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IS “NONTHEIST QUAKERISM” A CONTRADICTION OF TERMS?

PAUL ANDERSON

Is the term “Nontheist Friends” a contradiction of terms? On one hand, Friends have been free-thinking and open theologically, so liberal Friends have tended to welcome almost any nonconventional trend among their members. As a result, atheists and nontheists have felt a welcome among them, and some Friends in Britain and Friends General Conference have recently explored alternatives to theism. On the other hand, what does it mean to be a “Quaker”—even among liberal Friends? Can an atheist claim with integrity to be a “birthright Friend” if one has abandoned faith in the God, when the historic heart and soul of the Quaker movement has diminished all else in service to a dynamic relationship with the Living God? And, can a true nontheist claim to be a “convinced Friend” if one declares being *unconvinced* of God’s truth? On the surface it appears that one cannot have it both ways. One cannot by definition be an “unconvinced Quaker,” and one cannot claim a “birthright” while declaring also from its central tenets—either for potage or more substantive gain.

So, what are Quakers to do about a group that advertises themselves as “Nontheist Friends”? Is this a case of liberal Friends going too far, threatening to cut themselves off not only from their spiritual heritage but also from the rest of the global Quaker movement? They are certainly welcome to do so, but can they retain the names “Quaker” or “Friend” with integrity, or must these historic and theological terms be ceded to others if one truly becomes a nontheist?

BELIEF IN “NO GOD” AMONG MODERN SKEPTICS

Of course, the propounding of skepticism and atheism is ubiquitous in the modern era, so these discussions among Friends are not unique. Apparent in recent critiques of belief in God, however, some have also come to advocate an obverse “belief in No God” as a tenet of faith. Therefore, unlike the mere questioning of religious belief in God, declaring belief in “No God”—and religiously so—inevitably inherits the same liabilities of theistic religion and theology. The question is

how adequate such a stance is, and whether nontheism as a religion and counter-faith is a good thing, intellectually or otherwise.

Nearly four years ago I enrolled as an academic member of the National Newswriter's Association and attended their national meetings held that year in Washington D.C. hoping to see how religion journalists were covering religious issues in America. An interesting session was held on "We Believe in No God, and You Shouldn't Either," featuring Jennifer Michael Hecht (author of *Doubt: A History*), Barry Kosmin (director, Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture), and Paul Kurtz (founder, Center for Inquiry). The presentations were engaging, as arguments for secularism and atheism were propounded despite statistics showing that over 96% of people in America believed in some sort of God or divine being.

I found myself, however, drawn into the fray during the discussion, standing in line waiting to ask my questions of the panelists because some of their work was terribly problematic intellectually. Hecht's presentation was especially inadequate; she argued in favor of atheism citing such luminaries as Plato, Aquinas, and Jefferson being "on our side" and disparaged all references to Jewish-Christian scriptures as solely "religious" and therefore irrelevant to anthropological or sociological fields of scientific inquiry. As a biblical scholar, I pointed out that most critical biblical scholarship in the modern era is done scientifically (after all, my first book was published in Tübingen's *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neues Testament* series—the Scientific Investigation of the New Testament) with interests in anthropology, sociology, economics, politics, rhetoric, psychology, and virtually every other field of academic inquiry; so, marginalizing all biblical references as religious-only, and thus irrelevant to other fields of inquiry, betrays one's dismal ignorance of a longstanding academic field—an object of her critique.

While such a sweeping lacuna by a public scholar may be contextualized—though not excused—by noting that Hecht was referencing a field outside of her primary knowledge base, citing Plato, Aquinas, and Jefferson as allies of atheism or nontheism is intellectually incomprehensible. Plato argued for one God—the source of ideal truth, goodness and beauty, against the many lesser "gods"—projections of human investments and loyalties and declared himself "guilty" of the charge of seeking to corrupt the youth of his day away from their materialism toward a higher and transcendent understanding

of truth and its implications for living. Aquinas unquestioningly was the greatest Christian theologian between Augustine and Luther, and while his *disputatio* method of inquiry was indeed analytical, to say he did not believe in God is laughable. His five-fold proof of the existence of God might not be equally compelling in all respects, but just because he advocated critical questioning does not mean he disavowed theism. Jefferson was a deist, not an atheist. He believed in God but held that God’s work in the world was limited to natural means rather than supernatural ones. Further, he professed against critics to be an authentic Christian and in his later years cut and pasted the sayings of Jesus in a folio by which to direct his life; he believed in Jesus’ teachings and took them to heart.

What surprised me about Hecht’s presentation is that such a set of intellectually inexcusable statements could be made by someone arguing for intellectual advance and acuity. This seemed to me a public display of intellectual shoddiness at best—intellectual dishonesty at worst. Then again, I may have misunderstood her argument. If she was connecting “a history of doubt” to consequential “atheism,” in opposition to “a history of faith” and “theism,” that might account for her merging of categories with undue fluidity, but not all skepticism leads to atheism or reflects it. So, clarifying what is meant by doubt and belief, let alone theism, atheism, nontheism, and other terms, is essential to the larger discussion.

GODLESS FOR GOD’S SAKE?

In 2006 a book was published featuring the essays of 27 Quakers claiming to be part of a movement referring to itself as Quaker atheists and nontheists.¹ As several discussions of atheism, nontheism, and alternatives to theism had been conducted among British and North American Friends, this book and its attending website attempt to forge a movement among Friends challenging not only traditional and biblical views of God and the spiritual life, but also the very question of God itself, asking if Friends might be better off liberated from the restraints of assuming God exists and is active in the world. Citing a parallel from an Indian doctor regarding a picture of Ganesh, the Hindu god with the head of an elephant, David Boulton quotes him as saying, “I believe, trust and have complete confidence in every attribute of Ganesh—except his existence” (p. 13). By extension,

Boulton argues for embracing the attributes of God (love in action) independent from believing in God's existence.

The collection features ten essays seeking to build a case for Quaker nontheism (a softer form of atheism, although several contributors do claim to be atheists) and nineteen testimonials. Most of the contributors believed in some sort of spiritual reality we might term as "God" but had problems with particular descriptions of that reality. If that is indeed the case, I'm not sure they should see themselves as strict atheists or nontheists; they are actually *doing theology*. The question is how well they are doing theology; is it adequate or impoverished? One of the things I noticed is that while such Anglican nontheists as Don Cupitt and Shelby Spong are cited among some of the writers, and while Paul Tillich is mentioned some, the great theologians of recent decades, such as Karl Barth, John Zizioulas, Hans Küng, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner, Nancey Murphy, and Jürgen Moltmann are absent from the discussions. This makes one wonder if streams of influence are a bit on the shallow side, intellectually.

I also question the presentation of statistics; while one survey purports that a quarter of British Friends surveyed disbelieved or had some doubts about whether God existed (7% answering "no" and 19% answering "not sure," pp. 102-103), another question in the survey notes that 98% of British Friends listed "There is that of God in everyone" as "very/quite important" (p. 109)—the highest score among all theological tenets. If nearly all British Friends value highly the appeal of George Fox to "that of God" within every person, do a quarter of them really believe in No God? And, the highest value among Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends surveyed in 2004 (78%) was "For me, Meeting for Worship is a time to listen for God" (p. 109). Therefore, if "listening for God" in meetings for worship scored highest on the list of convictions for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends, this suggests a strong interest in attending and living responsively to the Divine—however one understands that reality.

Reviews of the book were quite negative in *The Friend* and *Friends Journal*, although responses to the reviews were mixed. Tony Stoller² asks whether we should "seek out a sense of belonging and goodness which is apart from God, indeed which denies the existence of God as anything much more than a rather anachronistic myth" or whether we should "resoundingly re-affirm that we are indeed theists, that we believe in and strive to know a theological God, that we are consciously

the Religious Society of Friends. If we are unable or unwilling to return God’s embrace, then what in the end is the point of being a Quaker?” Initial positive responses to Stoller’s critique include Diana Lampen’s questioning the statistics (given that belief and unbelief are on a continuum), Chris Barber’s affirming the reality of God whatever one calls it, and Joseph Gamblin’s suggestion that seeking a relationship with God is “an excellent guide for Meetings when considering future applications for membership.” Initial negative responses include Paul Holdworth’s being less bothered by asking hard questions than the certainty of some theists and David Boulton’s appreciation-yet-clarification that the contemporary question is not God’s existence, but what is meant by those speaking about “God” or “the Spirit.” Boulton then queries whether “compassion in action” might be a good way to describe that reality we refer to as “God”—also as a means of returning “the divine embrace.”³

Marty Grundy’s review in *Friends Journal* (November 2006, pp. 25-26) was more programmatic in its critique. Noting that not all the contributors to this book were happy with the label “nontheist,” as they also exhibited a good deal of diversity rather than coherence, she claims Boulton’s opening reference to Meister Eckhart is misleading: Eckhart “was not saying the best thing is to discard God, but rather to lay aside our fondest ideas, definitions, and expectations about God, to step into the void and in the unknowing find the Presence.”⁴ More pointedly, Grundy questions why a movement so directly opposed to Quaker faith and practice should be welcomed among Friends, noting the following problems:

- If foundational convictions of early Friends included such testimonies as “Christ is come to teach his people himself,” “the power of the Lord is over all,” and “the Lord did gather us up as in a net,” then denying “the experiential availability of the Living God” goes against these central Quaker beliefs.
- Dismissing “by fiat Quaker understandings of Truth” the approach of the book is based on several unquestioned assumptions: only what is apprehended through the senses, only what is inside one’s own head or experience, only that which can be comprehended by human intellect is “real.”
- While experience is repeatedly asserted to be the contributors’ only measure of truth, “they have deliberately

chosen to emasculate their own experience and to misinterpret that of others.” This includes denying the religious experiences of Quaker founders as well as Quaker contemporaries who testify to having had transformative encounters with God.

- “Does this book prove the difficult negative that God does not exist? No. Does it prove that the contributors’ varying interpretations of nontheistic humanism belong in the Religious Society of Friends? No. Ignorance of, or misuse or misappropriation of language, image, and metaphor does not change the reality of the matrix within which these symbols are embedded, and toward which they point.”
- While the essayists emphasize the importance of action, they neglect the spiritual origin of Quaker praxis, raising the question as to whether today’s Friends have neglected central components of membership, which involves understanding how central components of Friends worship, community, and social action are rooted in the theology and experience of “primitive Christianity revived.”

Responses to Grundy’s critique were mostly negative, although Philip Hunt is taken with her invitation to be shown experiential proof of the belief that God does not exist.⁵ Loomis Mayer notes that Christ can be known as a figure of history if not as a supernatural deity; Chris Knight wonders if this is postmodern Quakerism, even if essays might not speak to “our” condition; Harriet Heath asks whether our belief in continuing revelation might allow us to welcome those who do not share our beliefs in God.⁶ Elizabeth Willey asks if we are not all seeking God’s truth whatever we call it; Rosemary K. Coffey asks what we will profit from exclusion; Susan Furry asks whether “recognizing that of God in each other” challenges Grundy’s query as to whether “Friends have become so ‘sloppy’ in membership procedures that we have accepted people who don’t belong.” She testifies to having been an atheist but upon experiencing “that secret power” in the meeting for worship that Robert Barclay described—weakening the evil and raising up the good within—things changed personally.⁷ Then again, such an experience with the numinous seems more like a movement from atheism to Quakerism, leaving the former behind, rather than a viable merging of the two.

Chuck Fager’s review in *Quaker Theology*, however, was not only positive; it was laudatory.⁸ “What have we come to in Friends religious thought, when the most exciting book of Quaker theology I’ve read in years is produced by a bunch of Quaker non-theists—twenty-seven in all?” Fager even describes his appreciation as a Quaker theist (“or perhaps more accurately a failed non-theist”). Rather than being scandalized by asking tough questions of God, Fager notes the biblical precedent of Job, described as “perhaps the earliest biblical theological treatise.” Indeed, biblical Job’s situation challenges theological understandings of God’s justice, love, and power, as contemporary inquiries about God also do. Fager traces “the long pedigree of religious non-theism” within American Quakerism to Lucretia Mott 160 years ago and references an “apostolic succession” of Quaker non-theists ever since.⁹ He then attacks quite severely Marty Grundy’s review, calling it “distressing, even a bit shocking” for ones like her to be “wringing hands and reeling aghast at the infiltration of infidels into their orthodox sanctuary, and calling for a purge to clear up the Society’s ranks.” Fager concludes with citing Jesus’ measure of faithfulness, “by their fruits ye shall know them,” and claims that because such is so, “nontheist Friends have as much claim to a legitimate place in contemporary Quakerism as many who feel they are defending the last true redoubt against the invading forces of unbelief.”

Among these reviews, the major concern is whether atheism and nontheism go against the central Quaker ethos, which prioritizes the seeking and responding to the inward workings of the Living God. Of course, attempts to define the Infinite and to comprehend the Ultimate are beyond capacities of human means and constructs (religion and theology), but the religious quest as a spiritual endeavor to encounter and be directed by an immanent Divine Being has been the central thrust of the Jewish-Christian faith for millennia, and Friends have felt called to be radically devoted to faithful responsiveness within the human-divine relationship. If, as Boulton and others claim, there is no Divine Other, and what we conceive as “God” is merely (not just somewhat) a projection of human imaginations, this is categorically different from historic and authentic Quakerism, by any measure. Denying the central thrust of the historic Quaker quest—a transformative relationship with the Living God—is far different from missing a plank or two in the larger party platform.

STRAIGHTENING OUT THE LANGUAGE ABOUT THEISM AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

The first imperative in exploring alternatives to theism is to straighten out the language, as discussions of theism and nontheism reside within a field of reasoned inquiry: *theology*. Of course, any approach to doing theology, seeking to understand its central subject—*theos* (God)—is fraught with challenges. How is the invisible realm of the Divine, the Absolute, the Transcendent, the Ultimate to be apprehended by finite humans? Is there one god or many? How do we know that God exists, or not; and, what is meant by “existence”?¹⁰ Does humankind have a source, and if so, is the Ground and Source of our Being personal, loving, just, and true, or have humans risen above their originative source? Did life flow from nonlife? To affirm the reality of God in any sense, however, does not explain what God is like or how to relate to God. That’s what theology also does, providing understandings also of the human-divine relationship.

The map is not the territory, and yet maps are also helpful in navigating the terrain. Central theological problems address issues of what we think of God’s being all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and all-loving (omnibenevolent) given the fact of human suffering and apparent evil. This evokes the problem of theodicy (the justice of God). How could a just, able, and loving God allow tragedy and devastation in the world? Either God is unjust (either cruel or unfair), inept (either unknowing or unable), or unloving (and thus unworthy of conscientious respect). Ways theologians have addressed these classic issues, especially in post-Holocaust, post-colonial, and post-modern perspective, include limiting God’s activity (God acts spiritually rather than physically), challenging the finality of loss (finding meaning or even benefit in suffering), noting obstacles to God’s sovereign action (personified evil, human disobedience, natural disasters), or rejecting the notion of God altogether or at least somewhat (approaches of atheism and nontheism).

Of course, every approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, so the rich history of theological debates about God over three or more millennia poses an important basis for addressing these issues thoughtfully. Unfortunately for Friends, however, the fact that we have neglected second-order reflection (the map) in favor of first-order encounter (the territory) means that while many Friends are quite intellectually advanced in any number of fields, we are all too often intellectually impoverished when it comes to theological

discussions.¹¹ At times those intrigued with nontheism unwittingly reject entire subjects of study without being aware of alternatives to particular theological problems. They simply do not know the history of inquiry; at times they do not care. Therefore, understanding the larger issues and discussions, as well as the meanings of particular terms, is important if Friends wish to engage meaningfully in debates about the character and existence of God. Following are some basic ways of understanding some of the terms bandied about—at other times sidestepped—within these larger discussions.

Theism—the belief in a divine being, lending itself to a variety of views related to God’s involvement with humanity, the meaning of life, moral normativity, and the origin and character of the natural realm. If the cosmos has an origin, if there are elements of design in natural and material realms, if personhood has a source, if there is that than which nothing greater can be conceived, affirmative answers to these questions point to God. Many types of theism abound, often emerging as factors of how one deals with various inferences about God and the world.

Deterministic Theism—the belief that because God is all knowing and all powerful God controls what happens in the world. In some destinarian systems, God elects the saved and the damned; therefore, one must accept one’s fate and infer God’s sovereign hand in whatever comes in life. Because one’s salvation is not dependent on what one does, some once-saved-always-saved approaches diminish the role of human responsibility and moral choices.

Open Theism—the view that God is sovereign and all powerful, yet God limits Godself to the choices that humans make because of God’s love for humanity and honoring of persons’ autonomy. As a result, history is a factor of human choices and actions, and because God is personal and responsive to prayer, humans play a role in the unfolding of God’s redemptive work in the world.

Process Theism—the view that God is dynamic and becoming rather than unchanging and static. If human and other organisms, in their development and processive movement toward actualization, reflect the character of their maker, an improvement over classical theism sees God’s perfection as a factor of processive interactivity with humans and their choices. Therefore, humans are involved in the unfolding history of God’s will as a factor of the human-divine relationship.

Monothéisme—the belief that there is only one God and that such a Being calls humans into a covenantal relationship involving stipulations for humans and consequences wrought by God. In Hebrew Scripture’s presentation of a conditional covenant, where God’s people obey God’s laws blessing results; where they disobey adversity follows. Unconditional covenants in Scripture also show God’s gracious bestowal of blessing regardless of human merit.

Polythéisme—the belief in multiple gods, often in conflict with each other, reinforced by mythic narratives of one deity conquering competitors. In ancient times, the victory of one party over others was interpreted as a victory within the pantheon, legitimating the veneration (sometimes forced) of the victors’ deity over others.

Animisme—the belief that spirits inhabit natural items, leading to attempts to appease the spirits or gods related to one’s interest in order to receive favors. Totemism often results within animism, as elements within a culture lead to the representation of values in ways serving the inculcation of norms within a society—characteristically projections of human values and aspirations understood in sociological terms.

Pantheisme—the belief that all of nature and all of God are one. Therefore, God is not a personal being, nor is God transcendent; rather, God consists of “the whole show”—the sum of the parts of the natural cosmos. Such a view leads to moral realism, considering outcomes rather than principles as decisive in ethical considerations.

Panenthéisme—the belief that the reality of God includes the natural order but also extends beyond it. Therefore, God is at work through the natural world but is not distanced from it, although God’s existence and activity also transcend it.

Deisme—the belief that God exists, but as an impersonal force rather than a personal being involved directly in the direction of the natural order. God is known through reason and the observation of nature, not through revelation and divine disclosure. Like a divine clock-maker, God has “wound up” the universe, which runs according to natural laws and patterns; God’s truths are self-evident.

Skepticism—a stance of defaulting to doubt rather than belief, proof is required before a tenet is accepted. Verification hinges upon empirical demonstrability as ascertained by the senses, leading to a preference for materialism over and against idealism. As God is invisible and inaudible, skeptics doubt claims of religious experience and appeals to revealed truth.

Logical Positivism—a reduction of truth to what is positively proven beyond a reasonable doubt. Characteristically, positivism limits claims of verification to that which is empirically or logically demonstrable; obversely, positivism limits claims of falsification to that which is demonstrably overturned. With relation to God’s existence, the primary question hinges upon where the burden of proof lies—proving or disproving the existence of God.

Naturalism—the limiting of reality to the natural order, explaining phenomena without appeals to divine action or disclosure. God, while not necessarily denied within methodological naturalism, is considered irrelevant to human endeavors, as reality is explicable on the basis of natural laws and cause-and-effect relationships. Then again, metaphysical naturalism sees the cosmos as a closed system independent of the need for God.

Materialism—the limiting of reality to the realm of physicality, therefore rejecting the reality of God on the basis that God is unseen and materially inaccessible. In tension with idealism, materialism assumes that the material is all that is and all that can be meaningfully engaged. Therefore, ideal and transcendent realities are disregarded in the quest for truth and meaning.

Scientism—the view that because of its robust operation and promise science holds the answer to everything, including the meaning of life and the origin of human existence. Often competing with religion as a primary source of authority in the modern era, the elevation of science to mythic levels of authority sometimes goes beyond what scientific inquiry can actually deliver, taking on the semblance of a new religious movement.

Atheism—the belief that God is not. As a result, the origin of the world must be explained alternatively, not as a factor of creation or design but as a factor of other processes emerging for no apparent reason. In its modest forms, atheism simply makes

no allowance for divinity, supernaturalism, or revelation. In its stronger forms, atheism challenges religious conventions and assumptions claiming to pose a superior alternative.

Nontheism—a softer form of atheism preferring secular alternatives to theism and corollary beliefs in God. While humanism also has strong Judeo-Christian underpinnings in western society, nontheists often appeal to humanist, secular, and naturalist approaches to issues. Nontheists tend to see God as irrelevant and problematic, and thus sidestep issues of religious faith overall.

Therefore, as Friends discuss theism and its alternatives, they should understand what is meant by terms and how they are discussed within different schools of thought. For instance, any critique of theism must first identify which sort or aspect of theism it is addressing, as well as what historic discussions of particular tenets have emerged. If one objects to deterministic theism, might open or process theism pose a way forward? If one operates largely within laws of naturalism, might panentheism still allow a view of God who works through the natural order but also beyond it? If evil or tragedy in the world calls for an explanation, what do we do with human goodness and apparent redemption as realities? Might a supposed “nontheist” actually be a deist or a natural theologian—still believing in God but assuming God works in more spiritual and revelatory ways than interventionist or mechanistic ways? As natural theology is an established and respected field of inquiry,¹² a preference for naturalism does not require one to abandon theology or theism. One may do that, but it is naïve and uninformed to assume that such is the only choice.

As Friends engage these enduring subjects, they should consider the strengths and weaknesses of all sides of issues and should be modest in their claims as well as plain in their articulation. As Martin Marty has affirmed, the best way forward in fruitful theological discussion is appreciating the strengths of the arguments one finally rejects while also being mindful of the weakness of the views one embraces.

PROBLEMS WITH “QUAKERS” BELIEVING IN “NO GOD”

Given that some have begun to identify themselves publicly as “Nontheist Friends,” this creates severe problems for the larger Quaker movement, despite having several strengths as well as weaknesses.

Among strengths, the first is that theological discussion is happening, and Friends are asking some really hard questions about important subjects. With Fager, this is a strength of a robust theological inquiry, although I would encourage those interested in this theological subject to read broadly and in conservative directions as well as liberal ones.¹³ I would pose a mirror-image opposite recommendation for theologically conservative Friends to read those outside their camps, as well. This is what it takes to do theology well. On the other hand, if the authentic quest for God is removed from theological inquiry, is the central struggle of theology itself lost? As Chuck Fager has well described the character of theology elsewhere, as being like Jacob’s struggle with the angel, if the reality of God is removed from the struggle, can there be any tension-filled (and thus adequate) theology?

A second strength is the energy that David Boulton, Os Cresson, and others have been putting into the discussions; such is impressive by any measure. Of course, this would apply to any special interest among Friends, and perhaps Stoller’s pointing out that Quakers are indeed theists should lead to a “Theistic Quakers” special-interest group as a means of recovering a diminished feature of Quaker faith and practice. Then again, that may be redundant, as Quakers, historically and internationally, have sought to live receptively and responsively to God—a form of dynamic theism. If liberal Quakers become nontheistic, will they tolerate meetings of theistic Friends in their midst, or will they exclude or shame them for their lack of doubt? Doubtless, that could happen.

A third strength is the emphasis on the “fruits” of whatever comes from believing in No God. On one hand, the point is well taken, and the impressive Quaker credentials of contributors to the book make a strong statement as to their standing within the Society of Friends. On the other hand, if “works” also imply letting one’s “yes” be yes and one’s “no” be no, how can leading Quakers affirm the convictions of their communities of faith if they declare publicly that they do not believe in their affirmations of God? And, if good works pose the measure of value, have atheistic leaders been the most compelling of witnesses within the last century?¹⁴ Then again, Boulton’s citing of Mohamed Atta’s “faith in God” shows how problematic ill-defined theism can be.¹⁵ Indeed, God and the teachings/example of Jesus have been primary bases for the Quaker Peace Testimony, so without God as a principled basis it is doubtful that Quakers will long remain pacifists.¹⁶

Despite its strengths, weaknesses with the movement are more pronounced in my view—at least if nontheists wish to maintain an explicitly Quaker identity.

One weakness, as noted in the reviews, is that “Nontheist Quakerism” is a contradiction of terms. If the rise and progress of the people called Quakers has sought to diminish all else (speculative theologizing, cultic formalism, dead religiosity) in the interest of encountering the Living God experientially, the denial of such as a reality, or even as a possibility, means one rejects historic Quakerism. Conversely, if one believes in God and seeks to know God, even if the Ground and Source of our Being continues to be a mystery that defies human understanding, one cannot rightly call oneself an atheist or a nontheist. This is not a matter of some people excluding others; it is a factor of attempting to embrace mutually exclusive realities simultaneously.

A second weakness with the movement overall is that it sometimes comes across as intellectually naïve and somewhat superficial. The existence of God is a rich and varied subject of inquiry, and particular types of theism, as well as their alternatives, have intensive and extensive histories of intellectual engagement. Therefore, understanding the meanings of terms and the rich theological literature within particular schools of thought, before accepting *or* rejecting a doctrine, is basic to adequate inquiry. Further, virtually all academic theologians today think critically about God and how God is known and understood, and virtually all biblical scholars today operate naturalistically dealing with the facts of texts, cultures, and the histories of ideas. That, of course, creates other problems, but approaching God and the Bible rationally and critically, without appealing to supernatural factors, is basic to these disciplines and unexceptional. This does not mean, though, that all theologians and Bible scholars are nontheists, though they operate disciplinarily in rational and analytical ways.

A third weakness is not intrinsic to the movement, but it is far too common to command respect. In several cases, religious authorities are yoked to the nontheist cause inappropriately—either haphazardly or dishonestly. I don’t think Boulton’s citing of the great Christian mystic as basis for the title and thrust of his nontheistic book reflects intellectual dishonesty; I just doubt that he (or Don Cupitt, perhaps) has really thought about how Eckhart was dealing with St. Paul’s own theological-communal struggles in Romans 9. I also don’t know that all the Quaker luminaries cited by Os Cresson in his online

essays¹⁷ deserve to be linked too closely with nontheism. While Cresson correctly acknowledges that not all of the people mentioned were nontheistic (indeed, very few of them were) their questioning skepticism in ages past does not link them necessarily with nontheistic views today. All nontheists might be liberal, but not all liberals are (or were) nontheists. This is especially the case with Cresson’s presentation of Henry J. Cadbury as an atheist or a nontheist.¹⁸

Despite Cresson’s frequent quoting of Cadbury’s claim to being “no ardent theist or atheist” as proof that he was a nontheist, Cadbury was not denying being a theist in that statement. He was simply distinguishing his personal religion from ways he taught his Bible courses at Harvard Divinity School and elsewhere. The responsibility of a biblical instructor within an academic setting is to discover the plain and clear meaning of the text rather than imposing one’s personal beliefs, letting the text speak for itself—problematic or otherwise. Bible teachers call this “exegesis” (digging out the best meaning of the text) rather than “eisegesis” (inserting one’s beliefs into the text).¹⁹ While Cadbury was wonderfully understated in describing his religious beliefs and experience,²⁰ claiming also to be neither a literalist nor a mystic, this does not mean that he did not see himself as a deeply committed Christian who believed in God.²¹

As a logical positivist, he challenged the certainty of all claims, and I believe he also would have challenged the certainty of nontheist claims as well as conservative ones. As he never claimed to be a nontheist, his name should not be associated with “Nontheist Friends” directly and in the name of intellectual integrity should be removed from websites and other sources claiming such. Cadbury also claimed he was *no...atheist*. As David Boulton and others would affirm, though, he did point to Woolman as the model of his religious faithfulness—caring less about doctrinal definitions and deity references than deity-faithfulness (or God’s love) in action. Woolman, however, did not believe his divine errands were merely of human origin, which is why they carried their moral and prophetic weight—a direct factor of their originative thrust. If Woolman had *not* believed in a Loving God—the Source of love and justice—would he have taken up his prophetic challenge to injustice in the same world-changing way? I doubt it.

CONCLUSION

While multiple varieties of theism have their problems, I'm not sure that belief in No God is an improvement. Without a personal, loving, and just Ground and Source of our Being directing self-centered humans to be other-centered and self-effacing—at times directly and empoweringly so—humans cannot love others, even as they might like to. While people do tend to “make God in their own image,” as Boulton and others well remind us, it is also true that seeing ourselves as made in the divine image—that of One who acts redemptively in history, and who came to earth in the flesh, embodying God's self-giving love in his life and death—calls us to live sacrificially, graciously, and lovingly because its character is a scandalizing affront to the seductive empire of the individual. As Elton Trueblood so often said, a cut-flower society can last for a while, but without being connected to its theocentric roots, it will soon wither and die. Phenomenologically, how does second- and third-generation atheism tend to fare? Belief in No God has the same theological challenges as belief in God; the question is how those difficulties will be navigated theologically, experientially, and ethically by newfound adherents.

But what about “Quaker Nontheists” as an organization or a movement; is it a good thing or not? Well, any time people can be inspired to ask hard questions and seek the truth rigorously, this is good. The question is how to do so in ways that do not deny local and covenantal Quaker communities. If one is a hard atheist (or even a strong nontheist) this is problematic if seeking God and following God are important to one's Quaker affiliations. Questioning is one thing, but declaring publicly one's belief in No God and commitment to challenging the beliefs and experiences of any and all who embrace a Divine Being—in theory or in praxis—excludes all people of earnest faith, which is not very “Quakerly.”

How will committed nontheists speak to “that of No God” within every person? How will nontheists embrace any who have felt the healing salve of the Divine Embrace? How will “nontheist Friends” regard the history of the People Called Quakers, who, with Isaac Penington, were guided by the Light of Christ, the Seed of God, and the Power of the Holy Spirit working within the conscience of the individual? People are welcome to regard all who are given to a God beyond themselves as deluded, as atheists and some nontheists do, but in doing so, they exclude all committed members of the Society

of Friends—past, present, and future (if there is a future)—from their fellowship.

If Quakers seek to be nontheists, though, they should commit themselves to seeking the truth well and with integrity, as Quakers have characteristically done, even if holding open the possibility of God’s existence. Or, they could say, “others may, but I cannot,” without judging those who, unlike them, have encountered God (as did the Quaker former “skeptic” John Wilhelm Rowntree), believe in God, and are seekers of God. They will need to seek truth with rigor and inclusivity, reading conservative material as well as liberal material—weighing strengths and weaknesses of arguments fairly and with discerning judgment. They will need to speak with modesty of claim—not making overreaching statements about messianic implications of believing in No God, and certainly resisting the misrepresentative yoking of respected authorities to their cause when those same religious leaders would not likely claim to believe in No God. They will need to keep true to the commands of Jesus to love neighbors, enemies, and one another, even if they cannot commit themselves to loving a non-existing God, and even though they reject an ontological basis (God’s love for us) for doing so. If such commitments, however, become onerous as encumbrances, or against the currents of atheism/nontheism overall, they might consider dropping the “Quaker” part of the association, as Quakers have historically prioritized receptivity and responsiveness to the Living God above all else.

Is “Nontheist Quakerism” a contradiction of terms? Perhaps not, if questioning theism is a factor of seeking the truth, whether it confirms or counters one’s understandings of the Deity. That simply means that one has become (goodness!) a *Quaker theologian*. If, however, one commits to atheism or nontheism, against their yearly meeting’s faith and practice and against the historic and global Quaker movements, that seems incompatible with Quaker integrity. So, emerging nontheists are welcome to wear their Quakerism as an ornamental trapping “as long as they canst,” but eventually *they* will have to choose between a faith and practice rooted in knowing and following God and a declared belief in No God.

After all, taking leave of “god” (theology) for God’s sake (and God’s truth) is one thing; taking leave of the Living God due to theological perplexities over what is meant by “god” is another.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*, ed., David Boulton (Dent, UK: Dales Historical Monographs, 2006); see also David Boulton's book, *The Trouble with God: Building the Republic of Heaven* (Abingdon, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2005).
- 2 Tony Stoller, "Do Quakers Need God?" *The Friend* (9 June, 2006) 10-11.
- 3 *The Friend* (23 June, 2006) 8. Continuing affirmations include Bernard R. Bligh's appreciation for "an earlier generation of pacifists who had faith in God" without which later religious liberties would have been impossible (*The Friend*, 7 July, 2006, 8); Arthur Wright connects the peace witness to others bearing the likeness of God, and Diana Francis reminds us of the query, "What canst thou say?" in relation to members of Friends meetings and their experiential relation to God. Bernard J. Skillerne de Bristowe wonders if setting a "minimum standard" for Quakers goes against Friends' opposing credalism (*The Friend*, 21 July, 2006, 8), yet Richard Pashley argues that if an "irreducible minimum" is already set out in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (11.1) as being "divine guidance...and the equality of all before God" for members of Britain Yearly Meeting, "I cannot see how it can be argued that the Religious Society of Friends is their rightful spiritual home" (*The Friend*, 28 July, 2006, 8).
- 4 The question I have about the Meister Eckhart reference is how it squares with Thomas Kelly's reference in his 1939 William Penn Lecture, quoting Eckhart: "There are plenty to follow our Lord half-way, but not the other half. They will give up possessions, friends and honors, but it touches them too closely to disown themselves," in his essay on "Holy Obedience" (*A Testament of Devotion*, New York: HarperCollins 1992, 26). There is no way that Eckhart can be seen as deconstructing belief in God. In that sense, Grundy's objection with the basis for the title of the book is exactly correct; the main point of Eckhart's paragraph cited by Boulton is a reference to the Apostle Paul, who was actually declaring that he was willing to forfeit his own salvation if it would bring his fellow Jewish people to Christ in Romans 9:3. Here's the fuller quotation by Eckhart:

Man's last and highest parting occurs when for God's sake he takes leave of god. St. Paul took leave of god for God's sake and gave up all that he might get from god as well as all he might give—together with every idea of god. In parting with these he parted with god for God's sake and God remained in him as God is in his own nature—not as he is conceived by anyone to be—nor yet as something to be achieved, but more as an is-ness, as God really is. Then he and god were a unit, that is pure unity. (Raymond B. Blankey, trans., *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941, pp. 204-205)

Neither the Apostle Paul nor Meister Eckhart were nontheists; Eckhart was referring to Paul's spiritual unity with God, resulting only from abandoning notions of "god" as an object and responding to God as a subject—in relationship—in "complete self-surrender" to the dynamic Word of God. St. Paul's reference is to his willingness to be damned if it would bring fellow Jews to saving faith in Christ.
- 5 *Friends Journal* (February 2007) 44-45.
- 6 Does belief in No God as a doctrinal commitment exclude all Quakers and others who do believe in God? *Friends Journal* (February 2007) 44-46.
- 7 Again, belief in No God means there cannot be that of God in anyone, let alone everyone. This is what makes atheism and even nontheism incompatible with Quakerism even as defined by most liberal Friends. *Friends Journal* (March 2007) 5.
- 8 *Quaker Theology* #13 (Winter 2007).

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- 9 See Fager’s essay, “Lucretia Mott, Liberal Quaker Theologian,” *Quaker Theology* #10 (Spring-Summer, 2004). I’m not sure if the evidence shows her to be a nontheist, but she was indeed a liberal theologian.
- 10 Paul Tillich argued that God does not “exist” because God is not confined to categories of existence alone but also includes categories of essence and being. According to Tillich, there is no non-symbolic means of talking about God other than to refer to God as Being-Itself, the Ground and Source of our Being.
- 11 Henry J. Cadbury commented on the sorry state of Friends’ theological training: “Our Theological Illiteracy,” *Friends Journal* 1 (July 2, 1955) 6-7; he also notes how Quaker approaches to the Bible make a contribution to its liberal and valued interpretation: “Friends’ Use of the Bible,” *The Friend* 102 (1929) 373-375; “Friends’ Use of the Bible,” *The Friend* 123 (1950) 275-277; “A Liberal Approach to the Bible,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 14 (1957) 119-128.
- 12 Note the thrust of the prestigious Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology, delivered at the four great Scottish universities, endeavoring to “promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term—in other words, the knowledge of God”.
- 13 Some of the more thoughtful analyses of questions related to God can be noted on the Gifford Lectures (<http://www.giffordlectures.org/>), especially recent lectures presented by Alister McGrath, David Ferguson, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and Jean Elshtain. As a minimum, D. Elton Trueblood’s *A Place to Stand* (New York: Harper’s, 1969) should be considered as an important contribution to the demise of the “Death of God” movement of the 1960s—written by one of the leading Quaker thinkers of the 20th century. See also Trueblood’s presentation of “Theistic Realism” in his *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), his Swarthmore Lecture, *The Trustworthiness of Religious Experience* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1939), and *The Essence of Spiritual Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
- 14 While dictatorial religious leaders have had a spotted record regarding human rights over the last century, so have such atheistic leaders as Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot. Getting rid of “God” does not therefore insure nonviolent altruism. Consider such perspectives on the matter as Glen Tinder, “Can We Be Good without God?” *The Atlantic* (December 1989); and Greg Epstein, *Good without God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- 15 *Godless for God’s Sake*, 10.
- 16 See Henry J. Cadbury’s consistent references to God and Jesus’ teachings as foundational bases for pacifism in his many essays on the subject: “The Basis of Early Christian Antimilitarism” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 37 (1918) 66-94; “The Conscientious Objector of Patmos: The Revelation of John,” *The Christian Century* 39 (1922) 719-722; “The Individual Christian and the State,” *Friends Intelligencer* (Ninth Month 25, 1937) 654; “The Validity of Religious Pacifism,” *Christian Century* 60 (1943) 1534-1535; “Feeding Your Enemy in Peacetime,” *La Follette’s Magazine* (April, 1921) 54-55; “The Christian Verdict on War,” *World Tomorrow* 5:1 (January 1922) 15-17; “Answering That of God,” *The Journal of the Friends’ Historical Society* 39 (1947) 3-14. In receiving the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the AFSC in 1947, he declared, “...the thing that seems most important is the fact that while the world is waging a war in the name of Christ, we can bind up the wounds of war in the name of Christ.”
- 17 “Roots and Flowers of Quaker Nontheism,” <http://nontheistfriends.org/article/roots-and-flowers-of-quaker-nontheism-2>.

- 18 In addition to “The Making of a Quaker Nontheist Tradition,” by David Boulton and Os Cresson, *Godless for God’s Sake*, 87-100, see Os Cresson, “A Tender Concern for Religious Skeptics,” 2003, http://nontheists.quaker.org/CressonCadbury_10_27_03.pdf; “Seeking a Religion of Daily Life,” 2005, <http://www.nontheistfriends.org/article/seeking-a-religion-of-daily-life/>; “Henry Joel Cadbury: No Assurance of God or Eternal Life, with Added Notes,” <http://www.nontheistfriends.org/article/henry-joel-cadbury-no-assurance-of-god-or-immortality-with-added-notes/>.
- 19 Henry J. Cadbury, “The Bible, its Nature and its Use,” *Religion and Modern Life* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1927) 123-131.
- 20 This is why his New Testament writings continue to be of value for later generations of biblical scholars. In appreciation of his objectivity and careful analysis, I have sought to get back into print all of his New Testament books and fifty of his most significant essays. Books now available (each with a new introduction by myself) include: *The Making of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999); *The Book of Acts in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004); *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007); and *Jesus: What Manner of Man* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).
- 21 Cadbury’s references to God and the leadership of Christ are many throughout his voluminous writings; see, for instance: “In God We Trust,” *The Christian Century* 71 (1954) 822; “A Quaker View of the Church,” *Christendom* 9 (1944) 559-565; and “Priorities,” *The American Pulpit Series; Book 13* (Nashville: Abingdon/Cokesbury, 1946) 39-50. Harvard’s President, Nathan Pusey said, “Henry Cadbury’s whole life has personified devotion to God and his fellow man.” Mary Hoxie Jones, “Henry Joel Cadbury: A Biographical Sketch,” *Then and Now* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970, 11-70) 60.