

K L O I
 I T H I N G S J
 E C A H N O T H T O B S A Y
 D M A R S Q
 E T O G A N D X
 L R L A T H E I S T
 R E S P E C T V

Hyper-simplicity is a malady that affects most of us in one way or another. I add the modifier *hyper* because simplicity alone can be a thing of beauty and wisdom. Hyper-simplicity, however, disrespects the complexity of human thought. No, I am not mocking the truly simple. I am asking—correction, I am begging—that we refrain from reacting to one another’s beliefs with poorly thought-out quips and dismissive statements. People have reasons for their beliefs. They may not have evaluated those reasons for decades, but somewhere, somehow belief in something grew to the point of being recognizable and expressible.

Over the decades, I have heard a handful of one-liners about Atheism. I have no desire to shame those who have used these statements, but I would like to suggest that if we are ever tempted to utter one of these phrases in the presence of an Atheist, we pause, seal our lips, tilt our heads slightly, and nod from time to

time. The Atheist before us may think that we are just contemplative. Seriously, silence is a much kinder choice than the comments I list below:

“All Atheists hate their fathers.” *All* is a risky word to select as an opener for most sentences. In this case, however, *all* would probably offend even the most tolerant of listeners. Suggesting that Atheism is always the byproduct of a marred father-image or painful parent–child relationship is simply untrue, as my story alone demonstrates. People become Atheists for many different reasons. Some inherit the belief from their families or cultures. Some default to the belief in the absence of any other discernable, viable option. Some choose Atheism for scientific or philosophical reasons. Some turn to Atheism to mentally survive the realities of an insanely unjust global human condition. Besides, if all Atheists hate their fathers, the inverse truism should be that all Theists love their fathers. Do they?

“There’s no such thing as an Atheist.” Whenever I ask someone what they mean by this statement, I normally hear a response like this: “Atheism is a belief just like Christianity is a belief. By claiming to be Atheists, they nullify their very belief that there is no belief.” This often takes me back to a clip from *The Princess Bride*: “You have a dizzying intellect to be sure.” Of course there is such a thing as an Atheist. Atheists do not deny the existence of *belief*; they deny the existence of *God*. The two are not the same. God *was* before belief took her first breath. And God *would be* even if belief never breathed again.

“If there’s no such thing as God, why do you have to deny his existence?” The premise underlying this statement is that *denial of existence is proof of existence* because there would be nothing to deny if it did not exist in the first place. So . . . since I deny the existence

THINGS NOT TO SAY TO AN ATHEIST

of little green men on Mars to my kids, does that mean they must really exist? Since the scientific community on the whole denies the existence of a tooth fairy, does that mean she really exists?¹²

We can often avoid muddying the waters of conversation unnecessarily by identifying and evaluating the premises supporting our arguments. Both we and our hearers would benefit from such a practice. Though it requires a bit more mental effort, the fruit of that effort is—at the very least—respect, which perhaps is a more powerful force than words.