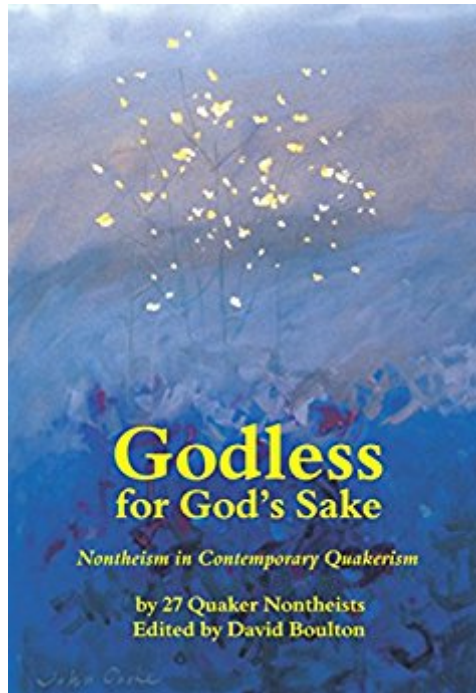




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# Godless For God's Sake - Nontheism In Contemporary Quakerism



## Synopsis

27 Quakers from 13 Yearly Meetings in four countries tell how they combine committed membership of the Religious Society of Friends with rejection of traditional belief in a transcendent, personal and supernatural God. For some of these 'nontheist' Friends, God is no more (but no less) than a symbol of the wholly human values of 'mercy, pity, peace and love'. For others, the idea of God and 'God-language' has become an archaism and a stumbling-block. Readers who seek a faith or world-view free of supernaturalism, whether they are Friends, members of other traditions or drop-outs from old-time religion, will find themselves in the company of a varied group whose search for an authentic 21st century understanding of religion and spirituality has led them to declare themselves 'Godless - for God's Sake'.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is very unique in that 27 atheists reveal why they are still Quakers. This book may seem strange to some because it is highly probable that many will have a stigmatized "Western/European", more precisely "Christian/Theistic", understanding of both religion and secular

beforehand. As one looks at other cultures and even domestic sociological trends, one cannot help but notice that religion, secularity, theism, and nontheism all overlap in a crisscross in significant ways. This book clearly shows that to be an atheist does not mean one is irreligious or nonreligious and it offers an internal look at how 27 people harbor both nontheism and religion simultaneously and how they interpret both at a personal level. Anthropologically and linguistically, religion really has nothing to do with gods, scriptures, or things that people often imagine a "religion" must have. Anthropologists have noted that, by the numbers of societies through time, the most common form of religion has been atheism (lacking gods), not theism. Some enlightening anthropological comments on this can be found in Ch.1 of "Atheism and Secularity" ([product link below](#)) for more on this fact. Since many in the West are often taught about theistic cultures in history (Europe and Middle East), but rarely about atheistic cultures (much of Asia, Africa, Polynesia, North America, etc.), it's understandable if people "cannot" imagine religions without gods. But this is why this book is very good. It offers a realistic look at religion through the eyes of Nontheist Quakers and shows that to be an atheist does NOT equate to nonreligion or irreligion. Current research does indicate that beliefs, behavior, and belonging are simply not congruent in individuals - meaning that what people do does not always follow in a cohesive fashion from what they believe nor do beliefs manifest into behaviors or attitudes automatically in a consistent direction (Chaves, Mark. 2010. SSSR Presidential address rain dances in the dry season: Overcoming the religious congruence fallacy. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49(1):1-14). This applies to nontheists as well since the lines between religion and secularity are often blurred. In fact, parallels between atheism and religion are becoming more commonplace. For instance, the fact that atheists have created atheist communities, self identification of people as 'atheists' and attaching values to it, creating collective identities of 'atheists' in the first place as if there were common characteristics between people who lack a particular belief, organizations strictly focusing on atheism (like American Atheists and Freedom From Religion Foundation), development of atheist music (Dan Barker and his CDs), development of religious rituals like freethought weddings, funerals and even baby dedications (Greg Epstein, an atheist chaplain, does this see NPR Report called "Removing Religion from Holidays a Tall Order" 12/27/07), atheist apologetics books by atheists defending atheism, atheist evangelism like Peter Boghossian's "A Manual for Creating Atheists" that strictly promotes atheist missionary work and seeks to convert unbelievers of atheism into their fold, emergence of atheist books on atheist parenting and how to raise your children as atheists (see next paragraph), participation and membership of atheists and atheist families in religious congregations (for diverse reasons), the existence of atheist chaplains in the military and universities serving the exact same

functions as religious chaplains, numerous spiritual books on humanism, legal treatments of atheism as religion in some court cases in the US, and many other social realities and manifestations seems to show that nontheism has many more dimensions than is often admitted. Indeed many books on atheism do not seem to emphasize that "atheism" is a major category of religion (the opposite of the major category called "theism") and that both theism and atheism can be split into many subcategories and divisions - usually into specific religions like Taoism or Islam. Religiosity and secularity cut both ways. Let us not forget the irreligious diversity in theism such as indifferent theists, agnostic theists, and deists. Europe has a good chunk of diverse configurations such as unbelieving theists, believing atheists, and those who are just culturally, not epistemically, embraceful (i.e. "Scandinavian Paradox"). Also let's not forget that many atheist religions do exist (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism, Church of Satan, Ethical Culture, Unitarian Universalism, Jewish Humanism, Raelianism, Scientology, other Humanist groups, etc). Atheist parenting books like "Parenting Beyond Belief: On Raising Ethical, Caring Kids Without Religion" and "Raising Freethinkers: A Practical Guide for Parenting Beyond Belief" offer some contact information on some of these. Other atheist religions can be found in [The Encyclopedia of Cults, Sects, and New Religions](#) and [The Encyclopedic Sourcebook of UFO Religions](#). A few books have tackled religion without theism, for example, [Religion Without God](#) by Ray Billington and [Religion without God](#) by Ronald Dworkin may shed much more light on this discussion. Another book like [Godless](#) is [Christian Atheist: Belonging without Believing](#) which may be of interest to some. Raelianism offers a purely naturalistic and explicitly atheist religion which may be of interest to those wanting to learn more about diversity in atheism (fundamental texts are found in "Intelligent Design: Message from the Designers". Britain has an interesting history with "secular religion" as well (see [Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850-1960](#)). These 27 atheist Quakers offer much of their biographies and experiences that have led them to stay within the Quaker tradition and how they see "religion". They are quite diverse just as theists are about these things and looking at etymology of the word "religion" would help in pinpointing how broad religion is. I won't spoil any details in the book, but their views are really quite open to many possibilities of understanding religion and are quite blunt about their nontheism. For further research on the diversity in atheism other cultures please check out the following 3 research texts [Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers](#) and [There Is No God: Atheists in America](#) and [Atheism and Secularity \[2 volumes\]](#) (Praeger Perspectives) (worldwide sociological data on beliefs and cultures). In "Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About

Contentment", Phil Zuckerman did a qualitative study and interviewed about 150 Danes and Swedes to see how they cope with life without theistic beliefs. However, he does note that just because some people do not have theistic beliefs, that does not mean they are without religion or are irreligious. Another excellent text is "State and Secularism: Some Asian Perspectives" which offers great perspectives from Asian cultures. A relevant scholarly collection of criticisms on the New Atheism and its social dimensions/impact please read *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Studies in Critical Social Sciences). Since the New Atheists are popular and do provide rigid and stigmatized versions of atheism, it is good to consider criticisms of those versions. Other international studies on atheism and secularity that discuss the religious diversity among the secular can be found in Kosmin, Barry A. and Ariela Keysar, Editors. 2007. "Secularism & Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives". Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC). Also, qualitative research on borderlands and overlap between nontheism, belief, and religion is available (see for instance, Rosen, Ina. 2009. "I'm a Believer - But I'll Be Damned If I'm Religious: Belief and Religion in the Greater Copenhagen Area - A Focus Group Study. Lund Studies in Sociology of Religion. Volume 8). In the end, the definition of atheism (from the Greek "a" (lack) + "theos" (god) + -isma (belief or condition)) means to lack beliefs in gods only. Everything beyond God - is optional - even religion. Probably people should see theism and atheism as components of both religion and secular since none of these terms are ever mutually exclusive or with hard boundaries in real life.

As one would expect from Quakers, this is a thoughtful, non-confrontational book beginning with essays explaining how one can lead a conscience-driven, nontheistic life and be welcome as a member of the Society of Friends. These essays are profound, readable, and helpful to an atheistic reader who might feel lonely in a world of believers. The latter part of the book is devoted to testimonies by nontheists who have been welcomed by Friends' Meetings.

The title "Godless for God's Sake" is a riff on Meister Eckhart who was a theist. Indeed Rome tried to call him something else, but he fought that accusation. The value of this book is that it compiles the thoughts of many leading Quaker non-theists. The down side is that many of them are holding positions that are present day theistic positions. The "death of God" movement was not a denial of God but a denial that we held a proper image of God, even a denial of the possibility of our holding a proper image. So the image is denied in order to allow the reality whatever it is to live. That is what Eckhart meant. So I thank the contemporary Quaker non-theists for telling us contemporary theists

what they think. On the other hand, I am hardly moved by their thinking. It is irrelevant to a Eckhart theist.

Great book of personal Quaker narratives --compiled by a true Nontheist Friend. The only people I've found resistant to the ideas found within this book are the Quakers themselves. These are also the people who need to read this book the most. The rest of us Nontheist Friends already get it!

I don't understand how an anti-theist (what is wrong with the word atheist?) would want to join a religion i.e. the RELIGIOUS Society of Friends. So I decided to buy and read *Godless for God's Sake*. Read the first chapter by David Boulton, which made no sense to me. I wish there was a way to dialogue with him especially. I want to understand, but unless there is an opportunity to share back and forth, to ask questions....learning doesn't happen, minds don't change....at least not in my case. I am Liberal Quaker. I don't care if you believe in Jesus or not. I don't particularly. But how can you belong to a religion, especially Quakers, and not believe in some kind of deity. I don't get it. I will continue reading and probably continue to get even more confused. For non Quakers, I don't care if someone is an atheist (pardon me anti-theist), agnostic etc etc. It doesn't matter. It only matters to me when it is within the Religious Society of Friends. Help me understand.

While it is virtually impossible to sum up the beliefs of all the nontheistic Friends (there is as much variation here as in any religion), the most remarkable aspect of this group is the way they continue to be a part of the Quaker community. Though regarded with some level of suspicion from both the religious and the atheistic, they persevere. Before the concept "clicked" for me while reading, I kept going back and forth trying to stick them in one group or the other; as atheists trying to cling on to a religious group or as theists that were just uncomfortable with the traditional notion of god. However, these essays have led me to believe that the authors are quite sincere in their positions. I strongly recommend this book, particularly for those brave enough to wonder if the gap between theism and atheism is as distinct as both sides lead us to believe.

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