

Find sticky choices around the table of faith

While reading a book on “values clarification” in my evangelical college, I came across one of those “Velcro ideas” that has stuck to my mind ever since: we only value those beliefs we seriously choose from viable alternatives. I circle back to this time and again. It helps me understand why some people seem to be stuck in one mindset, one belief system, one tradition. It may be the only “choice” presented to them. Maybe their parents raised them in that faith; they were offered one book with one view of one divinity. They were never given an actual free choice.

Let’s try an exercise. We lay out an array of books on your table. There’s a Bible – one copy of the Hebrew Bible and one of the Christian “New Testament,” a Qur'an, a collection of Vedas, Upanishads and a Bhagavad Gita, then we add a copy of the Analects of Confucius, various sutras (or texts) of the Sayings of the Buddha, the Tao Te Ching, a Book of Mormon, and a collection of the wisdom of various indigenous tribes throughout the world. What would you choose to read? A secular person might respond they have no interest in any of these. I understand that, yet choosing not to be familiar with spiritual texts revered by a majority of the world reveals a resistance to free thinking and growth in knowledge. As I see it, this disqualifies a person from serious criticism of religion itself, or any particular religious tradition or belief.

The “Velcro idea” of values I’ve carried all these years makes me sensitive to the whole spectrum of belief and nonbelief from

fervent flocks of believers to dyed in the wool atheists. A person can certainly value deeply a “chosen” belief, seeking to live by the values arising from that belief. Yet I wonder how they respond to someone who chose a different belief while holding the same values, practicing the same moral life.

Imagine that “table of alternatives.” Is it too risky to pick up a scripture you’ve never read and give it serious consideration? Can your faith withstand the questions that may pop up, the various views of the divine or diverse worldviews expressed? For the non-religious: is it too difficult to be exposed to the kinds of religious beliefs and experience you have known? Is it somehow threatening to be presented with something other than the fundamental or evangelical religion you have rejected?

I see this as an educational pursuit, to do some genuine self-reflection by allowing a wider field of vision, a deeper understanding of the “varieties of religious experience.” A person raised with the one choice of conservative Christianity can’t honestly claim their faith is superior to another faith they have never sincerely considered. How could they say the Bible is the only book worthy of being called “God’s Word” when so many others turn to different scriptures? Likewise, how could an individual who holds no religious beliefs ignore the writings of every historic tradition, dismissing the possibility there may be wisdom contained in those texts? If they’ve never made the effort to read and potentially learn, how can they claim to be a freethinker open to more knowledge? “It’s religion, there can’t be anything good in there,” simply isn’t a wise position.

If someone uses their scriptures to cause harm to others, or to

spread superstition, I would certainly hold them accountable to reason, and perhaps the instructions of their chosen book. If someone wants to clear the table of all books but their own, placing their special book in the center, that would be a statement against education. After all, supremacy is at the heart of the issue here. One “superior” option enforced with power – “God’s on our side” – destroys any opportunity to contrast and compare “sacred” teachings.

Now, let’s look closer. Who is sitting around the table? Does everyone have a chair? Each book on the table has a representative of that tradition. Are we willing to choose to value them as human beings who have beliefs different than our own? Can we choose to listen, to observe their practice, even if it seems weird or makes us uncomfortable? Are we able to push through our discomfort to truly learn, to consider another’s path of practice and belief? If we’re not willing to be open, and choose to resist learning from a stranger in a strange tradition, I would say that’s sad as well as a revealing myopia – a stubborn or fearful choice to remain ignorant of knowledge that could widen and balance our viewpoint.

Clarifying values, sincerely chosen from real alternatives, takes courage, and a commitment to welcome diverse voices – and books – at the tables displaying an array of curious choices.

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).

