



Highland Views
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Columnist

Courage of Frederick Douglass

Being a secular person in America leaves a person in a quandary: How vocal should one be? And how far is it acceptable to question the dominant religion?

In respectable circles it seems reasonable to be respectful, focusing on building relationships where both parties can learn from each other. This takes time, effort and a willingness to bite your tongue sometimes to listen without preaching either a secular or sacred gospel.

Some may wonder why a nonbeliever spends so much time thinking about belief — faith, religion, God, Bible, Church, Jesus and more. I wonder myself sometimes, until I sit back and remember: This consumed a huge part of my life and still holds deep meaning for many friends and family.

Truth is, if we didn't have so much religion all over the television, radio, internet and daily life, most of us probably wouldn't think much about it. As it is, faith is everywhere. People without faith can't escape it and are pushed and pulled — compelled really — to respond. And often the response is not going to please the faithful.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who fought her whole life for justice and equality, had some amazing friends and colleagues, each a critic of "orthodox" ("correct") faith and often labeled infidels, heretics or worse. One was Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave who was popular on the lecture circuit as he spoke out for the rights of African-Americans and women.

Douglass was a person of faith, but when you read his indictments of Christianity in America, you find yourself admiring his audacious courage.



Frederick Douglass, circa 1879. NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Here's one example:

"Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference ... I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ [and] hate the partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."

He goes on to quote the words of Jesus against the self-righteous who "outwardly appear righteous" but within are "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Luke 11).

Douglass said these folks "brand me with being an infidel," yet one imagines he shrugged that off, bearing in his body the brands of inhumanity.

After Douglass died in 1895, the city of Rochester, New York, where he spent many years lecturing, writing and publishing, proposed to build him a monument. Stanton's journal records her regret that Rochester did not consider a different kind of monument for her friend, perhaps a schoolhouse or housing for "colored families." (In 2018 the city is celebrating the bicentennial of his birth).

In her journal from 1897, Stanton (who had just published her infamous book, "The Woman's Bible") related a conversation she had with her close friend who had a "gentle play of humor" and a remarkably "sunny nature."

She says that the last time she saw Douglass he said he was certain that since they had both been denied rights due to gender or color they would "stand on equal ground with the angels in heaven." Stanton, who had a witty sense of humor herself, replied that "even St. Peter" might be against them.

Douglass' reply is stunning: "Then, hand in hand we will go below."

Religion can be a very odd nut to crack. On the one hand, we're promised an eternal reward in paradise (heaven) with the God of Love, if we believe, say and do the right things. On the other hand, the Loving Creator made a very special place for unbelievers.

In a very moving passage from "Travels in Alaska" (1915), naturalist John Muir recalls a speech he heard in 1879 given by Shakes, chief of the Stickeen tribe. Missionaries were making attempts to convert the native people and Muir witnessed this chief standing to address the ministers following their sermons and prayers.

Shakes admits that his people are "like children ... blind children" compared with the "ways of the white man" which are "far better." He urges his people to "learn this new religion" so they will go to the "good heaven country" and be happy.

Then chief Shakes speaks words that would cause any person of conscience to shudder. "Many of my people must be in that bad country the missionary calls 'Hell,' and I must go there also, for a Stickeen chief never deserts his people in time of trouble. To that bad country, therefore, I will go, and try to cheer my people and help them as best I can to endure their misery."

I've always found that passage extremely sad. These noble people were converted to "good news" that included the threat of hell and this courageous leader, like Douglass and Stanton, was willing to "march into hell for a heavenly cause."

Remarkably fearless faith and freethinking.
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