

Thawing our frozen theological views



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

Not long ago I saw a photo of a road repair truck that got stuck in a huge pothole. I find those kinds of ironies amusing. Sometimes it's not so amusing, like the shot of a firetruck burning during a wildfire.

I admit to a daypack-full of burning questions. Many of them can be traced back to their smoldering, incendiary source: theology.

My seminary was literally a "castle on a hill" in a paradise location near San Francisco. I took many courses across The Bay at sister seminaries in Berkeley, from professors who were Jesuit, Jewish, Buddhist, Baptist and other faiths. It was a rich experience in a very rich environment—a wealth of knowledge situated in a wealth of real estate.

One great value of that eclectic educational experience was to expose me to a host of perspectives on the "divine." Comparing and contrasting viewpoints was fascinating and I have no doubt that exposure led me straight into interfaith work. I came to value divergent views, welcoming a diversity of opinions particularly on matters of belief. Conformity

and uniformity are never life-giving. Living behind defensive walls, where everyone is "of one mind," feels much too confining and stifling.

Part of valuing a variety of theological views is the wealth of questions that arise. We look out our windows from our "faith homes" or our "castles of creeds" and see a world that intrigues us. When some of those windows become mirrors, we can begin the exploration of our own deepest questions about "higher things."

On an early spring day, Carol and I drove up to Black Balsam on the Blue Ridge Parkway. We started up one trail but there were too many people. We turned around to find another path. It was a little more challenging but we loved the climb up to a vantage point where we could see a long distance in all directions. It felt almost heavenly to be away from the crowds. We treasure these quiet moments with Nature.

What if we could treat theology this way? A vantage point—actually a collection of vantage points from a collage of hills and peaks. If we see "God talk" this way, with people crowding their way to the peaks and summits, we might ask ourselves if we're actually missing something—maybe a beautiful scene we pass by, an educational experience or perhaps even missing "the divine."

Pretty much every one of the founders of world religions went alone into the wilderness. Why are we so afraid? Out of solitude came a teaching, a message, some "good news" for the crowds and communities. Has this been lost? Have "selfies" taken the place of self-discovery?

Much of what we see and hear in the world of religion seems too narrow and narrow-minded. Most of us are exposed to one belief, one faith community, one holy book and one God. It's refreshing to hear a person of faith admit they were never offered any real choice to the faith they have, or their church, or their image of God. They may even lament their limited experience with varieties of believing. It's good to hear when someone honestly admits the slippery stones of their theology can be obstacles in the trail, tripping a true practice of freethought and free action.

The ancient Chinese Tao Te Ching teaches, "If I had just a little bit of wisdom, I should walk the Great Path and fear only straying from it. Though the Way [Tao] is quite broad, People love shortcuts." (53)

Theology is a shortcut, short-hand for "I don't know, but I need to call it something to make sense of my path, to find meaning in the world, life, nature, everything."

In our need to name the unnameable,

we take narrow paths someone else has mapped out for us—we wander from The Path. And what is The Path? You tell me. Better yet, let's discuss that, hiking to more vantage points where no one has an advantage. Let's ignite our intelligence and keep moving, exploring because The Way is living and moving too.

Near the turnoff to the trail that spring afternoon, we pulled off the road in amazement. A whole wall of water was frozen in a crystal cascade over the rocks along the Parkway. Crossing over to stand closer to the frozen artwork, I could hear the dripping and watch as icicles broke off, falling to the roadway. Beauty was frozen there before our eyes, yet it was anything but solid and still. It was in the process of moving, melting, transforming.

Is this what theology is? Is this what "God" means? Is there some thawing to do?

If we just had a little bit of wisdom.

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. Chris' new book, "Broken Bridges: Building Community in a World Divided by Beliefs," is now available on Amazon.