

# On Faith and Religion

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This paper is comprised of my thoughts on and experiences of faith and religion. It is substantially personal in nature and so might not be of interest to everyone. Indeed it is probably best thought of as an autobiographical note. I have included it among the *Implications of the Meaning of the Name* because the first four passages of the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* are a statement of monotheistic faith.

To begin with, a definition of faith. Very simply, faith is the belief that there is a God. The word Faith is often used to denote religion but this is a misnomer, probably introduced by Christians to imply that their beliefs about Jesus are equal to or even identical with the belief that there is a God. There can be no proof of the existence of God because that would make coming to faith merely an intellectual exercise, soulless and heartless, which it evidently is not. Coming to faith involves the growth of the soul and the engagement of the heart, and I believe that the strongest faith involves the activity of the mind. I believe the mind can clear the way for the soul to grow and the heart to move towards God. Consider, for example, the concept of truth. My understanding of truth is that truth is the comprehension of existence that is at once the most simple, the most beautiful, the most rationally compelling and the most spiritually satisfying. Now I ask you, what is more simple than the perfect one? God is The Perfect One. What is more beautiful than absolute perfection? God is absolutely perfect in every conceivable way. What is more rationally compelling than thoroughly reasoned understandings of existence? Existence in its entirety is comprised of God and His creation and they are perfectly reasonable. What is more spiritually satisfying than to contemplate on the source of all spirit? God is the source of all spirit. Hence I say that the existence of God is truth. I do not proffer this as proof of the existence of God but merely as a way that the mind can allow a thinking person to approach the belief that there is a God. Moreover, one of the most spiritually intense and satisfying times of my life was experienced while writing the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name* in Part ii of my website. This was an unequivocally mental activity and I have no doubt that it made my faith stronger.

I have no simple definition of religion, but as I understand it religion is essentially the expression of our beliefs about God and His creation or our beliefs about multiple gods or a Godless existence. I am only interested in those religions that profess belief in one God; the monotheistic religions. It is often said that there are three truly monotheistic religions; Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Some would say that there are more than three but I do not know enough about them to comment. However, if you have read my *Refutation of Christianity* then you will know that, according to my understanding, Christianity is not a truly monotheistic religion and so there are to my certain knowledge only two truly monotheistic religions. Having been born into Christianity, and raised and educated in it, I needed therefore to convert to either Islam or Judaism if I was to have the experience of sharing my faith, and so I considered both.

In relation to Islam, I have read some beautiful translations of the Qur'an and some fine commentaries on it (e.g. Abdullah Yusuf Ali's), and I have listened to beautiful recitations of the Qur'an albeit without understanding. I found in the Qur'an and commentaries some parts I liked a great deal and some parts I didn't like at all. I also attended a mosque on just two occasions for prayer and discussion on Muhammad, which is not a lot but it nonetheless helped me to make up my mind. However, the main problem I found with Islam is that, aside from the Qur'an and its commentaries, there is very little of interest to read. I think it is an understatement to say that in Islam original or critical religious thinking and writing are not encouraged. So it is that, aside from some parts of the Qur'an, I found Islam insufficiently interesting and it apparently has no place for free-thinkers and so I am satisfied that it is not the religion for me.

Judaism, by contrast, was a much stronger contender, at least in theory. I love the Torah and numerous Psalms and have greatly appreciated many and varied Jewish writings of the last two thousand years and so I believed I could comfortably and even happily convert to Judaism. So I attended a synagogue on Sabbath for the best part of a year and enjoyed many of the services. However, I have interacted with only two rabbis, one in person and one by email, and neither of those interactions ended well. The former was the rabbi of the synagogue I attended and I had not exchanged more than a few words with him before he let me know via an intermediary that he would not be converting me, without explaining why. The latter was the editor of a Jewish website and he ceased communicating with me in mid-exchange, again without explaining why. I suspect they

were both prompted to act in these ways by my writings but I cannot be sure because I did not even mention them to the former, only because it didn't come up in the few words we exchanged. However, I do not blame either of them because in my writings I do identify errors in the Talmud and I do criticise the rabbis and I probably wrote some other things they didn't like and so they might reasonably have taken offence, but my writings are a non-negotiable in my life and so I simply took these two encounters as a sign that Rabbinic Judaism is probably not for me.

Besides this I also object to the prohibition of pronouncing or even writing the name Yahweh and with the employment instead of surrogates such as Lord, Hashem or The Eternal, which I came increasingly to dislike. These surrogates interfered with my enjoyment of the Sabbath services, the siddur (prayer book), Jewish writings and even scholarly translations of the Torah. By contrast, I pronounce the name Yahweh every day in all of my addresses to God and would feel free to pronounce it and write it to others. It is far more meaningful and satisfying than any surrogate could be and it is clearly Yahweh's will that it should be used freely and in perpetuity, as evidenced by Exodus 3:15. I do not believe that Moses would ever have sanctioned the prohibition of the name Yahweh and it sincerely baffles me that it has become an established feature of today's Judaism, and so its prohibition also makes me feel that Rabbinic Judaism is probably not for me.

And so I departed from the synagogue and from Judaism and I doubt that I will go that way again. This might seem like an over-reaction but I can only say that, even aside from the above, I did not especially feel that I belonged in the congregation and I did not especially feel that I was sharing my faith, both of which might of course say more about me than them. However, and perhaps most importantly, I have very limited access to synagogues, Jewish congregations and rabbis, numbering one of each in total, and it is entirely possible that I would have a different experience elsewhere if such were geographically feasible, although there would still be the prohibition of the name Yahweh that would vex me.

And so to my religion or rather my lack thereof. It was either going to be Judaism or none at all and so it is none at all. That is not to say that I do not have a religious life because I do regard the Torah as sacred scripture and I do my best to do what I understand to be God's will. How much of the Torah is truly Mosaic I do not know, but I

am certain that Exodus 3:14 is and I am confident that Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is and so to be on the safe side I accept it all as sacred. And what is Gods will? I have said in the *Explanation of the Purpose of Creation* that it is our ultimate purpose in Creation to love God. The practical expression of that love is that we must do His will. I believe that the will of God is first and foremost that we must relieve the burden of suffering in His creation. I further believe that all suffering is one before God, so that the suffering of a pig is no different to God to the suffering of a human. The greatest share of the burden of suffering in Creation is borne by farm animals and so this is where I have directed most of my charitable attention.

However, if you do not fancy being a religious solitary, and if you are looking for a truly monotheistic religion built on the foundation laid by Moses, and if you are not put off by my limited experience of Judaism or by my objection to the surrogates for Yahweh, and if you have not written anything likely to offend the rabbis, then you will not do better than to convert to Judaism. Muhammad, on the other hand, did not even mention Exodus 3:14 or its contents in his Qur'an, let alone comment upon its meaning, and the Qur'an nowhere articulates the depth of meaning that is to be discovered in Exodus 3:14, and so I cannot recommend Islam to anyone for whom such considerations are important.

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