

To be more like God, or more human?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

Educator and former slave, Booker T. Washington (“born somewhere at sometime”-1915), told the story of a ship that was lost at sea for many days. Seeing a friendly vessel passing, the sailors called out for water. The other ship sent a message: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The crew of the lost ship didn’t believe it. They could never drink salt water. Finally they chose to risk it and lowered the bucket, drawing up fresh water. They were floating at the mouth of a great river.

Washington connects this story to cultivating relationships across boundaries. “Cast down your bucket where you are’-cast it down in making friends ... of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded” (“Up From Slavery,” 1900).

It seems reasonable that our various buckets can find refreshing water in many places and in many ways.

This could be applied to ships of religion. Let’s lower a bucket to see what we draw out.

Many people seek to be better human beings through faith. Moreover, while seeking to be better humans some feel they are becoming “more like God.” I find that interesting on several levels.

Do we want to be more divine or more human? If we say we wish to be more identified with the divine, what exactly does that mean?

Think of the qualities or characteristics believers respect and revere in a deity:

- sees the Big Picture (omniscience)
- unlimited power (omnipotence)
- loving, giving nature (care for all living things)
- creative (endless imagination)
- ability to reward the good and punish the bad (judge)
- no higher authority (no limits, no rules)

Now, on the other hand, what would it mean for us to become more Human?

- increase knowledge and wisdom
- become more creative, imaginative, inventive
- practice greater kindness, thoughtfulness and compassion
- ask more and more questions!

If we were more like God, would we be more human or less human?

For six years I rented a small cottage owned by a founder of the “Human Potential” movement. I called it the “heretic hermitage” since it was my retreat from long days with the chaplaincy.

The last time I saw the owner we

were discussing our worldviews and at one point he asked me with some alarm, “You aren’t an atheist are you!?” I smiled while explaining that I don’t use that label but as a freethinker I no longer believe in a supernatural. For him, it seemed, reaching full potential as humans included a sense of our own divinity—perhaps you could say a “human divinity.”

This recalls seminary studies when we considered “the Son of Man” (or “Child of Humanity”) in the Gospels. I suppose this is one origin of the theological notion that Jesus was “fully human” as well as “fully divine,” which, I admit, always puzzled me (as theology seems delighted to do).

Was the “divine child” ever a full human being? Did he experience all that we mortals experience?

Theological creeds don’t put emphasis on the “fully human” part because the focus is primarily on the “fully divine” part. The reason is simple: you would not have to believe in a human being, similar to yourself. Belief and faith only enter when something “greater than human” is added to the equation.

Think back on those characteristics of a deity. Do we really want to know everything, be all powerful and judge the world? Or do we want to improve our practice of innate traits such as a loving and creative nature?

In our quest to be more human, do we have the time to figure out how to be more like God when it appears we have a long way to go to understand what our own humanity means?

Leave that bucket in the water for a moment.

This fall I observed wrestling bear cubs, playful squirrels jumping from branch to branch high in the trees and a number of garden spiders weaving their pretty death-traps. As my mind works, I find myself sensing what it might be like to be less human, not more human.

Is this the same as weaving the web of divinity around us? Is this the old Human-Plus dilemma or dream?

I’m not sure. But I do imagine that becoming more human will incorporate (incarnate?) elements from the non-human. I think we need to draw buckets from our own rivers, our own fresh wells, and share that refreshment with “friendly ships.”

We may find that what we see in the natural world everyday quenches our thirst in ways the old salty creeds can’t.

Ancient stories tell of the divine wishing to be human. Instead of flipping the story we can grab a bucket.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many 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. His new book, “A Freethinker’s Gospel,” is available from Pisgah Press.



Relish the Charm of and the Beauty of

Ivester Jackson | Blackstreet
TOWN MOUNTAIN

A premier gated community
from Downtown Asheville
privacy, and natural beauty

- Estate sized lots on 18
- Homesites for
- 42 lots already

Open House

Saturday & Sunday

Meet at the
7 Woodland Aster Way

For more
TownMountain

Brittany
828.450.8116 | Brit

IVESTER JACKSON | BLACKSTREET

CHRISTIE'S
INTERNATIONAL REAL ESTATE

Ivester Jackson Blackstreet