

Is it heresy to dislike the menu?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

As I've often said, faith is a free choice, or ought to be. We hear of countries where people are treated badly, even imprisoned or killed, because they choose not to be a member of the "right religion."

Across the globe (and maybe closer to home than we want to admit) people are shunned, excommunicated, picked on or persecuted for making a decision not to hop aboard a particular theological train.

This is, of course, the value of the long tradition of Freethought, sometimes called — with disrespect and derision — heresy or infidelity. It began with the first human being who listened to a story, sermon or scripture and walked out, or questioned or simply stood up and stated, "Sorry but I can no longer accept that — it makes no sense to me; I don't acknowledge your authority; I must go another way — my own way."

Notice this person — call them the first freethinker — was not (as we say in the violent verbiage of today) "blasting," "slamming," "shaming," "taking down" or "throwing shade" on the others. He or she was merely expressing their own view, their own thoughts and feelings as

a reasonable individual.

If only they could have stayed in relationship with their former fellowship. Think how much they could have gained, could have learned, from each other — from honesty, sincerity, respectful dialogue.

Do you ever wonder what might have happened in history if Moses held council with the Canaanites, if Buddha sat with his Hindu neighbors, if Jesus broke bread with the Pharisees and if Muhammad organized a conference with the Arabian leadership?

Instead of reform we end up with revolution; instead of compromise we get sectarianism; instead of communication and collaboration we are left with "sides" and orthodoxy (my opinion is right, yours is wrong).

When I was managing several cooperative homes for independent seniors in the San Francisco Bay Area, an important component of my job was giving tours of each home to prospective residents and, if they were seriously interested in living there, conducting interviews.

I would always make it clear that the "foundation" of each household was respect centered on cooperation and good communication. Many welcomed that. Some were honest to admit this model of co-housing wouldn't work for them.

Unfortunately others would verbally assent to our minimal rules of responsibility and later prove to be a poor match

for renting a room with us. That could lead to an unhappy result for everyone involved.

With choice comes responsibility, and with responsibility comes choice. Not every person can handle that, especially when living in close quarters with a diverse group of personalities, many set in their ways.

As a manager, I had the "joyful" job of being gatekeeper, peacekeeper and too often exit-maker.

With extensive experience in compassionate "presence ministry," I couldn't help finding parallels with religion. How do we get folks to peacefully share a home, a neighborhood, a nation or a planet? And who can or will or is crazy enough, to "manage" that!

In the manager's office I hung the famous quote by Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu — a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace" (1967).

I like my space and my way of living as much as anyone, but there have to be compromises — communal promises — and we have to "make room" in the great

house for a central living room where relationships are central, where respect and responsibility are practiced. Otherwise, the household descends into division — chairs at the common table sit empty.

Residents of the senior homes I managed often found it challenging, to say the least, to agree on very basic things: the setting of the thermostat, cleanliness and chores, security issues and of course, menus.

Our patient Latino chef did everything he could to please folks even when I assured him he would never please every resident. Still, he served a variety of dishes and most people couldn't grumble — too much.

Which, again, seats me back at the table of theology in the restaurant we call religion.

If we look a little closer at what's offered, especially the "specials," we may want to try new dishes, just for a fresh taste. If we find the menu limited, it may be time to search for another restaurant.

The "divine deli" may not be what we're looking for. I hear secular salads can be good and healthy, even if the desserts are doubt-full.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.