

Lofty library spaces, table-tennis theology



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

My seminary classmate Tim worked part-time in the school library. One morning he told me there was someplace he discovered in the library and wanted to show me. He unlocked a door that led to a series of stairs ascending to hidden rooms up under the bell tower (the castle-on-the-hill seminary was known for the chimes that could be heard all over town). Tim led me into the highest room where I was surprised to see a pingpong table! That room became a refuge for some of us to enjoy a few hours of play after our daily dose of dogma and doctrine.

Paddling the ball back and forth also became a more leisurely way to knock

around our thoughts on theology, the church, and other “light” topics. Since it could get fairly warm in that “upper room,” especially in the California summer, we would open the one window high above the parking lot. Often when the game, and discussion, became heated, one of us would smack the ball so hard it would go sailing out the window. We rarely found those little white floating balls that flew like birds on the breeze. But we did find amusement in knowing there were some things, including beliefs, that might fly out the window from time to time.

In my mind, I frequently return to contemplate the god-talk of the past. In a nutshell, my personal story could be drawn in this way: I moved away from worshipping Jesus, to following him, to leaving him, to simply respecting his compassionate acts and ethical teachings. Some say, with a certain air of self-righteousness and judgment, that those of us who leave faith have “lost faith” or

maybe never knew God at all. Yet, more serious reflection – and a little play – can present a choice for a new pingpong ball, a new table, a new outlook.

Now I think of Theology – the questionable “Study of God” – as a kind of lofty game played high up under the chimes of the Church. Theologians become the keepers of the keys, the honored players who have special access to the high places of divine realms. The most honest god-talkers may share insights based on their studies while admitting it’s all a mystery and, though most would never say it, theology is guess-work, at best. How does one “study” the unknown, the unexplainable, and, most obviously, the invisible? Sure, many are guided by their faith and therefore (once again not admitted) they discover just what they are looking for. Searching for a God who looks and sounds like Jesus, they – surprise! – find Him. Even rigorous theology, claiming to follow the truth, time and time again

assumes there is a Subject to study. “I believe in God, therefore I find him, and feel called to study him.” Nothing wrong with that, as long as a person is honest about what they are doing. No one else is beholden to accept the results of these academic studies, or to believe in the object of their study. Libraries are full of theological writings. Again, I wonder: how is so much written about such a high flying silent and invisible subject no one ever seems to understand or comprehend?

Speaking of libraries, backpacking through Europe the summer after college, I stayed with a family in Basel, Switzerland. Discovering that the father not only worked at the nearby university, but served as the director of the archives, I was immediately intrigued. When he offered to give me a personal tour, I was eager to go. We descended the stairs into the cold, quiet space

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stacked with hundreds of shelves, each holding objects of history. With my new degree in religion and philosophy, I asked what treasures I could see. My guide took me to a shelf and removed a

small wooden box. Handing it to me, he said it contained personal papers of the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, who had been a professor at the university. Lightly holding those papers, then the hand-written letters of Calvin, Luther and other Protestant “saints,” was quite a thrill for a young college grad, who hadn’t even decided on a career in ministry yet.

On a visit to Washington, DC, Carol and I toured the Library of Congress. An amazing space that felt like a blend of a book lover’s paradise and a sacred space. The LOC is like a secular sanctuary, stacked with knowledge, wall to wall, floor to ceiling. A place of awe, yet a place more accessible than the locked and lofty rooms where Icons of Ideas are deified. Philosophy, theology and many

other subjects for study ought to be handled like table-tennis balls – lightly tossed in the air, knocked around, and sometimes sent soaring into space.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).