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Friendly Freethinker: Seeking Unity through our Common Bases

By Chris Highland
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My young Ethiopian friend Thomas sent me photos from a celebration in his homeland. He wrote: "Today, we Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been celebrating the baptism of The Son of God by John the Baptist in The Jordan River." Thomas is well aware that I would not be participating in that event, that I do not recognize Jesus of Nazareth, or anyone else, as the Son of God. Yet, Thomas and I have a deep connection through our love of the natural world. He has read several of my books and I enjoy the comments and photos he sends me. We often speak of the sense of kinship with our "Mother" earth, even as we are separated by so much ocean and land wrapped around our beautiful globe.

In one email, Thomas ended his note on the religious celebration with these words: "It creates to us the chance of being unified with our common bases beside all the gaps." This insightful man always leaves me with expansive thoughts to reflect upon. As I say, my "common bases" with Thomas are grounded in a shared sense of relation to the natural, secular world, yet also we share an

appreciation for the Good without borders.

“Beside all the gaps.” Thomas is sensitive to those things in daily life and on the wider world stage that threaten to divide, to break any unity and commonality by fracturing the human family, forcing us into “gaps.” A gap way of thinking focuses attention on what’s missing, the differences that divide, the empty places. I see this as an opportunity to notice what’s not happening, what potentially presents a challenge to human progress, to expand our thinking and form new collaborative action.

I think Thomas agrees, the more we connect and listen to diverse people near and far, the more chances we have to fill any gaps with knowledge, understanding, empathy and lovingkindness. This may sound like religious teachers, such as the Dalai Lama, but what does it matter? Whoever recognizes the divisions and presents a positive, constructive, healthy response, is worth a listen. That’s one reason I listen closely to Thomas’s words when he writes. What seems at first to be a simple comment sinks into a depth of thoughtful contemplation.

All of this is to say, I have great admiration for Thomas and others in Africa and elsewhere, who face daily poverty and political unrest, vulnerable to the degradation of the environment. I feel what happens to Thomas, his family and his country impacts all of us. We aren’t so separated by sea and soil that we can neglect or ignore the roots of relation and the branches of brotherhood which extend over the great plant of the planet. Thomas reminds me there are millions in all lands who not only see gaps, but often suffer in the gaps, and yet still dream of a common unity to bind the inhabitants of earth together. It’s hard to dream when suffering—I know that, Thomas knows that. But one by one we feel the inspiration of higher goals, much higher than some politicians and preachers promise. And, perhaps, much lower aims, more accessible, than the heavenly rewards promised by religions. Here is where Thomas and I, and many believers as well as secular people, may find agreement ... common bases. Do we have to accept the gaps, or the differing views or opinions that push others away, or do we push forward to make the connections, sowing the seeds that intertwine a harvest of hope and humility?



Thomas wrote to share several photos of his celebration of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. I’m fairly sure Thomas has never been to that river, I have not. I’m confident he and I could have a spirited conversation about that event, discussing our views about the meaning. In most Christian history and tradition, baptism is a cleansing from sin and a joining to the great family of faith. Why would God’s Child have to be baptized? Since both Jesus and John were Jews, this was not a Christian ritual but marked a passage to a life of service. I think of my friendship with Thomas in a similar vein. Knowing my young friend is keeping his faith—in Nature, Humanity, and his God, who intimately inhabits the natural and human world—gives me a cautious hopefulness. Conscientious and compassionate people in all nations either get disheartened with disunity, or see the gaps and work toward unity. No one has to go it alone. Faith won’t heal or bridge the gaps. But it can help some to stay on course and affirm life. That’s why I can stand with Thomas as we are “baptized” to be brothers, celebrating common rivers, common bases.

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