

Cordial and conciliatory conversation about religion

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

A newspaper column, perhaps especially one that centers on religion and secularism, invites a variety of responses. One response might be to ignore it. Another is to read and let it go. Another might be to think about the ideas or questions raised and consider whether to respond to the writer. I hear from a broad spectrum of readers, some who praise a particular column and others who pick up a thread and pull, from curiosity or criticism. Now and then, I hear from a fellow freethinker who would like me to be more sharply critical of religion. I welcome the opportunity to interact with each reader in a respectful exchange.

Having been a chaplain for many years, mingling with people across the spectrum of streets, shelters, jails, schools and religious groups, I'm used to some fair, and unfair, criticism. There was always someone who wasn't happy with

me, my work or my style (early on, my hat, beard and sandals bothered some; hauling my guitar around only added to their dislike). Then there was my theology. I learned fast that I could never please everyone with my "radical" beliefs, such as my view that Jesus of Nazareth was a model for ministry centered on compassion and inclusion rather than judging exclusion; that advocacy for the poorest neighbors can be unpopular. In our chaplaincy office we had an altar with a cross I brought back from the island of Iona in Scotland, placed alongside Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and Native American images. Of equal "spiritual" value were the "offerings" brought from our street community: a feather, flower, leaf or poem. This collection of symbols raised more questions than criticism.

Not long ago I heard from an agitated reader, somewhat troubled by my writing. He was pleasant enough to begin

with: "Your columns are well-written," before proceeding to lament that his local paper replaced a favorite pastor's column with mine. In his mind, this was "a marketable move away from conservative Christianity" because his town wants to "market" their area to be more like my, more liberal, town. He speculates that some no longer subscribe to his paper because it doesn't represent the more conservative culture of his area; the paper has changed because it seeks to change the "public perception" of his town. I don't know if that's the case, but he presents a sincere opinion.

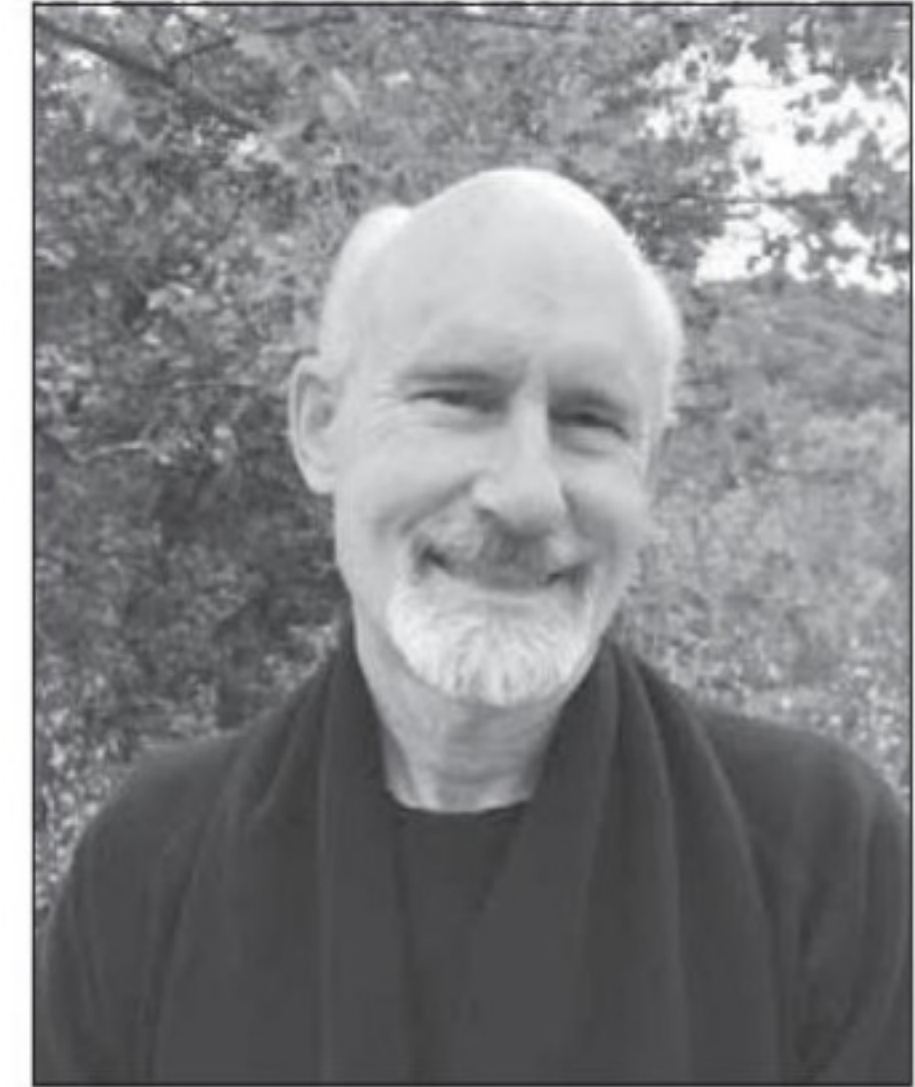
The respondent believes there is "negative fallout" from the fact "there is no public way to respond" to my views in print. He says: "some readers may be frustrated that you have a 'pulpit' that silences comeback [so you can] win with a final word." I assured the reader I'm not silencing anyone's feedback, but encour-

aging responses like his. I thanked him for his response and hoped others would write as he did. His next agitation concerned his view that if a religion writer has no religion, "that in itself is a religion." This of course relates to the old argument against any secular voice based on reason, science or philosophy, that a non-religious perspective is somehow, someday, a religion. The reader goes so far as to claim I "propagate my faith" as I express my views. In reply, I noted my freethinking humanism "is neither a faith or religion but a reasonable philosophy of life." At this point in the exchange I thought of an old but relevant cliché: "Disagree without being disagreeable."

To address his narrow understanding of where I live, his assertion we are simply a mix of Baptists and New Age believers, I continued the reply: "I would take your critique a step further and suggest public news sources publish more religion. Yes, you

heard that right. I'd like to hear a diverse spectrum of voices that truly represent contemporary America. Let's hear from Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Jews, and the growing number of 'spiritual but not religious'." I said many people could choose to ignore those voices and simply not read those columns, yet they would be missing wider perspectives of thinking on matters of religion in this country. Many seem to forget that the "free exercise" of religion, guaranteed by a Constitution, allows for a wonderful diversity of opinions.

My commenter seemed almost impressed, writing that my email was: "cordial and conciliatory." He agreed there could be "sharing of views (more religion) in the newspaper." Once again I expressed appreciation for reading and sending his feedback. I nearly told him that cordial and conciliatory tone reflects the "humanist spirit," an openness to an honest and respect-



ful exchange of opinions and beliefs, but chose to leave the topic and move along. In his concluding words he assured me he would "continue to read the column 'religiously'."

Respectful responses are always welcome.

Chris Highland was a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years before becoming a humanist celebrant and author of many books. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. His website is www.chighland.com.