

# ***God, Words, and Us -***

## *Quakers in conversation about religious difference*

Edited by Helen Rowlands

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This paper is a synopsis of the themes explored in ***God, Words and Us***, to help Friends, as well as people who are not Quakers, to prepare to engage with the issues in the book.

### **INTRODUCTION**

“This book has been produced to support Friends who wish to explore the ways we speak about our deepest religious and spiritual experiences.”

- What does the word “God” imply for each of us?
- Is faithfulness to a shared practice or method enough to unite us?
- How helpful is it to identify and label different positions?

The book emerged from work done by a group of about 25 Friends - called by the Revision Preparation Group a “Think-Tank” - over a period of nearly a year. The group concluded that:

- Quakers need to engage in open dialogue continually. When we share our experience and beliefs, and do it well, we can be enriched by our diversity.
- Words used can divide and hurt, and create false oppositions. We should try to avoid destructive aspects of difference.
- It is unhelpful to use polarised shorthand descriptions “theism/nontheism”. If labels are needed, they should be self-chosen, and not imposed on others.
- The real pattern of conviction or belief in Britain Yearly Meeting is much more nuanced and kaleidoscopic: we need a variety of models to describe it.
- We welcome and embrace diversity that enriches our community; we unite in our worship and witness

### **CHAPTER ONE – Telling our stories**

In this chapter, 18 Friends each share part of their story of religious experience and understanding. These personal stories are very different. They may help some people who feel one or another story articulates something of their own experience and understanding. They may help others to understand explanations that are rather different from their own.

### **CHAPTER TWO – Bringing our full selves to the conversation**

“Participants brought their intellects to the conversation, and also brought feelings. This was a group of people reflecting theologically on their own faith, who all have a stake in where the conversation takes them. That experience is different from a conference of supposedly objective, disinterested academic researchers.”

The book then gives some idea of how to approach this in meetings and discussion groups, carefully considering the emotional impact such discussions may have for Friends.

In such discussions we can often be at cross purposes with each other. We are encouraged to listen more, and speak less.

*“...we accept that we start from where we are: we are all different – extraordinarily different, and we all claim a ‘Quaker’ identity....We approach each other tentatively, reverently, humbly, and ask ‘What can I learn from you about my Quaker identity?’* writes Marissa Johnson.

*‘Be aware of your emotions, attitudes and prejudices as you listen to the truths of others and as you try to speak your own truth.’* An Open Space working group

### **CHAPTER THREE – sharing experiences of core Quaker practice**

- How do you understand prayer?
- What is your experience of worship?

“We wondered what difference individual beliefs about God might make to the practice of prayer, of worship or of corporate discernment”.

“Would the invitation to describe personal experience of Quaker practice be helpful in shedding light on our theological similarities and differences?” There are 18 extended quotations from individual Friends, and from an Open Space working group, sharing their experiences and understandings about prayer and worship.

### **CHAPTER FOUR – exploring the language of ‘theism’ and ‘nontheism’**

Another set of 18 different shared experiences are offered here, followed by some insights:

- Diversity of belief and language among Friends is real and should be acknowledged.
- Neither the term ‘theist’ nor the term ‘nontheist’ can be used to identify a single, clearly defined set of beliefs.
- It is not helpful to talk about ‘theist/nontheist’ as if they are either/or.
- Some Quakers want to self-identify as ‘nontheist’. Very few, if any, apply the label ‘theist’ to themselves – so let’s stop using the term ‘theist’.
- Diversity is a gift in/to the Quaker community. Differences need not prevent us from working together for the common good.
- Can we therefore aspire to tell our personal truths as well as we can at present, and not get hooked in to a particular scientific or philosophical method that implies that either way they are ‘true’ or they must be ‘false’.

### **CHAPTER FIVE – reframing the issues: developing some alternative models, seeking new vocabulary, rediscovering Quaker insights.**

Ideas such as “a spectrum of beliefs” are explored – and questions raised as to whether that analogy is helpful or not.

*“It might be better to move away from binaries and think in holistic and dynamic terms”* – picturing Quakerism as a solar system – a sun with radiating planets.

## **Finding words for “things beyond what words can utter”: understanding and reconciling with our Society’s past –**

Beth Allen writes of three difficulties:

- We are not reconciled to our own evangelical past.
- We have lost some sense of the history of the development of Quaker thought, and of our shared development as a community of thinking and developing people.
- We approach these matters almost exclusively as intellectual questions – *“though Friends can be deeply pastoral, we don’t frame our thinking about profound healing and caring for each other in religious terms – we are more comfortable with secular language about ‘inner-growth’. In focusing on intellectual thinking about God, what essential elements of religious vocabulary have we lost?”*

## **Denying lies: seeking life and truth**

Rachel Muers wants to try reformulating our terms – as “denial of lies” – saying no to things that aren’t true. *“Both these groups of Friends are making a clear and necessary move in what they say no to; and that they are diverse, provisional and experimental in what they say yes to as a consequence of the no....*

*For a start, it’s put the focus on the shared search for, and encounter with, life and truth.....My reframing has also, I think, slightly de-emphasised the conflict. What the non-theist is rejecting is something problematic (e.g. the ‘God’ who won’t let you use your brain). What the non-nontheist, the believer in God, is rejecting is also something problematic (e.g. the ‘common sense’ that won’t let you believe that your experience really happened).*

*....the negatives are never the whole story. The negatives are always (perhaps) about getting certain things out of the way....If I am not alone, who is it who accompanies me? And when we start asking that kind of question – with our lives as well as our minds – we’re released individually and as a community into a wide open space, a journey, a process of growth, an unfathomable depth, pick your metaphor.....How can we be each other’s good companions on the journey?”*

## **A four-dimensional model for describing religious/spiritual experience**

An Open Space working group explored a model of describing religious/spiritual experience drawing on the work of some theologians and the concepts of Spiral Dynamics. The concept is well explained on pages 68 & 69, which need to be read carefully to grasp the ideas of

**Via positiva** – with positive poetical images and metaphor

**Via negativa** – letting go of images, rituals, associations which cloud understanding

**Via creativa** – engaging with activities and processes that lead to new insights

**Via transformativa** – the surrender to processes that bring about surprising and unexpected new experiences, relationships and insights.

## **A distinctive Quaker approach to God**

Rex Ambler and an Open Space working group set out a way that 'central Quaker understandings' can and should be articulated. This is following the pattern he has taught of

- Trusting Quaker experience rather than speculation, dogma or received tradition
- Experiencing the Light within
- A disciplined way of listening in silence and stillness
- The diversity around our common faith can then be seen and experienced as a source of enrichment

## **A comparison between the position of nontheists in our yearly meeting and that of non-pacifists**

Rachel Muers offers us a possible analogy:

*"There are Quakers who aren't pacifists. They're committed Quakers, and other Quakers are very happy they're there. As far as I can tell, non-pacifist Quakers accept they're part of an organisation this is collectively committed to pacifism. They expect Quakers collectively to express pacifist views and act in ways that reflect pacifism; they don't have a problem with that and don't expect it to change any time soon. ....*

*...My assumption is that non-pacifist Friends wouldn't expect their personal convictions to be expressed in collective Quaker statements and actions but they'd probably expect to see them reflected somewhere as the 'minority report' in a collection like Qf&p....*

*Substitute 'nontheist' for 'non-pacifist' and see what comes out the other end?"*

She also offers a couple of other images to help Friends think about this situation, pages 74 & 75

- A 'Meeting for Leaving'
- A caravan moving through the desert - this image, fully explained in the book, resonated strongly with the think-tank group. Does it for you?

## **WAYS TO WORK ON THIS MATERIAL – and other background information**

At the end of the book there is a plan for a two-hour discussion session. It is adaptable for two shorter sessions, with further ideas for group study and reflection.

There is also a list of resources suitable for group study which include books, websites, and blogs by think-tank participants.

There is also a fuller explanation (pages 93-95) of the background to this book, and a full list of the think-tank participants.

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Synopsis by Michael Wright: Middlesbrough Local Meeting