

Critical thinking critically important in faith crises



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Have you ever been through a crisis of faith? I've had many such moments. It can be frightening to face doubts and unanswerable questions. It can be lonely. If we're fortunate, we meet sensitive, empathetic people who offer encouragement and simple presence to guide us in our thinking. For some, the crisis may open a door to walk away from one faith, or faith itself.

"People just need to THINK!" I smiled and nodded. A student in one of my classes was responding to an irrational or nonsensical statement read in class. Sometimes it seems there is little think-

ing, not much reflection, and a limited amount of critical thinking going on. This isn't about people being stupid or ignorant, just that we may get the impression someone isn't doing the required mental work. Isn't this critically necessary in meaningful matters of faith?

Let's take something we might call: Critical Theological Theory (CTT). Many would object to a critique of God, but we're really talking about doing a deeper dive into what people mean by "God." I've got my opinions, distilled over many years in ministry and beyond. Yet my concern here is to shine a spotlight on the dark-gray areas of "god-talk." People, including many clergy, assume we know what they mean when they repeat god-words over and over. What someone has in mind when they speak of such nebulous things as spirit and god, may be very different from

what another individual hears. Education matters, as does culture, language and family upbringing. Until we engage our brains and practice CTT, all other theories that relate to religion drift into irrelevance.

A pastor-televangelist-political candidate told a crowd of self-proclaimed "spiritual warriors": "This is a God nation, this is a Jesus nation, and you will never take my God and my gun out of this nation." Now, we might be curious why he's so defensive and protective of both his faith and his firearm, but he went on to "declare war on Satan" and all those (of one particular "godless" party) who are trying "to destroy our way of life" in America. Apparently this pastor has a very fearful faith. When we think harder and deeper about it, applying our CTT, we tend to discover there is no dark-gray area with this thinking, only very dark ideology — it dawns on

us that more light is critically needed.

In a class I was teaching on Christian Nationalism, we spent weeks considering why America was not founded as a Christian nation, has never been a Christian nation, and is not one now. Yet one student held firm: "But this IS a Christian nation!" How do we respond to a mind set on a belief — a firm "mind-set"? I asked the student for evidence, any evidence, of that belief. None was offered. One may argue, and many do, that some American founders were Evangelical Christians who inserted "Judeo-Christian principles" into our founding documents. Yet, that argument falls apart when we think harder, deeper and apply our handy CTT. The Unitarians, Deists and several Christian denominations represented at the Constitutional Convention would not be

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considered “real Christians” by the Christian Nation preachers and proponents today. Of course, if they actually were “good Christians” intent on creating a religiously-based form of government, you would think they would have made that explicit in those documents. The secular government they formed allowed for a radically active practice of CTT across a diverse landscape (by the

way, would “good Christians” have excluded Native Americans, Blacks and women from privileges such as property ownership and voting rights?).

So, we see that “people just need to think.” For example, I was taught as a child that “Columbus was the discoverer of America” and that he was an exemplary human being, later finding out he was neither. A serious practice of CTT — and basic reasoning — often leads to an evolution in our thinking, even our worldview. This can certainly be destabilizing and disorienting, but it doesn’t take away the joy of learning and explor-

ing for ourselves.

Doesn’t deeper, determined thinking destroy faith? Not necessarily. It may transform one’s beliefs; it may lead to changing beliefs or choosing another religious practice. It’s certainly possible that extended contemplation and self-reflection, open exploration of new ideas and experiences, could cause a crisis in our personal CTT. After all, “critical” means exercising good judgement, not criticizing for the sake of being a critic. A discerning mind, which allows for divergent opinions, open to new theories, can present clearer views

leading to wiser action.

Applying our CTT won’t take us through every crisis period. “Just Think” might not help any better than “Just Believe.” On the other hand, a compassionate and critical approach to life’s challenges can be critically important.

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