

The radical, liberating roots of relevant religion



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

The progression of my faith perspectives can be described in fairly simple terms: Church student, Bible student, College student, World Religion student, Seminary student, Chaplain student, Non-profit student, Nature student, Freethought student, Humanist student. Notice any similarity? I suppose I've been a teacher because I've been a student for so much of my life. I've served in leadership because I've learned from good leaders who were lifetime students.

What does a student do? A student studies. A student learns. To be a student is to gain knowledge and discover how to apply that knowledge. A teacher does the same thing and takes it one step further – they study and learn in order to pass along the knowledge, hopefully a bit of wisdom.

Much of our religious tradition gets confused when it comes to education. For some, it's a matter of distrusting the mind, reason, the whole critical thinking process. They have established instructors to "download" the "correct" information into young minds. No question or investigation necessary. Others don't necessarily distrust or disrespect

thinking, they merely believe the mind can only go so far. Then faith takes them the rest of the way. The way to where? Well, to "spiritual things" beyond the realm of reasoning.

Who can assist us when education and religion are in a tense relationship? One response to this question may be surprising. I know I found it surprising, even a little shocking.

In the 1970s and 1980s there were Roman Catholic priests in Latin America who were advocating a remarkably fresh practice of faith, particularly the Christian faith and more specifically the Catholic Christian faith. These were mainly priests who were living and working with the poorest people in their countries. I was especially drawn to books by Jose Miguez Bonino, of Argentina, including "Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation" and "Room to Be People." While I was in seminary, Archbishop Oscar Romero, who stood with the poor, was assassinated while celebrating Mass in El Salvador. The dangers of this radically revolutionary understanding of the gospel shocked the world.

At that time I was attending a community Mass held in a school across the street from the seminary. The young Jesuit and Franciscan priests presented an interpretation of the gospel centering on radical inclusion and compassion for the most vulnerable in the community, similar to what was emerging from Latin America. Discussing this with one

priest, Father Matt, I found my Protestant views had progressed to much the same place, a similar understanding of Jesus' message.

One result of taking the biblical message so seriously as a practical, social program planted in justice, is that amazing things begin to happen. Ancient books and old creeds become less important. The present world takes precedence over any other world. People and their lives become more important than convincing others of our own beliefs. The voices of marginalized people and their daily experiences of injustice are raised up to consciousness. As the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire states, the person who "is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled" is the one who "is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them." ("Pedagogy of the Oppressed").

Does this sound "radical"? It should. It gets to the "roots" (see the definition of "radical"). And this is one reason Jesus, the radical Palestinian Jewish teacher, was not afraid to walk into the danger zone between the powerful and the powerless; he was unafraid to challenge the structures – even religious systems – that keep people down.

If a person is not this kind of radical, are they following Jesus? What I've always appreciated about Liberation Theology is that you don't need a particular theology to practice it. It concerns real people in unjust circumstances (the

"oppressed") where political or religious systems have prevented them from standing up, speaking out and organizing for their human or civil rights.

This is one reason Liberation thought applies to many communities including diverse racial-ethnic, gender, sexual or other identities.

If we view ourselves as students among other students, the way forward becomes clear. Our task is to pay attention, open to perpetual learning, endless education. We can't accomplish that if we're stuck in our chosen worldview, seeing others primarily through our narrow cultural, national or religious lens. When we actively listen to people whose lives are very different, who struggle with daily stresses or injustices we know little about, we open our ears and minds to them – we become their students.

I progressed to this point only by paying attention to people who live on the "edges." It's a radical step to go where they are and listen. All I can say is: it's liberating.

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. His latest books are "A Freethinker's Gospel" and "Broken Bridges." Learn more at chighland.com.