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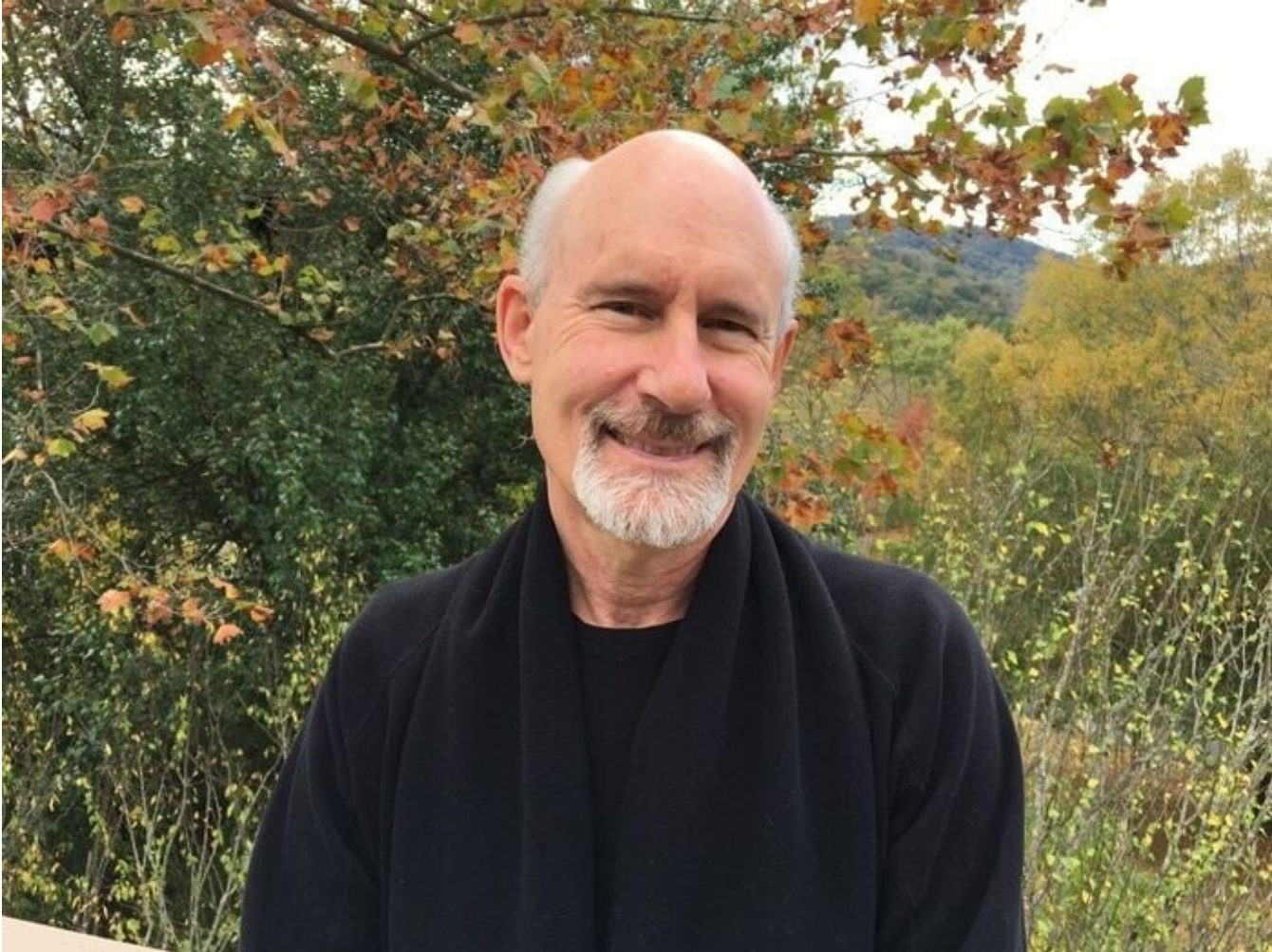
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## Friendly Freethinker: Why be Skittish about Sacred Skits?

By Chris Highland  
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Kids love to perform in skits. I well remember participating in school and church youth group plays and skits. Usually these were quite funny, mostly when we flubbed a line or wore some silly costume. The word "skit" comes from an old verb meaning "move lightly and rapidly." Makes it easy to understand why skits are short and humorous. Of course, it's not only children who enjoy performing skits. Some adult comedy skits are hilarious.

Recently during an early winter snowflurry, I was watching a flurry of feathers at the deck feeder. When I made any movement indoors, the startled wings burst into the air, frightened to flight. As slow and stealthy as possible I stepped through the kitchen, but as soon as my shadow caught the eye of one bird they all darted away. "Skittish" was the word that came to mind. There's no creature that acts more skittish than a bird. To be skittish is to be "restive, excitable, nervous, easily frightened; skittery, jumpy, fidgety." It usually refers to animals who are nervous or excitable. What about skittish people?

When it comes to some religious subjects, people can become quite skittish. Even some religious skits can cause skittishness. I think back to scenes from Monty Python, poking fun at the Church or a belief. Messing with revered or sacred objects or people can feel sacrilegious. Irreverence can seem disrespectful, a violation of the sacred. It may be good to keep in mind that sacred items are usually things, not people, beliefs or ideas. Some consider physical Bibles sacred, or items on an altar, or clergy vestments. Sacraments are sacred, of course, since they are believed to be “holy,” set apart for specific religious rituals. These are things common people are not supposed to touch or see. Are there untouchable ideas as well? (I’ve often wondered about the story of Jesus dying—there was an earthquake, and the curtain in the temple was torn, exposing the holy of holies where only the priests could go. Talk about making people skittish. Was the Gospel writer suggesting a tearing of tradition, a breaking open of sacredness for all?—see Matthew 27).

Secular people get skittish too. Some become nervous, or a bit agitated, when people talk about their faith. When an ordinary experience is made extraordinary by a person’s beliefs, or a natural thing is transformed into something super-natural, or a claim is made to some kind of spiritual authority, one who doesn’t accept those things might get restive, fidgety. Raising uncomfortable questions or challenging the assertion of truth, might turn the skittishness around. There is a shared skittishness. What do people do then? Calm down, admit their discomfort, and maybe even create a new skit that expresses the tensions, tears the divisions, exposes the differences, even in a light and humorous way.

How much religious practice is a skit? I don’t mean this as a “bad review.” I don’t think it’s disrespectful to point to a religious practice as a play, a performance, a dance or drama which tells a story, embodies a message. A skit may be a symbol of the sacred. Couldn’t an activity of faith at times be understood as a parable, an analogy “made flesh” in order to dramatize a meaning or moral lesson? The word made flesh—an ultimate drama, the literal embodiment of sacredness. Would it make you skittish to think of the whole biblical story, including the Jesus Story, as one Great Skit?

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Is religion itself one long historical skit? Actors play their part and invite participation. Some traditions welcome everyone to join in the drama, while others create a clergy class to be on stage directing the movement on behalf of the congregant audience. Some take each skit literally as historical truth. Others find meaning in the symbolic nature of the acting. Like myths, truth can be told without literalism; ancient books can offer truth without being venerated to a higher, sanctified stage. A skit that displays and describes a myth can still be both entertaining and enlightening. On the other hand, the performance may no longer hold sway over those who become skittish, sensing that new representations of beliefs may be needed for the off-stage realities of today’s world.

The excitable birds on our deck offer their own lessons on skits, skittishness and sacredness. Each individual, each species, comes for the same reason: to find sustenance, seeds to get them through the winter. As actors in the great drama of Nature, they fly through their skittery exuberance. Every chickadee, nuthatch, wren, cardinal, titmouse and towhee seeks to survive on the forest stage, season by season.

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