

## Describing our experiences differently

We Quakers are committed to the notion is that there is “that of God in everyone” – that every human being is to be respected and valued as we are - unique and precious – with the potential to shine as lights in a sometimes very dark world. How each of us interprets what or who God is, and how we identify God in other people, is for each of us to discern for ourselves.

As Ben Pink Dandelion explains, Liberal Quakerism *“is not defined in terms of doctrine but in terms of the form of Quakerism.... its worship and business method, its testimony and values. Belief is plural but also marginal.”* The Quakers – A Very Short Introduction: (Oxford 2008)

This is not new. John Macmurray said nearly 50 years ago *“The central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends is that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs; that what makes us Christians is an attitude of mind and a way of life; and these are compatible with wide variations, and with changes of beliefs and opinions...”*

*“Faith no longer means the acceptance of an established creed or the assent to an authoritative system of doctrine. It recovers the original meaning of trust and fearless confidence; and this spirit of faith is expressed in a way of living which cares for one another and for the needs of all.”* Search for Reality in Religion (Swarthmore Lecture 1965).

What is perhaps new, and encouraging, is the discernment made by Friends last year whose deliberations resulted in the Whoosh! Epistle: *“We discern a growing confidence within the Religious Society of Friends that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for.*

*Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation. This could be a ‘transition moment’ for British Quakers, as we discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times.*

*Do we have the courage to speak with passion and conviction about our spiritual lives? Can we acquire the confidence to find our own words to express the ways in which we understand the divine? Can we encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them?”* ([www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012](http://www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012))

Such is the context in which the theist/nontheist disagreement is aired in the pages of The Friend and elsewhere. I want to make a plea for a warmer spirit of mutual respect and understanding between Friends committed to either view, and for those who are not sure where they are in this debate.

My own journey from theism to nontheism has been entirely since I returned to Quaker worship 15 years ago. It came not through anyone else trying to persuade me, simply through my own experience. I had been an Anglican for more than 40 years. I encountered Quakers when I was a student, and I treasured the copy of *Advices and Queries* I was given then: it shaped my life and thinking whilst I remained an Anglican.

As I sat again in my local Quaker Meeting week by week from 1998, I was listening for that of God from beyond and outside me. I came gradually to realise I was listening instead to that which came from within me, and from within other Friends in the Meeting.

Over a period of years, experiencing, reading, reflecting, talking to others, I came to leave the concept of God behind, as many years ago I had let go of the devil. However, I was bereaved of God – I missed him, but I did not want to artificially manufacture a replacement to fill my God-shaped gap. My period of bereavement for God lasted about four years. I came to be not only content without God, but to be freer and more myself without God.

Indeed my experience of prayer has been enriched. I express thankfulness, wonder, concern for others, and examine myself without directing any of these thoughts to a Being in the Beyond. I listen too, and sometimes feel led. Long ago I became independent of my human parents: I no longer need a divine parent either.

I value our Quaker Business Method. Many times I have been conscious of meeting in a spirit of worship, hoping and expecting to be guided in our discernment. I have often found the decisions reached have not been what I expected. So often I have recognised that we were in some way led, and the decisions reached were right at that time.

Now many Friends I know are quite clear in attributing that leading to the Spirit of God. That is their experience. I recognise and respect that, and have no wish to try to persuade any of them otherwise. However, while I share the same experience, I explain it as a natural phenomenon, not a super-natural one. If, in Quaker practice, I seek to be true to my own experience, I do so hope that other Friends will recognise and respect that too. Can we all accept, indeed cherish and celebrate, this diversity in unity?

I have many friends who are members of different Christian churches. There is a rich diversity of theological ideas amongst them. Quakers are not alone in facing this theism/nontheism debate. Brian Mountford, Vicar of the University Church of St. Mary in Oxford, encouraged by his bishop, explores it from an Anglican perspective in “Christian Atheist – Belonging without Believing” (O books 2010).

However many of my friends find they are not as free to openly explore their ideas with fellow church members. The “oughts” and “shoulds” can come at them

thick and fast, and people are soon telling they should not be thinking as they do. There is a wider acceptance of different viewpoints openly expressed amongst us in the Religious Society of Friends. I value that.

I convene an ecumenical Book Club at our Meeting House each month. We are able to explore very different ideas and experiences, respecting each other, without feeling the need to impose some doctrinal framework upon each other. We learn from each other, and indeed we value and cherish each other.

Doctrinal orthodoxy has exercised a profound hold on the churches of Western Europe since the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era. Charles Freeman in his book “The Closing of the Western Mind – the rise of faith and the fall of reason” (Pimlico 2002) charts its impact. Once this strangle-hold of an orthodox interpretation of the ineffable was broken, many benefits of the Western world have been able to develop: education, health-care, commerce, emancipation for men and women. A vision widely shared, is for more and more people to be able to be true to themselves, in a spiritual freedom which is liberating.

If the group who framed the Whoosh! Epistle last year are accurate in discerning that our experience-based religion is what many people are looking for, I for one hope we will all value the unusual diversity in our Religious Society of Friends in Britain in accounting for our spiritual experiences, as we live in peace with one another.

Each of us is free to account for our experiences as we understand them. Each of us is free to explain them to others and to listen respectfully to their different perspectives. Can we recognise that there are many benefits in being part of a “rainbow coalition”? George Fox’s question - “What canst thou say?” - remains a challenge to us all.

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