

Definitions of religion raise important questions



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

A friend I'll call "Steve" has done a fair amount of teaching, as I have. He and I read some of the same books on humanist thought. As Steve and I discuss serious subjects concerning the ever-hot topic of religion and faith, he sent me his current thinking on the matters:

"Here's a little definition of 'religion' that I came up with a couple of days ago (certainly it's not all original; lots of sources here, including things you and I have talked about): Religion: mythology and superstition based on fear and wishful thinking; additionally, or alternately, the desire to experience awe and to be part of something greater than oneself."

His reasoning seems sound. I responded positively: "As I see it, your alternate definition of religion makes the most sense, though it can quickly drift into the myth and superstition stuff, when people aren't thinking critically." This invited him to say more: "I guess that the alternate definition is the aspirational one, for the participant The first part of the definition is what religion does, indeed, too easily drift into (I

like that phrasing); sometimes, however, the fear and wishful thinking are the seeds (looking for a better word) for the participant, and that kind of becomes the religion."

Steve is not theologically trained, yet he certainly touches the heart of the matter. Who are the "participants"? The believers, those who choose to believe, are also choosing to participate by aspiring to something perhaps indefinable – beyond definition. However, if that's true, it begs the question: if we can't define what's going on with believing in beliefs, where can a conversation go?

He and I commiserate that we can't talk about these issues with everyone in our lives. As my friend states: "I know a lot of people who would be really angry about this." Why is it so many feel threatened, or get agitated, when questions are raised, or we make attempts to define what's going on with religion and faith? Is it disrespectful or aggressive to try to make sense of these sensitive subjects? I suppose that's the real issue: how sensitive (emotional) people are when presented with curiosity, investigation, seeking understanding.

While defining what we understand religion to be, we also have to consider what religion is not. Obviously, religion is not easy to define. As I see it, religion is not a human experience that always

lends itself to meaningful expression. In other words, words are a problem. Religious faith is essentially storytelling but it cannot adequately explain what the stories mean. Religion is very personal, an individual experience, and it's true that people who share similar stories can come together to tell and re-tell those stories, but other than trying to convince others their stories are sincere and true, it is not a comprehensive communicator. "I believe" doesn't convey much more than an opinion based on feelings and perhaps, we can hope, serious reflection.

Anyone can pick up a dictionary to look up an "official" or "traditional" definition of religion, but I find it more illuminating to hear how each person frames this in their own words, from their own experience. There are no experts or authorities in these matters, at least in my view. Each of us is the "author" of our own insights and viewpoints. This is both the strength and the weakness of religious experience – it speaks to an individual's personal views, and it cannot be expressed in any definitive, conclusive way. This leaves us with more questions than answers and perhaps that's the whole point my friend and I are presenting.

I appreciated the comment Steve made at the end of his email: "I plan to

write more about the definition; we can discuss at a later date." Wouldn't that be great, if people could agree to keep thinking, writing and discussing these important topics? Those who choose to resist, cut off or subvert honest reasoning and discussion are the ones perhaps most susceptible to those myths and superstitions we've identified. They may be the ones who truly give religion "a bad name" or lead to critics attacking faith as irrational, delusional, even dangerous. And well it can be when abdicating authority to the self-appointed "Definers" who not only tell us what religion and faith mean, but what God, scripture and anything else means.

After our exchange, Steve re-phrased his definition-in-process: "The best aspects of religion grow out of a desire to be part of something greater than oneself, to be part of a community, and to experience a sense of awe; the worst [aspects] emerge when religion slides into – or is pulled into – mythology, fear, and wishful thinking."

Growing, desiring, connecting, sensing awe. Seems healthier than mythologizing, fearing and wishing, wouldn't you think?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant.