

The Quaker Way Notes

Chapter 2: Looking for God

16-21 May, 2018

1. Gaining awareness

The first thing we need to become aware of in the Quaker way is ourselves. We have to break through the ideas and images we have construction of ourselves to something more like the reality....

But this new sense of reality can be alarming. It may reveal things in our life that we were trying to avoid or evade....

How do we connect with people and the world in a way that is truthful and honest, yet also safe? How do we connect with the reality that brought us into being, that can help us maybe make sense of this brief life of ours, and give some purpose to our life that will not be eroded by the knowledge that we all have to die? (30)

2. The "God-shaped hole"

- *The sense of God as the ultimate reality of our life, whatever that might happen to be.*
- *Not...a particular being that we could imagine or describe, but...whatever reality it might be that lies behind or beneath all the particular realities we know of.*
- *We have to become aware of something in ourselves that points in that direction, possibly a lack of something...or a longing for something that could provide a basis or a meaning for our life. (31)*

3. 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)

4. The Quaker way avoids belief

- *Most religions or spiritualities set out their beliefs, their doctrines, as a necessary basis for pursuing the truth. Quakers take the view that beliefs are not necessary, and may even be a hindrance. Quakers are serious about God, certainly, but they do not require belief in God as a starting point, or even as a goal to be aimed at. The question that concerns them is what helps you or hinders you in finding the reality that will enable you to live well. (33)*

- 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)

5. Growing awareness

- *The experience of the light does not immediately bring us to an experience of God. It is initially a down-to-earth experience of ourselves.... And it is where we need to begin, as early Friends made quite clear. We cannot advance in our spiritual life until we have come to terms with our present experience of life. (36)*
- *That needs to be emphasized today because Friends sometimes have an easy way of speaking about God, which hasn't come to terms with the difficulty, the obstacle to our getting out of our egos.*

It is sometimes said that if we come to Meeting and sit in silence we can then experience God directly. This is what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." It doesn't of course happen like that, so Friends can get very disappointed and discouraged. (37)

- *When we do begin to get sense of God we realize that it is quite different from what our previous idea of God might have led us to expect. This kind of reality will not fit into our ready-made concepts. (37)*

6. 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.... He 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)*

- Three things the Light will do:

- *It will make them more aware of themselves, and with such clarity and force that they will recognize it to be the truth. And this surprising discover will then make them aware that something deep within them knows them better than they know themselves.... So they become aware, as early Friends like to say, of "that of God" within themselves, which assures them of an inner connection with God in themselves.... (38)*
- *[It will] inspire them to live more in harmony with this truth and love they have found within them. They will recognize their normal way of life as relatively selfish and uncaring, but this inner light is so affirming and liberating, when taken seriously, that they will want to make that the centre of their lives....*

In other words, they will become more godlike.... They remain human, after all, and God is not human.... [But] they grow "into the image of God." (39)

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'..."

— Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

- *Because your own divine self has come to life, you will know intuitively, from experience, what God is. It still cannot be described rationally, because it goes beyond the world of people and things that our reason is designed to cope with. They will be confident in their*

knowledge nonetheless, because they are intimately aware of it, rather as they are intimately aware of themselves and those whom they love. (40)

7. Speaking of God

- *Follow the advice we are already being given in our conscience.... Explore the possibilities of our own present experience of life, including our negative experiences of anxiety, guilt and uncertainty. ... There is the promise that if we venture on the path we will discover the huge positive of awareness and faith.*
- *There is a risk that any...description [of that positive experience] 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)*
- *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." (41) [See page 42 for five relevant Penn quotations.]*

8. Ambler's summary of the above discussion

We could summarize our discussion so far by saying that we gain a sense of God first by becoming aware of a depth in ourselves that connects us with something beyond the range of our ego and ego-based concepts - 'that of God' within us - and secondly by experiencing the transformation that takes place when we open ourselves to what this deep self will reveal to us.

We see ourselves as we are, broken and conflicted, yet find ourselves being healed and restored as we accept this truth about ourselves, not immediately perhaps, but surely and steadily as we continue to open ourselves to reality.

We are not sure how all this happens, but we are confident that some reality in and around us knows very well what is going on and cares sufficiently to mend us and make us whole. We have to say this, if we are honest, because when we faced reality - at last - we found it didn't hurt. On the contrary we have been made happy and whole by it.

The experience of being made whole by opening ourselves to the truth conveys a deep message to us: ultimately reality is loving. (43)

9. But what kind of reality could this be?

- *It 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)

10. Pointing beyond

- We can have "the experience that gives us a sense of a reality beyond what we can grasp" when we "get out of our egos." [Note: "get out of," not "do away with."]

In one way or another, the ego...gives up its assertiveness, its demand, and gives way to what is happening around it. It becomes a passive observer. As a result, it is more able to see clearly and feel directly.... [It] gives way to a deeper capacity for awareness which can see things as they are and see them whole. (45)

- Before we thought of the world as something other than ourselves, "out there" in contrast to our personal reality "in here." Now we see that "ultimately there is no separation."
- For practical purposes we keep some sense of our individuality, but it has no ultimate significance. The idea that we were alone in the world was an illusion.
- 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." (45)
- *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)

- *There is also the possibility of feeling things differently.... When I see that I am not fundamentally separate from other people, for- example, I can feel a new closeness to them. If I can then affirm this closeness by caring for them, I express a love that goes well beyond my usual, ego-centred desire. This is the spiritual meaning of love....*
- *There is no calculation at all, only action in response to a feeling for others, a desire to help, based on the insight of our fundamental oneness. But this love generates an insight of its own.*

Loving another person in this way...is affirming the whole and therefore participating in the making of it. It is 'growing into the image of God' as creator of the world and 'so seeing him as he is'. Love in this sense is an experience of God. (46)

11. The significance of everyday life

- With such an experience of God we *know*. We don't have to believe.
 - We are still limited and life is still uncertain, but we have a *confidence* that takes the anxiety out of life.
 - This enables us to *trust* reality when things go hard, knowing that our acceptance of what happens will enable us to respond creatively. (46-47)
- *Such an experience may also help that intellectual quandary.... When we experience God in this existential way..., 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, another dimension.... [We] very soon get to the limit of words, and of logic, when we try to describe the experience of reality in this direct and fundamental way.

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. (47-48)

- *We will still have differences of language, of course, and some people may still be uncomfortable about using the word 'God', with all its heavy associations. They will find other ways to express themselves and not go unheard, so they will feel free to hear others who still find that word evocative and powerful.*

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'. (48)