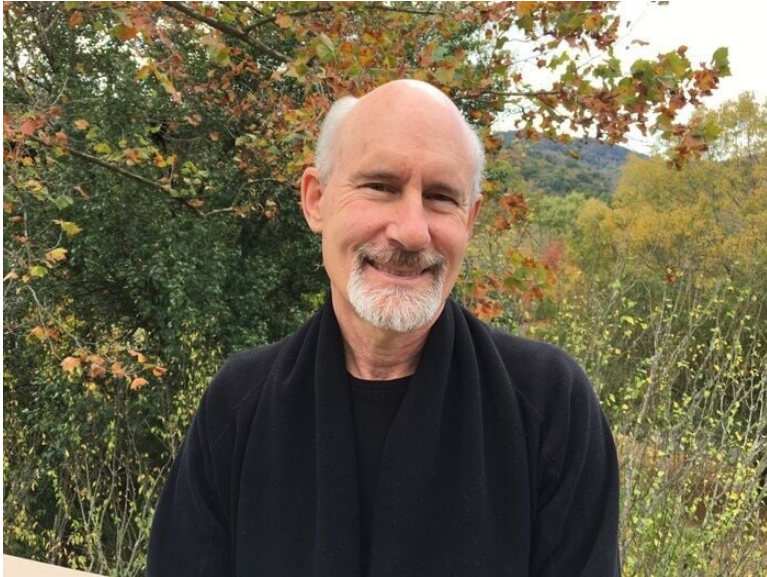


https://www.blackbeltnewsnetwork.com/religion/friendly-freethinker-when-beliefs-are-treated-like-advertisements/article_fbcbcff1-a3f6-4cda-bcce-4443444d542e.html

Friendly Freethinker: When Beliefs are treated like Advertisements

By Chris Highland
Jul 28, 2026



It appears we live in a time when the “commercial success” of the “Christian brand” has become fused or confused with a kind of “political religion.” A cross is wrapped in a flag; a Bible is treated like the Constitution; a political rally turns into a church service. Confusing. When we consider the larger picture—the literal image—of advertising, it makes some sense. We like symbols—symbols have power—but they

don't prove loyalty to anything other than beliefs we have chosen (if we have truly chosen them, rather than merely "bought in" because we long to belong). Symbols can be meaningful when we think about them and understand them in context, aware of their power. But symbols can be dangerous and destructive when we neglect to use reason, believing we can wave our flags in the face of others, or use them as weapons.

As Carol and I were leaving a store, we stopped to stare at a pickup truck arrayed with a number of stickers. Each of these made clear where the owner stood on politics. Not just one but three stickers were Confederate flags. All the more stunning since it was Fourth of July weekend. I'm of the opinion people have the right to "fly any flag" they choose, even if it bothers someone. Our car has a few stickers, the most prominent simply states "E Pluribus Unum." I suppose that might sound almost radical these days, when pluralism and unity seem to frighten some folks.

It used to be said that someone wore their beliefs "on their sleeve." It's common to advertise (or preach) on our clothing or cars. Anything and everything is silently announced. I think the best ones make you think, or cleverly cause you to wonder what the person is trying to say. Now there are many ways to claim and proclaim beliefs, from sleeves to screens, bumpers to blogposts. What concerns me at the moment is

how “evangelistic” we choose to be with our opinions, especially when it comes to religious opinions, and why we feel that’s necessary.

Why do some believers think we’ll be convinced they are good Christians because they wear a cross around their neck or post one in their yard? Should we accept a person is a follower of Christ because their hat displays a favorite face of Jesus, or they emblazon a scripture verse on their shirt? If they “open carry” a Bible, can we trust they are a “true believer”? Why do some folks think it’s a “sign of faith” to place large signs by the highway, preaching to drivers that we are going to Hell if we don’t accept their God? All of these proud pronouncements of piety seem to shout: “Hey, look at me, I’m a Real Christian! I’m not afraid to show off my faith!” The problem is, just like most consumer ads, we’re not convinced by flashy commercials. Is there any other way we might learn what someone believes?

I seem to remember an old verse that might need to be dusted off: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5. My suggestion is that the entire Sermon on the Mount be dusted off and brought into the light of day). If some imagine that “shining their light” means advertising—bumperstickers, bling, bright flags and flashy rags—perhaps they’ve forgotten the “good works” part. When did an ancient instrument of

torture (that is, the cross), or a Bible hawked by a politician, become so marketable? Do you suppose giving “glory to God” may have more to do with “show me what you believe” than a preachy “word from our sponsor”?

Is someone a “better American” because they go all out to celebrate Christmas, or fly a big flag for the Fourth? I’m guessing most don’t do this to prove their piety and patriotism, but personally I question the purpose of so many public proclamations that seem showy. When a “good American” looks the same as a “good Christian” I wonder if “good works” get lost in the mix.

When a person “makes a statement” in a more permanent way, say in a tattoo, I have to ask whether they realize how permanent that is, that they will need to live with that throughout their lives (though there are ways of removing the ink). But, what happens if they don’t like the mark, or the message, when they get older? What if they change their mind, or their beliefs? Using our body as a billboard for beliefs seems extreme, but however we advertise, we ought to know what message we’re really sending.

Chris Highland

2026

Chris Highland was a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a writer and teacher in Asheville, NC. www.chighland.com, (chris.highland@gmail.com)