

# What I've come to value in world religions



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

I taught my first class right out of college, in a church, and the subject was World Religions. I was captivated then and remain fascinated with “comparative religion.” It felt liberating to read the sacred scriptures of many traditions with people who had never read anything but the Bible. Discussions I led for years following that first class only deepened my appreciation for the process itself. Learning from other viewpoints, expanding one’s worldview, became essential for “enlightened” education.

By the way, no one ever told me our classes harmed their faith or made them convert. It wasn’t about doubt, the intent was to learn, grow, understand and be better informed about a world shared by many faith traditions.

Silently sitting in an Asheville Quaker meeting I was reminded of my breath, something I first became aware of sitting with Buddhists. As I sat there, I grew in appreciation for the simplicity of the gathering. We sang, then sat in silence, before several people shared a story, announcement or social concern.

The “light” that came to me was the central heart of all traditions and humanity itself. I reasoned that a “calling back” seems to be a threaded theme winding through my wrestling with religion over the years.

Most traditions open old books and quote long-dead teachers — there’s a great deal of looking over the shoulder, gazing backward at what “they said,” what “they did” in olden times. There can be great value in learning from the past, from one’s communal or common history. Yet, don’t we need voices of wisdom that speak in our day, our language — to bring some light to our lives today?

As I look back, and then look forward, there is a sense that the past is still alive. What lives on has to be truly alive and be relevant and meaningful.

When I consider what I’ve learned from my study



Seek paths of light. COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

and teaching of world religions it becomes clearer why I still value elements of each historic stream. Though I no longer accept their supernatural undercurrents, I retain an appreciation for their intrinsic wisdom that doesn’t muddy the water, or dam the free-flow.

■ Hinduism calls me back to an acceptance of birth, life and death as the natural drama of Nature and human nature.

■ Buddhism calls me back to mindful breath and the inter-connection of relationships, human and non-human

■ Judaism calls me back to ethical community and cultural identity rooted in family bonds.

■ Christianity calls me back to hearing the voices of the outcasts and giving oneself to others in service

■ Islam calls me back to the essence of compassion and mercy that begins each chapter of the Qur’an.

■ Taoism calls me back to the great mysterious balance in Nature, the yin and yang of the universe.

■ Confucianism calls me back to “reciprocity,” treating others with humanity and justice.

■ Paganism calls me back to a grounding in the earth and the cycles of the seasons.

■ Jainism calls me back to respect for the smallest inhabitants of the planet.

■ Sikhism calls me back to a fierce protection of the innocent.

■ Shintoism calls me back to honoring ancestors and waterfalls.

■ Zoroastrianism calls me back to the tending of the central flame and purifying fire.

In my own Christian story I am called back to formative experiences with each branch of the “Jesus Tree.” I can still find good things from my life among Presbyterians and Baptists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals, Interfaith and Progressive believers. Each left me with something to contemplate along the journey forward.

It has to be forward, doesn’t it? When a practice or preaching of one faith holds us back, leaves us back in the past, it becomes an obstacle, what some biblical writers called a “stumbling block.”

Oddly enough, one of the blocks people stumble over the most is the founder of their faith. I often wonder whether any of those wise teachers ever intended to get in the way of living the lessons they taught. Would there be a Buddhism without Buddha, a Judaism without Moses, a Christianity without Jesus or Islam without Muhammad? Were the teachers so integrated with their words that the religion that bears their name would disintegrate without them?

Personally, I think it’s a question worth asking, and perhaps a good test of the viability of religious teachings.

Sitting with the “Friends” in that Quaker meeting house called me back to what I value in all these ancient streams of wisdom. I’m grateful for the journey because it never ends. I still learn, I continue to teach, and there’s always something to glean from the harvest of traditions, though much of the time I dig up more questions to seed the next crop of wonder.

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