

# Is your family divided by faith?



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

**M**y older sister called recently. It had been a while. She wanted to tell me about a memorial service she went to for a relative. She lives out West and we don't see each other very often. Thousands of miles and "busy lives" — that eternal excuse — keep us apart.

But there's another reason we don't talk that much: Religion.

My sister called because she was thinking of the memorial, mortality and me. She wanted to tell me she misses me and loves me. Life is short, so it's important to say what seems most important now, because later there may be no "later."

I assured my dear sibling that I loved her too and said that even with our differences about some things, we'll always love each other as sister and brother. We ended the call a little choked up but cheerful.

How many families feel these relational rifts, these stresses and strains over sensitive beliefs? From what I can tell, a lot of families feel it.

Those who wonder why an unbeliever thinks and writes so much about faith might want to keep this in mind: There may be no greater force of division in our world than dogma, doctrine and divinity. Where are the reasonable voices echoing across the canyons that separate person from person, believer from unbeliever?

When a relative tells us they are praying for us, urges us to go to church

(synagogue, mosque) or worries about our eternal soul, how do we respond? Anger and argument? Sadness, silence or separation?

Since we're talking about division here, let's do the math. Maybe you've read these figures before, but it's worth a reminder. The PEW Research Center, in its Religious Landscape Study from 2014, found that 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian.

What's the next highest percentage? "Unaffiliated" (including atheists and agnostics) make up about 22 percent of Americans. That's way more than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons. No surprise, a higher percentage of the unaffiliated are young (ages 18-29).

We may have heard all this before, but it sinks in deeper when we think of relationships and families. One in five adults was raised in a mixed (or interfaith) family, so it's not uncommon for a family to consist of relatives who believe differently, either several religions or a person of faith and another with no faith.

This is our reality. Whether seculars like it or not, faith is "at home" in America. Whether believers like it or pray it's not true, nonbelievers are also "at home" here.

The real issue of concern is how these divisions play out in our daily lives. Maybe it's not an issue for you and your family. But it probably is for your neighbor and many more in your town. It's certainly a national issue, as we can see every time a minority voice (including nonbelievers) speaks up for fairness. What we see — or maybe don't see enough — is the impact of the religious divide, the tensions that tear



COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

Crossing the canyons in Kauai.

relationships apart.

We might ask ourselves if our beliefs are important enough to rip a friendship, a marriage or a whole family asunder. As Jon Meacham writes in "American Gospel," "A Christian who opposes [an emotional cultural issue] sees any kind of accommodation as nothing less than a capitulation to the forces of death. A secularist who fears that believers blinded by faith will impose their values on the rest of the country thinks the religious rituals in public life may be the thin edge of the wedge."

We should all be aware of those wedges that divide us. Meacham observes that "Many committed secularists in our own age have largely made their peace with public religion."

On the other hand, believers "ought to be more interested in making the life of the world gentle for others than in asserting the dominance of their own faith."

This might mean that an atheist lets some things slide (like "In God We

Trust" and "God Bless America") while the person of faith tries to be a little more sensitive to the growing number of their "godless" neighbors.

Obviously, religious congregations could learn from those who have left or choose to never go. Yet that's risky and attitudes may change. Seems worth the risk though, doesn't it?

The risk is even more worth it when it comes to closer relationships, especially in families. If people can't find ways of communicating with open ears and open minds the fractures will fester. The sad conclusion will be: "My beliefs are more important than you."

In the hard work of listening with love, you can pick up a hammer, I can grab a saw and we can make sure our fence has a gate.

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