

A secular defense of faith: without apologies



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

This column will not please many in either the theist or atheist worlds. In a sense, this is Part Three of my series on Apologetics, the tactic that attempts to defend one faith above all faiths. Here I'm stepping into controversial territory, presenting a defense of faith from a non-believer's point of view. An impossible task? I don't "believe" so. I think it's time to clear the air between the world of religious beliefs and the world of secularism. My point is essentially this: there is one world — it's all we have — so let's make room for worldviews that make our world a better place to live for everyone, including believers and

non-believers. Is this possible? I think so. In fact, I hope so — it has to be possible. We need theists as well as atheists. And even if you don't accept that or believe that, it's what we have. Religion isn't going away, and neither is the skepticism of the agnostic or the outright rejection of religion by the atheist. The critical question is: does one's belief, or non-belief, truly "make our world a better place"?

After years of inter-religious work among people of faith and those without faith, I think it's a needless distraction to put effort into defending one particular faith, or faith over non-faith. Anyone has the freedom and right to select a faith of their choice and practice one of many available faiths. In fact, I would suggest we need the whole spectrum of religious beliefs, as well as the full array of non-religious viewpoints. The more we have to choose from, the

more we can appreciate our choices.

A valuable guideline can be found in Thomas Jefferson's statement: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god." If a neighbor's belief causes harm to others, protections are in place, we have civil authorities to respond. Otherwise, what does it matter what someone believes about gods? On the other hand, if a person's beliefs motivate them to be a neighbor helping neighbors, showing kindness and practicing justice through compassionate actions, this benefits the community and causes no harm. If I believe something different but act in similar ways toward others, this not only doesn't cause injury or harm, but can potentially be an opportunity, an invitation, to live and work peaceably with my neighbor.

Isn't this rather idealistic, at least, not very realistic or practical? Maybe,

but what's the alternative? People arguing over beliefs and opinions, constantly fighting over who is right — apologist versus apologist. This would seem to be harmful to everyone, injuring the whole community.

Naturalist and philosopher John Burroughs described religion as "an emotion, an inspiration, a feeling of the Infinite." The closer we are to Nature, and our own nature, we may experience a "faith beyond faith," or as Burroughs wrote: "a love, an enthusiasm, a consecration to natural truth" ("Accepting the Universe," 1920). What we choose to believe may be very different from what our parents and grandparents believed, yet we can understand why they believed. Burroughs observed that parents may have had sincere beliefs, and though not the same as ours, we sense

See HIGHLAND, Page 2C

Highland

Continued from Page 1C

their pious perspectives “lifted them above themselves; they healed their wounds; they consoled them for many of the failures and disappointments of this world; they developed character; they tempered the steel in their nature.” We can appreciate the comfort, hope and strength, faith provided to former generations, and to many in our own time. Nevertheless, reasonable concerns must be central: Is a belief truly making the world better, and better for all? Is a faith chosen primarily for personal satisfaction, to support

personal righteousness, or is it right — good and healthy — for all concerned?

As John Burroughs saw it, “We accept Nature as we find it, and do not crave the intervention of a God that sits behind and is superior to it.” More interested in biology and zoology than theology, Burroughs chose not to be distracted from the world’s beauty — balanced by suffering and death — by looking out and beyond the natural order. Yet, he understood and honored the role religion has played and continues to play in the human community. He knew why people, including his own family, hold to a faith rooted in the past. He sensed an enduring value in some of those beliefs. So, without apology, he respected the “sentiment” of religion, while learning to accept the world as it is, his own ex-

perience based on wonder, curiosity, reason and scientific investigations in relation to the world he shared with various species, and various human religious perspectives.

Perhaps the only apologetics we truly need is a defense of naturally diverse and inclusive neighborhoods.

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