

Bill Rea ? My faith is my own

As I have written many times, I am not a religious man.

And as I have also written many times, I put that fact on the record as neither an admission or a boast, but as a simple statement of fact.

In an interesting aside, I wrote that very statement (worded roughly the same way) in a column about 10 years ago. A couple of weeks later, I received an email from the minister of one of the churches in the community in which I was working at the time (not in Caledon). If I recall, he was asking me to help promote some event in which his church was involved (which I was happy to do). But the end of the email contained a postscript ? ?I think you are a religious man.?

Right from that moment, I knew there were the makings of a very spirited debate. Alas, it never came to pass. He and I bumped into each other a lot on our particular rounds, but we were both busy men (I still am, and I assume he is too ? last I heard, he was in charge of a church in Sarnia, a fact I verified with a bit of Googling during this writing), meaning our discussions were usually brief. Our conversations verified that he had indeed imparted the message and I had indeed received it. But neither of us had the time that such a debate would have required. Pity.

In the end, he called me a ?spiritual man,? and I went along with it.

But whatever kind of man I am, be it religious or spiritual, I proclaim that I have no problems with religion, or with people practising their faiths, whatever they may happen to be ? with very few conditions. For example, I have limited use for any faith that would advocate human sacrifice or anything else that contemporary society would object to.

I'm also not a big fan of people who proselytize.

Let me be clear ? I have no problem with people proclaiming their faith, especially if they have been asked to express it.

I remember an incident a couple of years ago, in which young lady in the United States was named to deliver the valedictorial address at her graduation. She got herself into a certain amount of hot water because she chose to attribute her academic success to God. If memory serves, quite a stink was raised over that, with talk of certain sanctions being taken against this girl. I recall being angry at this development at the time. While I may have not agreed with her giving God the credit for her success (there are too many of us, myself included, who are inclined to give praise to the Almighty when we happen to get lucky), responsibility for that address was given to this person, and she was at liberty to deliver it as she pleased. If she wanted to credit her accomplishments to herself, her parents, God, the Great Pumpkin, Count Dracula or Homer Simpson, that was her call to make.

She chose to use a forum she had been granted to promote a certain position regarding religion, and her address would have taken a matter of minutes. Had she come out with a promotion of any cause not related to religion, very few people would have cared less. She was invited to make points she chose to.

On the other hand, had she approached people with out such an invitation, and started promoting a certain faith, that would be another matter, depending largely on how persistent she was. There is nothing wrong with going to people's doors to promote a point of view, provided one leaves when one is asked (it's hopefully assumed that good manners are employed by all around).

We're in the middle of an election campaign. Most of us have had people step onto our property to drop material about some candidate or another at our door. Seldom does a week go by that my wife or I arrive home and find some material from a real estate agent wondering if we want to sell our house. I object to none of these approaches, as long as those making them don't get too pushy. I'm happy to read material from any candidate seeking my vote and will vote accordingly, and my wife and I will sell our home when we're good and ready. Granted, what constitutes ?too pushy? is open to interpretation.

And when we're ready to convert to another faith, that will be our decision (actually my decision, since I have no more right to set Beth's religious agenda than she has to set mine), arrived at in due course.

So I don't have a problem with people who proselytize, provided they don't get too pushy about it.

Beth and I encountered one such person at a community event earlier this year. It was one of those events at which a number of businesses and groups had set up tables, and one of those tables was being staffed by people from a local church. One of the men at that booth dashed up to Beth and started asking her if she wanted to go to heaven. The poor girl was caught off guard, and stammered a bit as she answered this pushy fellow. I watched this, slowly getting into my ?knight in shining armour? mood. That didn't get too far, because this guy abruptly turned on me, asking if I wanted to go to Heaven.

I answered honestly. Since I'm a human being, I know I'm going to die one of these days. But I'm frankly content to wait for events to unfold

?I'd prefer to stay here,? I told him ? obviously an answer he wasn't expecting.

Thus ended the attempt to convert us, and not a moment too soon.

That was not the first experience I've had with people into proselytizing, although most of the previous ones were at least well-meaning.

I once interviewed a man who was a guest speaker at a local church. I will not name him here, largely because I believe he meant well by his action and I don't wish to embarrass him. But let it be sufficient to know this guy is very well known in Canada for something other than his evangelical activities. The fact is I was too thrilled at meeting him to be put off by his subtle attempts to convert me.

I have since interviewed this man a second time, and that was more in keeping with his real claim to fame.

The first real time I came face-to-face with proselytizing was more than 30 years ago, during the time I waited on tables in a Toronto hotel dining room.

There was one night when I waited on a rather unassuming, but very nice young couple. After they left, as I was clearing the table, I came upon a small pamphlet entitled Roger's Deliverance. The pamphlet related that Roger was a young, 'clean-living' fellow who had been staying in a facility with an indoor swimming pool. Roger woke up in the middle of the night, and decided to go for swim. He stood on the diving board, with his arms outstretched, and saw his shadow on the far wall, reminding him of the Crucifixion scene. That scene evidently prompted Roger to change his mind about diving into the pool, and opting to slip in instead. Good thing, because no one had told him the pool had been drained, and he was spared because of the religious connotations of what he had seen.

The pamphlet was my tip.

The tip that I was expecting probably would have kept me in cigarettes for about a day (I was a chain smoker at the time). Yet I have never resented what I got. And as time goes by, I am less inclined to be angry. I couldn't spend the pamphlet those folks left me, but I've always understood their hearts were in the right place.

