

Atheist Thanksgiving

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Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(514) 725-0488
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Christ detaches easily from Christmas and leaves lots of good things behind—generosity, good will, and children foremost among them. Does Thanksgiving also have detachable parts, so that atheists might celebrate it, just as they can Christmas?

It would seem so: Thanksgiving is a harvest festival as well as a giving of thanks, and the two can be separated as wheat from chaff.

For religious people, to celebrate Thanksgiving is to give thanks to God. It's to give thanks to God for all the good things one has, as they have all come from Him as gifts. Among the good things He has given to you are His love, His guidance, and the simple fact of your existence in the world. Each of these is precious to you and yet none of them have you earned, and so your benefactor is due your thanks.

The religious meaning of Thanksgiving is not exclusive to just a few religions. All sorts of religious people can feel the attraction of Thanksgiving and appreciate its significance. All that's necessary for a person to participate is the belief that a deity is responsible for his or her existence and is looking out for her—and not out of duty but gratuitously.

Not only can Christians, Muslims, and Jews give thanks; so, too, can Stoics and other pantheists, as well as animists, spiritualists, and new-agers of all kinds. I can think of no wider basis for interfaith communion than the giving of thanks, despite the endless variety of ways in which the recipient of that thanks is conceived.

Atheists cannot, though, join in the giving of thanks. Atheists don't think God exists, not in any conception, and so don't think there is anyone around to whom to give thanks.

Can't atheists just be thankful for all the people in their lives who matter to them, or for their wellbeing and happiness, or just for being alive? They can, if "thankful for" simply refers to an emotion of contentment or happiness or appreciation. Best, though, just to say they can be happy for being alive and an appreciative of their friends and those who love them. They do not also feel grateful for life and friends and love, for the emotion of gratitude requires believing that someone exists to be thanked.

Well, that God doesn't exist doesn't imply that atheists can't be grateful to the people who matter to them or to the people whose labour and concern contributes to their security and prosperity, does it? Gratitude to all these people can certainly be part of the happiness they feel, and they can express that gratitude.

The above argument fails, though, for gratitude is appropriate only when what you receive has been given freely, as a gift. For the most part, whatever security or prosperity we enjoy, we enjoy as a result of either compensated exchange or happenstance. We are not to

thank people for doing their jobs, no matter how well they do them, and no one can be thanked for what comes by accident or luck.

Of course, each of us now and then benefits from a good bestowed gratuitously by a friend or a stranger. For these gifts, though, we show our gratitude immediately and directly, by saying or nodding “thank you” to our benefactor. We don’t need to set aside a time for a ritualized general thank-you. One personal thank-you at the time of each favour is enough.

If these reflections are correct, atheists cannot participate in the giving-thanks part of Thanksgiving. Not in any way at all. What remains, then, is simply the harvest-festival part.

For religious people, the standard setting for the giving of thanks is entirely incidental to the meaning of the occasion. The family around the table, the turkey or ham, the football game, the Peanuts TV special—all of these are just props and ritual, more or less useful in putting people at their ease and in mind of their purpose. None is essential to thanking God.

What for a religious person, though, is just the setting of Thanksgiving is for the atheist the entire celebration itself. Family and fun, and marking the change of the seasons, is its only meaning and significance.

I suppose that to a religious person, atheist Thanksgiving must appear a thin thing, lacking reverence and grandeur. It does lack them, but then, again, a person who reveres God must feel diminished in her own eyes. Giving thanks to God must engender in the religious the sense that they are powerless supplicants to a higher reality. Another thing we atheists are happy about, then, is that nothing at all depends on the will of a spirit in the sky.