EVANGELISM: GOD-TALK, PEOPLE-STYLE ---------- ELLIOTT #2004

Most of the strangers I meet, who have or make a minute for it, seem eager or at least deeply interested in talking about God (despite their being products of the Am. public-school system, where God-talk is ruled out....or maybe partly because, as they were early starved of God-talk?). All God's social creatures (crickets, birds, humans, et al) give off signals shaped to ascertain the presence/absence of interest in what the sending creature is interested in. Yes, usually sex; but sometimes, in some cases/people, God. On meeting, I usually have given off some yes-I'd-like-to-talk-with-you-about-God signal by the first period--ie, within the first sentence. Not woodenly: why shouldn't this be an artform? And certainly not aggressively: the other person is as apt to initiate the conversation as I--and sometimes, almost never, sends the God-talk signal....Two instances (*Italics* = their words; () = my comments):

1. (Last evening, 2 Oct 85, on a walk I offered a cheery greeting to an early-middle-aged man who would, I assumed, pass me. W'd never seen each other before.) *That's an unusual walking-stick!* Osage orange. Made for me by a man about your age; I was his pastor. *Tell me, what is God like?* He loves us, is with us, and wants to guide us. *Well, I sure need guiding! What happened at the hotel...., are you sure God loves us?* Not just us; you. *Then you think there's something to prayer?* I have no doubt of it. *You believe in prayer?* I do. *Will you pray for me, here, now? I need to know whether I should get in touch with...(he named the woman), and what I should say if I do.* God, you knew what Tom wanted even before he told me. So in a way, he told you before he told me. Help him to know and feel that, and thank you for hearing. Then help him to be honest with you about all that happened, and honest with himself about how he feels about it and what he fears and what he hopes for. Guide him, Lord, in Jesus' name. *And you believe God just now heard you?* I have no doubt of it. *And you have no doubt either that he'll hear me if I pray?* No doubt. *God, here I am. You know me. You know what's wrong with me and what's right, which is more than I know. And you know what I should do, and I don't know--I'm confused and afraid. Help me, guide me. Amen.* (He opened his eyes and smiled at me a child's smile, and I smiled back.) How is it with you now? *I'm on my way! Thanks!* (At my initiative, we exchanged names; but I made no effort toward further contact: should I have?....NB: God-talk, but very little God-language. Eg, words not used: faith, repentance, Christ, creation-Creator, sin, judgment, punishment, hell, rewards, heaven, atonement, redemption. E.B. White's rule of clarity-simplicity, "Do not overwrite," becomes here Do not overspeak. I used little God-language for the situational, not any ideological, reason....I acted on the faith that God would guide him rather than on the fear that his oracular faith would lead him into deeper despair....Wearing a visible mark of faith --in this instance, my shepherd's crook--often results in someone's initiating God-talk with you....Only half such encounters involve my profession's being known.)

2. (Speaking honestly for God is as important as speaking honestly to God, and simplicity is next to and the natural partner of honesty....After interpersonal small-talk, I asked my NYC cabbie his religion.) *Catholic, but I don't go: too busy. But I'm glad my church now has it's hand out with something in it for the poor: when I was growing up, it had its hand out empty.* Why should the church be for the poor? (Long pause.) *Because God is. Once I was rich and ruined everybody and everything, and God was not with me; when I became poor, God came to me and said "All you have is mine. Share it for me." And I've been doing that, and I sense all the time--including 14 hours a day in this cab--that God is with me.* "God," you say. What's God like? (No pause.) *He's like, for one thing, electricity. Millions of switches in this city, and nothing happens till somebody switches one on. I've learned how to switch God on, but I'm worried that my young children haven't. What can I do for them?* Read them Bible stories ten minutes every day, then pray the Lord's Prayer with them. *Will that work?* They've got switches, too. Flip them on for God, and tell them how it works for you. *I will. I will!* (Much humor in the conversation: this is verbatim, but not a complete verbatim.)