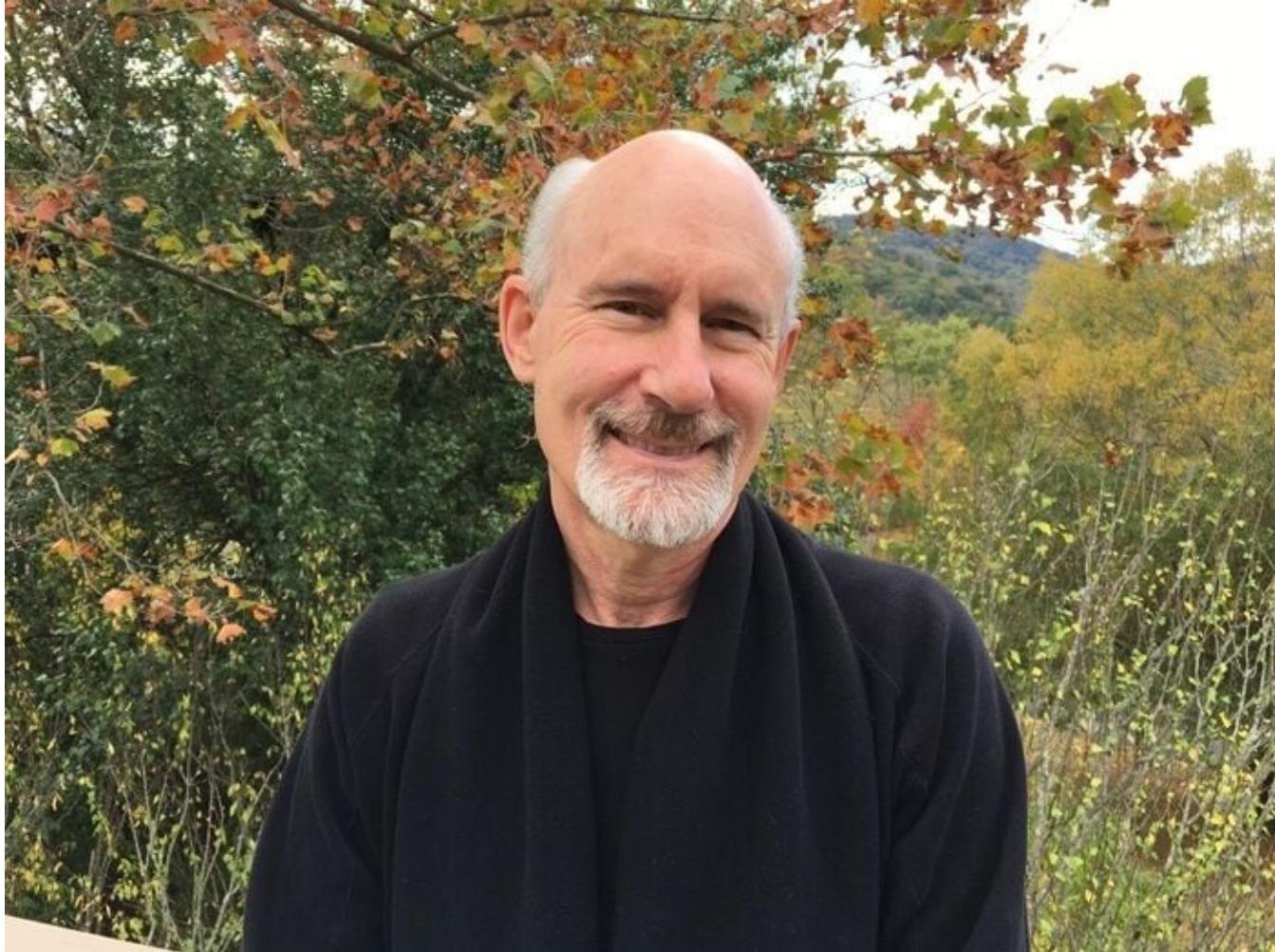


Friendly Freethinker: Which Faith is “Number One Clergy Recommended”?

By Chris Highland
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We received one of those mailers. You know the kind. Selling a product with caps, exclamations and superlatives. Another “Buy This Now!” sort of advertisement. As frequently happens, this one was addressed to my deceased mother-in-law, so the urgency was almost amusing—almost. The bold letters shouted from the glossy paper: “The [Product] For Your Every Need!,” “Best Selling,” “Best Value,” assuring the recipient that it was “Excellent Quality.” How could anyone resist such claims? (my hand is raised; I could). On this one small ad-card the company crammed even more come-ons—“Everyone Loves It!”—including a handful of testimonials from satisfied (ecstatic) customers: “Impressive,” “Amazing!” If you believe personal testimonies, enough to pay out cold, hard cash, these should do it. After all, these all come under the emblazoned: “Doctor Recommended!”

Follow my reasoning (I assure you I’m not going in the direction of “Number One Columnist Recommended!”). When you think seriously about these advertisements, any advertisements, they usually direct attention from critical thinking, to demand an immediate response with little or no rational, logical reflection. The intention of my writing is to nudge the brain cells a bit, without suggesting anyone “buy” my particular views or perspectives. I suppose you could say I’m advertising, in the original sense of drawing attention to something (Latin: “turning toward”), but it’s not about selling a reader on what I say, only to stir up some thoughts, and perhaps thoughtfulness.

Direct marketing has direct effects. The same is true for religious marketing. What concerns me, and may concern you, is the manner in which some purveyors of faith display their wares, especially to vulnerable people. It usually has to do with money (If I believed in hell, I would hope there was an especially hot corner of it for those who take money from the most vulnerable). Selling faith is a dirty business

in my book. Sure, show (advertise) your beliefs through compassionate living, but as soon as it gets packaged and sold it becomes a hot mess.

Ask yourself: What was Buddha selling? How about Jesus? Can faith even be sold? How about salvation? What does that even mean, and how could that even be possible? This is what marketing does to me, pushes and pulls me to ask more questions, seek adequate answers and make wise choices. Shouldn't healthy religion encourage the same?

Some religions have a long history of marketing and sales. Those who believe in the "high calling"—to call everyone else to believe what they believe—insist that their message is the original message. It may be very old, centuries old, and contained in ancient books few ever read, but they want to convince us what they believe is what those teachers and texts were teaching. It may be called "Good News" ("Best Value," "Excellent Quality," "For Your Every Need") yet what makes it "good" and is it truly "new"? Maybe it's a tradition of interpretation of some words from the distant past, but who is going to buy that? Why should we? "But it says ... in our holy book." Well, you are welcome to choose to believe it in your way, but you haven't sold me on it. I may not even be a customer shopping for something on your sacred shelves (social media offers many "spiritual goods," for a price).

Speaking of personal testimony, I'm often puzzled how quickly people accept it. One person has a meaningful experience and tells the story. Should we readily accept their testimony, or believe the same experience should happen to us? Why? "Hear what I say" is an invitation to accept "hearsay"—second hand information not allowed in courtrooms. My "faith journey" is a story I have told many times in a number of ways. I don't tell contradictory stories or make anything up, but I honestly have to say the story has changed over the years. Not substantially, only that I may use different terms, analogies or images to express my life-path. I may frame the journey as a "journey," an "emergence" or educational evolution. I'm not "sold" on one image or another, so I don't attempt to "sell" that to anyone else.

I suggest we be suspicious of those faith leaders who feel they have something to sell, who preach we should purchase their product, so they pull out all the marketing schemes. "Number One Clergy Recommended," or just "Clergy Recommended." Compare this with "Doctor Recommended." Which doctor, which clergy? Who gets a cut of the claims? Not all religions or clergy are involved in this direct, or indirect, marketing and sales. Many may share their beliefs with others, but not as a superior product.

Maybe Caveat emptor—buyer beware—ought to be a kind of scripture.