

Getting religious differences out on the table

By Dale McGowan

By the time I told my Southern Baptist girlfriend that I was an atheist, she had every reason to believe otherwise. I'd been sitting next to her in church for a year, bowing my head during the prayers, putting money in the offering plate. I was, to all outward appearances, a Christian.

I didn't do this to deceive her. I had attended church off and on for years, and I knew she preferred not to go alone, so I went with her. I hadn't quite gotten around to spelling out my disbelief, for an obvious reason: I was worried about the consequences.

No, "worried" is too weak a word. I was terrified. At 27, I knew that Becca was the one I wanted to spend my life with. Our religious difference was a footnote for me, but I didn't know whether it would be a footnote to her. I thought it might even be a deal breaker—and this was not a deal I wanted broken. But I knew we couldn't enter an engagement, much less a marriage, on false pretenses. If it was going to be a big deal, it needed to be a big deal before we got engaged, before we got married.

I figured a moving car was the right place to bring it up.

On one of our driving trips from LA to San Francisco to see her parents, I finally mustered the nerve: "I don't believe in God," I said, "it's something I've thought about seriously for years, and it's not likely to change. Is that, uh...okay with you?"

Silence. She hadn't seen it coming.

Finally she said, "Well...is it okay with you that I *do* believe?"

I said yes, of course. I'd known that from the beginning.

Another long pause.

"It has to be okay for me to go to church." This was not in the form of a question. I said it was okay, of course it was okay, and I wanted to continue going with her if that was all right.

We talked for an hour, an amazing, revealing conversation. Among many other things, I learned something I might never have known otherwise: *why* it was so important for her to go to church.

I'd have been troubled to learn that her religious beliefs and practices were centered on the fear of hell or even a need to please God. Instead, I learned that she attended church for other reasons. In addition to some family history—her stepfather forbade her devout mother from going to church, and Becca was damned if she would suffer the same fate—

she went for the sense of community and human connection she felt, for the opportunity to slow down and reflect, to engage the world in a different way from the rest of the week. It was rewarding and fulfilling to her for reasons I could completely respect, even if I didn't feel them myself. God was the frame in which her human values were expressed, including values I shared with her.

Importantly, she did not believe that those who do not accept Christ are consigned to hell. This was good news: A relationship in which one partner thinks the other is worthy of eternal punishment isn't a healthy one. Fortunately, the more tolerant view is the more common. Sixty-five percent of U.S. Christians believe that non-Christians can end up in heaven, and the majority of those include the nonreligious among the saved.

Just as important were my own attitudes about the religious. I did not believe (as some atheists do) that religious people are unintelligent, nor that the influence of religion is uniformly bad. I found many religious beliefs and practices to be life-affirming and humane. And I had no interest in "deconverting" Becca. She was perfect already.

By the end of the conversation, I was relieved, we knew each other a lot better, she had articulated her own values and beliefs in a way that was new even to her, and the biggest secret I had was out in the open. And it had gone just fine.

Twenty-three years and three kids later, I'm awfully glad we had that chat.