

QUAKER DISCERNMENT: A NON-THEIST VIEW

SARAH RICHARDS contributed this article following questions raised about 'discernment' at the NFN open meeting at Yearly Meeting on May 25.

Quakers claim that their business method functions by the Meeting, in worship, collectively finding 'the will of God'. How can this be reconciled with a non-theist viewpoint which suggests that there is no external supernatural interventionist 'God' to have a will to follow?

Non-theism is, of course, a broad spectrum, so I should perhaps first identify my own place on it. I am what I think our Friends in the US would call a 'naturalist': I do not believe in any form of eternal entity which can, at will, cause unique violations of the laws of physics, chemistry and biology. That is not to say that we humans understand those laws completely, and there are almost certainly instances where such laws *appear* to be violated but where in fact they are not: it is simply that our understanding does not yet extend to the mechanisms of that particular case. I would include the notion of an external entity putting a thought or idea into a person's mind as being a violation of known laws, even though we do not know what consciousness is or where it comes from: so the idea of faithful Quakers waiting for an external being to put into one or more of their minds the ideas it wants put into effect is one I cannot accept as being an expression of the truth, of what really happens in a Meeting for Worship for business (hereinafter abbreviated to MWB). I do have an open mind on whether there might be some kind of Entity of Ultimate Reality which is beyond both the space and time in which we live and our comprehension, but which might in some way provide a reason why anything exists at all: but that is another story. Such an entity would not in any way have human characteristics, and would certainly not have a will in the sphere of the kind of actions with which we deal in our MWBs, at any level (local, area or whatever).

However, I also come to my theological position (spiritual position?) from the point of view of a mathematician: and I find my knowledge of mathematics very helpful because it has things to say about the nature of existence. In particular, it posits different kinds of existence. Something can exist conceptually, and be used in mathematical calculations and descriptions, without having any equivalent existence realised in the parameters of the world we live in. Perhaps the best known of these is the quantity usually denoted by i , the square root of

minus one. A brief explanation: it can readily be shown that a negative number multiplied by another negative number results in a positive number. Therefore there is no real number which multiplied by itself – squared, that is – results in a negative number: whether the starting number was positive or negative, the result of squaring will always be a positive number. Mathematicians are unfazed by this fact, and simply imagine that there is nevertheless such a number: as it cannot be real they label it an imaginary number and call it *i*. This raises the interesting question as to whether that number exists!

So I find it quite natural that there should be some concept, such as 'the will of God', which exists in the same way as the square root of minus one: it has no real existence but nevertheless exists as a concept which is useful and can give helpful results. Now it is my experience that there is what you might call a set of principles and values, which would include all the Quaker testimonies, as well as the 'best' (best in whose view, though, on what scale of judgement?) of human attributes such as compassion, love, fairness and so on. These things would be what theists think of as the Will of God, assuming a God of love such as we can infer from what we know of the teaching of Jesus, though not of course the God described in the Old Testament, who is often described as having attributes which none of us would wish to worship – starting with the desire to smite one's enemies dead. But there is no reason why we should not accept such a set of the 'good' values and attributes as what is meant by 'the will of God' without needing to attach them to an external entity of any kind: they can just be 'a way that works' which exists as a concept without needing a being to 'hold' it. In our discernment, therefore, we can think of seeking collectively the way which is in accordance with this conceptual way, and think of 'following the leadings of the Spirit' as the operation of our searching process done with an awareness of that way. This seems to me to be a perfectly legitimate view of the Quaker business method which is compatible with a non-theist position.

Finally, it is worth commenting on the notion that something is 'good' or 'best' or 'highest' independently of a God who lays down what is good. Julian Baggini, in his fascinating book 'The Pig that wants to be eaten', tells of a philosopher – a less than sycophantic character – challenging the Almighty God who appears just a little intimidated by this fierce intellect questioning His authority. The philosopher asks the Almighty whether something is good because God says it is, or whether God declares something good because in His infinite wisdom He knows it *is*

good. God initially replies that the former is the case: but the philosopher then suggests that in that case, something manifestly evil such as the torturing of children would become 'good' simply by God declaring it to be so. 'Ah,' says God, taking his cue from Captain Mainwaring, 'Just testing: of course the answer is really the latter, since the former is clearly absurd'. 'So', says the philosopher, 'Good and evil then are independent of You: things are intrinsically good or bad without the need for a deity to say so'. God, at this point, retires in confusion. This cautionary tale indicates that it is quite reasonable to think of values and principles that are good in themselves, which will form part of what I referred to as 'the way', without the need for a separated Mind of God to evaluate them as good. This confirms my suggestion of a 'will of God' which can exist without the need for a God to will it: a non-theist solution to the concept of Quaker Discernment.

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