

Friendship of a Follower & Freethinker

JN and CH met while working together with people on the streets and opening an emergency winter shelter in Marin. These selections from an online conversation between a Pastor who identifies as a “Follower of Jesus” and a secular Freethinker (me) occurred over a decade ago. The dialogue didn’t last long online, but there were “Walks and Talks” from coffeeshops for several months

The Pastor: JN, “follower of Jesus,” an evangelical pastor of Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Marin County, CA. Graduate of Golden Gate Baptist Seminary. Businessowner, shelter provider, model plane flyer, husband and father.

The Freethinker: CH, “follower of Nature,” teacher and writer in Marin County, CA. Graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary. Former Protestant minister, interfaith chaplain and county shelter director, husband and father.

From the Pastor:

“Hope you are doing well. Thanks for your last response to my science ponderings. I’ve concluded that you and I just see things differently. Where I see design and purpose you don’t. I draw conclusions from the wonder and complication of DNA, wonderful sunsets, amazing displays of nature and conclude there is a divine mind behind it all. You simply don’t. I don’t want to hammer and re-hammer the issue. The conclusions we draw are simply what they are.

The beauty of nature has always moved me, even from when I was young and before I came to faith. As I have grown older my appreciation has only grown and the wonder of God and his wonderful gift to us is just stunning. Behind books and articles are authors, behind wonderful paintings are amazing artists, song come from song writers, and in and of themselves it has never made sense to me that they are their own source. But again, we simply disagree on the evidence we see.”

From the Freethinker:

“Well, there you are, my friend. Those seem like reasonable (intelligently designed) conclusions you offer. I too see wondrous and beautiful artistry behind, in and through the universe: Nature—without a face or Personality, not demanding devotion or praise or prayer. Simply, complexly, Nature. Some may call the natural order “God” (Allah, Shiva, Tao, Buddha, Jesus—countless human faces), but

why give it a name and put a mask on it? (remember Joseph Campbell's "the masks of god"?).

I'm not stuck on the name "Nature" but it seems to encompass everything (like Cosmos, Universe, etc)—the unity of all. Really exquisitely incredible and fascinating, worthy of our intense exploration, investigation and reasoning. I simply cannot take that leap beyond what I see, feel, touch, think. . .

Is there "order" and "design"? Yes. . .and chaos and disorder and disease, suffering and death. All part of the natural way of the cosmos. If part of a "plan" of a Supreme Being I would have to question His/Her skills, motives and maybe sanity.

Maybe we could take a Walk and Talk next week?

From the Pastor:

"I know, you sorta made my point, you draw a different conclusion then I do. Like one of my old buddies used to say "exactly!"

I don't see God as demanding much, actually he seems to allow people to do their own thing if they want.

What I enjoy is not that I have to serve God, but that I get to serve him in the midst of his wonder and beauty. Yes there is disease, heartache etc. this is a fallen world not forced into anything, but allowed to make choices, humans are not robots you know that. We are not doing very well with our responsibility that I think we both agree with. They get to nurture their children or rape them (sadly). God is not weak because he chooses to give us the choice to be evil or good. There is no inherent weakness in a janitor who cannot both clean or not clean a room. God is not weak as some try to argue by giving humans the choice to be good or evil.

I remember one day coming to the awareness that I didn't "have to call my sponsor" but that I had the privilege of calling him to get help. God does not force me call upon him for help and wisdom.... I get to. That's very cool! It's not you "must" but rather "you may." I'm amazed often at how He meets me in the midst of my life.

Some folks choose to "serve" nature in the very same way. They don't have to... they get to, (like you do) I'm just going one more step that's all."

From the Freethinker:

“Yes, but. . .there’s always a Yes But in these conversations isn’t there? Two of your words grabbed me: Serve and Janitor! When you say you serve a God who “doesn’t demand much” I really wonder about your eternal soul! This is swimming upstream to the entire history of Christianity and Religion. If people pretty much determine their own “fate” then why be of any one faith or have faith at all? What is faith if not “being faithful” to follow a God who says, believe in Jesus or you’re lost? (I know you are a closet “universalist” but let’s get real). A Janitor? Hmm. But the janitor did not make the room, or the people, or the “stuff” to make a mess with! Your “Janitor” did. And we are left to clean up for ourselves. Not a very good strategy or plan if you ask me.

I do not see that I am “serving” Nature. I think, once again, you would like to make a one-to-one correspondence between what you call God and I call Nature, as if I have simply replaced God with Nature which I haven’t. I see no Personality in the universe and if there was a Person “behind it all” what would they look like (as I said before, are we saying Allah, or the Goddess or Shiva. . .?). Servanthood implies a Master to bow down to in obedience. The natural cosmos is not a Master to serve but a living inter-relationship to enjoy. Ahh, maybe this is where we meet, at this point of joyful relation!? That is indeed Good, though not God!

On another subject. . .

From the Pastor:

Ah, the question mark in the sky, written as if by clouds. If we were to see something this clear in the sky and with any kind of regularity (more than random ink blots, or the rare puffy cloud that looks like a chubby bear) surely we would conclude that it was by some kind of design. Not random, not chaotic. Yet everyday, we are confronted by the wonder of nature full of complexity, full of marvel and mystery. The aged salmon returns to the spawning grounds year after year. Trees with their amazing ability to draw literally tons of water from the ground year after year. Dare we say this is random, chaotic, or somehow say this is “order without design?” If we do is this not some kind of “FAITH” after all?

Where or where is the example of sustained order without the design of a master? The wonder of it all!

From the Freethinker:

I truly agree, my friend. If we saw these “signs” in the sky, there might be some evidence someone “up there” was communicating. Yet, we have. . .books, old books (scriptures) and a very old tradition handed down that says, “Just believe.” I’m with you on the wonder, complexity, marvel and mystery, the salmon, the trees, and humans too! Nature is an incredible artist! Quite natural. But not “miraculous,” or super-natural. Can there be common ground exactly where you identify—in the wonder and mystery? One foot on the earth and one in the heavens seems an unnecessary stretch, even for someone who works out all the time! Thanks for the questions!!

As our conversations grew less frequent and we grew out of touch I continued to hope we would continue our talks. Yet, after a particularly difficult exchange after coffee presenting our views on abortion, I think it caused a breakdown of our friendship.

Not hearing from him for some time after the shelter closed, I posted several jokes on “The Lighter Side”:

Why did the atheist cross the road?

He thought there might be a street on the other side, but he wouldn’t believe it until he tested his hypothesis.

Why did the atheist throw her watch out the window?

She wanted to see if it was designed intelligently enough to evolve into a bird.

A minister, a priest, a rabbi, and an atheist meet in a bar at 10:00 a.m. The bartender asks the minister what he’ll have, and the minister orders a martini. The priest also orders a martini, as does the rabbi. When the bartender asks the atheist what he wants, the atheist says he’d like a cup of coffee. “Why aren’t you having a martini like those guys?” asks the bartender. “Oh,” says the atheist, “I don’t believe in martinis before lunch.”

How many atheists does it take to change a light bulb?

Two. One to actually change the bulb, and the other to videotape the job so fundamentalists won’t claim that god did it.

Atheist: What’s this fly doing in my soup?

Waiter: Praying.

Atheist: Very funny. I can't eat this. Take it back.

Waiter: You see? The fly's prayers were answered.

I wish my friend, the “follower of Jesus,” very well in his life and ministry. I value the time we worked and shared walks and talks together.

Chris Highland

(originally published on the former Rational Doubt blog on Patheos)