

# Faith, truth and church's 'authority problem'



**Highland Views**  
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Guest columnist

This world of religion provides me with endless subjects (and a few rabbit holes) to wander and wonder. I'm rarely without a theological trail to explore. Opinions, that used to be "a dime a dozen," are now given greater value in some circles – perhaps as much as "a dollar a dozen." I'm not sure my personal opinions on matters of faith are always valuable, yet I continue to find fascination in following a path of reasoning.

When opinion meets opinion, one perspective meets up with another, there is potential for expanding viewpoints. And that potential is diminished when one person offers a statement of opinion and claims it is "The Truth, and nothing but Truth ... because of God."

In a cordial conversation this week with several Catholic women, we stood on a busy street discussing a sensitive subject. Just before we had the conversation, another lady asked if I believed in the Ten Commandments. When I re-

sponded that there are many commands in scripture that seem to be ignored, she walked away with a scowl. Turning back to the other women, we proceeded to have a fairly open discussion about faith, the Bible and God. One younger woman had the enthusiasm of a new convert, excited to announce she knew the truth. I said that was her belief, but many others don't believe the same. She was quick to respond: "It's not what I believe, it's the Truth!" Smiling, I gently replied that was a belief she chose, and I respected her right to believe it, but not to push it on others.

As I see it, religion has always had an "authority problem." For example, in that day's conversation, a belief was expressed as "the truth," the Bible was claimed to be "the truth," Jesus is "the truth" and what "the Pope says is true." This circles back to "What I believe is true," asserting that anyone listening needs to accept that truth. When I told the woman quoting the Ten Commandments to me that I didn't accept the authority of the Bible, she had no response except to ... quote more verses to me. It accomplished nothing since I don't accept her authority.

These good Catholic ladies agreed it isn't right to shout our beliefs at others,

especially when it is judgmental and intimidating. We agreed there are kinder ways of expressing our personal feelings about emotional issues. I could tell these women were listening closely to my words when I told them there are many understandings of the Bible, different practices of faith, and some people who choose not to believe in God.

It's always a joy to dispel assumptions about freethinkers. I told these ladies I was once a believer. I said I have had Catholic colleagues and friends who are nuns and priests. Pointing toward some of the loud Evangelical preachers nearby, I said some don't think Catholics are even Christians. And, I told them I appreciate some things the Pope says.

We each choose our authorities, don't we? Deciding for ourselves who is telling the truth is critical to a reasonable approach to any issue or subject, including religion. I've found those people who are the most honest about their choices are the most open to finding common ground. Perhaps the honesty itself is the common ground we most need. When a person claims one particular authority, they ought to know why they chose that source of truth and be prepared to offer a reasonable explanation. Whether a

news source or a source of wisdom or "divine words," any authority needs to be transparent, open to curiosity, questions and discussion.

The Catholic women I spoke to that day believe similar things I do about respecting others, the fact that we don't know what another person is going through and can't judge them for their personal choices. We could agree that "loving your neighbor" is central to a life of faith, as well as to a secular person's practice of caring for other people. We are on the same page when it comes to Jesus' essential teachings about love.

In the end, my conversation with these women reminded me (and I hope it left them with the thought) that exchanging diverse views in a calm and intelligent manner, leaves open the possibility of building relationships "beyond belief." This may not happen in a church, or mean we share an identical worldview, but in the wider sense of neighborhoods and the greater human community. I was affirmed in my belief that true authority lies in the sincerity of one individual relating to another with an open curiosity, and good intentions.

*Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" ([chighland.com](http://chighland.com)).*