

"The God-shaped Hole"

What "God" means today

There are many ways of thinking and feeling about God, of course. Today the variety is vast, and bewildering. But I am thinking of a very fundamental meaning of the word which we should all be able to recognize and accept. It is the sense of God as the ultimate reality of our life, whatever that might happen to be.

We are not referring to a particular being that we could imagine or describe, but to whatever reality it might be that lies behind or beneath all the particular realities we know of. To make sense of this idea we have to become aware of something in ourselves that points in that direction, possibly a lack of something we need but cannot identify, or a longing for something that could provide a basis or a meaning for our life.

It is not so much a sense of God as that word is commonly understood, as a sense of 'a God-shaped hole'. I may have no idea what it is—it may even be a huge void or an absence—but I may have a very clear sense that without it, and without a positive relationship to it my life is incomplete and unsatisfactory.

So 'God' in this sense is not an intellectual idea, an hypothesis, that answers a query about how the world works, or how the world began. It is a spiritual idea that answers our own inner longing for reality, our deep personal need for meaning and security and identity, but which nothing else - nothing in the world around us—seems to be able to answer. (Chap. 2, pp.30-31)

So what might this reality be?

This is a question that cannot be answered intellectually, as George Fox and early Friends acknowledged.

[The] Quaker way of dealing with this question [is] to stay with the feeling, stay with the anxiety and awe. "Be true to what you experience, and let the experience itself point the way through." (32)

Most intellectuals of Fox's time claimed authority to talk confidently about God, but Fox doubted them if they had not real experience of God. He wrote that they merely projected images of themselves onto "God" in order to feel secure.

"You make images of God like yourselves.... You poor silly creatures, empty of life or light or grace or truth which comes from the God of truth.... You in your foolishness, darkness and ignorance go make an image of the incomprehensible God, and so you will comprehend him in the fashion of man." (34)

God cannot be understood intellectually, yet it is possible "to have a sense or feeling of God, which is somehow already in our conscience." Margaret Fell, who later joined Fox as wife and fellow minister, wrote of her first experience of Fox's teaching:

"[He] said, 'The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had from the Lord.' And said, 'Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and has walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?'" (35-36)

Advice from Samuel Fisher (1660)

When you really see yourselves you will then "see God," not literally of course, but in the metaphorical sense of being aware of God.... [Fisher] is telling us, not what God is like, what sort of a reality God is (which is impossible), but what we can do to get a deep sense and assurance of God.... His advice to the doubters of his time is to refer them to the advice they are already being given in their consciences, if only they would listen to it. (38)

Not tying the experience of "God" down to words

Quakers then and now are concerned that any description of the positive inner experience of God "might be taken as a belief, an idea that could be detached from experience and regarded as true in itself. It would then defeat its purpose" (40).

Here are some early examples quoted by Ambler (41):

Anthony Benezet (18th c.): I know some think great advantage will arise from people's having what are called right ideas of God.... Ideas, however exalted they may appear, are still but bare ideas, and can have no influence in subduing that love of the world, that...poisonous idolatry of self, so apt, under one subtle form or another, to insinuate itself even into the hearts of such as have already made some good advances in religion.

William Penn (17th c.): Behind such ideas, he could see, was the mistaken idea that Truth could finally be established in a set of words. Words were not fitted to this purpose. To get to the truth we had to let go of words and learn a different language, a "language of the spirit."

Queries:

1. What are some of the ways you talk to yourself about your personal experience of "the God-shaped hole" and what you feel fills it?
2. How do you talk to others about these matters?
3. What gaps, differences, discomforts, and so on do you experience in trying to describe your personal experience to others?