

Why Not Join the Unitarians?

That is one of the questions most frequently asked when I tell people about being a nontheist Friend.

The answer that comes to mind first has nothing to do with being of a nontheist bent. I grew up in the Religious Society of Friends, literally and figuratively. My parents joined the Society when I was about two. Although there was no Monthly Meeting in Watertown, New York, where I spent my childhood, my parents organized meetings for worship with other folks. We attended Quarterly Meeting, never missed a session of Yearly Meeting, and went to Quaker conferences regularly. My parents lived and spoke as Friends. From the time of my earliest memories, I identified myself as a Quaker. As a teen, I began testing Quaker principles. For instance, one year I used plain speech to see what it was like. I gave up eating meat, to witness to the sanctity of animal life. Somewhere in my twenties I began attending meetings for business and accepting committee responsibilities. Through all these years, I have felt great love and respect for Quakers themselves and for the Society's practices, testimonies, and purpose. I'm satisfied among Friends, and I'm not looking for another religious community.

However. Does it make sense to continue in the Society of Friends when my thinking seems to differ from, perhaps even oppose, the thinking of the majority of Friends, past and present? I've been accused of trying to impose a new religion on folks who already have a perfectly good one. I've been suspected of being a parasite, stealing the religious vitality and activity of a God-centered people to feed my own godless (possibly empty) life. My mother hinted I could be a visionary, avoiding responsibility for founding a new religious order by hiding behind the familiar skirts of the Religious Society of Friends. Or am I simply misguided, a round peg in a square hole who would be happier if I would only join a like-minded group?

So far, I think none of the above. I am a Quaker, living a Quaker life. Interestingly enough, it is the very commitment to being the best Quaker I can be that leads me at this time to reject belief in God.

Quakers taught me to use plain speech, and to tell the truth, always. In my view, it is neither plain nor necessarily truthful to say such things as "I felt God's presence" or "It's in God's hands." What does that mean? Behind that hackneyed, confusing word/concept "God" lies a specific experience: a feeling, a thought, a vision. Tell me plainly what you experience! And "just the facts, ma'am." I don't see how you can say truthfully "I know God exists," since in order to know God experimentally you would have to be God. And if you are going to assert—as some would—that in a sense you are God, we're back to the problem of plain speech, because I don't know what you mean.

Quakers taught me to have the courage and creativity to think for myself. To question everything, especially authority. Quakerism itself impels me to question the Religious Society of Friends, God, and even George Fox. Fox believed in God, but does that mean it's the truth?

Friends convinced me to shun empty forms, to dedicate myself to living as close as possible to the quick of life. That directs me to strip away the ritual of talking about, imaging, and believing in God. I aim for the spirit of life.

Among Friends I learned to accept, even expect, revelation. Years ago, I used to banish my doubts about God with the thought that so many believers, over so many millennia, could not be wrong. Now I see that, in fact, the beliefs could be mistaken. There could be new light. Faithfulness demands I do not allow millennia of beliefs to stand in the way of seeking truth.

Quakers taught me not to seek truth alone. The corporate search of the past four and one-half years has supported my leading to explore nontheism. Many Friends are broken, because traditional beliefs don't speak to their hearts, and they feel alienated from the Society. God (at least as we currently constitute God) may not be the answer. The Friends for whom God is the answer are sometimes rigid, even defensive, about their beliefs. It appears to me that unstated fear and need may be constricting their religious experience and expression. Again, corporate seeking suggests that permitting a nontheist attitude might free believers to examine and share their fears, and to deepen their faith as a result. Finally, I think we can claim to be engaged in corporate search only if we keep the doors open, including those we dislike. One of the finest characteristics of Friends is that we are on a religious quest, not a religious path.

To some extent, I am more deeply Quaker now than I ever was before. I love the quest. I love the discoveries, the risks, the mysteries. I've learned from Friends that the only mistake is to avoid life, to draw back from our leadings. I trust absolutely that the exploration of life without belief in God will bear fruit. Either the fruits will benefit the Society, or they will prove false. In that case, Friends will help me see and correct my error.

Someone might ask, "Why not carry on your search in some other group, where people share your doubts?"

That would be to succumb to the myth. The myth is that what we say about our religious experience matters more than our experience. To some extent, language informs our experience. But the essence of humanity and of life lie beyond the reach of words. The difference between the person who says "I'm building the city of God" and the one who says "I'm building a world that works for everyone" is no more significant than the difference between brown skin and red.

Edward Hoare says in his article "The Heart of It"* that "agnostics and humanists have weakened the religious basis of the yearly meeting." How? Such folks (to say nothing of nontheists!) have, he says, "no understanding of becoming gathered." The ignorance of human nature displayed in this statement is staggering. Yet it is a common view, and commonly walls up human beings alive.

It is native to humans to seek company, to seek aliveness, to seek to be gathered. True enough, we are capable of straying far from that impulse. Still, our yearning for belonging is an essential element of humanity. Whether you call it seeking God or searching for "friendliness and tolerance" (as Hoare's agnostics and humanists apparently said they were) is ultimately of no consequence. To deny the religious nature and possibility of another person, on the basis of the language that person uses, is to deny that person's humanity. Grasping my humanity firmly in hand, I say I belong just as much in a Quaker community as I do among Unitarians. We are the same people, going in the same direction.

Of course, by the same token, I could go join the Unitarians, or the Ethical Society, or the Buddhists. But the Religious Society of Friends has given me immeasurable wealth of purpose, practices, and principles. What kind of sense of satisfaction would it make, now that I've finally matured enough to develop an original religious life, to tuck all those goods under my arm and turn my back on the Quakers? That might in fact qualify me as a parasite. Instead, you don't have to look hard to see that I'm sharing gifts with the Religious Society of Friends. It is transparent that my purpose is to participate in realizing the vision of Friends. The myth is that people who believe in God have something, while those who doubt are have-nots. Quakers, of all people, ought to be able to spot and keep out of such a vicious trap.

I might suggest that parasites are people who believe in God because everyone else does and because it feels good and because then they don't have to be responsible for their own lives. People who have doubts that they don't contribute to the Society, while they feed off the good feelings and good name of the Society, are also being parasites.

I am not condemning, however. All of us probably are parasitic at times. Part of the genius of Fox was the recognition that the spirit is indwelling, so we don't need to live off others.

This brings me to one more reason for committing myself to the Religious Society of Friends: its genius. In my view, Quakers are on a track that works. We have resources for laying new track toward creating the Peaceable Realm. I'm interested in making the biggest difference I can with my life, so I'm dedicating my life to people I think will make good use of it.

Now I have a question. Should we allow people who believe in God to join the Religious Society of Friends?

Of course, traditionally we have. But as I've said above, what is tradition compared to truth? The Religious Society of Friends is a body of seekers. Belief is the end of seeking, the decision that "Now I know the truth." It's not that our seeking should never lead to finding. But there is a vital difference between, on the one hand, noticing and celebrating a discovery, which one might then observe to see how it continues or changes throughout life; and, on the other hand, casting our discoveries in concrete and worshipping them. The latter attitude, which I would call belief, stops life in its tracks. The former, which could lead to faith, can dance with life.

Many Friends hold a set of beliefs about God. They are encouraged to do so by most religious traditions, in the erroneous conviction that religion has to do with beliefs. That opens a whole new topic, to pursue some other time. Suffice it to say that believing blocks at least as much as it opens. And it would be trite, if it weren't tragic, to point out that examples such as the mother who murdered Elisa to exorcise the devil, and the man who killed Rabin because God told him to, and so on and so on and so on, all demonstrate that believing in God is no guarantee of godliness.

However, a revelation that came to me at the 1996 Friends General Conference Gathering was that nontheism does not immunize me against holding beliefs, nor against misconstruing the universe. I recognize my full partnership with, and love for, those who choose to believe. Several of my best Friends are unequivocally, outspokenly God-centered. They sometimes seem to me too insistent on certain concepts and images. But, like the Native American listening to John Woolman, I love to feel the spirit behind their words. That spirit belongs to no particular religion; it is simply ours.

We are all, thankfully, in this together!

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