

Loving Friends and Loving God

By Gary Chartier



By loving friends, we love God, whether we know it or not. The experience of friendship can point people to conscious awareness of the divine presence, and thus to explicit love for God. So friendship has the potential to be a rich spiritual resource. Because God is the world's transcendent Creator, we can experience and respond to the divine presence under any circumstances. So we do not have to choose between loving God and loving creation. Indeed, we love God precisely as we love the created world. In particular, we love God as we love other people. Thus, friendship can be a form of love for God.¹

The Defining Nature of Friendship

Love between persons is fundamental to who we are. Every genuinely moral choice is an implicit expression of love for God, for to accept a moral limitation on my being is to accept my status as a creature.² With every moral

choice I confront comes the requirement that I make or reaffirm a fundamental decision about my own identity. Am I God? Am I valueless? Or am I a part of God's good creation.³ Each of us faces these questions in every situation. Every time I make a choice about some concrete, particular thing in the world I also decide who I am. Even when not directly confronting another person, even when I am alone, I have to ask if my choices take the reality and value of others—and myself—into adequate account. Our encounters with other people pose basic moral and spiritual questions with particular force and clarity: will we exist with others in relationships of love, or will we sacrifice them—or ourselves—in relationships of abuse, domination, or neglect? Will we be open to the world, or will we refuse to acknowledge any reality beyond ourselves?⁴

Personal relationships call up, challenge, and engage every aspect of our humanness.⁵ Thus, interpersonal love fundamentally reflects who we are.⁶ When we love, therefore, we decisively express our basic orientation to the world—and thus to God.⁷ Friendship is a particularly intense and committed kind of love. It embodies and expresses the decision to accept oneself as a part of God's good creation in several ways.⁸

Friendship and Respect for Difference

It does so, first, because it is grounded in respect for otherness.⁹ My friend is different from me. No matter how much I love her, no matter how much our interests may converge, no matter how much we may identify with each other, I must recognize that she is still free, that she can surprise me, that our desires may not always coincide. To take her seriously as a friend is to grant her the space to be who she is.

Of course, if the identities of two friends merged, they wouldn't be friends. Love is so powerful, so profoundly moving, precisely because it is given freely by another. A friend who does not stand over against me cannot really love me. The inner logic of friendship

requires the maintenance of otherness, the respect for difference, between the friends. Allowing a friend to be herself can prove to be a delicate moral task.

Friendship, Fidelity, and Vulnerability

To love a friend is to be faithful to her even as she grows and changes in the exercise of her freedom. This might be an easy task if a friend's interests and one's own, a friend's personality and one's own, a friend's identity and one's own, were simply the same. But the reality of a friend's difference from oneself challenges

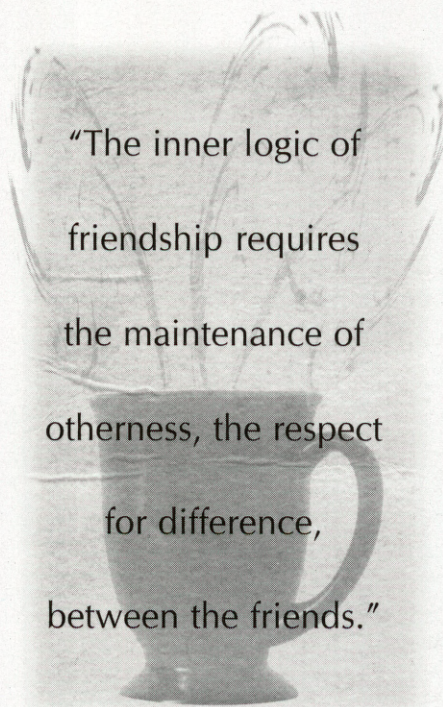
one to be loyal despite change and conflict. That a true friend is in an important sense a part of oneself only complicates matters further. By defining who one is with reference to who a friend is, by making her part of oneself even as she differs from oneself, one accepts a potentially threatening vulnerability.

To take a friendship seriously is to accept the responsibility to be loyal to someone to whom one is vulnerable. A friend's claim on one's loyalty constrains one's options. Accepting this claim means that one must consistently define one's own projects with reference to hers, even when—precisely when—

they are not identical with one's own. In opting for fidelity, one accepts oneself as limited, as finite—as a creature.

Accepting Friendship, Gifts, and Grace

Another important moral and spiritual dimension of friendship is the essentially graced quality of a life in which friendship is a part. Accepting friends and friend-



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ships as gifts; accepting a friend's ongoing, particular self-gifts; and accepting oneself as a friend's gift are all ways in which, as a friend, one owns oneself as a part of God's good creation.

As a Christian, I will believe that God has been at work in and through the events leading to the formation of my friendships. In this sense, each friendship is a gift of grace. But it is possible to accept and respond to the experience of grace in friendship whatever one believes about divine providence. That a friendship cannot be planned or controlled confronts us directly with its character as a gift of grace. Friendships come into being when we least expect them. The factors that predispose us to enter into them are often unconscious: we often want particular people as friends for social, cultural, and psychological reasons that we cannot articulate. Seemingly random circumstances bring people together and give them opportunities to discover each other as potential friends. Thus, our friendships tend to be beyond our conscious control.

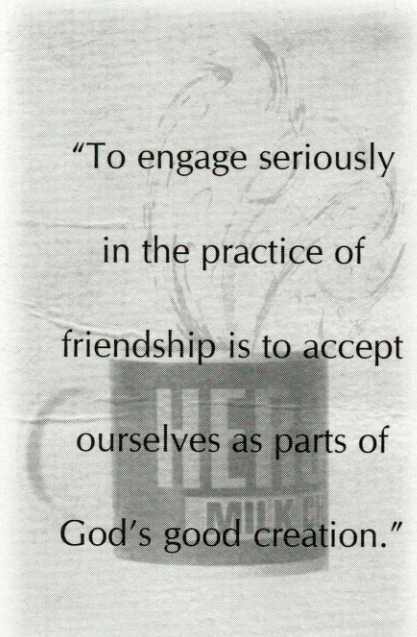
Becoming and remaining a friend reflects the recognition that our lives are better—more fulfilled, marked by greater flourishing—when we share ourselves with others than when we close ourselves off in individualistic isolation. As a friend, I accept that I need someone else if I want to experience a certain quality of life. After a friendship has come into being, and I have bonded my life with that of a friend, I also need her if I am to be the person I am, to retain the identity I have achieved in relationship with her. In this sense, I am dependent on her.

As one weaves one's life together with a friend, one becomes dependent on her in other ways as well. A friendship itself is a gift. But gifts of various kinds may also accompany or result from it. Gifts of time, money, expertise, and emotional support may all express a friend's love. Receiving these gifts joyfully may sometimes be easy—but not always. Fearful of domination and abuse, we may flee dependence. But accepting gifts is part of what it means to be a friend. To let a friend

know that she has something valuable to give by accepting her gift is a gift in its own right. Our friends need to know that what they offer is significant, that it matters. When we grant the reality of our dependence by accepting our friends' gifts, we affirm again our status as God's creatures.

To make another person a close friend is to make her part of oneself. Who one is, then, depends on who she is. One is always vulnerable, of course, to forces outside one's control, but in friendship one explicitly owns and accepts one's vulnerability. One chooses it. One agrees that one's identity will be affected by the actions of another. Realizing that her love has shaped and

continues to shape who one is, one accepts that one's identity is a friend's gift. It is contingent on her choices and on what befalls her. "A friend is a part of my own being. If he is no longer there, then I have somehow died with him."¹⁰ The friend's gift thus includes, in a sense, the gift of myself. To receive this gift of grace thankfully, instead of shunning it as a source of enervating dependence, is also to choose life as a part of the good creation.



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Friendship as a Response to the Good

Friendship represents a response to the good discerned in the friend. I don't mean that we seek—or should seek—only the virtuous or the beautiful as our friends. But everything that is at all is good. The simple fact of existing is good. Being is good. The only perfectly bad thing would be something that didn't exist at all. Of course, the good that every finite thing embodies is limited—that's just what finitude means, and the goods realized in human lives are distorted by, among other things, humanity's moral imperfection and brokenness. The fact remains, though, that, whenever we experience true friendship, we respond to qualities of our friends as in some sense good. Friendship is morally significant, then, because in it we respond to the claim of a goodness external to ourselves.

To engage seriously in the practice of friendship is to accept ourselves as parts of God's good creation. It is to grant, practically if not always explicitly, that we are finite, contingent, vulnerable. It is to deny the possibility that we could ever exist on our own, and thus to affirm that we are creatures. In owning ourselves as creatures, we experience again and again an essential element of the conversion that is necessary if we are to relate appropriately to God. For in friendship we accept that we are not divine. We recognize our dependence, even as we celebrate the goodness of the grace on which we are dependent.¹¹ Thus, we orient ourselves aright in relation to God.¹²

Distractions and Disagreements

Some people seem to think there's a basic, unavoidable conflict between loving other people and devotion to God. For them, God "is the only thing worthy of love." Every other reality is less important, less valuable. Prayer and devotional practices are the only genuinely worthwhile activities. We are wasting time and emotional energy when we focus our attention on other people—time and energy we could instead give to God. Our friends are at best distractions from God, who is our only true Beloved.

Such people are wrong. They rest on a misunderstanding of God's relation to the world—a misunderstanding according to which friendship is a spiritual distraction and God and creatures compete for our love. I believe the Christian doctrine of creation helps to show why this conception is doubtful.

As well as highlighting God's presence in the world, the Christian doctrine of creation also points to the difference between God and creation. Being created means being the kind of reality that couldn't exist on its own. Being created means being finite, limited, constrained. By contrast, God is infinite. God isn't a thing, an object, or a bit of finite reality. As the universe's infinite Creator, God is qualitatively different from each of the things that make up the universe, and from the universe in its totality.

We can encounter God anywhere and in any context. God doesn't live in church. Having pious feelings isn't the only way to be sensitive to God's presence (indeed, it may not even be an especially good way). Turning away from particular things in the world won't enable us to know or love God better, for we can turn away from one finite thing only to another finite thing and God is not a finite thing at all. The Creator is not a competitor with any aspect of creation for our attention and love. A God who could be a human friend's rival for our affections—even a successful rival—isn't really God at all.

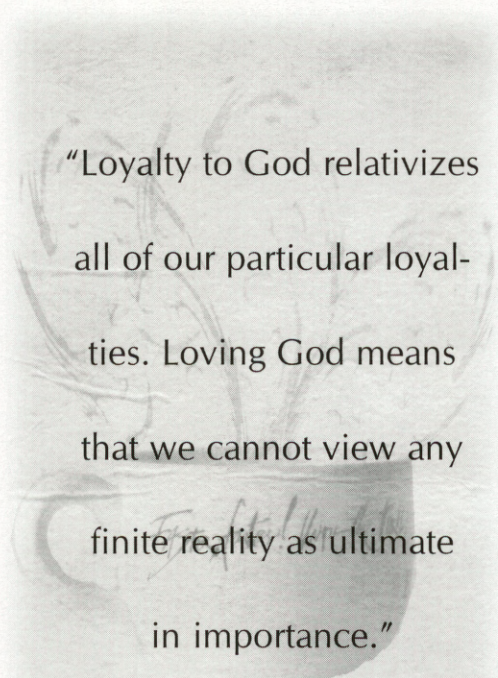
Friendship and Idolatry

The actual significance of Christian concern with idolatry can help us avoid the guilt and anxiety that sometimes follow from the view that God and creation compete for our love. We can't treat any finite thing, any creature, as if it were infinite—as if it were God—without falsifying the nature of reality. If we are to treat each bit of finite reality appropriately, then we can't allow any single constituent of the creation to trump the claims of all the others. Only if we give ultimate loyalty

solely to God, to the infinite reality that transcends every particular object in the world, will we be able to put every finite reality in perspective and give each its due. That's why Christians ought to avoid idolatry.¹³

Being loyal to God does clearly mean, then, that one can't act as if a friend—or, for that matter, a car, a house, an institution, a nation, even a planet—is the only thing that really matters. Loyalty to God relativizes all of our particular loyalties. It puts each one in its proper place. Loving God means that we cannot view any finite reality as ultimate in importance.

It doesn't mean, however, that we can't or shouldn't care deeply, intensely, about particular people and communities and things. Indeed, love for God manifests itself precisely in our love for and attachment



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to particular goods.¹⁴ We need to take seriously not only the claims of those realities that are central to our own particular projects, but also those we haven't chosen to focus on, but which may matter profoundly to others.

It is not our job to replace God. We are not responsible for the universe. To act as if we were would itself be an especially pitiful and futile kind of idolatry. We can and should have particular, finite projects of our own, causes and relationships that matter to us deeply. And, obviously, if we care about some things we will be able to devote less attention to others.¹⁵ But we can avoid idolatry as long as we don't treat the things and people we care about primarily as the only things and people worth caring about at all.

Idolatry as a Moral Concept

Avoiding idolatry means being morally responsible by respecting each element of the creation for what it is. Idolatry is wrong, not so much because idolatrous behavior doesn't give God what God is due, but because it doesn't give the creation what it is due. "God does not stand in line waiting his turn at the wicket, not even at the head of the line. Rather, he brings this or that neighbor to the head of the line, and demands our best attention for him. And at another moment, perhaps, he closes the wicket, sends the whole line away, and demands to inspect our books."¹⁶

We refuse to succumb to idolatry by choosing to live morally responsible lives, not by forsaking life in the world. Provided we don't attempt to be God, there's no reason our particular commitments should come into significant conflict with our general loyalty to the good of creation most of the time. Rejecting idolatry means that when conflicts occur we must be willing to let our particular loves take their proper places in relation to the other elements of created reality.

Idolizing someone else is bad for her or him as well as for others whose legitimate claims we may ignore because of our idolatry. Treating a friend as a source of

absolute good imposes a crushing burden on her or him. Being treated as the center of the universe imposes an enormous responsibility on the idolized person for the idolater's well-being, one the idol is incapable of bearing. In turn, the idolater may use this sense of responsibility as a basis for trying to control the idolized person. That it tempts the idolater to manipulation and control, however, isn't the only thing that makes idolatry bad for the idolater. Enchanted by the idolized person, she or he may give up freedom, agency, and responsibility. She or he may find the failure of the idol to deliver the ultimate

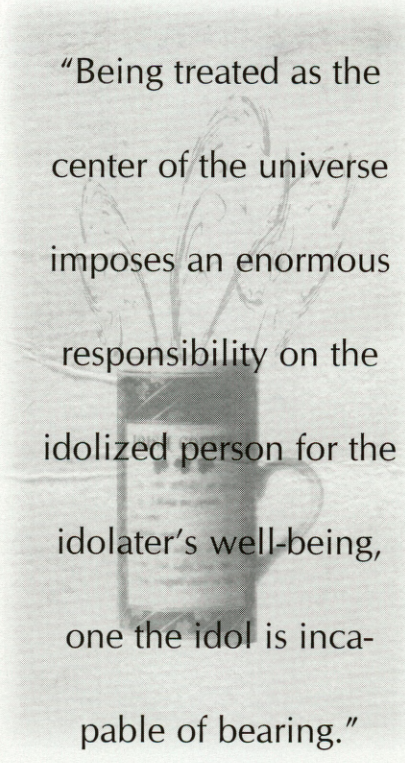
satisfaction for which she or he seeks profoundly disappointing. Recognizing persons as infinitely precious and cherishable, but nonetheless incapable of substituting for God, incapable of trumping absolutely the claims of other creatures, is the only way to relate to them properly. Idolatry is a bad idea. However, passionate desire, devotion, and care aren't idolatrous: they are appropriate responses to the immeasurably precious creatures human beings are. Idolatry is wrong because of what it takes away from the idolater, the idolized person, and from others.¹⁷

Understood correctly, then, we should avoid idolatry for the sake of the creaturely world. Loving friends, loving them intensely, needn't be idolatrous. It doesn't have to keep us from loving God. We don't have to

ration our love for our friends to make sure we've got enough left over for God. We can love God precisely as we love our friends. God is not in competition with the world, or any part of the world, for our loyalty. Any reality to which we could be loyal only as we turned away from things in the creaturely world wouldn't be God at all: it would be an especially demonic idol.

Disagreeing with Friends in a Religiously Plural World

This is especially important in an environment like the one in which many, if not most, contemporary



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people live. People in our world confront a dizzying array of religious options. It should not surprise us that people we care about, people who care about us, disagree with us about some or all of the things that matter most to us.¹⁸

Proselytization is not the purpose of friendship. One doesn't become someone's friend to win her over to one's own religious community or convictions. A relationship with a person directed toward converting her isn't a friendship. At the same time, beliefs—our own and other people's—ought to matter to us. What we believe can determine how we experience our world, how we relate to ourselves and other people. Our religious convictions can significantly influence the kinds of lives we lead and different convictions have the potential to shape very different lives, so some disagreements are certainly worth taking seriously. Just because someone says, "This belief works for me," it doesn't follow that the belief in question really does work for her, that it doesn't lead her to engage in self-destructive behavior, that it doesn't prevent her from reaching her full potential. Precisely because we care about people, then, we need to care about what they believe.

Any disagreement about important issues can be stressful, but disagreements with friends about religious matters can be especially painful if we feel that our loved ones' disagreements with us may prove that they are outside the circle of God's grace. We may have learned somewhere to fear that God will accept friends who disagree with us about important religious matters only if the friends change.¹⁹ Thus, we may be tempted to shun people who disagree with us, or to view prospective friends as suspect if their convictions differ from ours. Even if we do open ourselves to people who differ with us, we may secretly fear that they are outside the pale of God's grace.

Friendship as a Sign of Spiritual Health

Realistically, it is likely that loved ones with whom we differ are morally flawed, struggling, divided human

beings—just like us. That means that their devotion to us may be fitful and that other loyalties may compete with their loyalties to us. But it doesn't mean that their love for us isn't at least as genuine as ours for them. If their love for us is real and respects the claims of the rest of creation, then friends who disagree with us give good evidence of God's work in their hearts and lives. We can understand their friendship for us as love for God, as the fruit of God's grace, and as appropriately responsive to God's love.²⁰

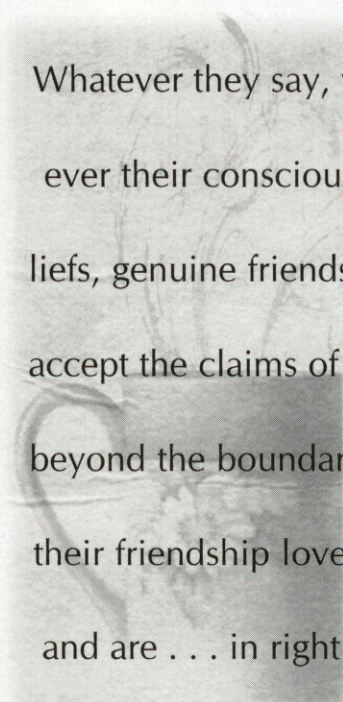
This realization frees us to share lovingly our convictions about the most adequate way to be fulfilled and responsible persons in God's world. Because we love friends, we will want their lives to be as rich as possible with the gifts—relational, emotional, physical, and social—that God wants to give them. But we will not suppose that our efforts will determine whether they accept God's grace or not, whether God accepts them or not, or whether God is lovingly present and active in their lives.

People love God implicitly in friendship. Whatever they say, whatever their conscious beliefs, genuine friends who accept the claims of those beyond the boundaries of their friendship love God and are in an important sense in right relationship with God.²¹ Thus, even if they

disagree with us about things that matter profoundly, and even if they hurt themselves and others as a result, our friends' love gives evidence that they are not strangers to God's saving grace.

Loving Those with Whom We Disagree

Some Christian discomfort with close relationships across religious boundaries appears to be grounded in a concern with what we might label "purity." Some Christians seem to feel as if close contact with non-Christians will defile them, make them unclean.²² At its roots, the idea of purity involves maintenance of social



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order and group identity. Categorizing and classifying people, places, practices, objects, and events imparts meaning and structure to a seemingly chaotic world. Establishing group boundary markers—we are the people who do this, who don't look like that, or who don't go there—enables a community to feel secure and stable. Purity rules serve to maintain group identity.

Sometimes, of course, Christians worry about relationships with those outside the Christian community not only because of a vague fear of impurity, but also because they worry that their beliefs will be challenged, their perspectives altered, and their habits changed. Of course, it's possible that a person might give up valuable convictions and practices because of a friendship. However, there's no reason for this possibility to make anyone fearful of a genuine friendship.

Still, few if any friendships—and certainly none between people whose religious or moral beliefs differ significantly—will be free of tension. Such tension is no reason to forsake a friendship. Instead, it can provide an opportunity for growth. Friends who disagree should be able to learn from each other. The respect friends have for each other means that one friend won't force her beliefs on another, but each will still likely share her beliefs—not only verbally, but also (and more importantly) by embodying them.

Seeing what a particular vision of life looks like in practice can be a profound challenge to one's assumptions about fulfilled, flourishing human existence. Obviously, that can be very unsettling. But unless one supposes that one already has everything figured out and has nothing to learn, one will seek to learn from a friend instead of ignoring, denying, or rejecting the things that make her different from oneself. To close oneself off to a friend's challenge—even for supposedly religious reasons—would be to indulge in an excessive self-confidence that represented an implicit denial of one's creatureliness.

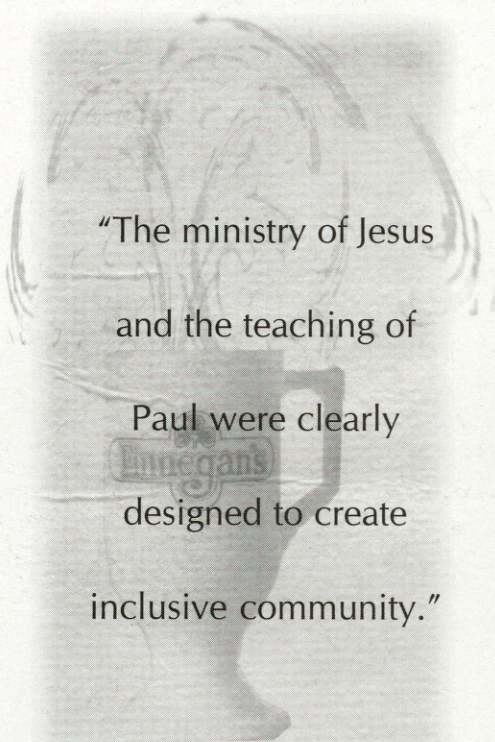
Breaking Down Boundaries That Separate People

The conviction that God is the world's transcendent Creator, that God's truth is infinitely greater than our beliefs, that God's world is far vaster than our particular communities, should make us question any attempt to keep our beliefs or lives pristine, pure, unchallenged, and unchanged. The church, like any other community, has come to exercise demonic power in our lives if we refuse, whatever the price, to allow contact with those outside its boundaries to upset our orderly lives within it, if we seek to protect our identities at any cost.

Any community must be open to challenge and change if it is to avoid idolatry. The Christian church has a particularly strong reason to reject rules about purity that divide people. The ministry of Jesus and the teaching of Paul were clearly designed to create inclusive community. Christianity was founded on the premise that boundaries separating people and communities should be broken down.²³

Throughout his letters, Paul wrestled with the question of how a movement that started Jewish could become a truly universal community. His solutions and prescriptions were, of course, carefully shaped—albeit pragmatic—responses to the particular challenges he confronted, but the consistency with which they exhibit his commitment to inclusiveness in the face of prevailing purity rules is both obvious and noteworthy.²⁴

Shunning those whose views might unsettle us or challenge the convictions of our communities is a manifestation of idolatry and should be avoided—not embraced. Paul and Jesus were both committed to fighting the idolization of human communities and the consequent creation of boundaries designed to keep outsiders at arms' length. Thus, a central Christian belief and a fundamental trajectory of the Christian tradition militate against Christian exclusivism.



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Learning Through Religious Disagreement

A friend with whom one differs about religious issues will usually have reasons for viewing things the way she does. If she holds her beliefs responsibly, if she has thought about them carefully and reflectively, engaging with her will enrich one's own understanding. One undoubtedly has things to learn. One should expect to change in the course of sharing life with one's friends. Indeed, one should be disturbed if one does not change.²⁵

It is certainly possible that one may find one's own convictions essentially unaltered by one's relationship with a friend who does not share them. Even then, however, one may well find that this relationship enables acquisition of a clearer understanding of just what it is one believes, what one's beliefs mean, and how important they are. Dialogue helps to clarify one's thinking whatever the outcome.²⁶

A true friend is another self. This means letting her into the inmost core of one's being, being vulnerable to her, accepting that one can and indeed will change in relationship with her. So respect for a friend's otherness cannot mean keeping her at a distance. The call to fidelity in friendship is a call to remain in relationship with another despite stresses and tensions. The recognition of one's own creaturely finitude is a challenge to continue learning from disagreements with a friend.

Experiencing God and the World Through Friendship

People find it difficult to believe in a loving and empowering God for an enormous variety of reasons. But it is certainly unlikely that someone will be able to believe if she lacks the experience of genuine community, if she is closed in on herself—fearful, self-protective,

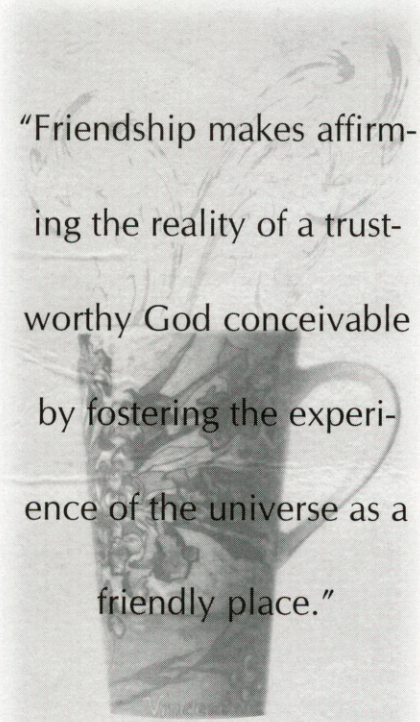
or arrogant. Friendship can help to make healthy religious belief possible for such a person. It can contribute to the development of basic trust: the confidence that the universe is, despite its darkness, danger, and undeniable obscurity, a fundamentally friendly place, a place in which it is worthwhile to risk oneself in love.²⁷ Thus, it can nurture an openness of spirit that makes dialogue, including dialogue about ultimate questions, possible. It can also encourage recognition of the self's

limited character, its inherent relatedness, as a result of which relationship—including relationship with God—can come to be seen as empowering rather than threatening.

One will find it hard to experience the world as a benevolently ordered, meaningful whole if one's own social world is in chaos. A personal life void of purpose or bereft of evidence of love, affirmation, and support is hardly a fertile breeding ground for religious belief. The collapse of the social structures that have given one security and hope may occasion the collapse of one's belief in God as well. Without a sense of basic trust, fostered in relationship and community, one's attitude toward God will be no different from one's attitude toward any other reality different

from oneself. The only kind of God one will be able to imagine will be an object—an object to be manipulated or a competitive oppressor. One may thus distort one's picture of God beyond recognition, or deny that God-talk refers to any kind of reality at all.²⁸

If "the absence of human community . . . renders prayer well-nigh impossible,"²⁹ then only when such community exists will authentic, appropriate religious believing be viable for many people. This is obviously a societal and political as well as personal problem. A small group rarely has enough power to stabilize or reconstruct other people's social worlds on its own, but what happens on the personal level matters, too. As friends offer each other love and trust, fear can be exchanged for love, and doubt can give way to hope. When people learn to trust each other, and when, as a result, they come to experience the world in trustful ways, they will be able to believe in a trustworthy God



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as well. Close friendship provides a setting in which people can acquire the sense of basic trust crucial to the formation of belief in God.

Friendship makes affirming the reality of a trustworthy God conceivable by fostering the experience of the universe as a friendly place. It does so by encouraging the kind of dialogue within which friends can explore the possibility of God. Being a friend, existing in friendship, makes one a certain kind of person.

Friendship expresses and reinforces a basic commitment to be in the world dialogically, to attend to the surprises with which things and other people present us, to relativize our own perspectives and projects as we listen—literally and figuratively—to others. Attending to what is other than oneself, allowing one's preconceived notions to be challenged is essential if one is even to consider the possibility that a religious interpretation of reality might be appropriate.

This kind of openness is necessary if dialogue about religious questions is to get underway. It is not simply a prerequisite for discussing belief in God, however; it is to a significant degree the goal of the dialogue as well. A healthy belief in God is expressed, crucially, as one opens oneself to the rest of reality, recognizing one's inherent finitude and fallibility. This is precisely what the kind of openness required for dialogue is about.³⁰ One can offer implicit love to God without being overtly religious, but one cannot be overtly religious in a healthy way without adopting a basic stance of openness to the world.³¹ Such a stance, characterized by readiness for dialogue and respect for otherness, can be both generated and sustained by the experience of friendship.

Friendship cannot create religious convictions on its own, but it can foster a way of experiencing the world—one marked by venturesome openness and hopeful trust—that make religious belief an option. If a person's social world has been shattered, or if it never cohered in a meaningful way at all, it will be very hard for her to see the world as anything but a place of threatening darkness. The experience of friendship can serve to light a candle in that darkness, to begin the

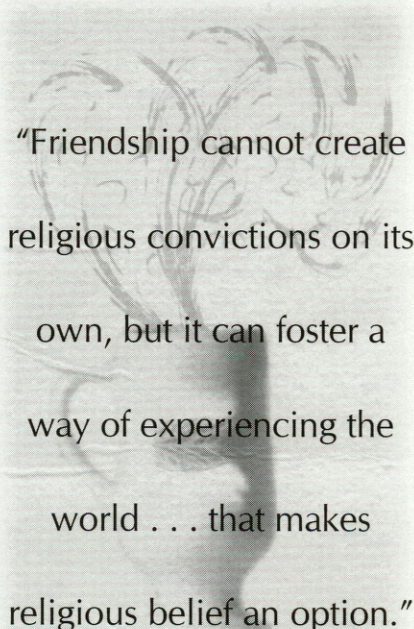
painful and tedious process of constructing or reconstructing a social reality within the context of which she can find it possible to believe.³²

Is That All There Is?

In love relationships such as friendships, we experience the quest for more than we could ever

possibly have. We may unreflectively expect those we love to provide us, not just with fidelity, but also with ultimate security—including security that comes from knowing they will never die. Our behavior suggests that we want them to offer, not merely deep and committed love, but a total acceptance that will permanently heal our doubts about our standing in the universe. Friendship is an arena in which we struggle against—and thus, ironically, affirm—our contingency.

The anxiety to which these unfulfillable demands are reactions is one that our friends cannot assuage. They cannot secure us against fate. Even as we realize this and struggle against it, however, we confront the demand within ourselves for something that can. Again, the secular person can conclude that this striving for ultimate security and acceptance is finally futile, that it is the product of self-deception. But she must at least acknowledge that it expresses a desire for more than secular reality seems able to deliver, which raises the question whether secular reality truly is all the reality there is.³³



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Friendship and the Desire for Total Acceptance

Friendship provides us with distinctive opportunities for evil as well as good. The vulnerability to which

we commit ourselves in friendship gives us the opportunity to do each other profound harm. Sometimes—unfortunately—we can erase from our memories the faces of strangers or mere acquaintances whose lives we have damaged. It's a lot harder to forget the pain we cause our friends.

If our moral failings are especially evident in our friendships, then these relationships also challenge us with particular intensity to seek healing and acceptance. While a friend from whom one has become separated can accept one anew, our moral failures may prompt us unconsciously to want more—an acceptance that covers, not merely this particular failure, but all possible failures, past and future. Such an acceptance must represent an affirmation of who one is in one's totality, without illusions—otherwise, what would it be worth?³⁴

How can we find such acceptance? The secular response must be, again, that is not forthcoming, that our desire for it is finally unrealistic. So it may be. But secular people who continue to search for it can at least be pardoned for finding their quest an anomaly with which secularity itself is ill-equipped to deal.

Various features of friendship—the basic trust it fosters; the hope it reflects; the protest it registers against futility, decay, and death; its embodiment of the search for meaning; its inability to offer the ultimate fulfillment with which it may seem to tempt us; and the desire for acceptance it occasions—all fit somewhat uneasily within the confines of modern secularism. Christian theology discloses friendship as a form of implicit love for God. However, a theological analysis of contemporary culture also suggests ways in which aspects of the experience of friendship can point to discontinuities within secular experience, discontinuities that might spur some secular people to raise the question of God explicitly.

Celebrating One of God's Richest Gifts

Friendship and the love of God do not conflict; they would do so only if God were a finite thing in the world, instead of its infinite Creator. It is precisely in and through our encounters in the world—including those with our friends—that we respond in love to God. We don't avoid idolatry by regulating or suppressing our human loves to make appropriate room for God in our lives (how much room would be enough?), but by acknowledging the claims made upon us by the diverse

constituents of the creation and refusing to give any of them—including ourselves and our friends—a pseudodivine absoluteness. Even if, fearful of vulnerability and contingency, we could flee from the world to God we would be ignoring the example of Jesus and our hope for life beyond death as well as denying ourselves the opportunity to experience the rich gifts God has given us in creation.

Taking friendship seriously requires us to own ourselves as parts of God's good creation. Thus, friendship is a form of faithful response to God—whether explicit or implicit. Because friendship is a kind of implicit love for God, religious differences need not prevent Christians from seeing friends with whose convictions they differ as nonetheless inside the circle of God's grace—simply in virtue of their genuine friendship. While some conflicts may occur between persons with differing religious convictions, this need not keep them from being friends. Indeed, their differences may spur each to growth and a greater appreciation of God's truth.

Basic trust is crucial to belief in God. Indeed, community—including the community of friendship—is the only thing that makes religious belief a live option for some people. The experience of friendship can help foster basic trust, and thus render belief possible. Numerous features of friendship also raise questions contemporary secularity may find it hard to answer, and in so doing help nudge people toward explicit love for God.

Loving friends is neither irrelevant to Christian spirituality nor a distraction from the love of God. As a form of love for God and an inspiration for basic trust and explicit Christian belief, it can play an important role in contemporary Christian life. That friendship is a way in which divine love is shared and experienced gives us yet another reason to celebrate it as one of the richest of God's gifts.

Notes and References

1. I am especially indebted to Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations 6: Concerning Vatican Council II*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton; New York: Seabury, 1974), 231-49. See also Rahner's *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

2. Cf. Rahner, "Atheism and Implicit Christianity," *Theological Investigations 9: Writings of 1965-67*, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder, 1972), 153: "The person who accepts a moral demand from his conscience as absolutely valid for him and embraces it as such in a free act of affirmation—no matter how unreflected—asserts the absolute being of God, whether he

knows or conceptualizes it or not, as the very reason why there can be such a thing as an absolute moral demand at all."

3. Cf. Rahner, "Anonymous and Explicit Faith," *Theological Investigations 16: Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, trans. David Morland (New York: Crossroad-Seabury, 1979), 55-56: a person "accepts God when he freely accepts himself in his own unlimited transcendence. He does this when he genuinely follows his conscience with free consent, because by such an action he affirms as well the condition of possibility of such a radical option which is implicitly bound up with this decision, i.e. he affirms God."

4. See Rahner, "Unity," 239-44. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), 40: "there is one limit to man's attempt to draw all content into himself—the other self. . . . One can destroy . . . [the other self] as a self, but one cannot assimilate it as a content of one's own centeredness." See also, Rahner, "The 'Commandment' of Love in Relation to the Other Commandments," *Theological Investigations 5: Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (London: Darton; New York: Seabury, 1966), 456: the "commandment" of love "does not command man to do something or other but simply commands him to fulfill himself, and charges man with himself, i.e. himself as the possibility of love in the acceptance of the love in which God does not give something but gives himself."

5. Rahner, "Unity," 242.

6. *Ibid.*, 243.

7. Persons and communities of persons are not the only sources of value in the universe. Paintings and dogs and trees and cars and houses also exert distinctive claims on us. But it's easy to forget this when we deal with inanimate objects. They don't overtly resist us. It is not always easy to secure the results one desires from a piece of metal or wood. But we are confident that in such cases technological manipulation will suffice to ensure that we will finally get our way.

By contrast, persons are free. They present us with special challenges. They're not pliable in the same way inanimate objects—or even animals—are. They respond unpredictably, sometimes perversely, to what we do. Our relationships with them put us in our places more directly and obviously than our relationships with nonhuman elements of the created order. They challenge us more directly than do the nonhuman creatures (animate and inanimate) we usually encounter. Relationships with people require us more insistently to ask fundamental moral questions about our identities than relationships of other kinds.

8. My analysis here depends on Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 242-46.

9. On this point, see Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Putnam, 1951), 200-208. Weil's view appears to be that only God's grace could empower friends to respect each other as other. When they do so, they give evidence of openness to God's work in their lives. In *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 24-34, Tillich offers a nuanced analysis of the balance between identity and difference in love relationships (including friendship) as he reflects on the tension between *philia* and *eros*.

10. Ladislaus Boros, *Meeting God in Man* (London: Herder, 1968), 57; cf. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 245.

11. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 246.

12. Luke Johnson, *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 82-83.

13. The notion of "radical monotheism"—the Christian

alternative to idolatry—as an essentially moral and political concept is ably developed in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, with Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper, 1970); see also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 13; and Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women under Pressure* (New York: Harper, 1966), 230-35.

14. Cf. Robert Merrihew Adams, "God as the Good" (unpublished Wilde Lecture 1, 1989).

15. Cf. Adams, "Idolatry" (unpublished Wilde Lecture 3, 1989), 3.

16. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans; Leicester, Eng.: IVP, 1986), 232-33.

17. The work of Diogenes Allen has helped inspire this insight. See Allen's *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1987).

18. This issue is addressed sensitively, though with explicit reference only to family members, in Karl Rahner, "The Christian Among Unbelieving Relations," *Theological Investigations 3: The Theology of the Spiritual Life*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton; New York: Seabury, 1974), 355-72. My analysis and response to the problem represents largely an extension of Rahner's, and I am indebted to him here as in many other places. Rahner does not employ precisely the same solution to the problem as I do—i.e., that the very fact that a genuine, nonexploitative love relationship exists at all is evidence of what he would call "anonymous Christianity"—but my response is consonant with his overall perspective.

19. If we accept this supposition while also caring about people whose beliefs are, we think, inadequate, we may find ourselves torn. On one hand, we may want to share the good news contained in (what we hope are) our more adequate beliefs. On the other hand, we may discover deep within ourselves the secret, vaguely guilty hope that our beliefs don't really matter very much. That way, differences of belief won't separate those who care about us from God's grace (and perhaps also from us, its presumed recipients).

20. This is not, in and of itself, an interpretation of non-Christian experience that Christians should expect non-Christians to find appealing. It is not a kind of "natural theology," an argument designed to convince non-Christians of anything. It is a Christian reading of experience, a theological interpretation of human existence that follows from basic Christian convictions about God and creation. Its function is not to convince anyone to join the Christian community, but to emphasize to fearful or arrogant Christians that God is present as accepting and transforming love throughout the entire creation.

21. Joseph A. DiNoia, "Implicit Faith, General Revelation and the State of Non-Christians," *Thomist* 47 (1983): 209-41, has argued that the notion of implicit faith is unhelpful as a general way of talking about the spiritual status of non-Christians. In response, I have avoided this expression—despite its popularity—in place of alternatives like "implicit love." However, I am not persuaded that DiNoia's challenge to some Catholic discussions of "implicit faith" is decisive against the view I have articulated here.

First, DiNoia focuses on "faith" in a rather narrowly propositional sense, seeking to show that non-Christian morality and spiritual sensitivity do not imply belief in the central doctrines of Christianity. These arguments do not count against a view of implicit faith dependent on a Protestant conception of faith as trust.

Second, DiNoia's arguments depend on the claim that a

Christian account of a person's experience within a non-Christian religious tradition must be congruent with the person's own self-understanding. (For instance, he asserts: "The ascription of truth in other religions to divine inspiration is sometimes framed in terms of the doctrine of revelation. This is a secondary or extended use of the doctrine which may or may not be appropriate given non-Christians' self-descriptions" [230; but cf. the hair-splitting distinction on 231].) How are these self-descriptions relevant? As DiNoia himself asserts on the same page, "Truth, wherever it occurs, comes from the one source of truth.") But this claim hardly seems supportable. The Rahnerian claim is not an empirical analysis of the content of non-Christian experience; it is a theological reading of the underpinnings of that experience. While the empirical character of non-Christian experience is not irrelevant to such a reading, it does not bear directly on the validity of the Rahnerian position, which is not empirical in focus. Thus, DiNoia's claims do not render implausible, or even improbable, the claim that the moral and spiritual dispositions of non-Christians are such that they relate appropriately to God, even should they conceptualize their relationships with God inadequately.

DiNoia develops his argument further in *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992). In this book, DiNoia suggests that some non-Christian responses to reality may count as implicit faith, and some may not.

22. The standard discussion of purity is Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966). Jeffrey Stout examines how Douglas's work might be appropriated by ethicists and theologians in *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).

23. See, e.g., Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision—Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989); and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983).

24. Paul addresses the question of community boundaries throughout his writings. The issue of eating with believing "Gentiles" is addressed in Gal. 2:11-17 (cf. Acts 15). In 1 Cor. 10:27-30, he explicitly affirms the appropriateness of table fellowship with those outside the Christian community. The central importance in Pauline thought of the notion that the boundaries between the supposedly "pure" and "impure" are broken down is highlighted in Eph. 3:4-6, which asserts that "the mystery of Christ" is the fact that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

With its call not to be "mismatched with unbelievers" and its injunction to "touch nothing unclean," 2 Cor. 6:14-17, might appear to be an exception to Paul's general commitment. Read in context, however, the text does not represent a call to the Corinthian Christians to separate themselves in general from those outside the Christian community, but a demand—making pragmatic use of traditional purity language—that they refuse to give their loyalty to opponents whose views Paul implicitly critiques throughout the letter.

25. Cf. Lorentz Gregory Jones, "Formation in Moral Judgment: An Essay on the Social Context of Christian Life" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1988), 124: "the good life inevitably entails friendship . . . because intimate friendships extend and redefine the boundaries of particular conceptions of the good life."

26. Cf. *ibid.*, 121: a friend different from me can enable me "to learn who I am by contrasting myself with others." See also Stanley Hauerwas, "How My Mind Has Changed: The Testament of Friends," *The Christian Century*, Feb. 28, 1990, 213: "Unfortunately, I am unable to remember 'my position' or the arguments I use to support it. Without friends to remember my claims I am at a complete loss. But I discover that in their remembering, which is often expressed in disagreements, there is often more than I knew. I continue to be graced with graduate students who understand me better than I understand myself and can show me where I have got it wrong." When Hauerwas says, "many of my friends are churchd" (214), he clearly implies that some are not. There is no reason to suppose that he does not include them among the friends who help him to grow by challenging and disagreeing with him. Cf. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1983).

27. Wolfhart Pannenberg evaluates the significance of basic trust for theology in *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 220-42.

28. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 202.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Such openness can, of course, be encouraged in friendship whether or not dialogue about religious matters is a feature of the relationship.

31. In Dennis Guernsey and Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Family: A Socio-Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 132-36, Guernsey highlights the possibility that the structure of a person's family may play a greater role in shaping her religious convictions than the explicit content of the beliefs taught her by family members. Guernsey's argument seems to suggest that, whatever its religious or antireligious orientation, a warm, accepting family that provides each of its members with a sense of order, meaning, value, and purpose is more likely to foster the religious development of its members than one marked by chaos and authoritarianism. It is reasonable to assume that structural features of other intimate relationships, including friendship, have similar consequences for personal religious experience.

32. Adrian Furnham, "Friendship and Personal Development," in *The Dialectics of Friendship*, eds. Roy Porter and Sylvana Tomaselli (London: Routledge, 1989), defends from a psychological perspective the view that friendship makes a significant contribution to the formation of healthy personalities in children. Furnham criticizes the view, which he attributes "mainly to psychoanalytic thinkers," that mother-child relationships are "of paramount importance in child development," and that children's friendships are thus "far less important, indeed themselves 'determined' by the parental relationship." Friendship, too, plays a key role in the positive formation of the self (93).

33. *Ibid.*, 316-33.

34. *Ibid.*, 402-7.

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