

Atheists & believers need to talk



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

Neil Carter is a former evangelical Christian who writes a blog on the religion site Patheos, called “Godless in Dixie.” Neil is a schoolteacher and father of five who moderates a discussion group of more than 450 atheists in Mississippi.

A few years ago Neil was interviewed by a pastor for “Interview an Atheist at Church Day” and the video has more than 60,000 views. That video got me asking a question I often ponder: What if more congregations dared to move beyond the fear and misunderstandings to invite secular people in for conversation, question and dialogue?

Some may wonder, What’s the purpose? To doubt our faith? I suppose the answer depends on the congregation and how people understand the value of asking hard questions of themselves.

For many people the word “atheist” conjures up a whole lot of negative images and feelings. “Atheists hate religion and faith,” “Atheists are angry with God,” “Atheists are unhappy people,” “Atheists are un-American.” You may have heard something like this, or felt that yourself.

Nonbelievers like Carter (and many of the 800 members of The Clergy Project) offer an alternate view, a different perspective, on the choice to disbelieve.

In one blog post Neil writes, “Atheism for Dummies’ author Dale McGowan once said that ‘Atheism is the first step. Humanism is the thousand steps that follow.’ I totally agree ... atheism is just the beginning. It’s only an answer to one single question: Do you believe in any gods? Speaking for myself, I’m far more interested in where you take things from there.”

In other words, a believer says “I believe” and a nonbeliever says, “I don’t believe.” Then what? Does that shut down all conversation? Does that create an insurmountable obstacle to any relationship or potential to work together? Why can’t that be the opening for some



Chris Highland titled this photo, “Path to the light of understanding?” COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

very healthy exchanges in order to do what good dialogue is meant to do: to learn, to gain understanding, to consider how another person thinks or feels?

Not long ago a student asked me to “tell us more about your personal story.” I smiled, replying that the class was about Freethinkers in history, though, I assured him, “you’ll hear a lot of me in telling their stories.”

That’s the point, isn’t it? We learn from history as well as the histories all around us. We all have stories to tell and often we find there are commonalities, parallels in some elements of our personal journeys.

Statements of belief or faith only tell so much of the story. Who the person is behind the belief or non-belief is equally interesting, or it ought to be. A story of conversion as well as de-conversion is deeply personal and meaningful to each of us. Where can we feel welcome to share those stories safely without judgment?

Theist or atheist, that is the question. But it’s only one question — only a beginning. As Neil puts it, “I’m far more interested in where you take things from there.” I’m as unimpressed by someone who makes it all about their faith as I am by someone who makes it all about their faithlessness. We need more teaching and less preaching.

Most discussions of atheism focus on what’s missing, what someone does not have. No god. No faith. No community or congregation. Many assume this means a

nonbeliever also has no hope, no peace, no love in their lives. At its worst, this can lead to the prejudice that nonbelievers have no morality since “they have no moral standard.”

Atheists often respond with a question: “You mean if you didn’t have the Bible telling you how to be good you wouldn’t know that killing, stealing or treating others unjustly is wrong?”

Ethical practice is essential to humanism, and that’s why the phrase “Good without God” is popular. This isn’t to say people who believe in God are not good. It only needs to be said to counter the misnomer that you need God in order to live a life of goodness and love.

This is where an “Interview an Atheist at Church” (synagogue, mosque, temple) could be a big step toward greater understanding. There is so much more to the story that needs to be heard. As Neil explains in his video at the church, the more we talk about these things in the open, we find we share many of the same values and “beliefs” about what is good and right and important for our communities.

Freethinkers (atheist and agnostic) live and work alongside faithful believers in the same communities. What if we put aside some fears and invited more honest conversation?

Chris Highland and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.