

There are still some mysteries left in the world



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Reading an interesting article by Richard Just stimulated some reflection (“How Religion Can Put Our Democracy Back Together,” The Washington Post Magazine, October 28, 2020). These lines caught my attention: “I’ve always had a healthy skepticism toward organized religion, but as I’ve read and learned and practiced more in recent years, I’ve started to think: Could some of the areas where religion excels – the wonder, the mystery – help to repair the intangible corners of American democracy, at a time when American democracy could use all the help it can get?”

As a freethinking humanist who’s intrigued by these things, I’m seeing a pattern to progressive perspectives on faith. Many Jews, like Richard Just, as well as Christians and Muslims, speak in similar terms about religious faith. To them, religion is about finding wonder, facing mystery, fronting the transcendent. In the Post article, a Muslim imam says religion offers peace and serenity, a way to deal with fears and uncertainties. A Baptist pastor says the church community offers “emotional comfort” and “life markers.” Richard Just adds:

“One value that is found in all the major religions is, of course, humility.”

I wouldn’t necessarily dispute any of these claims, though I would add a few pertinent and persistent questions: Are there other ways and other places to find those things? Is Religion the only source of mystery in our world? Can humility be valued outside faith?

A neighbor gave me a book by Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson, a Norwegian biologist, entitled, “Extraordinary Insects.” Early in the book the author discusses the transformation of insects from larvae to adult – the process of metamorphosis. Scientists continue to study this amazing process. As the author exclaims: “Luckily, there are still some mysteries left in the world!”

The first paragraph of the book is a stinger: “There are more than 200 million insects for every human being living on the planet today.” The author states there may be as many as 10 quintillion of these six-legged critters, more than the grains of sand on the beaches of the earth! Incredible. Mind you, this is the opening paragraph, which ends this way: “Like it or not, they have you surrounded, because Earth is the planet of the insects.”

Wonderful! Mysterious! Humbling! Are those terms exclusive to religion? Perhaps seeing humans as a small, outnumbered part of an insect-ruled planet doesn’t provide us a comfortable way to handle our fears and uncertainties. Yet,

why can’t we find emotional comfort or “life-markers” in the knowledge we are no greater than any other life on earth?

I don’t view Science as a kind of new religion (Scientism) but I wonder if the scientist’s focus on Wonder is the key to the transformation – metamorphosis – of religion. Could we say Wonderism is the next stage of religion?

Richard Just writes: “[Because] religion is fundamentally a mystery, it can also be a profound source of analytical humility and existential uncertainty. It can teach us to value, even celebrate, contradictions, to think constantly about how we might be wrong – an ethic that is the very opposite of the perpetual certainty now running rampant in American politics.” And, a humanistic, naturalistic worldview can teach the same values and ethics.

Our secular form of government may be the best example of this. “When in the course of human events ...” opens our secular scripture, the Declaration of Independence. Yes, we are entitled to freedom and equality by “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God,” but no explanation or religious context is presented. These are “human” events and some truths are self-evident (not by revelation), demanding action. Religion can support those truths (including Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness) and the radical actions called for, or, religion can be a great obstacle. No mystery there.

Richard Just concludes: “[In] the long run, religion doesn’t have to be a divisive, rather than a unifying, force.” True indeed. And religious faith that acknowledges it holds no exceptional, privileged position in the human community, can assist our social endeavors as well as scientific investigations. Common ground is found in the wonder, intrinsic to our curious nature, driving us to understand our world is not ours alone. Faith says it belongs to God. Wonderism says it may belong to insects!

No, religion has no monopoly on mystery and mystery does not have to exclusively concern the out-of-this-world. Those who appeal to a super-world (insects not allowed) neglect to sense an intimate delight in deeper investigation into the present, accessible world.

What will you do with your 200 million insects? The real question is: What will they do with you? A mystery to ponder, or a call to awaken to the extraordinary all around us?

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.