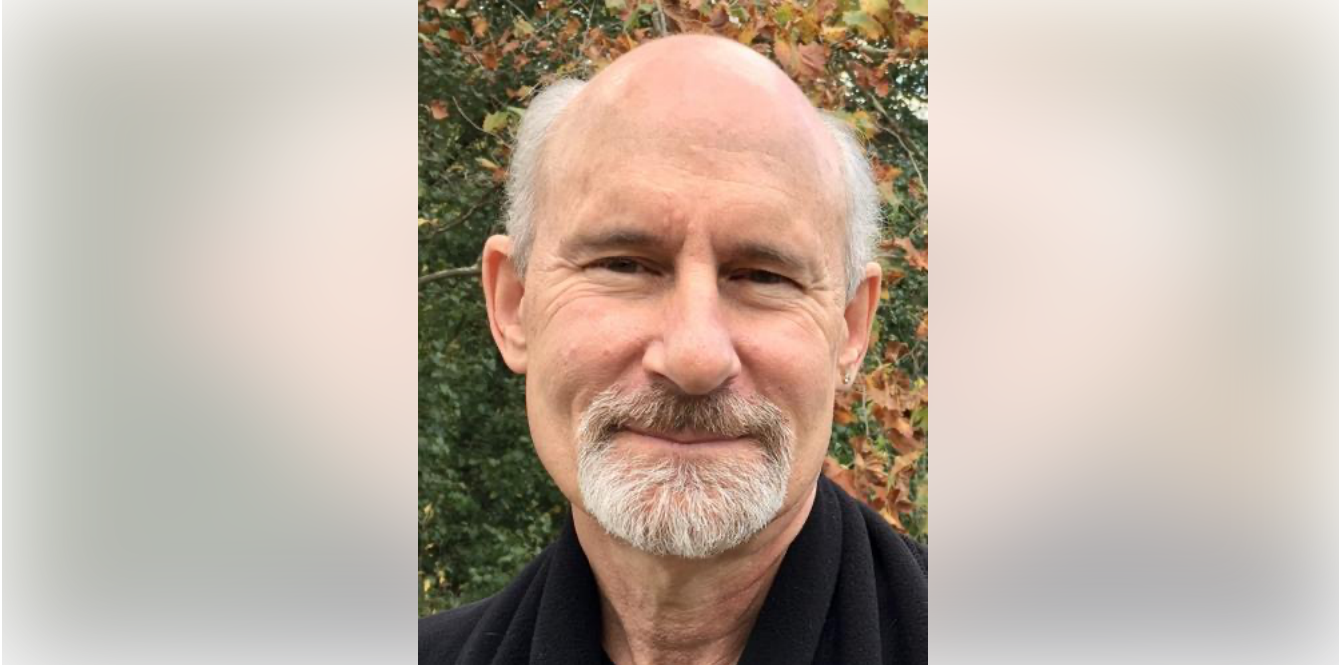




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## Friendly Freethinker: When Faith is in the Driver's Seat

By Chris Highland  
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On winding mountain roads, I need to be the driver; I get too queasy as a passenger. I have memories of long car trips with my family when the windows had to be rolled down for lots of fresh air in my face. Frequent stops to stretch in the open air were helpful. These days, I prefer to be the driver, controlling the direction and speed, steering with my own hands. Riding along is fine most of the time, but there's something about being in charge of the machine, like the years when I rode a motorcycle. I enjoyed many travels on the "iron horse," though the thrill comes with great responsibility. The same with driving a car.

Sometimes I think the best way to get a handle—or steering wheel—on matters of religion is to think of analogies. To make sense of what faith means to each individual, it can be useful to consider images that frame the picture. In my mind, driving a car is one appropriate image.

Years ago, I jotted down something in a journal that describes mirrors and windows. Faith can be a practice of looking in the rear-view mirrors, looking to the past. This is often the most obvious when people have to reach backward to ancient books, creeds, theologies, quoting voices from long ago, from behind. There is great danger in driving while distracted by mirrors. Keeping our eyes forward is smart and essential.

When faith is in the driver's seat, there are many possibilities. Where will this go? Where will this take us? Are we moving, and if we are, is it forward or backward? Could we take a turn and explore a new street? All of this directional decision-making can be quite risky. The reality is, allowing someone else to control the vehicle of our life has huge consequences. To state the risk of faith very bluntly: Religion

drives people to compassion or craziness. At best, a wide-angle faith perspective can work well. At worst, we read bumperstickers that proudly proclaim: "Jesus is My Driver."

It doesn't take much awareness of current events in the world to see where some religious faith is driving its followers—that is, where it's taking passengers. Many rely on "authorities" such as clergy, handing over the wheel to those who claim to know which direction is best for their lives. I recall the youthful days when we spoke and sang of "surrender"—giving up the control of our lives to God, which always came with the added requirement to put trust in a leader who was "closer to the Lord" and therefore would never steer us astray. Our main responsibility was to surrender to the "higher authority" and put our lives in their holy hands.

That's quite a frightening thought to me now. Does faith ask too much of us, to give up the driver's seat? We were also told, by those authoritative leaders, that we should let go of our sinful, prideful egos and let God sit on the throne, in the driver's seat, of our life. Thankfully that was never completely possible. I never truly wanted my ego, my self, my unique identity, to dissolve into what the Apostle Paul claimed as, "no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2). At a young, impressionable age, that sounded pretty good—handing over the control of my life to the Great Driver who knew exactly where to steer my life. Although, I was also taught, especially by my parents and teachers, that I needed to take responsibility for my choices and actions to control the direction of my life (obey my inner GPS). I guess you could say I kept one hand on the wheel, but when I believed I was only a passenger, not in control, I sensed the ride could take scary turns.

I'm uncertain about the increase in "driverless" vehicles. Sounds irresponsible to me. Yet, I can see advantages to turning the wheel over to a computer that may have faster reaction times and a much better sense of direction (after all, many planes can fly quite well on auto-pilot). On the other hand, I would have much more trust knowing there were hands on the wheel. I think this directly applies to faith. No machine, and no human life, can run on faith alone. Positive, forward motion depends on a volitional decision—the will to move, and proceed, safely and responsibly. "I Run on Prayer" is a nice sentiment, but there has to be real fuel, energy, to do much of anything, to really go somewhere.

Most of us have to drive at some point in life. Who or what is in control makes a difference.