

When you believe your religion is the right one



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Each of us wants to believe our views and opinions, our beliefs and perspectives, are correct. No one wants to be wrong, to have our facts incorrect, or to discover our worldview just doesn't hold up under honest scrutiny. If I think I'm right, it doesn't have to mean your opinions are wrong. We like to feel we're standing on solid ground and know what's right and wrong, good and bad. However, just a tad bit of humility might cause us to "hold a self-evident truth": that each person is responsible for their belief choices, and ought to keep in mind there are many diverse view-

points. Maybe several different views are partially correct and together they are at least more right, more true. On the subject of religious beliefs, this can get tricky, but not unmanageable. For instance, a person of faith may be committed to assisting those in need, and they find out the person next to them, their colleague in that service work, has a different faith, or no faith at all. In that case, perhaps it's "right" to do the right thing, rather than believe the same. Each of these co-workers agree it is right and good to help others. Unfortunately, there are those who can't let go of their "rightness" or righteousness.

Think about it. One person chooses a faith. They may get very excited to share that faith with others. Do they wish (pray) for everyone to believe exactly as they do? They are convinced their enthusiastic convictions will be convincing. Yet, even within Christianity, there

are thousands of different beliefs. Do they all count as true, right and Christian? Who decides?

As a freethinking person who thinks freedom of thought and conscience is central and essential, I defend your right to believe your religion is right, true, the best. But that doesn't mean you can push it on me, my family, my school district, my legislature, my government. If you don't think I have the same right to choose my views, and freely practice what I believe, we have a problem. I refuse to follow laws based solely on your beliefs. My country is not your church; your Bible is not my Constitution; and most fundamentally, your God isn't (necessarily) my God.

April Ajoy is a Christian who was raised as an Evangelical Pentecostal (I share a little of her faith journey). Her father was an evangelist and she sang with the family all over the world. April

wrote the book "Star Spangled Jesus," telling her story of emerging from a narrow belief that was actually proud of being narrow: "We knew we were right." It wasn't until she got to college and became friends with other Christians who believed some unfamiliar things, that she began to learn she could change some beliefs and still be a follower of Jesus.

Let's put this in perspective. Ninety-nine point nine percent of the universe goes about its business without me (let me add another couple nines to that). Look up at the moon, the stars, the nothingness of space and you become next to nothing — we're surrounded by nothing, swimming in an endless pool of (mostly) nothing. Is that thought depressing? It shouldn't be. Why? Because it's the way it is, the way the cosmos is.

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My beliefs, your beliefs, anyone's beliefs, can't possibly comprehend, let alone encompass the vastness, the immensity, of the All-ness. This is the natural context for a profound moment of understanding: we don't know much, so we shouldn't think we have the corner on truth. "Yes, but my ancient scriptures say...." or "My God told me..." Sorry, but that simply won't cut it. Your concept of God may not be big enough. We are one of billions upon billions of creatures on this small spinning planet, and we know very little about it, about all other life, about ourselves. There's that humility thing again. You may be right, believing your faith is right, that your God is God, and that anyone like me who doesn't see things as you do is wrong. Then again,

who knows?

April Ajoy writes of her early experience: "I started to realize many years ago that my passion to take America back for Christ was often at odds with the teachings of Jesus. I could only carry that cognitive dissonance for so long. Because Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are those who believe all the exact, right things." He said blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers." She concludes with a newer kind of "good news": "To follow these teachings, I had to lay down my need to be right."

Wise words for the upright.

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. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).