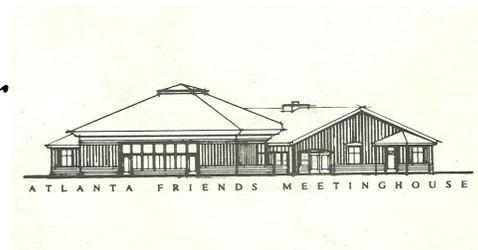


# Atlanta Friends Meeting Newsletter

Atlanta Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). All are welcome.



Meeting for Worship  
Each First Day (Sunday)  
10:00 – 11:00 a.m.  
701 W. Howard Ave.  
Decatur, GA 30030

## May 2013

**Query:** Do I live simply and promote right sharing of the world's bounty? Do I keep my life uncluttered with things and activities, avoiding commitments beyond my strength and light? How do I maintain simplicity, moderation, and honesty in my speech, my manner of living, and my daily work? Is the life of the Meeting so organized that it helps us to simplify our lives?

[Editors' Note: Because April Meeting for Business occurs late this month, the June newsletter will contain both April and May minutes. Extra space this month allows us to run an excerpt of greater length than usual. We hope you enjoy this first part of an essay from a forthcoming book of the same name by the late Ronald Dworkin, who died in February.]

### Ronald Dworkin: Religion Without God

The familiar stark divide between people of religion and without religion is too crude. Many millions of people who count themselves atheists have convictions and experiences very like and just as profound as those that believers count as religious. They say that though they do not believe in a “personal” god, they nevertheless believe in a “force” in the universe “greater than we are.” They feel an inescapable responsibility to live their lives well, with due respect for the lives of others; they take pride in a life they think well lived and suffer sometimes inconsolable regret at a life they think, in retrospect, wasted. They find the Grand Canyon not just arresting but breathtakingly and eerily wonderful. They are not simply interested in the latest discoveries about the vast universe but enthralled by them. These are not, for them, just a matter of immediate sensuous and otherwise inexplicable response. They express a conviction that the force and wonder they sense are real, just as real as planets or pain, that moral truth and natural wonder do not simply evoke awe but call for it.

There are famous and poetic expressions of the same set of attitudes. Albert Einstein said that though an atheist he was a deeply religious man: “To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men.” Percy Bysshe Shelley declared himself an atheist who nevertheless felt that “The awful shadow of some unseen Power/Floats though unseen among us....” Philosophers, historians, and sociologists of religion have insisted on an account of religious experience that finds a place for religious atheism. William James said that one of the two essentials of religion is a sense of fundamentality: that there are “things in the universe,” as he put it, “that throw the last stone.” Theists have a god for that role, but an atheist can think that the importance of living well throws the last stone, that there is nothing more basic on which that responsibility rests or needs to rest.

Judges often have to decide what “religion” means for legal purposes. For example, the American Supreme Court had to decide whether, when Congress provided a “conscientious objection” exemption from military service for men whose religion would not allow them to serve, an atheist whose moral convictions also prohibited service qualified for the objection. It decided that he did qualify. The Court,

called upon to interpret the Constitution's guarantee of "free exercise of religion" in another case, declared that many religions flourish in the United States that do not recognize a god, including something the Court called "secular humanism." Ordinary people, moreover, have come to use "religion" in contexts having nothing to do with either gods or ineffable forces. They say that Americans make a religion of their Constitution, and that for some people baseball is a religion. These latter uses of "religion" are only metaphorical, to be sure, but they seem parasitic not on beliefs about God but rather on deep commitments more generally.

So the phrase "religious atheism," however surprising, is not an oxymoron; religion is not restricted to theism just as a matter of what words mean. But the phrase might still be thought confusing. Would it not be better, for the sake of clarity, to reserve "religion" for theism and then to say that Einstein, Shelley, and the others are "sensitive" or "spiritual" atheists? But on a second look, expanding the territory of religion improves clarity by making plain the importance of what is shared across that territory. Richard Dawkins says that Einstein's language is "destructively misleading" because clarity demands a sharp distinction between a belief that the universe is governed by fundamental physical laws, which Dawkins thought Einstein meant, and a belief that it is governed by something "supernatural," which Dawkins thinks the word "religion" suggests.

But Einstein meant much more than that the universe is organized around fundamental physical laws; indeed his view I quoted is, in one important sense, an endorsement of the supernatural. The beauty and sublimity he said we could reach only as a feeble reflection are not part of nature; they are something beyond nature that cannot be grasped even by finally understanding the most fundamental of physical laws. It was Einstein's faith that some transcendental and objective value permeates the universe, value that is neither a natural phenomenon nor a subjective reaction to natural phenomena. That is what led him to insist on his own religiosity. No other description, he thought, could better capture the character of his faith.

So we should let Einstein have his self-description, the scholars their broad categories, the judges their interpretations. Religion, we should say, does not necessarily mean a belief in God. But then, granted that someone can be religious without believing in a god, what does being religious mean? What is the difference between a religious attitude toward the world and a nonreligious attitude? That is hard to answer because "religion" is an interpretive concept. That is, people who use the concept do not agree about precisely what it means: when they use it they are taking a stand about what it should mean. Einstein may well have had something different in mind when he called himself religious than William James did when he classified certain experiences as religious or the Supreme Court justices did when they said that atheistic beliefs could qualify as religious. So we should consider our question in that spirit. What account of religion would it be most revealing to adopt?

We must turn to this challenge almost immediately. But we should pause to notice the background against which we consider the issue. Religious war is, like cancer, a curse of our species. People kill each other, around the world, because they hate each other's gods. In less violent places like America they fight mainly in politics, at every level from national elections to local school board meetings. The fiercest battles are then not between different sects of godly religion but between zealous believers and those atheists they regard as immoral heathens who cannot be trusted and whose growing numbers threaten the moral health and integrity of the political community.

The zealots have great political power in America now, at least for the present. The so-called religious right is a voting bloc still eagerly courted. The political power of religion has provoked, predictably, an opposite—though hardly equal—reaction. Militant atheism, though politically inert, is

now a great commercial success. No one who called himself an atheist could be elected to any important office in America, but Richard Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* (2006) has sold millions of copies here, and dozens of other books that condemn religion as superstition crowd bookstores. Books ridiculing God were once, decades ago, rare. Religion meant a Bible and no one thought it worth the trouble to point out the endless errors of the biblical account of creation. No more. Scholars devote careers to refuting what once seemed, among those who enthusiastically buy their books, too silly to refute.

If we can separate God from religion—if we can come to understand what the religious point of view really is and why it does not require or assume a supernatural person—then we may be able to lower, at least, the temperature of these battles by separating questions of science from questions of value. The new religious wars are now really culture wars. They are not just about scientific history—about what best accounts for the development of the human species, for instance—but more fundamentally about the meaning of human life and what living well means. . . .

### *What Is Religion? The Metaphysical Core*

What, then, should we count as a religious attitude? I will try to provide a reasonably abstract and hence ecumenical account. The religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value. The first holds that human life has objective meaning or importance. Each person has an innate and inescapable responsibility to try to make his life a successful one: that means living well, accepting ethical responsibilities to oneself as well as moral responsibilities to others, not just if we happen to think this important but because it is in itself important whether we think so or not.

The second holds that what we call “nature”—the universe as a whole and in all its parts—is not just a matter of fact but is itself sublime: something of intrinsic value and wonder. Together these two comprehensive value judgments declare inherent value in both dimensions of human life: biological and biographical. We are part of nature because we have a physical being and duration: nature is the locus and nutrient of our physical lives. We are apart from nature because we are conscious of ourselves as making a life and must make decisions that, taken together, determine what life we have made.

For many people religion includes much more than those two values: for many theists it also includes obligations of worship, for instance. But I shall take these two—life's intrinsic meaning and nature's intrinsic beauty—as paradigms of a fully religious attitude to life. These are not convictions that one can isolate from the rest of one's life. They engage a whole personality. They permeate experience: they generate pride, remorse, and thrill. Mystery is an important part of that thrill. William James said that "like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, [religion] adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else." The enchantment is the discovery of transcendental value in what seems otherwise transient and dead. But how can religious atheists know what they claim about the various values they embrace? How can they be in touch with the world of value to check the perhaps fanciful claim in which they invest so much emotion? Believers have the authority of a god for their convictions; atheists seem to pluck theirs out of the air. We need to explore a bit the metaphysics of value.

The religious attitude rejects naturalism, which is one name for the very popular metaphysical theory that nothing is real except what can be studied by the natural sciences, including psychology.

That is, nothing exists that is neither matter nor mind; there is really, fundamentally, no such thing as a good life or justice or cruelty or beauty. Richard Dawkins spoke for naturalists when he suggested the scientists' proper reply to people who, criticizing naturalism, endlessly quote Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." "Yes," Dawkins replied, "but we're working on it."

Some naturalists are nihilists: they say that values are only illusions. Other naturalists accept that in some sense values exist, but they define them so as to deny them any independent existence: they make them depend entirely on people's thoughts or reactions. They say, for instance, that describing someone's behavior as good or right only means that, as a matter of fact, the lives of more people will be pleasant if everyone behaves in that way. Or that saying a painting is beautiful only means that in general people take pleasure in looking at it.

The religious attitude rejects all forms of naturalism. It insists that values are real and fundamental, not just manifestations of something else; they are as real as trees or pain. It also rejects a very different theory we might call grounded realism. This position, also popular among philosophers, holds that values are real and that our value judgments can be objectively true—but only on the assumption, which might be wrong, that we have good reason, apart from our own confidence in our value judgments, to think that we have the capacity to discover truths about value.

There are many forms of grounded realism: one is a form of theism that traces our capacity for value judgment to a god. (I shall shortly argue that this supposed grounding goes in the wrong direction.) They all agree that, if value judgment can ever be sound, there must be some independent reason to think that people have a capacity for sound moral judgment—independent because it does not itself rely on that capacity. That makes the status of value hostage to biology or metaphysics. Suppose we find undeniable evidence that we hold the moral convictions we do only because they were evolutionarily adaptive, which certainly did not require them to be true. Then, on this view, we would have no reason to think that cruelty is really wrong. If we think it is, then we must think we have some other way of being "in touch with" moral truth.

The religious attitude insists on a much more fundamental divorce between the world of value and facts about our natural history or our psychological susceptibilities. Nothing could impeach our judgment that cruelty is wrong except a good moral argument that cruelty is not after all wrong. We ask: What reason do we have for supposing that we have the capacity for sound value judgment? Ungrounded realism answers: the only possible reason we could have—we reflect responsibly on our moral convictions and find them persuasive. We think them true, and we therefore think we have the capacity to find the truth. How can we reject the hypothesis that all our convictions about value are only mutually supporting illusions? Ungrounded realism answers: we understand that hypothesis in the only way that makes it intelligible. It suggests that we do not have an adequate moral case for any of our moral judgments. We refute that suggestion by making moral arguments for some of our moral judgments.

The religious attitude, to repeat, insists on the full independence of value: the world of value is self-contained and self-certifying. Does that disqualify the religious attitude on grounds of circularity? Notice that there is no finally noncircular way to certify our capacity to find truth of any kind in any intellectual domain. We rely on experiment and observation to certify our judgments in science. But experiment and observation are reliable only in virtue of the truth of basic assumptions about causation and optics that we rely on science itself, and nothing more basic, to certify. And of course our judgments about the nature of the external world all depend, even more fundamentally, on a universally

shared assumption that there is an external world, an assumption that science cannot itself certify.

We find it impossible not to believe the elementary truths of mathematics and, when we understand them, the astonishingly complex truths that mathematicians have proved. But we cannot demonstrate either the elementary truths or the methods of mathematical demonstration from outside mathematics. We feel that we do not need any independent certification: we know we have an innate capacity for logic and mathematical truth. But how do we know we have that capacity? Only because we form beliefs in these domains that we simply cannot, however we try, disown. So we must have such a capacity.

We might say: we accept our most basic scientific and mathematical capacities finally as a matter of faith. The religious attitude insists that we embrace our values in the same way: finally as a matter of faith as well. There is a striking difference. We have generally agreed standards of good scientific argument and valid mathematical demonstration; but we have no agreed standards for moral or other forms of reasoning about value. On the contrary, we disagree markedly about goodness, right, beauty, and justice. Does that mean that we have an external certification of our capacities for science and mathematics that we lack in the domain of value?

No, because interpersonal agreement is not an external certification in any domain. The principles of scientific method, including the need for interpersonal confirmation of observation, are justified only by the science these methods have produced. As I said, everything in science, including the importance of shared observation, hangs together: it rests on nothing outside science itself. Logic and mathematics are different still. Consensus about the validity of a complex mathematical argument is in no way evidence of that validity. What if—unimaginable horror—the human race ceased to agree about valid mathematical or logical arguments? It would fall into terminal decline, but no one would have any good reason, along the way, to doubt that five and seven make twelve. Value is different still. If value is objective, then consensus about a particular value judgment is irrelevant to its truth or anyone's responsibility in thinking it true, and experience shows, for better or worse, that the human community can survive great discord about moral or ethical or aesthetic truth. For the religious attitude, disagreement is a red herring.

I said, just now, that the religious attitude rests finally on faith. I said that mainly to point out that science and mathematics are, in the same way, matters of faith as well. In each domain we accept felt, inescapable conviction rather than the benediction of some independent means of verification as the final arbiter of what we are entitled responsibly to believe. This kind of faith is not just passive acceptance of the conceptual truth that we cannot justify our science or our logic or our values without appealing to science or logic or value. It is a positive affirmation of the reality of these worlds and of our confidence that though each of our judgments may be wrong we are entitled to think them right if we have reflected on them responsibly enough.

In the special case of value, however, faith means something more, because our convictions about value are emotional commitments as well and, whatever tests of coherence and internal support they survive, they must feel right in an emotional way as well. They must have a grip on one's whole personality. Theologians often say that religious faith is a *sui generis* experience of conviction. Rudolf Otto, in his markedly influential book, *The Idea of the Holy*, called the experience "numinous" and said it was a kind of "faith-knowledge." I mean to suggest that convictions of value are also complex, *sui generis*, emotional experiences. . . . [W]hen scientists confront the unimaginable vastness of space and the astounding complexity of atomic particles they have an emotional reaction that matches Otto's description surprisingly well. Indeed many of them use the very term "numinous" to describe what they

feel. They find the universe awe-inspiring and deserving of a kind of emotional response that at least borders on trembling.

But of course I do not mean, in speaking of faith, that the fact that a moral conviction survives reflection is itself an argument for that conviction. A conviction of truth is a psychological fact and only a value judgment can argue for the conviction's truth. And of course I do not mean that value judgments are in the end only subjective. Our felt conviction that cruelty is wrong is a conviction that cruelty is really wrong; we cannot have that conviction without thinking that it is objectively true. Acknowledging the role of felt, irresistible conviction in our experience of value just recognizes the fact that we have such convictions, that they can survive responsible reflection, and that we then have no reason at all, short of further evidence or argument, to doubt their truth.

You may think that if all we can do to defend value judgments is appeal to other value judgments, and then finally to declare faith in the whole set of judgments, then our claims to objective truth are just whistles in the dark. But this challenge, however familiar, is not an argument against the religious worldview. It is only a rejection of that worldview. It denies the basic tenets of the religious attitude: it produces, at best, a standoff. You just do not have the religious point of view.

[To be continued -- Eds.]

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*Friends Journal* received three honors in the Associated Church Press's annual Best of the Christian Press awards. The April 2012 issue on "Membership and the Generation Gap" won an Award of Excellence (first place) in the Theme Issue category. Our 2012 website redesign won an honorable mention in the Website Redesign category.

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### **Third Friday Film Series at First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta**

470 Candler Park Dr., NE, Atlanta, GA 30307

Friday, May 17, 2013

#### **Bill Haney's "The LAST MOUNTAIN" (2011)**

A coal mining corporation – Massey - and a tiny community in West Virginia vie for the last great mountain in Appalachia untouched by mountaintop removal. Winner of the Pare Lorentz Award at the International Documentary Association. Doors open 7:00 pm; film starts at 7:30 pm sharp; popcorn and refreshments available. We welcome donations - \$1 to \$10 sliding scale.

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Our Clerk, David Foster, will have an exhibit, "Floral Wonders", at the GA State Botanical Gardens (on the south side of Athens) from May 12th until June 30th. There will be an opening reception from 2pm until 4pm on May 12th - a Mother's Day road trip to somewhere beautiful perhaps. You are all cordially invited.

## Calendar for Fifth Month (May) 2013

### Area Meetings for Worship

- Every First Day (Sunday), 10:00 a.m. – Meetinghouse, with a smaller group in the Library.  
Every First Day, 12:30 p.m. – Carrollton Friends Worship Group.  
St. Andrew's UMC Youth Center, 1106 Maple St.; Margaret Bray, 770-830-8705.  
Every Second and Fourth First Day, 10:00 a.m. – Canton Friends Worship Group.  
360 E. Marietta St.; 779-720-4669 or wrldpeas@mindspring.com.  
Every Second First Day, 10:30 a.m. -- Macon Friends Worship Group.  
Contact Diana Day, 478-227-8892; maconquakers.org.  
First Fifth Morning (Thursday) – AFSC office, 60 Walton St. NW, Atlanta.  
Every Fifth Day (Thursday) (except 1st of the month), 12:10 p.m. – East Lake Commons,  
Decatur. Contact Bert Skellie, 404-378-5883, bertskellie@gmail.com.  
Sixth Day (Friday) (2<sup>nd</sup> week of August through May), 8:45 a.m. – Friends School of Atlanta.  
Community Meeting Room, 862 Columbia Dr., Decatur, 404-373-8746.

### Weekly Events at the Meetinghouse

- Every First Day (Sunday)  
9:00 a.m. Adult Religious Education, Library  
9:15 a.m. Singing, Classroom A/B  
10:00 a.m. Meeting for Worship  
Every Second - Fifth Day (Monday-Thursday)  
8:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m. Smart Toddlers, Nursery playground  
Every Third Day (Tuesday)  
7:00 p.m. Silent Meditation, Library  
Every Fourth Day (Wednesday)  
7:00 p.m. Mid-Week Worship, Library  
Every Fifth Day (Thursday)  
7:30 p.m. Bible Study, Library

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If you would like to have a permanent nametag made, leave a request in one of the baskets on the front table. Indicate whether you prefer one that hangs around the neck or that pins. When Carol Gray has made one for you, it will be placed in the black file box on the greeting table.

If you would like to be included in the AFM database and receive the Newsletter by mail and/or appear in future AFM Directories, please send your name and contact information to Nina Gooch at ninagooch@gmail.com or 404-371-9873. Please indicate if you want to be in the directory, receive the newsletter by mail, or both.

Contributions to the Atlanta Friends Meeting may be placed in the slot marked "Contributions" in the greeting area of the Meetinghouse or mailed to the Treasurer at the above address. Thank you!

*This newsletter is a publication of the Atlanta Friends Meeting. Views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Meeting.*

To receive the Newsletter via e-mail, send a blank e-mail to afmnewsletter-subscribe@yahoogroups.com from the address where you want to receive the newsletter. You will receive a note back from Yahoo asking you to confirm your subscription; hit reply and you will be added to the list at no charge. To receive general announcements and to participate in discussion, follow the same instructions, but address the note to afmdiscussion-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. To receive announcements relating directly to the life of the meeting, send the same note to afmannouncementssubscribe@yahoogroups.com.

**DEADLINE FOR 6<sup>TH</sup> MONTH NEWSLETTER:  
MAY 25**

Readers are encouraged to submit letters, articles, notices and anything else of interest to Friends. Items should be sent directly to atlquakerltr@gmail.com **in plain text in the body of the email. Texts may be edited for length and format. Pictures should be in .jpg format.**