

# Religion, Sex and Politics

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“I can hardly stand to go home anymore! Every time Uncle Kenny opens his mouth I just cringe, knowing he’s about to say something stupid. I love my family, but I don’t know if I can take the stress of being with them if all we’re going to talk about is politics.”

The old adage is that we should never talk about religion, sex, or politics in polite company, but for most people, family is NOT polite company. Nor should it be necessarily. Family can be a place where people can relax and be themselves and have conversations that can be too thorny for a casual lunch with coworkers.

But not all families create space for talking about sticky topics. Some families would rather not talk at all than risk disagreements, and other families subtly (or not so subtly) insist that everyone agree. I have found that whenever there seem to be only 2 choices about how to respond to a situation, we’re not thinking broadly enough. The same is true as we head into this time of family gatherings. One option, as always, is to change the subject. This is usually best started with an acknowledgment of what’s been said. A simple “Huh. Interesting.” can start your transition to a safer subject.

If you have the attention, or space in your mind to allow for an exchange of ideas without getting combative, a more effective strategy is to listen and ask questions designed to build the relationship. This doesn’t imply agreement, it just shows the natural human curiosity that we show when we ask about someone’s family or work. In fact, if you disagree, then you might first say something like, “That’s not really how I think about it”, or “That’s not really been my experience”, and then listen to the response. Remember, this isn’t about trying to change someone’s mind. It’s about getting closer, or at least preserving the relationship.

Some examples of questions you might ask are:

“How did you come to that perspective?”

“Where have you seen that policy work well?”

“What information do you think the other side doesn’t fully understand?”

“Can you say more about your thinking about this issue?”

Take the opportunity to fully listen and try to understand, and not for the purpose of changing minds. Take the time to change YOUR understanding of this person and her or his perspective. Almost no one ever changes their mind because of a lecture or argument from someone with a different perspective. But relationships can be damaged if the primary mode of communication is based in conflict.

If you care about preserving (or even improving) a connection, be willing to put aside your position to fully see someone else’s. You may even learn something new about the issue (or yourself!).