

Faith and Freethought Forums

“I look forward to more opportunities for these dialogues. Thank you for bringing your experience and story to share.”

“Thank you for your leadership and teaching last Sunday evening. I really enjoyed the conversation and heard a lot of good feedback from the participants.”

These comments were received from a pastor and a lay leader following two of my presentations in a local church. One was held in the sanctuary, sitting in front with one pastor while another pastor sat in the audience of curious folks (some church members and some not). The other was a Sunday morning adult education class on “Religious Wounds” parishioners and non-members sharing how they’ve been hurt by the Church in some way.

In the sanctuary session I read a few passages from my book, *A Freethinker’s Gospel*, and took questions from the pastor and others. People were mostly interested to hear my thoughts on slippery words like “sacred” and “secular” and what freethinking, as a radical practice of fearless questioning, can mean for believers and non-believers alike.

In the class session I joined an Episcopal priest who is also a practicing Buddhist for a discussion of our non-theistic views and how theologies and creeds were too limiting for us to remain in traditional churches. The emphasis was not on how we’ve personally been hurt (that’s not my story) but the alternative ways we have discovered “well-being” outside the Church.

A good number of those who attended these gatherings read my columns regularly and appreciate my angle on religious subjects. Though many consider themselves people of faith, they find my reasonable and gentle approach to issues of faith (with a few sharp edges) thought-provoking and reflection-stoking.

I see my weekly columns on the Religion page of our local paper as invitations to engage in these kinds of open and respectful conversations. My intention is to help create more opportunities like these. How refreshing to have honest questions raised in environments that often restrict, consciously or not, the most troubling concerns of faith.

On the same day as the Sunday school class I gave a talk at our local Ethical Humanist meeting—another welcoming group with many excellent comments and questions. Discussing the importance of building relationships across the borders of belief, I encouraged people to challenge me on the way I use the word “gospel” and my view that heretics, even the founders of the world religions, could be freethinkers.

Asking if people of faith can actually be freethinkers, most in the gathering agreed. One young man challenged that and I commended him for speaking out. An older man said he thought the using the word “gospel” was too restrictive. It was a lively exchange.

After the Humanist hour, one leader told me, *“Thank you for an excellent presentation/discussion ... I believe you challenged and broadened views and understanding on Freethinking. I know my own understanding was broadened.”*

The enthusiasm I've felt from these events has further convinced me that the time is right and ripe for freethinkers to “get invited” to faith communities. Providing the physical and mental space for these forums may be challenging but to me the immense benefits are worth the effort.

During my years as a chaplain I often brought unhoused people into the “houses of God” to tell their stories, read their poetry or perform their music. These were always deeply meaningful times for all of us and I would even say some congregations had “conversion” experiences—their “come-to-Jesus” or “come-to-Moses” moments.

This is a little how I'm feeling when speaking openly about a secular, humanist, freethinking outlook in the context of a religious community. A kind of “come-to-our-senses” moment. When moderated by someone who values respectful listening and learning, it's a win-win for everyone—since “winning” is not the intent.

Several of my recent talks were presented on the Martin Luther King, Jr holiday weekend. My wife Carol, a Protestant minister, enjoys reading passages from Dr. King with me each year. Since we had visited Birmingham, Alabama in recent months, I was re-reading portions of the letter he scribbled from his Birmingham City jail cell. The famous lines struck home a little more this year. He was “gravely disappointed” by “the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice . . .”

There seem to be some clear parallels with what I sense when stepping back into a church. In the Sunday class I described my disappointment and discouragement with the Church. Heads were nodding in agreement. I was raised in a denomination that prides itself (oh so humbly) on its “order.” Services, rituals, meetings all follow prescribed order from either the Book of Worship or the Book of Order (both indispensable for more orthodox ministers).

King’s words ring loud and true in the face of this fixation with orderliness, since justice is not always so neat and orderly— it’s rarely comfortable. Continually seeking an “absence of tension” belies the life and teachings of the very dis-orderly and rebellious heretic the church claims to follow.

A positive peace is the presence of justice. There’s a lot packed into that phrase. As our cars require regular alignment and balancing to move forward, so do we. Justice could be described as an aligned and balanced vehicle carrying peacemakers over the bumpiest roads.

As I see it, opening the discussion for freethinking dialogue in a congregational context is steering in the right direction. Not every non-believer will have interest in doing this and certainly many congregations and clergy won’t sign up. Yet, that’s too bad for people in both camps who will miss out on opportunities to widen understanding, dispel misunderstandings and nurture potentially new relationships across the barriers that divide.

Precedence for these open dialogues is growing. If you haven’t watched Neil Carter’s “Interview an Atheist in Church” videos, or other similar face to face conversations hosted by churches, I recommend them. The Life Center Church YouTube video interviewing two atheists is pretty good. The Bridge (Orlando Sentinel) hosted an excellent discussion of Religious Freedom by a Baptist megachurch pastor and an atheist from the Freethought Community.

If you’ve tried this in your own community I’d be interested in your experience. In my opinion, it’s important to expose large numbers of people to these forums not only locally but nationally. As I see it, these are far better than the distraction and divisiveness of fruitless theological debates.

As a more wide open model, NPR's "1A" devoted an hour to "Ask an Atheist" with representatives from Black Atheists, Secular Student Alliance and the Ethical Society. Listeners called or wrote in with questions and comments, eliciting thoughtful, reasonable responses.

Dr. King understood that a direct approach to connecting people of differing views could be risky and tense. He put it in these terms:

"Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with."

Drawing out these non-violent lessons from the sphere of racial justice, I think "religious justice" (rational, aligned action) has similar needs. Applying this wisdom to something as simple as a Sunday school conversation between believers and non-believers can be productive and constructive. It makes sense to acknowledge the "hidden tension" and let it come to the surface. If the setting feels safe and leadership is sensitive and respectful, various viewpoints can be brought out in a manner that everyone can learn from.

And if someone doesn't think this is workable or worth the time, all I can say is that you're missing out. Considering the responses I'm hearing, freethinking is a real gift to the faith and faithless communities (especially since we share the same community). Freethought is a tool or template for constructive, positive next steps in truth-telling, fearless education and peaceful inclusiveness.

The "gospel" of Freethought needs to spread!

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