

Reading (something else), writing and religion



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

A reader questioned why this column appears in the “Faith” section of their newspaper. They didn’t think my opinions on religion should be printed with “the Christians.” Apparently the reader believes that pages devoted to religion should exclusively present their own particular type of Christianity. No one considered to be the “wrong kind” of believer – and especially those who identify as non-Christian or non-religious – ought to be given space to voice an opinion that differs from the reader. To me, that sounds like a fundamental misunderstanding of a free press, free speech, and freedom of conscience and religion.

It never ceases to puzzle me why people read what they don’t want to read, and then don’t want anyone else to read it. Consider book bans and “inappropriate” library or school texts. “We don’t want our children to read those things, so we don’t want any other parents to allow their children to read them.” A very narrow “reading” of civil society in a secular democracy. If we can’t, or won’t, be exposed to something, no one else should be able to. If our God doesn’t want us to read that, see that, hear that ... then it shouldn’t be available for anyone else. I saw a meme that suggested simple steps to take if there was a book that offended you – “Step One: Read Something Else.”

We used to trust librarians (and teachers, too). We relied on them to recommend good books to inspire, encourage and instill knowledge, as well as a basic love of learning and delight in

reading. We never expected these respected adults to tell us what to think or tell us about all the books we shouldn’t read. A library, like a classroom, was a safe (and quiet) place to expand our young minds, to have adventures, to take journeys of imagination to far off lands. No one tried to stunt our growth by demanding we stay in our bubble of experience. At home, we had a family Bible, but also encyclopedias, dictionaries, novels and many other kinds of books. My parents were people of deep faith, yet never told me I couldn’t read this or that, allowing me the freedom to follow my inquisitive nature.

In high school there were books I didn’t want to read (students aren’t always pleased with assigned books). Some I read, and didn’t like, but usually picked up a bit of knowledge; others held my attention and I actually learned something. Then, there were a few I

liked so much I still have them (two poetry collections). In college, and later in seminary, we were assigned texts with various degrees of interest. Mostly, I gained something from each, even if they weren’t my first choice. These days, someone may recommend a book (or a website) and I decide whether to check it out or not. I offer my own recommendations. There’s rarely some book or film I would tell others not to read or see, and I would never try to restrict anyone else from looking at something I didn’t like, even if I was disturbed by it. In a pluralistic democracy, I don’t see how we can honestly do that, censoring materials due to one individual’s or group’s preferences or moralistic standards. Freedom of choice has to mean something.

The upset reader seems to be fine

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with the editor placing my columns in another part of the paper (maybe hidden in the classifieds?). I get that. But they miss the main reason my writings have been published every week for eight years: I address religious issues ... from a secular viewpoint. Having been a minister, now a humanist married to a minister, I certainly am not anti-religious. I don't mock or disrespect

religious beliefs, though I ask hard questions of faith in order to challenge the faithful (not just Christians), encouraging deeper thinking on beliefs that either don't make much sense to secular people like me, or appear to be irrational nonsense. I think that's fair to talk about. I wish someone would have challenged my beliefs years ago. I may have grown stronger in my faith, or, decided to make some changes in my views. Either way, as uncomfortable as that can be, self-reflective interrogation of our own views can be very healthy. And, yes, this is true for a humanist writer as well. The agitated reader seemed bothered that I'm not a believ-

er. I don't mind being called an atheist, though some use the word to dismiss another person and their opinions on faith. It's a way of saying, "he's not one of us, so don't give him a forum." All I can say to that is I'll keep writing, and including voices like the reader's. It's the freethinker's way.

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., N.C. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).