“Bridge Religion”

I used to believe that bridge, and bidding in particular, was a language. It is very difficult to determine whether Polish is a better language than Chinese, and it is equally difficult to determine whether one bidding system is better than another.

But I have recently changed my view on the matter. Bridge bidding is a religion. It has its “gods”, its “religious texts”, and its “zealot evangelists.” Just as religion has been responsible for most wars, conflicts over bidding agreements have been responsible for the most partnership break-ups.

Currently, I am a Precisionist of the Meckwellian sect - strong club, aggressive openings, and pattern bidding; among Meckwellians, I am a Lite Meckwellian. For most of my bridge life I had belonged to the Bridgeworldian faith, followed by several years as a Relayic and a brief stint as a Zerthian. (I broke from the Zerthian church because I could not embrace a religion that was constantly changing, unless I was the one making the changes.) [Eds. We didn’t know what Zerth was either, so we asked Dave; it turns out to be a strong club relay system.]

I recently played with a very good player from the Washington D.C. area. Prior to playing we exchanged system notes. He sent me notes on a combination of Washingtonian (“if I don't open one of a major, I can't have five”) and Walshian (“if the auction starts 1♣-1M, I can have six or more diamonds.”) We both tried to be flexible, but the chasm was too great and the partnership proved short-lived.

My wife Anne is a bridge atheist. When I was a Bridgeworldian, she played Bridge World Standard. Now that I am a Meckwellian, she is the keeper of the good book, Dave and Anne’s Bridge Notes - Meckwell Lite. But she doesn’t appear to feel too strongly one way or another as long as I don’t try to keep adding bells and whistles. Too many changes will find me sleeping on the couch.

There is another common element in bridge religions: They all rely on faith. If you do not trust your partner, you will ultimately land in bridge hell. I recently had the opportunity to have my faith tested in a way that went well beyond simple trials of walking on hot coals or sleeping on a bed of nails.

Greg Herman is a graduate student at Colorado State University and a member of last year’s United States Bridge Federation junior team that went to Istanbul. Greg is an excellent player, albeit a bit of a mad scientist. I do not know how firmly grounded he is in any particular religion, but he appears to be well versed in most of them. We agreed to play a variation of Meckwell Lite with which he is familiar. We talked on the phone one night for several hours and made it as far as the “one diamond section.” (That is true, but it was because we followed bridge expert Bart Bramley’s advice of starting in the lower left hand corner of the convention card and working backwards. Bart thinks that everyone spends far too much time on their notrump structure and not enough on the back side of the card, so he starts there first. Good advice.) Greg and I also exchanged notes and emails for several weeks prior to playing.

This was our second time playing together. It was a sectional Sunday Swiss against a husband and wife pair. In the immediately prior deal, the auction started 1♦-(1 ♦ “alert”). “What is it?”, I
asked, and the wife said, “I don't know, look at our convention card.”

On the next board I picked up as dealer ♠KQJx ♥Axxx ♦AQxx ♣x. The auction proceeded: 1♦ (16 + HCP)-(2♦ “alert, transfer to hearts”) -3♥! What is Greg’s bid of 3♥? We had no prior relevant discussion, but in the notes we had shared we had written that the auction 1♣-(2X)-3X would show a 4-4-4-1 game forcing hand with a singleton in X. The opponents didn’t bid further, and the auction proceeded: 3♠ (natural and setting trump, assuming that responder is 4=1=4=4)-4♦ (presumably a control)-4♥ (intended as a control, but natural just in case)-5♥!!

What is junior doing to me? First he jumps to 3♥ against a pair that didn’t know what a double of 1♦ meant and now he jumps again to 5♥. Could this be hearts? What else could it be? Well, in theory, it could be Exclusion Keycard Blackwood with spades as trump, although he is typically expected to be 4441 and not 5440 when he “cuebids” 3♥ on this auction. Putting my faith in what I believed were our agreements, I didn’t pass (would 5♥ be forcing if 3♥ had been natural?) but instead responded to Exclusion with 6♦ (showing two keycards in spades, excluding the heart ace, plus the spade queen)-6♥!!

If I weren’t over the edge before this point, I was ready to jump off the cliff now. I leave to you, my reader, to decide what you would have bid, but after an eternity I decided that in very experienced top partnerships, 6♥ would be “last train”, confirming all the keycards and looking for seven. As I had no extras, I retreated to 6♣ and anxiously awaited the dummy, which was ♠A10xx ♥10987x ♦AKQx. Yes, he had bid the hand very well in an established partnership. I had been very lucky to have landed safely. If I had bid this way with Annie, I would like to think we too would have arrived in 6♠ but, just on principle, I would have ended up sleeping on the couch.

(The opening lead was the ♥K. Spades were 3-2, I cashed the ♦A. The ♦K was singleton offside, validating the Rabbi’s rule (“when the king is singleton play the ace”). Making seven. I was so rattled I failed to claim my beer for winning the last trick with the ♦7. At the other table they were also in 6♠, but they played a diamond to the queen and then cashed the ♦A for down one. Win 17 IMPs and the event. It is a true story of biblical proportions, with a happy ending.)