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People Don't Know What They Don't Know

By Freddy Davis

Conor Friedersdorf is a staff writer for *The Atlantic* magazine. He also writes a periodic newsletter called *Up for Debate*.

As he was preparing for one of his newsletters, he solicited some of his readers' thoughts on their personal religious journeys – the results of which he published in one of his *Atlantic* articles. These respondents hailed from a variety of religious traditions, and reveal a large variety of thoughts about religion. Their responses give us some very interesting things to chew on as we think about our own interaction with people regarding faith matters. Here is a synopsis of the responses Friedersdorf received.

- Betsy values spirituality and appreciates people who practice it rightly. However, she believes those kind of people are few and far between. She is convinced that most religious people are in it for influence and self-aggrandizement.
- Chad is a faithful Christian whose personal relationship with God is unwavering. He recognizes that there are people who claim to be Christians but don't live up to its standards. But his faith is found in God, not in sinful people.
- Paul grew up Catholic but as a teenager began questioning the teachings of Christianity – particularly concerning hell. Over the years he struggled, but finally, in his 30s, began studying Buddhism and found inner peace in that practice.
- Bob grew up as a Reform Jew and continued practicing it for many years. However, at one point a dispute arose within the synagogue and, being on the wrong side, he was kicked out. Since that time he has become an agnostic and now considers himself a secular Jew.
- Jess grew up a Reform Jew and later married a man raised Episcopal who converted to

Judaism. However, she does not consider herself spiritual. She loves participating in the Synagogue as it helps her maintain a connection with her cultural traditions. She now considers herself "religious but not spiritual."

- Jan considers himself a religious pluralist. He believes each person must develop their own unique approach to the "supreme reality," and it is found in many religions. He believes there is an underlying unity in all the various religions around the world.
- Tyler grew up in the Mormon church and deeply appreciates the organized aspect of his faith. There he has found a community that loves and cares for one another.
- Kathleen grew up in a nonreligious family, but they allowed her to go to a Christian camp with her friends when she was young. There she was "born again" (to her parent's chagrin) and participated in an evangelical church. Intrigued with the Bible, she studied theology in college and seminary, but in the process adopted a liberal form theology and rejected her former evangelical beliefs. She now teaches her liberal theology at a secular university.
- Irene was raised Greek Orthodox in the family of a priest. She never rebelled from her faith, and she herself married a man who became an Orthodox priest. Now retired, she and her husband served the church for over 30 years.
- Max is an atheist, and over the years his "disbelief" has only become more certain to him. That said, he has completely withdrawn any support for militant Atheists. He believes their provocations have actually caused people to consider a choice between faith and reason, and have made more people choose faith. He sees this as pushing people to abandon reasonable thought.

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- Benjamin grew up in a family that was regular in church, but were rather nominal in their actual faith. In college he began participating in a Christian campus ministry, and through a friendship with one of the interns, came to know a genuine relationship with Christ.
- Jaleelah grew up in a Muslim home in Canada, and attended Muslim Sunday School as a child. It was, overall, a good experience for her, and even now she continues to appreciate the camaraderie and shared culture of her group. However, she later came to question the legitimacy of the religion, and has become rather skeptical about religion in general.
- Cherry is a regular church attender and believes that actually going to church is very important for Christians because it helps them stay close to God.
- Isaa is a 70 year old baptized believer in God, and a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Earlier in life, he saw church simply as a place that could help him fulfill personal goals. Over the years, however, he has come to see it as a place where he is able to meet God.

Friedersdorf's purpose in writing the article was basically to show some of the many ways people think about religion, and he does, indeed, provide a fairly wide variety of thoughts and attitudes. In reading through this, a couple of things jumped out at me.

The first was that most people's thoughts and understanding about faith matters is about an inch deep. It seems that the majority think about God to some degree, but have either rejected Him or pretty much put Him on the back burner of their lives. The other thing that struck me was that even those who had an interest in spiritual things had little serious understanding of their faith – regardless of which faith they followed.

Today I am going to address this in a little more personal sense than I normally do in my articles. Rather than just throw out information, I am going to share some insights, then invite you to personally interact with me as it fits your needs.

My own experience interacting with people has paralleled Friedersdorf's findings to an amazing degree. That said, for the most part, I actually tend to not think very much about other people's experiences. Perhaps I do it a little more than most people because I write a lot about this topic. But even with that being true, my greatest focus tends to be on things that directly affect me.

To be honest, most of the people I am close with are Christians, because they are the ones most in my world. And when I do interact with people who are not Christians, I am not generally thinking about their relative position among all of the other people in society. Rather it is generally more about the interaction I am having with them directly. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that per se, it is just an observation about the way people tend to engage society.

But Friedersdorf's article does give me pause to think about people outside of my usual inner circle – and that's a good thing. I need to be aware that I live in a world where my Christian environment, and my personal passion for knowing the Bible and growing in Christ, is not the norm. I also need to be reminded that even though there are a lot of people who want nothing to do with God, virtually everyone has a vacuum in their spirit that they are longing to fill. Some of them are keenly aware of it and just don't know how to address the problem, while perhaps the majority don't even consciously recognize it, but still express it somehow when they have moments that cause them to pause and reflect.

What Friedersdorf did for the purpose of writing his article is a fantastic way of non-threateningly

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bringing a person's thoughts about faith to the surface. All he did was ask people to "describe their relationship with organized religion." Then he just shut up and let them talk. His purpose was, obviously, to gather information to write his article. But what a fantastic way for a Christian to get a conversation going. Doing it this way creates an environment where talking about faith is a normal matter for discussion.

There is not a specific "right and wrong" way to engage a person about faith matters. Where Christians get off track is when they just don't do it at all. There are times when it is possible to just jump in and start sharing about Christ. But for many people, probably most, they need a bridge that creates trust before they are willing to open up on such a sensitive topic. Asking a question and being willing to actually listen to their answer is a fantastic way to create that trust. Then, when it is appropriate (and

you will discern when that is), you will naturally have an opening to share about your faith.

There is one other thing that it is also important to zero in on – your own preparation. It is one thing to gain another person's trust so they will talk to you. It is another thing altogether to be prepared to share with them. Christian discipleship training is perhaps one of the most neglected parts of most believers' spiritual life. It is easy to go to church and enjoy worship and Bible study, but it takes a special personal commitment to learn the things we need to share when the opportunities open up.

It is not really that hard, but it doesn't just happen automatically by osmosis. We must make an intentional decision to do it, then figure out the things we need to learn. I am more than delighted to help you with that if you would like my input. Feel free to e-mail me anytime at Freddy@marketfaith.org.

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