

Are we fans of 'World Champion' religion?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I once played on a championship basketball team. OK, it was only a junior high team, but we did come out on top in the district one year. We thought we ruled the world, for a minute. Later in the 1970s, I waited in my car all night to get in line early for tickets to an NBA game. Our professional hometown team was in the finals and the whole city was full of excitement. When our team won, we waved banners and flags celebrating the "World Championship." After watching highlights of this year's Super Bowl, when another of my hometown teams triumphed, it wasn't hard to notice fans holding large banners proclaiming the team, "World Champions!" As my mind works, I began to connect this sports tradition with fan frenzy in religion. I wonder about some "faith fans" who get overzealous for their beliefs.

Is there one "World Champion" religion? I suppose it depends on whether people believe in a "World Champion" God. We hear some believers proclai-

m, "Our God rules over All." In Christian circles this may originate with the apostle Paul's quote of Psalm 24 in First Corinthians 10: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." This carries forward the verse in Deuteronomy 10: "Behold, to the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, and the earth and everything in it." At times we may hear a similar message from other faiths: "We Win! ... and if we aren't winning right now, we will, because our God is the Champ."

There seem to be many who treat religion like a sport, a competition with winners and losers.

When I taught courses on World Religions, I often presented three options for understanding the faiths of the earth. I called them the "Three C's": Competitive, Comparative, Cooperative. The most advanced or progressive understanding of religion is cooperative. This framework presents faith as "one among many," and encourages a cooperative spirit of collaboration, working beside others who may believe quite differently than we do, yet perhaps share similar commitments to the betterment of humankind. Cooperative religion not only works well in a pluralistic culture, but it's essential to any healthy community. Comparative reli-

gion is a good thing, as various believers learn from those who practice different faiths. Lastly, and I think at the lowest level, is competitive religion. Conversion is central for these folks, because it's all about convincing others that they're wrong and you're right, that God is on your side. Hurray, Your God wins!

I'm writing this as the Winter Olympics are being hosted in Italy. Every team strives for a gold medal, though many competitors may only achieve a silver or bronze (which, like simply participating, is still a spectacular achievement!). "The Games" are a good thing, when the competition isn't too nationalistic. Participants competing on the snow or ice can be a good way to show sportsmanship and good will. Could religions learn something from the Olympics? Exercising supernatural beliefs or not, a practice of goodwill and mutual respect can lead to excellence, an ethical life that doesn't seek to "win," and doesn't look down on "losers."

Another thought. Does Religion Rule? That is, does Religion itself intend to be the reigning World Champion over secular society? There are those who talk and preach this way. "We will dominate" they suggest when they propagate a message that their religion is supreme and "Our God Reigns" (we used to sing this song in

church). Do these folks truly seek to command control over the culture, the government, the world, your life and mine?

I'm a "champion" of a secular world. This doesn't mean I want to eliminate religion or faith from the earth. Of course not. I'm a strong supporter of a "this-world" (secular) response to the wide diversity of beliefs. What this means is pretty much what we read in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the "no establishment" clause ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ..."). No religion can be set up as the supreme champion — THE American Religion — no faith is the loser. And Religion itself can't be cheered on to victory by its fan base over non-religion.

A religious tradition can't really be the "best in the world," can it? Maybe one could be the top winner — this year — in the world of competitive "spiritual sports," but it can never "claim" the whole planet, or galaxy. No religion is the gold medal winner of all time (the G.O.A.T.). Wouldn't it be great though, if a "world champion" was the most humble, compassionate practice or person?

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).