

Should we keep our religion to ourselves?



Highland Views

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Columnist

There is a cartoon I find amusing. A man standing at the entrance to heaven reads a sign that says, "Welcome to Heaven: Keep Your Religion to Yourself." The angel next to him explains, "Ironically, that's what makes it so peaceful here."

Some comics seem to nail the truth. The cartoon raises interesting questions. What would happen if people kept their beliefs to themselves?

We all have a variety of beliefs about all kinds of things. Is the cartoon saying we shouldn't talk about anything we feel strongly about? I don't think so.

The point is made. Religious beliefs tend to stir the pot and can often hinder rather than help the peace.

Many would say they feel "called" or even "commanded" to "share the faith." They would be disobeying God to keep their faith to themselves. I once felt that was true. I remember passing around a booklet of "spiritual laws" that began by claiming "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."

A nice thing to say, except the next "law" stated we're all sinners who deserve punishment for not loving the loving God. The "wonderful plan" was like saying "Love me, or else."

We could never keep our faith to ourselves because then we wouldn't be faithful.

Other believers may not show their

religious feelings outside their place of worship. The rituals, songs, sermons and prayers are displayed within the walls of sanctuaries. When they exit out the doors, there really isn't any particular way to tell what their beliefs are. They may wear a religious pin or have a bumper sticker with a message that gives a hint, but generally they aren't ostentatiously believers.

Some people of faith would say they don't need to talk about their beliefs because their life shows what they believe. Their faith is mostly nonverbal. They do good, compassionate work, and maybe they're motivated by faith, but they don't make a big deal of it.

An interesting crossover concerns those who wear religious clothing, not necessarily to flaunt their faith — it's just natural for them to wear in public. We may think of a Catholic nun in the grocery store making a purchase from a Muslim cashier wearing a headscarf. Maybe we see two men on the street both wearing small caps. Is one a Jew and the other a Muslim? If so, what branch of Judaism, what branch of Islam?

Here's something to consider: What if we had to guess what someone believed? What would the world be like if we couldn't tell what religion someone subscribed to because they didn't advertise it?

This is something I like to test. I'll be in a group of believers, reasonably and respectfully discussing some issue and no one knows I'm not "one of them." Unless someone starts talking about the sacred or the supernatural there is prob-



"Gate of Heaven" (among the Giant Sequoias). CHRIS HIGHLAND

ably no way anyone would know a non-believing secular is in their midst.

I find that both comforting and instructive. When we put aside the "flags" we wave — the labels and identities we like to display — what are we left with? We're just people; people sharing the same communities and often the same concerns. We'd love to say we're a member of this or that group.

There's nothing wrong with being proud about our affiliations. It's just that as soon as we do that, the potential arises for division or misunderstanding. Anything collaborative can slip into U/T mode: Us/Them.

The history of religion holds up a lot

of signs — and flags. Much of the time the signs have almost shouted: "DON'T keep your religion to yourself!" "Let your light shine for all to see." "The Word must be heard!"

The message is loud and clear: Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, let everyone know you're a believer, one of God's own. You must let them know what you have and they don't have.

Isn't that a sad, stressful message? It seems like too much pressure to "proclaim the word" when there's so much more goodness to spread instead.

Not long ago I spoke with an elderly clergyman who told me he knew Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They both served churches in the Atlanta area back in the 1950s. Some parishioners of this retired minister didn't want anything to do with Rev. King and didn't even want his children in their church school.

As I walked with this soft-spoken gentleman, he asked about my background. I gave him the thumbnail summary about leaving the ministry and becoming a freethinker. He seemed intrigued but didn't ask more questions. As he went his way I wondered if my openness disturbed him.

Religious talk has a way of doing that sometimes.

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