

# Listening helps us learn from each other



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Generally speaking, I think it's a good idea for believers and nonbelievers to share their personal stories. Whether expressing deep faith, or reasons for choosing a path of freethought, we can learn from each other's experiences.

Of course, in order to take these stories seriously, there will have to be respectful listening. Just as important to the exchange of opinions, is the opportunity to respond with questions that may be uncomfortable for some to hear, but essential to a meaningful and mutual learning.

It's certainly unhelpful to hear blanket statements or absolute claims that some might assume should not be questioned or challenged.

What brings this to mind is a quote I read by a woman in India, a former believer who said: "I'm an atheist and I believe religion is totally against human rights and women's rights." Though I might sympathize to some extent with this person's negative view, I think these oversimplified judgments invite serious pushback. Briefly responding on

social media, I commented: "Well, let's be honest, 'Religion' is too broad to make this statement." This stirred some strong feelings in the secular community. Some laughed, others scoffed and said things like: "She's right. Religion was invented to maintain oppression." Another assured me: "It is religion that provides the cover for the worst impulses" and those "impulses are not to be questioned because of religion." Then, another: "Religion is the root of all the problems in this world!" One more quoted the title of a popular book by an atheist: "Religion poisons everything."

I wasn't surprised by the comments. As we know, the subject of religion can generate hot debate. I also noticed that out of over 3000 responses to the woman's statement, many self-identified atheists, as well as people of faith, felt she had overstated the point. I was pleased to see that several seemed to spin off of my comment to defend "progressive" religion or simply expand on a wider view of religious experience. That's the balance I was looking for. Though we may understand a person's reaction to faith, it simply isn't true that ALL religion, ALL religious teachings and ALL believers are "totally against human rights."

The woman's quote was posted by the Freedom From Religion Foundation

based in Wisconsin. FFRF is an outspoken advocate for agnostics, atheists, humanists and freethinkers. Though I don't agree with everything they say and do, I have been a supporter of FFRF for a number of years. Their defense of the separation of church and state, and challenge to religious privilege, are essential elements of their work. While I understand their reasons for raising up anti-religious voices, and often agree with their criticisms of extremist religious actions, especially in the political sphere, I think they do a disservice to all sides when they amplify rather shallow views of religion. As I see it, FFRF and other secular organizations are in a prime position to use more careful language in their responses to religion and people of faith.

What I mean by pushing back a bit on secular voices is fairly simple. Atheists don't like it when religious people lump them into categories such as "angry atheist," "haters of religion," "leftist communist" or other stereotypical bigotry. Therefore, atheists should take care not to lump all religious believers into unfair categories either, such as "irrational, anti-science nuts" or "delusional idiots" and the like. Reasonable people can do better.

Yes, I think it's a good thing to exchange personal stories of faith and sec-

ular living. Religious beliefs are all over the map (literally), as are secular outlooks. There are Democrats, Independents and Republicans on all sides. There's a wide mix of experiences as well as worldviews on all sides as well. And, surely we can make the effort not to divide the world into "sides" that build barriers between diverse viewpoints.

Characterizing various groups (by oversimplifying or caricatures and cartoons) doesn't move us in the direction of a wider field of vision. Loud, aggressive voices may get the most airtime, so we begin to form a picture of "those people." It's good to keep in mind those pictures can be quite distorted, even destructive to constructive communication and potential relationships. What I sometimes hear, in the broad and blanket statements, is a resistance to real communication and relationship with "the other." As a freethinking humanist, I don't see how that resistance does any good for anyone, when it weaponizes stories, forcing them onto a battlefield in a war of words.

To the Indian woman's point, when and where is religion against human rights, and what can we do about it? This is the conversation I would have, with her, and with believers and nonbelievers across every boundary.