

Quaker Diversity

Introduction

About nine months ago I attended the second annual conference of the Nontheist Friends Network at Woodbrooke in Birmingham and I was asked by M&O if I would say something this morning about that conference and about what nontheism is.

What I hope to do this morning is to briefly describe three main approaches to religious belief and understanding that are found among Irish Quakers today: I will call these views traditional theism, liberal theism and nontheism. I will then say a little about the nontheist conference I attended in England back in March, and finally I will close with a brief comment on my own journey of exploration through these assorted religious perspectives.

I hope this talk will be one small contribution to raising the level of understanding among Friends of the diversity of beliefs within the Society and serve as an encouragement to others to share their insights with confidence.

I. Traditional Theism

Traditional theism is based on the foundational idea that the invisible world is more real than the visible world. So, for example, there exists an eternal world beyond our physical world where God lives in the beauty of perfection.

Traditional theists see God as an 'ethical sky father' who is the architect and creator of our universe and the one who sets the moral standards for our life here on earth.

The bible is viewed as a collection of books containing inspired messages from God, conveying to us a glimpse of the heavenly realm and telling us about how we should live our lives here on earth if we are to join God in his world of eternal happiness.

Jesus of Nazareth is the human incarnation of this eternal God, an event in history in which God condescended to enter our physical world to die for our sins and point the way to heaven. Jesus, after his crucifixion, was then bodily resurrected from death and ascended back into heaven to reign with God forever.

The Holy Spirit is the supernatural indwelling of this eternal God, mystically dwelling in our hearts: the Spirit with whom we can commune in a personal way as an invisible friend from whom we can seek help.

Prayer is an act of worshipping the eternal God and asking for his help and intervention in human affairs. God answers prayer by intervening in our world and changing things, especially when we ask in the name of Jesus.

Traditional theists believe that, like Jesus, we will be resurrected from death to live with God in heaven forever. Rejecters of this message will also be resurrected, only to be judged by Jesus, and consigned to spend an eternity of continual punishment.

This was the traditional teaching of the Church from the 1st century and continued largely unchallenged until the enlightenment in the 18th century. George Fox, who lived in the 17th century, would have been very familiar with these biblical doctrines and I have no doubt that he would have assented to many of them.

II. Liberal theism

This brings me to the second view that I want to briefly describe this morning – that of liberal theism. Like traditional theism, liberal theism is based on the foundational idea that the invisible world is more real than the visible world. Liberal theists, like traditionalists, affirm that there exists an eternal world beyond our physical world where God lives in the beauty of perfection.

However, liberals have tended to embrace the results of scientific investigation and the findings of critical biblical studies whereas traditionalists have tended to reject any theories that run counter to their beliefs.

So, for example, while liberals would still see God in terms of the architect and creator of the cosmos, they would also accept the results of modern big bang cosmology which describes an evolving universe that may be more than 13 billion years old. Liberals would not insist that the universe was literally created in seven days as stated in the book of Genesis but would see this as a creation myth behind which the deeper truth is to be found that God created all things. Similarly, liberals would be very comfortable with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution which states that human beings have descended from more primitive life forms here on earth, over a period of millions of years, seeing this as the mechanism which God has used to bring everything into existence.

Liberals are more accepting of a human view of Jesus of Nazareth as a man, fundamentally like any other man, who taught a human ethic of love, forgiveness, toleration and peace. Liberals would see much of the doctrinal material in the New Testament such as Christ's death for our sins and bodily resurrection as an early church overlay on the life of Jesus.

Liberals would tend to see prayer more in terms of how it changes us as individuals when we pray rather than in terms of asking God to intervene in the physical world to change events. So, liberals would see action in humanitarian aid as a means by which prayer is answered.

III. Nontheism

This brings me, thirdly, to nontheism.

Nontheism differs from theism in asserting that the visible world is the only real world that we will ever experience and that 'God' is a mythical projection or personification of our own desires to construct value, meaning and dignity in our life here on earth.

There is no pre-defined code of ethics 'out there' which we are obliged to live by – the only ethics we have are those principles of conduct which we humans have devised for ourselves over thousands of years of human history.

There are no absolute rules for how human society should be organized or how we should conduct ourselves as individuals. The cosmos does not reveal to us any pre-defined blueprint for how life should be conducted here on earth.

We seek to say 'yes' to life by constructing meaning for ourselves as individuals and as societies through our work, in our relationships and by facing suffering with courage and resolve. It is in these ways that we all may contribute to the creation of value and meaning in our own time and place.

Nontheists tend to agree with the liberal understanding of Jesus of Nazareth as a teacher from antiquity who taught a very human sort of religion based on love, tolerance, forgiveness and peace. The doctrines of incarnation, resurrection and ascension are seen as attempts by the early church to raise the human Jesus to the level of a mythical God.

The nontheist sees the work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart more in terms of the spontaneous, natural inner working of the human psyche in which we meditate upon and respond to life as we presently experience it. The nontheist sees God in terms of 'an inner light' that is found in every human being. It is 'that of God in everyone'.

The nontheist sees this life as the only life we will ever experience and is focussed on the living of this life to the full, now, and in accordance with those human principles that make for happiness and dignity for all.

IV. Non-theist Friends Network (NFN)

Within Britain Yearly Meeting of Friends there are interest groups which have formed around each of the three viewpoints I have mentioned this morning. The *New Foundation Fellowship* is a group of Quakers who meet from time to time to share together in worship in a traditional christocentric way and encourage each other in the Christian faith. The *Quaker Universalist Group* is an interest group of liberal Quakers who meet periodically to celebrate the diversity of religious expression within Quakerism. They emphasize the idea of that of God in everyone and embrace a range of religious expressions including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and many other perspectives. The *Nontheist Friends Network* was formed quite recently as a forum to support the sharing of experience among Quakers who see religion as a human creation.

The conference I attended in March of this year was the 2nd annual conference of the NFN at Woodbrooke Study Centre in Birmingham. The convener of the conference was David Boulton and the keynote speaker was Michael Wright whose address was entitled: "Religion – a human creation for creative humans." Among other things in his address he described Meeting for Worship in terms of a response of awe at our natural world, a concern for those in need, an appreciation of our own health and freedom, and an examination of our choices and relationships with a view to igniting our compassion to live love into the world. In the highly connected world of today human friendships and social networks are more important than beliefs and abstract ideas.

V. A personal story

So, what is my take on all these matters?

I have to say that it is a challenging thing to 'unthink' yourself from the concepts of your childhood but that is the journey that I have been on now for the best part of twenty years.

In my teenage years and through my twenties and early thirties I would have readily embraced traditional theism and thought of God in terms of a heavenly father as the New Testament encourages us to do. I also happily accepted scientific principles as part of the package deal, seeing the laws of physics in terms of the rules that God built into the universe to make it work as it does.

It was not until my forties and the period in which I studied theology in more detail at university that I became acquainted with the methods and results of biblical criticism and began to see the bible as a humanly constructed book and Jesus as a human being. In fact I began to see that all human knowledge is a human construction, including our scientific theories, and that they do not necessarily describe how things actually are in themselves.

Once I began to read Don Cupitt's books, about four years ago, I knew the game was up! I came to see that my beliefs are not shored-up from outside by any sort of cosmic sky-God but are simply stories that we humans have traditionally told to each other to make some sort of sense out of the world around us. For this reason I would now describe myself as a nontheist Friend.

VI. Conclusion - How does nontheism fit with Quaker principles?

I think the answer is that nontheism fits very well with Quaker principles.

What many people fear about loss of belief in a supernatural God is that all value and meaning will collapse and we will all spiral downwards into the despair of nihilism. What I have come to see is that it is we humans who are responsible for the creation of all meaning and value in life and we no longer need to rely on metaphysical beliefs about a supernatural God to do this work for us.

From this nontheist perspective the Quaker values of peace, equality, simplicity and integrity continue as before. More than that, the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth also stand and his parables about love, tolerance, forgiveness and peace are as powerful and meaningful today as they were when they were first uttered.

The only difference between the theist Friend and the nontheist Friend is that the nontheist no longer has a focus on any world to come and sees the focus of life entirely in terms of a creative and compassionate response to life as we live it here and now.

Recommended reading

Nontheist books:

Boulton, D. (ed.) (2009) *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*, Dent, Dales Historical Monographs

Cupitt, D. (1980) *Taking Leave of God*, London, SCM Press

Cupitt, D. (1984) *The Sea of Faith*, London, SCM Press

Cupitt, D. (2012) *The Last Testament*, London, SCM Press

Theist responses:

Hebblethwaite, B. (1988) *The Ocean of Truth – A Defence of Objective Theism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

Ward, K. (1982) *Holding Fast to God – A Reply to Don Cupitt*, London, SPCK

*Paul Bates
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