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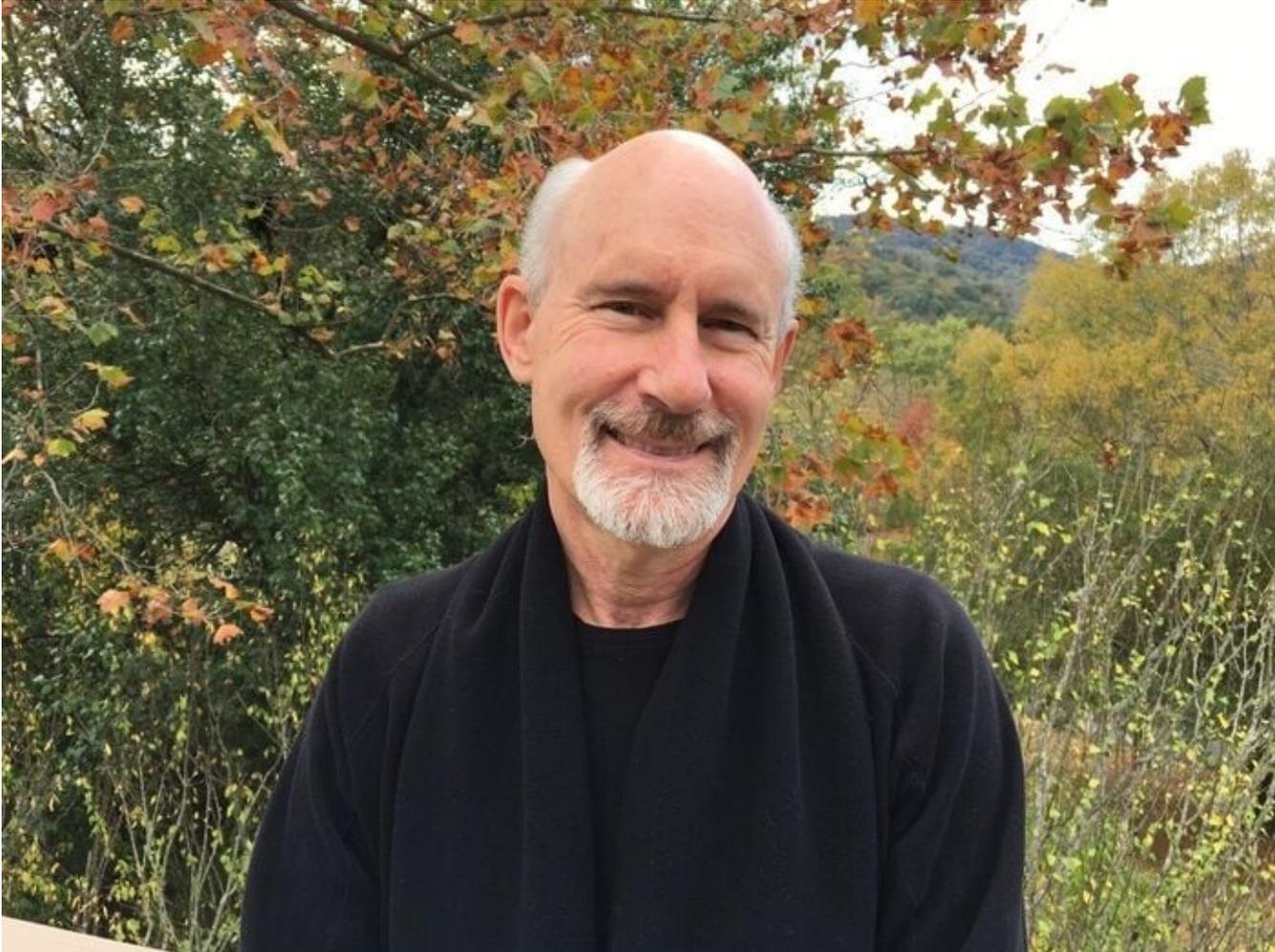
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Friendly Freethinker: Confessions, Professions and Concessions to Renewal

By Chris Highland
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I was brought up confessing—sins, of course, but also sincere beliefs. We could say the foundation of the Christian Church is confession. Profession is central as well, since confessing and professing faith are closely related. If this sounds confusing, that's because it isn't supposed to make logical sense. This is important to keep in mind when considering the long history of "official" confessions and creeds of Christianity.

From earliest years, I stood with my family and our congregation to repeat the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in the forgiveness of sins" was a critical line in that creed, since the whole story of Jesus, his death and resurrection hinged on sin, and the forgiveness of sin, as long as we confess (to admit or declare fault). In the Presbyterian Church, USA, I was raised in, we were expected to confess to the Confessions,

or authoritative declarations, of historic Christian tradition. Creeds (what a believer believes by faith) and Confessions (what a believer declares by faith) guide the faithful to walk the straight and narrow. Where these creedal and confessional statements step into murky waters is when they come “face to faith” with the billions of world citizens who confess and profess different beliefs, or none at all.

In my teen years, the Church was processing a new creed called “The Confession of 1967.” There was an effort to update language to reflect more enlightened views of modern society, while also revealing the challenges of a changing world. I wrote down the following lines from The Confession of 1967 for the first class I ever taught on World Religions in my home church. Notice the stretching toward a more inclusive approach to other beliefs.

“The church in its mission encounters the religions of men and in that encounter becomes conscious of its own human character as a religion ... The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.”

Apparently, those who framed the Confession had experience with differing views and beliefs. Sometimes missionaries who have served in various cultures share a more open perspective. Others, not so much. While the wording reflects a more generous approach to non-Christian faiths, it also shows the long-held belief that people outside the Church can be useful for strengthening the faith of Christians. Encountering other religions is useful for reminding Christians they are one of many religions on earth (notice this isn't about personal interactions with believers in other faiths). “God has used” [other religions] to challenge the Church to renewal.” No surprise this is followed by a statement emphasizing the uniqueness (supremacy) of the Christian Religion: “The gift of God in Christ is for all men.” There's a touch of humility in one sentence proclaiming God judges Christians along with other faiths, but it still concludes with the “commission” to “carry the gospel to all” believers in any religion, “even when they profess [no religion].”



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As I read it, the Confession of 1967, written nearly 60 years ago, steps to the edge of true reform before stepping back to the older creedal and confessional doctrines. A nod toward respectful relations with non-Christians isn't exactly revolutionary, especially when it falls back on the belief that everyone must hear the message of salvation, and the Church (the Protestant Reformed American Presbyterian incarnation) is the primary bearer of that “good news.”

I have to confess that Confessions, along with personal confessions, don't really speak to anyone outside the well-defended Fences of Faith. Yet, like the Bible, traditional believers want the world to concede these statements come directly from the mouth of the Almighty (by revelation or by vote), and should be believed and received as authority.

For those of us who choose another faith or no faith, we read the “inspired” words as further attempts by one tradition to claim its voice has a special status in human behavior and belief. We “confess” we simply don't believe in Church pronouncements, or biblical teachings on sin and salvation, and see no need to pay much attention to what is written or preached by convention, council, committee or clergy. That isn't disrespectful, only truthful.

If the Church is truly guided by the stated confession, that they are simply one religion among many, with a lot to learn from other faiths (and nonbelievers), then the honest response would not be to focus on professing their gospel to the “unchurched,” but making the concession that it's time for real renewal, humbly engaging our world.

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