ministry and service. Deeper and wider daily experiences were like new births. However, at ordination, I was required once again to "confirm and affirm" correct beliefs.

Eventually becoming a freethinking adult myself, I looked back on this personal "growing up in faith" and decided my baby self may have been right after all. After all...we are not necessarily born to believe, except to believe in our innate ability and inborn right to make up our own minds what, if anything, we want to believe. Those who taught us, passing along what they had been taught as children, aren't gods; they are not the final authority for how we see the world and

interact with the world. That is our responsibility as "grown-ups" who either live with a grown-up faith of our choosing, or a fundamental commitment to a good, mature life.

Perhaps each baby actually enters the world agnostic. They don't know much of anything. When they look up and giggle, or scream, they gaze into giant faces with goofy grins. The child can't identify the faces as Allah, Buddha, Jesus or Krishna. There is only the sense that someone is watching over them, caring for them. That must be both comforting and terrifying.

When waking at the dawning of the summer solstice, it dawned on me: awakenings come through many seasons of life — birth to death. What we believed as children may be very different from what we believe as older adults. I would suggest that is a very good thing. Because the wonder of living is not about what we don't believe in (a-theism), but in what gives us joy and a sense of belonging. Seems almost childlike to say that.

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 Free-thinker" (www.chighland.com).