

Handout 4.2 – What now?

Letting go of beliefs

Our sense of God is a "kind of reality [that] will not fit into our ready-made concepts." But what kind of reality is this?

[This reality] does personal things like revealing and reproving and forgiving, but it has no bodily form in space and time so it cannot be described as a person.

We can speak poetically of this reality of course, avoiding literal language, and this is mostly how Quakers do speak of it.... That is, they are using words in an unusual way: not literally to describe this reality, but metaphorically to hint at it, point towards it, or perhaps to evoke a sense of it.

This is half of an answer. It answers the how but not the what. If our language about God is a matter of pointing, not describing, it has to point to something, or towards it.

[We need to grasp] how radical the Quaker vision is, how serious it is about letting go of beliefs and words, and trusting to the experience that comes through silence.... [The] way to deal with this question of what it is we point to in our God-language is to look, again, at the experience out of which it arises. (45)

Reality is finally a mystery

Before we started the Quaker experiment, we thought of the world as something other than ourselves, "out there" in contrast to our personal reality "in here." Now we begin to see that "ultimately there is no separation."

Reality can be seen and felt as a whole which sustains itself or, rather, is sustained, but not by anything that humans can explain. "Reality is finally a mystery."

Our little word 'God' tries to name that mystery. And it is important that it does.

It indicates that our world is all of a piece, grounded in and held together by a reality beyond our grasp, but which is nonetheless felt as the basis of our own individual lives. It points to what transcends our world, unites it and sustains it in being.

It points but it does not describe. It offers no concepts or images that enable us to grasp the reality in our minds. It can only invite us to look and to see for ourselves. And that, as we have observed, means looking initially into ourselves so that we can eventually see everything differently. (45-46)

The significance of everyday life

Instead of needing to convince ourselves that concept, a belief is true, we simply know from experience.

Such experiences of God can be immensely significant to us, even though we are unable to put them into words. They give a sense of the ultimate reality of our life, the ultimate context in which our life has to be lived.

With such an experience we know. We don't have to believe. We know that we are grounded in what's real, that we are connected and not ultimately alone, that we belong and are in some sense secure.

This confidence takes the anxiety out of life. We are limited, of course, just as before, and our life is as uncertain as ever, but we find that we are able to accept this as part of what life is. We live and we die, and it's all a gift:

Naked I came from the womb, naked I shall return whence I came.

The Lord gives and The Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)

Trusting reality

It has significance too in enabling us to trust reality when things go hard for us, knowing that our acceptance of what happens, whatever happens, will enable us to respond creatively. And it enables us to trust the deeper impulses and insights of our life that emerge especially as we sit in silent waiting....

Trusting is important when these experiences are only fleeting and momentary, as they usually are. We may have only one such experience in a lifetime, but it could be enough to ground our confidence in God and God's leadings in our day-to-day living. (47)

Experiencing God in an existential way

When we experience God in this existential way that is, as part of our awareness of life as we live it, we can't think of it as some kind of an object or thing, or even a person. God is not something or someone that might not exist. God is not out there, and God is not not out there. God is everywhere and nowhere....

If we could hold on to this personal way of talking about God, I don't think we would have such problems about the question of whether God exists. We can let that question go, as irrelevant....

The purpose of words in our spiritual life, as Isaac Penington once memorably put it "is to bring men [and women] to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter." (47-48)

Queries

1. What are some "poetical" ways you might describe what you already trust about reality?
2. What helps you to feel and accept this trustworthiness?
3. How do you share your inward confidence in your daily life—whether or not you tell anyone where it comes from?