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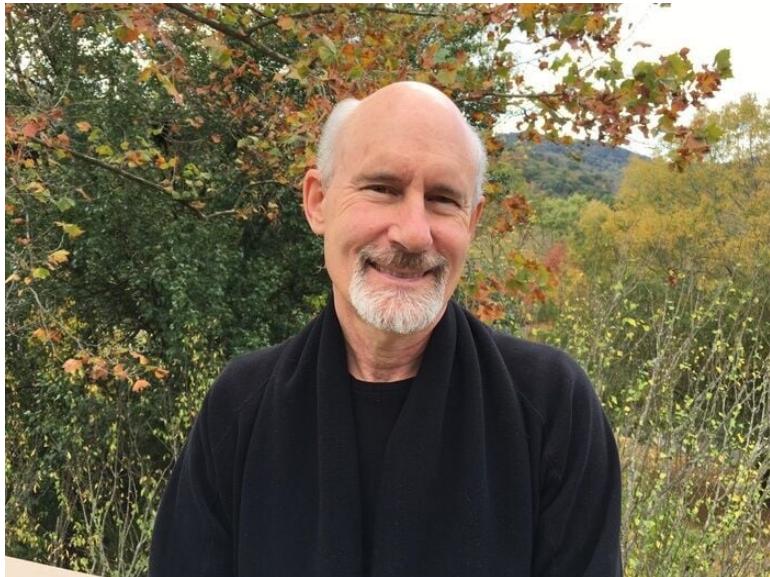
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## **An open invitation to the potluck of religion**

By Chris Highland Friendly Freethinker  
Sep 14, 2025



Growing up with a large extended family of both blood and belief (home and church), gatherings were often a smorgasbord of experiences.

Whether holiday parties at my grandparents house or a Sunday afternoon church picnic, the playing, storytelling and jesting made them all something to look forward to. Of course, the main attraction was the food. Tables filled with delights for all senses, but especially for the great variety of tastes. With so many dishes created by so many hands in so many kitchens, the smells and flavors drew us kids like the hungry circling flies and wasps.

These memories of family, community and culinary delights, brought back a taste, a touch, a scent of my consuming of religious beliefs. I believed my family loved me and wanted me to grow strong through good exercise and good food. I believed my church family wanted the same, with the added nourishment of a growing faith and deeper participation in the life of the congregation. Both kinds of gatherings began with prayer, often by my father on behalf of the family, or the pastor shepherding his flock to the fellowship. Sitting to eat as a family, there were invariably jokes and laughs—primarily teasing and punning by my dad and his three brothers—but most were in “good taste.” The same was true at church; except for some church lady’s questionable casserole, most church picnic dishes were rather delicious. Yet now I wonder: what are we feeding people, especially the youth, and what are we being fed? What is healthy and what is not so nutritious?

In the Great Potluck of Religion, what are you bringing? A heavy casserole dish made from a traditional recipe? Your special plate, handed down by ancestors, for the Main Course? Something light and thoughtful, maybe colorful and crunchy finger-foods? An enticing dessert?

The presentation may be important, especially if you want to make an impression, to attract people to your dish on your table. Some religions have strict rules about food, what can be eaten, how it can be prepared. There may be specific guidelines for purity and particular blessings to be spoken. Whether for religious or health reasons, what a dish consists of can make a big difference. Ingredients matter.



If a person is not religious, how might they participate in the feast? Well, they have a wide choice, which is a very freethinking way of approaching these long tables. They might take small bites of various plates, deciding for themselves what seems good and digestible. And what could a non-believer bring to the table? Perhaps a fresh dish that anyone and everyone could share. As a mindful humanist, a person might cook up something that respects various cultures and beliefs. No doubt some might choose not to partake of the secular dish. That's fine. Yet, if a person of faith is open to try

new dishes, new tastes, open to learning, tasting, a little of other cultures and traditions, maybe they would dare to try a new taste.

Religion should be a choice, should it not? What we believe ought to be chosen from an array of alternative choices. The menu is long and wide with something for everyone. From polytheism to monotheism and everything in-between, or Nature, or nothing in particular, it all comes down to a decision what is ultimate, what to become a member of, if anything. Secular people ought to be willing to try out new tastes as well, with an eye for skepticism and an ear for unhealthiness, a rational perspective needs to reason which ingredients are authentic and genuine, and what has been baked by whom. Not every baked (or half-baked) belief is good, or good for every person. A secular person can help others learn to exchange dishes, even recipes, or let go of a culinary creation that no longer offers nourishment, and may even be toxic.

In the potluck of religion, the real gift of the gathering may be the attempt to build community through a shared experience of “food for the soul”—selections of unique contributions to the culture for mind and body. The true test of how beneficial the potluck is will always have something to do with the experience itself. Who can resist a bountiful potluck? Who wants

everyone to eat their dishes and no one else's?

What happens when there is only one meal on the menu?

Thinking back to those early potlucks and picnics, what feeds my memory the most is the people, whatever they believed, eating, laughing, playing, telling personal stories, as they were simply being human together in community. What's being served? Who is being served? The best potluck welcomes anyone and everyone to the open table.

*Chris Highland was a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years before becoming a humanist celebrant and author of many books. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. His website is [www.chighland.com](http://www.chighland.com).*