

We of little (or no) faith need to be open



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Have you ever been around others and didn't feel you could be completely honest about what you believe or don't believe? Maybe it was at work or in a family gathering. Maybe with an old friend or new. Religious opinions and political viewpoints can be hot topics stirring emotional reactions. Most of the time we probably keep some thoughts to ourselves; it's not worth the risk of contentious conversation (if our convictions actually lead to conversation rather than argument). Believers as well as nonbelievers can have the same feeling of discomfort, wondering how their true thoughts would be received or perceived. Will they be rejected, shunned, even attacked? (in some countries, expressing unorthodox views can be dangerous, deadly)

In her book, "We of Little Faith," Jewish atheist and Washington Post columnist Kate Cohen challenges us, especially nonbelievers, not to hide our personal, chosen opinions. She encourages atheists — those who don't believe in anything supernatural — to speak up,

for their own benefit and for the benefit of those around them or those who might hear their words. Cohen warns, if there could be serious consequences with "coming out," by all means don't share your beliefs or non-beliefs. If you could lose your job or family relationships, or other potential harm could result, the risks might be too high. "Living in peace" is a value we don't want to give up. Yet, as she urges in the Epilogue, there comes a time when we need to be open and honest, with ourselves and others.

Though it can seem to be true, "belief in God is not universal," therefore "coming out" as a nonbeliever (or heretic in one's religious tradition) can do two things: "give others permission to live their lives more honestly" and confront harmful faith practices since: "religion is at the center of every battle against scientific and social progress." Cohen is not speaking of all believers, but a problem that's not always obvious: "Religious belief is — more and more, both at the state and federal level — a way to sidestep every advance the country makes in terms of civil rights, human rights, and public health." We've seen this in several recent Supreme Court decisions and the resistance to pandemic directives. When some in the religious community demand special preference and privilege, or exemptions from rules

everyone else abides by, or they want to impose their "biblical values" on all of us, secular Americans and their reasonable allies in faith circles need to stand to protect true religious freedom for all, not just some.

"The more atheists reveal the truth about themselves, the more that people in our lives can borrow from our strength, voice their own beliefs, be honest with their own loved ones, and be true to themselves. You could hardly give someone something more valuable than that."

Kate Cohen ends her book of valuable insights with one last plea: "Please consider taking a deep breath and coming out with the truth."

Those with little faith, an unorthodox or nontraditional faith, or those with no faith, have many resources to support the serious and essential decision to bring their true thoughts into the light of day. Though we may not sense an openness to such honesty in our own congregations or circles of relations, we can be assured we are not alone. Maybe it's time not to keep it to ourselves out of fear of conflict or disconnection. Cohen relates personal stories from raising her own children in a family culturally Jewish yet religiously atheist. She's open about the difficulties arising from the decision she and her husband made to be truthful with their kids. She's open

because she encourages more parents to also be open and truthful. One of their sons decided not to have his bar mitzvah, and the grandfather wasn't happy, but over time it was accepted in the family. As for holidays, Cohen describes creating new celebrations in the family, and the creativity that can shape a holiday into something good for each household. Thanksgiving is one day when she feels she is "joining my own heart and voice to everyone else's, to be, for a day, both in tune with the world around me and in tune with the World inside me." There don't have to be miracle stories, scripture readings or traditional rituals to find meaning and joy in these familial moments. As Cohen states her desire and intent: "Just a table to be filled with food and surrounded with celebrants and a day in which to pause, see, and rejoice."

Secular or religious, it can be deeply meaningful to express our true thoughts and feelings in a manner that invites congenial conversation and a common celebration of life's goodness.

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