

# Trees of life and the roots of religion



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Walking up our road, the pavement turns into a rustic trail into the forest. I've tried hiking a bit higher, but this one afternoon, months after Hurricane Helene, I was stopped by many fallen trees. Some had snapped in two; others lifted their roots and tipped over, either with a crash or a thud. We couldn't hear most of this destruction, the wind was too loud. Up there in the midst of the toppled giants, I mused on the importance of trees, for life on earth, and for the life of religion.

In the Genesis Garden, the center of attention was the Tree of Life. It doesn't show up again in the biblical story until the last chapter of the book of Revelation. "And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations"

(Revelation 22). Why would a river flow down a street? Well, we saw that during the flood when the storm altered the course of the rivers and creeks. But why a flood in heaven? And, I've always been curious how the tree grew "on either side" of the river. Those must be deep and long roots. I'm not being literal here, because this is a mythological tale from ancient times. What can be the message? Who knows, except it seems there is a city, a river and a tree in the heavenly future.

By the way, ever wonder what happened to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Did it wither, topple over, or is it still out there somewhere, waiting to be re-discovered? Either way, we could use more fruit from that tree.

Abraham shared a meal with God (at least three angelic representatives) under some oak trees (Genesis 18). "Now the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he raised his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed down to the ground, and said, "My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by. Please let a little water be

brought and wash your feet, and make yourselves comfortable under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, so that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do as you have said." This is another example of the biblical puzzle of a three-in-one God. The human-divine mixture that is beyond comprehension, yet repeats. Abraham and Sarah, aged as they were, are told to expect a child. Sarah laughs. The child is named Isaac, "one who laughs."

Strange things happen around trees in the Bible. For many Christian believers, the central story of the Bible is the death of Jesus on a tree. For centuries, the lifeless man on the leafless tree has been the "crux" of the whole faith. Yes, the resurrection is important as well, yet without the nails in the wood, there would be no message of salvation and forgiveness.

Gautama Buddha achieved a state of "enlightenment" under an Indian bodhi tree. He sat, calm, quiet, meditative, until he became the Buddha: the Awake One. That forest, that tree, was a symbol of solitude, directing the mind to a deeper interrelationship with all life. Placed together — planted together — the Tree of Enlightenment, the Tree of

Life and the Tree of Knowledge, present a forest for faith, freethought, or both. Add one more tree — the Cross — and the balance is perhaps complete. Living trees mixed together with dead trees — Life balanced with Death.

My walk in the decimated woods that afternoon brought all this into focus. Religion is interlaced with green and growing branches, as well as broken sticks and rootless logs. The blocked trail made me pause, to hesitate and contemplate how to proceed. Choosing not to risk climbing over the tumbled towers, I was left wondering how trees mark meaningful moments in history — world history, religious history, our common history, our personal history. If the fruit of the tree is for knowledge, if the leaves are for healing, if it reaches high for awakening, or tears roots to fall in suffering, the forests of faith can flourish in the secular soil of this natural world.

*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](http://www.chighland.com)).*