

Exploring the definition of ‘ourselves’



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

A reader explained that he and his wife believe in God, but sense an affinity for humanism.

They read my column on “How a Humanist can write on religion” (Dec. 9, 2023) and wondered if they were humanists themselves. They were responding to the definition I quoted from the American Humanist Association: “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.” This basically described them, except the phrase, “without theism.” They said there is much they don’t know about God, but there is much they believe is true. Their beliefs are guided by a passage from the Prophet Micah: “to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Then the reader asked: “Since we are, apparently, not Humanists...what would you call us?”

I took that as a serious question. I always appreciate this honesty and humility. In response, I wrote: “Generally speaking, as I understand it, Humanism is non-theistic, yet, in my view, anyone can practice a “humanistic” way of life. Since the concept of “God” is open to interpretation (for me, Nature/Cosmos replaces a personal God), the aim is not to believe correctly but to live ethically, responsibly, guided by reason.” I concluded: “I call myself a freethinking humanist. You are free of course to call yourself whatever you wish.”

What we call ourselves makes a difference. In Spanish, I would say: “Me llamo, Chris” – “I call myself, Chris.” To my daughter I’m just “Dad”; to my wife “Hey You” (just kidding). When I was an ordained minister I was called “Reverend Highland” or “Chaplain Chris.” What matters the most, I think, is how we refer to ourselves, what identifies us in our own minds. What other people see and how they describe us is on them, based on their judgments, which may be accurate or not. Sometimes a description may be true to some extent but we would rather not be called by that name. Some think it’s exposing a secret to call me an “atheist”; it’s true I hold no belief in the supernatural, yet I don’t care to be called that negative – and often pejorative – term.

I own up to who I am and what I may or may not believe, but don’t feel I need to wear that on my hat. Regarding beliefs, well, that gets trickier since we all have different images in mind when certain words are used. I don’t want to be known as a non-theist, non-believer – or, as the non-religious are often called: a None. Who wants to be identified by what they don’t believe or think? I’d rather be a “pro” person. This is one reason I default to “freethinking humanist.” It may not cover everything I think, or everything I am, but it states something positive and meaningful about myself.

I was pleased when the reader continued: “We do not feel the need to proselytize or to condemn others for not sharing our beliefs. We do not want the USA to become a Christian nation, or any other brand of theocracy.” It seems these folks simply wish to live a loving life without preaching at others. In my mind, this makes them thoughtful human beings – humanists at heart, if you will. If a person seeks to live that kind of life, a life of kindness and humility, who cares what they call themselves? Who even cares what they believe or don’t believe? The common denominator is

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“the good life.” Will there be differences and sometimes disagreements with others who are differently motivated? Sure. Yet, if I see what you’re doing, how you live, and it seems energized by compassion, peace and thoughtfulness, I might think: that’s humanist or humanistic. I would feel no need to conclude they are Humanists, or Christians, or any other faith.

There are many who think it very much matters what we call ourselves and what we believe. They’re attached to certain names, and if we fail to meet their test for what “fits” neatly into their

definitions, we are labeled a name they choose, something that aligns with their belief and worldview.

The Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh wrote a powerful poem with the title “Call Me by My True Names.” It concludes: “Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are one. Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.” No matter our names, it’s the open door that matters.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).