

## What Do We Believe?

April 1, 2021 By [Adam Segal-Isaacson](#)



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### Some Notes Toward an Idea

In the novel *Monday the Rabbi Took Off* by Harry Kemelman, Rabbi David Small is asked by the Israeli police chief, “Do you believe in God?” Rabbi Small’s response is that it depends on three variables. The first variable is “I,” as one might expect, but it is worth looking more closely at the other two variables:

Do you mean in the same way that I believe that two and two make four? Or the way that I believe that light travels a certain number of miles per second, which I myself have never seen demonstrated but which has been demonstrated by people whose competence and integrity I have been taught to trust? Or do you mean in the sense



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that I believe that there was a man named Washington who won independence for the American colonies from Britain, or in the sense that I believe there was a man named Moses who did the same thing for the Jews from Egypt? . . . And finally, the third variable—God. Do you mean a humanlike figure? Or an ineffable essence? One who is aware of us individually and responsive to our pleas for help? Or one who is so far above us that He can have no interest in us?

This quote has been one I have thought about for years, as it seems to encapsulate the crux of discussions on what we believe: Whose authority do we take as reliable, and what is it we are describing? Quakers have had, over time, various answers to these problems, but fundamentally we rely on personal experience for our religious beliefs. We have tended to believe that each of us, at any time, can have a revelation of a new direction. One fundamental idea of Quakers is that “There is one . . . who can speak to thy condition,” as George Fox said in his *Journal*. The omitted phrase in the above quote is “even Christ Jesus,” which could be interpreted as meaning “that is, Jesus” or “which includes Jesus.” While Fox, being a Christian, probably meant the first option, I, being a non-Christian, tend toward the second. This leads us to the third variable in Rabbi Small’s question above: What is the “one” that Fox refers to?

Some among Quakers are quite sure that when we talk about God we mean Jesus, in one of the many formulations that Christians have had over time about him. For others, God is more nondescript, more like the “ineffable essence” that Rabbi Small mentions. Some Friends are agnostic (from the Greek for “not knowing”), saying that God is inherently unknowable or that they are undecided on the question of God’s existence. For some it includes other formulations entirely. There was much controversy in New York Yearly Meeting some years ago about whether Wiccan practices could be included in a Quaker context. Some Friends style themselves as “nontheists,” meaning that whatever they believe has no relationship to historical constructs of God. I say that I do believe in God but am a bit fuzzy about what that means precisely or



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whether it conforms to anyone else's conception of Spirit. Perhaps it is more of an aggregated *spiritus mundi* than usual conceptions of God. I think this falls within the variability of Friends.

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**We do ask new members to state what their beliefs are, and how they think they align with Quakers. We ask new members to be harmonious with our beliefs. I use the word “harmonious” with particular intent, because as someone once pointed out, if everyone is singing the same note, it’s not harmony; it’s monotony.**

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Most religions require one to adhere to a specific set of beliefs, but we Friends don't. We do ask new members to state what their beliefs are, and how they think they align with Quakers. We ask new members to be harmonious with our beliefs. I use the word “harmonious” with particular intent, because as someone once pointed out, if everyone is

singing the same note, it's not harmony; it's monotony. We are seeking harmony in our approach to religion. When I applied to join Friends many years ago, I made it quite clear in my letter of application that I was not a Christian. Over time I've come to define this as not believing in the *special* divinity of Jesus. Not that Jesus wasn't divine, but that he was no more divine than you or me. He may have been wiser, but that isn't the same as divinity. I was sent a clearness committee that included a very devout Christian Friend and another lifelong Friend. After discussion, it was clear that my views were harmonious with Friends views. It's a big tent. Somehow we manage to talk to each other even with many disparate ideas about God.

For mystics such as Friends are, we use our personal experience as the basis for our beliefs. Given the variety of religious experience, that seems appropriate. Of course, translating that inchoate experience in order to share it with others is

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inevitably incomplete and modified by the metaphors we choose to use. It becomes quite possible that when one person says “Jesus,” and another person says “Goddess,” and another person says “God,” or “Allah,” or “Krishna,” or “Gaia,” that we are actually all talking about the same thing, or at least about different aspects of the same thing, much like the blind men and the elephant. In that context, I think it is fair to say that no one human can comprehend the totality of God. The Bible more or less supports that view. It is even possible that someone who says, “I don’t believe in God,” means, more precisely, “I don’t believe in this particular way of thinking about God.” Thus when we talk about religious ideas, we need to strive for inclusiveness and generosity in our thinking. I have had fruitful discussions with people from many different backgrounds and different beliefs. I have also attended worship services in other religious institutions without feeling out of place, as, while the metaphors and language differ, the essential experience is similar.

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**Fortunately for Quakers, while we tend to be believers, we don’t actually require belief in God. What we do require—if we require anything—is to ardently seek to do the right thing. Our goal is right action, even when we disagree about what the right action in a given circumstance is.**

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**T**he use of personal experience as a guide leads to the question of what is appropriate authority. Quakers have vested that authority, historically, only in God, denying secular authority. But in our daily lives, we are constantly faced with questions of what to believe. We are bombarded with “facts” and questions of which ones are true. Some facts are in Rabbi Small’s first category: things we can demonstrate ourselves. But there are a lot of “facts” presented to us that fall into Rabbi Small’s second category: things that have been demonstrated by

others but which we cannot demonstrate for ourselves, like the speed of light. Here personal experience may play us false. For all practical purposes the sun *does* appear to rise in the east and set in the west, but we know that this is not true. Personal experience can be a useful starting point, but it does not always suffice. Arthur Eddington, the Quaker astronomer, had a leading to not dismiss Albert Einstein's theories out of hand simply because Einstein was German, even though many of his English colleagues did just that. Instead he followed through, eventually obtaining the first real demonstration that Einstein's theories were correct. The point is not that personal experience proves that thus-and-such is so, but that one can use personal experience to build to a proof that thus-and-such is so—at least for now. Scientific ideas are always in flux, always potentially to be changed as new data arises. It is not so different with religious leadings, which require repeated testing.

Keeping in mind the varieties of belief and the response appropriate to each is difficult, and often one makes mistakes. When one is on particularly shaky ground, such as "belief in God," our position must be much more tenuous. Fortunately for Quakers, while we tend to be believers, we don't actually require belief in God. What we do require—if we require anything—is to ardently seek to do the right thing. Our goal is right action, even when we disagree about what the right action in a given circumstance is. So perhaps our fundamental belief isn't even "there is one who can speak to thy condition" but "[h]e hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8). Humbly is key, as we must be aware of what we do not know or understand but must still try to do good. This gets to the fundamental principle of right action. As Fox himself said, "Be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one" (Letter, 1656). To follow Fox's words, however one perceives God, is, I think, the essence of practicing right action and doing good in the world.

Belief, while important, may be less crucial.

Christ Jesus

God

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## Adam Segal-Isaacson



Adam Segal-Isaacson is a member of Brooklyn (N.Y.) Meeting and has been involved in aiding communication among Friends.

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