

The Atheist's Guide to Quaker Process: Spirit-led Decisions for the Secular

Reviewed by David Boulton

America's Pendle Hill Quaker Center has a long tradition of publishing Quaker pamphlets which challenge, inform and inspire. This one, number 472, ticks all three boxes. It is not, as you might carelessly assume from the title, just another defence of nontheist Quakerism or another contribution to the debate about the existence of a divine intelligence. Its target readership is the growing number of *non-Quaker* nontheists employed by Quaker organisations, the men and women recruited partly because there aren't enough Quakers but also because 'the Quaker institution rightly seeks the wisdom and skills to be found outside Quaker circles... [including] members who are atheist, agnostic, sceptical, or simply have never given [religion] much thought'. But can a faith-based practice be adapted for use by nontheists without being rendered meaningless? Yes it can! is the message of the author, Selden W Smith.

Selden Smith is no johnny-come-lately to Quakerism. He attended a Quaker school (where not all the staff were Quakers), graduated at Penn State College and served on the American Friends Service Committee. His disbelief in God was no obstacle to his service as monthly meeting clerk, yearly meeting clerk and a member of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* Revision Committee.

As Janaki Spickard Keeler writes in the pamphlet's preface, 'Seldon Smith may not have a faith in God or a divine Source, but he does have a faith: he has faith in humanity and in our ability to access a deeper wisdom collaboratively through Quaker process. At the time when we are seeing the detrimental effects of collective societal decisions that have prioritized short-term gains and individual greed, Selden's faith in humanity to do better is a faith of radical hope'. Although the pamphlet was written for nontheist non-Quakers, 'it can also serve as a blueprint for how Friends and non-Friends can use Quaker process to work collaboratively for the greater good.'

The aspect of Quaker process most relevant to non-Quaker employees in Quaker institutions is Quaker collective decision-making. Employees used to secular decision-making by debate and vote may well feel unable to take part with integrity in what could seem to them a mystical process focused on attempts to discern the will of an almighty God they don't believe in. Some

nontheist Quakers may feel the same. Selden Smith recognises that nontheists may have difficulty in finding common ground in a process ‘based on a God concept’, but, he says, ‘the unifying principle is not actually all of us believing the same thing (we don’t), but all of us *attempting* to reach beyond ourselves, our egos, our personal goals, and our pride. If focusing on some Other can quiet my ego, then the vast potential of the mind beneath it, with all its power, creativity and chaos, has a chance to surface however fractionally and briefly. In my experience, the nature of that Other is unimportant. True, the moment may be fleeting – but when multiplied by everyone in the room, the result is a kind of secular communion, with its basis not in religious tradition but in care for the unity of the organization.’

Whether secular or religious, whether we experience it as wholly human or holy spirit, we can all participate in the search for ‘the sense of the meeting’. Whether aided by a ‘higher authority’ or by ‘the embrace of the profound but generally hidden capacity within our own heads’, we can avoid every group decision becoming a contest, a battleground. ‘We can open ourselves to its revelations, and even when they do not come, the conscious exercise of yielding puts the nontheist in the same mental space, with all its attendant benefits, as the worshipful intentions of the believer. True, they may have different notions of what they are yielding to; but then, that is true even when all present profess belief in the divine. Far more important is that when the nontheist and the believer are both giving up the desire to dominate – and, vitally, trusting each other to do so – they can, again, experience secular communion in a shared, safe place’.

Secular or religious, it hardly matters what word we use. It is in the process itself – what we do and how we do it – that theist and nontheist can find unity and community. Selden Smith’s pamphlet challenges all of us.

*‘The Atheist’s Guide to Quaker Process’ is obtainable from
pamphlets@pendlehill.org*