

Two-thousand year-old thinking can be dangerous



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Following a speaking engagement at a local church, I was handed a brochure describing their congregation and ministry. Before opening to read their “Core Values,” I read the cover statement: “Our faith is over 2,000 years old. Our thinking is not.” Seems a very good message for any congregation and community. Faith is very important to a lot of people, which doesn’t preclude the need to use our powers of reason as individuals and communities. In fact, as this church presents it, faith requires thinking. I’m not so sure this is commonly advertised in many religious circles.

Using our minds is essential in making reasonable decisions in all matters. Shouldn’t that be especially true in major life decisions such as what to believe and whom to believe?

Nicholas Little, Legal Director for the Center for Inquiry, responded to those who equate “alternative medicine” with science-based medicine: “[This] risks encouraging many across the world to eschew scientifically proven treatment and instead to place their faith in quackery. That kind of thinking kills people...” (“WHO Thought This Was a Good Idea?,” CFI, Aug. 18, 2023). The seriousness of the issue certainly calls for greater attention, by the religious and the non-religious. As we know (don’t we?), believing something is true doesn’t make it so. This applies to medicine as well as theology.

How do we respond when a person says their thinking is “biblical,” they believe the same as a biblical writer? This might make sense to some, yet why and how would we believe, or think, like a person from such a different time, culture and perhaps religion? (as I often remind: Jesus was not a Christian, and all the biblical writers were Jewish). Of course, here the biggest problem is that we really don’t know what people thought that long ago — we can’t get inside their heads. Clearly it’s a good thing to read and reflect on ancient literature, sacred and secular. But can we put ourselves into their historical experience, sense their feelings, read their thoughts? Remarkably, people today sometimes claim they know what’s in God’s head, God’s mind, how God thinks and feels. Quite a claim. The Apostle Paul not only asserted he knew the mind of God but audaciously claimed to “have the mind of Christ” (First Corinthians 2:16). How could anyone reasonably dispute that? How could we have a rational conversation with someone who says they share a brain with the Almighty? I’m not sure I would even start a conversation with that person. What’s the purpose? All we might hear is: “I know what God thinks, so there’s no room for discussion” (and isn’t that what Paul’s letters fundamentally assert?). Once someone proclaims they think as the Creator of the Universe thinks, I think I’d avoid them. On the other hand, they probably need to get a good “brain-wash” since little can come from that Big Mind Transplant except disillusion and disappointment, even destruction of all reasoning.

One way to approach this is to think of what we might call the Religion of Quotation. Memory is the heart of tradition, but we can’t really pass along memories that aren’t our own. What we often see is the use of scripture as the primary authority because it tells us

what to think and how to think. In my youthful days, we would quote a verse and that would guide our life that day. The next day, another verse, and so on. “God said it, I believe it, I live it” was our justification for anything. Each verse became the Voice and the Voice became the verse. Every word became The Word.

Thinking that’s aged for thousands of years may offer fresh insights, tidbits of wisdom to contemplate. I continue to mine gems of wisdom in the Greek and Roman philosophers and, from time to time, in Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and other religious teachers from centuries long past. Some wise teaching, like good wine, gets better with age. Nevertheless, other old ways of thinking and believing may have gone bad, spoiled, not only distasteful but unfit for human consumption. Old thinking might even be dangerous, deadly. Quoting or reciting passages from ancient literature can hoodwink people into thinking they don’t have to think much because someone else has done the thinking for them a long, long time ago. Abdicating our ability to reason and surrendering our self-authority and self-reliance can lead to all kinds of destructive actions. Besides, worldviews matter. Hopefully we see that if the ancients believed the (flat) earth was the center of the universe, heaven was up, hell was down, slavery was acceptable and women should stay in “their place,” we have to do better believing, and better thinking.

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).