

My Christian Thanksgiving

What had she meant? My sister predicted that I and another of her Thanksgiving guests -- someone who was very Christian -- might have an "interesting discussion." Was this a portent, a prelude to a food-fight?

The sole member of my family who is a practicing Christian had telephoned. We made arrangements for the holiday meal. Yes, I would bring the salad and my wife would bake a pie. As was our tradition since moving to Florida, my wife and I planned to spend Thanksgiving with my sister, her husband, their children and friends. Because I keep current on many topics, and I generally like people; I frequently get into interesting discussions. But why had my hackles been raised when my sister forecast it?

My older sister described her other guests. One couple she described as "colorful." They had recently gone into the hypnotism business by way of a corporate franchise, Her other two non-family guests were members of her church. My sister paused, and then, as if preparing me, told me that they were very Christian. That's when she mentioned something about the guy and me having an interesting discussion. I mumbled "it probably won't even come up," meaning the topic of belief in a god. It's not like I've got a chip on my shoulder and go looking for arguments.

Our telephone conversation moved to another topic. Probably my parents' health. And then the phone was in the cradle and I began wondering what in the world she meant. My sister knows me. I don't wear my atheism on my sleeve, nor do I keep it on the tip of my tongue. Why then did she mention the religiosity of her other guests?

Aha, I thought, maybe sis had first described me to her very Christian guests as a way of preparing them to spend the day with someone who, gasp, does not bow his head and say "amen" during the pre-meal voodoo. So the day's host, my thinking went, had prepared the others to face me. Perhaps

she was afraid they would assume her brother was also Christian and embarrass themselves via dramatic talk about the marquee man in their lives, Jesus Christ Superstar.

But there was that bit about an “interesting discussion.” Upon being informed he would be spending Thanksgiving with a heathen, had her male Christian friend expressed an eagerness to engage the atheist in talk about a god’s love and the only son he sent to pay for humanity’s sins? My enthusiasm for the holiday took a nose dive. *Great*, I thought, *I get to defend my non-belief to a stranger*. I imagined Joe Christian (not his real name) shaking my hand and saying, “So you’re the atheist.” What would I do, just say “yes” and let Joe dictate the tone and course of the conversation?

I imagined a response. “I prefer to look at it this way,” I would begin. “I am a human being who does not believe in any god. If *atheist* is an accurate way to describe that part of my thinking and behavior, so be it. But it is only part. Is that part central to who I am? I suppose the fact that I really, really like Dutch potato bread is not quite as central. Except of course when I am supermarket shopping or sitting down to dinner. Because I shop regularly and eat even more frequently than I shop, an argument could be made that the label *potato bread lover* hits the nail of my personhood more squarely on the head than *atheist* does.

“It isn’t healthy,” I might add, “to look at the world as if it were neatly divided into believers and non-believers. We should instead recognize that we are all human beings and that the differences between us are not absolute characteristics, but habits and thoughts. Just as the Christian is a human being who may believe different things about the universe, but largely behaves like others, the atheist, too, may have different beliefs but is also foremost a human being.”

I decided against the potato-bread argument. How else could I respond? Should I adopt a style more pithy and to-the-point? If you’re milling around holding a cheese-topped cracker and a glass of wine, better to be brief and off-hand-ish. That way the conversation can more smoothly segue to other issues, such as cute pet stories.

One hour after talking to my sister I was still thinking about the potential Thanksgiving showdown on belief street. My wife and I had retired to our sunroom. I lay on the couch and stared straight through the book propped atop my stomach. What if Joe Christian asked me, point blank, “Why don’t you believe in God?” What would I do then? I felt like I was preparing for the defense of a doctoral dissertation. This guy was not just Christian, but *very* Christian. Would he arrive with a dagger of unflinching faith clenched in his teeth and one hundred rounds of atheist-piercing arguments strapped to his chest?

Okay, I thought, if he asks me why I don’t believe in his god I’ll try to make one or all of these three points. First I’ll say, “I wonder why you ask. If you ask that question because you want to get to know me -- and you will listen thoughtfully and, when I am finished, leave it at that, and then I could reciprocally ask you why you believe in your god, and I could listen thoughtfully and leave it at that, and both of us would acquire greater knowledge of the other -- if the question is asked with that intent, I will gladly answer. If, on the other hand, you ask solely as a way of giving yourself the opening to challenge and try to change my thinking, that’s a question I’m not interested in answering. At least not at this time and setting.”

Part two of my response might go like this: “I find the question, ‘Why don’t you believe in God?’ to be odd. Imagine an anthropologist traveling to a distant island. On the island she finds a tribe of 100 hunter-gatherers. At nightfall 10 members of the tribe gather around a small fire and tell stories about past hunts and plan for future hunts. Around a larger fire the other 90 members wear tortoise-shell caps and wave the long thigh bones of an animal in the air. As they dance they keep time by tapping the head of the bone against their tortoise-shell caps. The anthropologist approaches the smaller group, and, confusion in her voice, asks why they aren’t dancing and hitting themselves over the head.

“Here’s my point: Doesn’t the existence of exotic behavior cry out for an explanation more loudly than the lack thereof?”

I smile, still not reading the book I'm staring through. I'm pleased with the insinuation that the behavior of believers is akin to striking oneself over the head with a bone, with or without a protective tortoise-shell helmet. Is that unfair? Maybe. But what would a Martian anthropologist conclude upon witnessing, for example, one human stand before many and give this talk:

There is a great, invisible guy. This great invisible guy sent his son to pay for your bad behavior.

The son was nailed to a pole and planted in the desert to expedite his miraculous re-appearance act. If you truly believe, you will be granted eternal life in a heavenly space at the right hand of the great invisible guy.

I'm biased of course, but I think the Martian would suspect that somebody had been sniffing a big tube of glue.

The third part of my potential response to Joe Christian might go like this: "I don't believe in a god because I see no credible evidence of a god." Or, if my 10 year-old nephew were over-hearing our conversion, maybe I'd say, "I don't believe in 'God' because every time I call him, (whistling) *Whewww-whhhhhhit! Here God, c'mon God, where are you God? . . .* he never comes." And then I'd wink at my nephew. But only in a daydream.

So there I was, planning my chess moves. Could I efficiently checkmate the Christian into leaving me alone?

As it turns out, all my imaginings about being accosted by a zealous Christian were off the mark. That's not to say there was no ideological friction that day as we gathered to eat a large, flightless bird. Truth is, the only thing Joe Christian and I talked about, person to person, was his golf and my tennis. And we fully respected each other's choice of recreation. Religion did come up that day, and a few sparks flew, but I was only tangentially involved. But that's another story.