

How a humanist can write on religion



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

I'm always happy to hear from readers who share their thoughts on "Highland Views." One reader in another state took issue with a column I wrote on a fundamentalist Bible study program, saying I was "belittling" those who believe in evangelism and missionary work. The reader felt I shouldn't "throw stones" at a form of Christianity that I walked away from. I could see how my views on these matters might cause a person to react this way, so responded that "religion" columns are written from many perspectives. "I write as a free-thinking humanist, which means I express honest personal views based on my experience, after a long journey in faith, and out of faith. While some of my views may seem to "dismiss" or disrespect other beliefs, the intent is to shine a light on "truth claims" and practices that, to my mind, seem unhealthy or harmful. A reader is free to choose to read or not, agree or not...or write and express their personal opinion (as you have)." Addressing the reader's discomfort with my viewpoint on the Bible pro-

gram, I stated: "My critique is based on my own experience. You had a different experience and are free to express that."

In our email exchange, the reader seemed agitated that my columns are given space in a section of the newspaper where they expected to read only religious opinions. They questioned why I would write in a part of the paper they felt should be reserved exclusively for believers. "You also describe yourself as a humanist. I think that is a good fit, just not fit for religion columns." I wrote back what I understand to be the intent of including a "Religion" section in a public newspaper: "Articles can be 'about' Religion, not necessary 'from' a religious perspective. Anyone is free to read a religious periodical instead, if they choose." Articles on religion, especially if these are presented as opinion pieces, do not have to be religious opinions, written by representatives of particular faith traditions. There are scholars who study religion who may hold religious beliefs, or they may not. Does it matter? Are only Christian believers allowed to write on Christianity?

This reader expressed consternation that humanist opinions appear alongside religious ones. "Humanism is not a religion. It is a philosophy, and one that does not perceive the need for religion at all." I agreed with this, while explaining a little more about this philosophy. "I do

not claim that Humanism is a religion. You are correct that it is not strictly a religion but a philosophy. It should be noted, however, since many of us have extensive backgrounds in faith communities, we can address a wide range of issues within those communities. Certainly, like yourself, there will be those who are uncomfortable, even agitated, by humanist opinions. An important thing to note is that Humanism is not evangelical; it does not seek converts. The philosophy simply encourages each individual to take the responsibility to use reason to decide what to believe or not believe." (The American Humanist Association defines modern Humanism as: "a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good".)

Who is qualified to write about faith and religion? Who is disqualified? Are there forums or platforms where we can't speak of religion, or question it? Is it acceptable to challenge, even poke a little, at religious faith? No doubt, faith is a sensitive subject. Religion, politics, sexuality are touchy topics indeed. When does an honest, even a sharp, criticism of beliefs become disrespectful or dismissive? When people feel personally offended, that should be taken

seriously. Yet, it's also important to speak from our own experience while keeping in mind that some might not want to hear how we frame those events in our lives. They may not wish to engage with our interpretations of those experiences. That is, of course, their prerogative. I sometimes suggest a person choose not to read something, or tell me what it is that bothers them. Respectful engagement can lead to a two-way education.

The reader who was bothered by my column on a Bible study program pushed a bit more: "While of course you are free to express your views about anything you choose, it would be more intellectually honest to refrain from publishing those views under a banner of religion."

I reminded them that intellectual honesty extends to mindfulness of diverse expressions without using the newspaper as a pulpit to preach.

When the reader thanked me for responding, I felt a renewed sense of the value of humanist voices in public forums on faith and freethought.

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).