

Appreciating Theological Diversity Among Friends “What's Belief got to do with It?”

John Hunter, Durham Meeting

Within Quakerism, it is clear that a wide range of theological views are held, but it is not much spoken of. This leaves many in our various meetings wondering if they really belong as if there was some Quaker standard of adherence to certain concepts of God and spirituality that eventually would be required. While Quakers from the beginning have self-consciously been a “non-creedal” sect, among many there may be yet an underlying unease stemming from what we have been taught (that religion is fundamentally about “belief and God”) and some may feel that there is therefor an unwritten Quaker creed that we must somehow discover and adopt.

This program will speak to the issue of what modern Friends believe and will advance the prospect that if we are to “let our lives speak” for love and peace in the world, we must strive to find unity and support starting in the microcosm of our local Meetings where we may find that we have some different beliefs.

Morning Session

- 9:00 Silent Worship
9:30 Introduction of Program -John Hunter
9:45 Panel of 6 long-time Quakers with varying theological views -(8 minutes each)
My personal theological and spiritual journey and how it relates to my experience of Quakerism in my meeting.
10:40 Break
10:45 Small Group Discussions: (Claremont process*, 5 per group)
Brief introductions (name, meeting, something that I enjoy)
Two Rounds:
1. Personal reaction to the panel speakers.
2. What makes me a Quaker?
11:20 Brief reports from groups (followed by some discussion.)
12:00 Settling Out

Afternoon Session

- 1:00 Settling In
1:15 Introduction: “If we have differing fundamental beliefs, must one of us must be wrong?
(Since it's not me, can we work together? Maybe one of us doesn't belong!”)
The dilemma of dualistic thinking. Quakerism (religion) as orthopraxy. Quaker understanding of unity. - John Hunter
1:30 Small Groups: (Claremont process*, same groups as AM)
Two Rounds:
1. What are my most important religious beliefs and significant related behaviors?
2. In what ways can I participate in unity among those with different beliefs?
2:15 Group summary reports
2:30 Summary Discussion
2:45 Worship, Settle Out.
3:00 Adjourn

****Claremont Dialogue**** *Each person in the group has the opportunity to speak, but no one is required to do so. No one should make a direct response to another's comments. (This is not a “conversation”.) All group members must speak or “pass” before someone speaks twice.*

Program Speaking Notes for JBH for 2/18/11

Morning Session

9:00 Worship

9:30 Introduction

Friends,

The program handout for today briefly describes what we intend to explore today. Let me review and augment a bit so that we are clear about the intent of today's activities.

The topic deals with theological diversity among Friends. The program this morning is to recognize the reality that individual Friends among us in fact hold widely divergent beliefs about the nature of God and about what Quakerism means to each of us. These facts are not new. What is new, and I believe represents a real maturity among Friends, is the fact that we can now talk about our differences and not be threatened, but instead be strengthened in our understandings and in our commitment to our Quaker communities and traditional Quaker testimonies.

In times past, differences of theological views were a key factor in ugly and bitter schisms among Friends. A few examples... In 1798 Hannah Barnard's preaching and theological views were well known and accepted. While a devout believer, she openly questioned a literal reading of the Bible and in particular the Old Testament stories of the nature of the God's pettiness and threats of violent retribution. As was the custom for dynamic and revered ministers, her Monthly Meeting approved a minute for her to travel in the ministry to Ireland and England. This minute was subsequently endorsed by her quarterly meeting and then New York Yearly Meeting. She was well received in Ireland, but in England the literalist evangelicals had by then risen to dominance and she was denied permission to preach among English Friends and sent home. Back in New York she found that change had occurred there as well and she was stopped from preaching and then disowned from her meeting.25 years later at the time of the Great Separation, Elias Hicks, who had been an admired Quaker Quietist preacher for 40 years and whose views did not change, became the target of some Friends, who had become convinced of the evangelical view. They would follow Elias Hicks from town to town and when he spoke in meetings for worship would immediately rise up and specifically attack his long-time views as dangerous and "unsound".

Such harsh feelings about differences in theology persist in some quarters today, but we are privileged to enjoy what I am calling a religious maturity and is exemplified here in Piedmont Friends Fellowship. We know that a wide variety of beliefs are represented among us, but we nonetheless enjoy a fellowship and support each other in our spiritual journeys. We know that what is of key importance is open and honest seeking grounded in the Spirit. We take seriously the passage from Corinthians often quoted by early Friends, "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."

[Read David Boulton's short essay on Theodicy and Quaker views of God.]

Before I introduce our panel of PFF Quakers, let me share an overall statistic that might be helpful to keep in mind. By several surveys in the last decade, unprogrammed Quakers in England and America report about 25 percent agnostic or atheist beliefs. While pastoral and programmed meetings were not specifically surveyed, there is no reason not to think that a significant, but perhaps lower, percentage feel the same way. (As an aside, I attended a presentation at New Garden Meeting last spring conducted by Friends there on the subject of nontheism among Friends.) Historically, there is a record of nontheism among Friends going back over 100 years. In this theological diversity we Quakers are not alone in that many surveys of mainstream American Christian churches shows about the same breakdown as with Friends. To summarize then, about 75 to perhaps 85 percent of Quakers in PFF may hold traditional Christian theological beliefs, but there is also a significant minority that doesn't.

9:45 **Introduce panel.** These fine Friends will share from their personal spiritual journeys. I have asked them to speak about their traditional or non-traditional theological views and what influence these views have on how they experience being a Quaker.

Dale Hoover (Raleigh)
Dan Read (Durham)
Martin Doherty (Charlotte)
Trish Sebens (Friendship)
Doris Wilson (Upstate Friends)
Cathy Bridge (Durham)

Each Friend on this panel will speak for 7 minutes or so (I'll time) and after they have finished we will break into small groups for some Claremont Dialogues. (I'll explain the Claremont Dialogue process after the panel members have spoken.)

10:35 After a brief break for those who may need one, we will divide into small groups for our Claremont Dialogues. [Describe Claremont Dialogue] Count off by 5's. Note that those preparing lunch may want to speak first. Hand out slips with questions on them. Ask each group to appoint someone to make a brief report to the whole group. Advise that we will re-convene at: 11:20

11:20 - Re-convene for reports from the groups. If time some general discussion

11:50 Settle out then Lunch

Afternoon Session

1:00 Settle In

1:15 Introduction

“If we have differing fundamental beliefs, must one of us must be wrong?
(Since it's not me, can we work together? Maybe one of us doesn't belong!”)

The dilemma of dualistic thinking. Quakerism (religion) as orthopraxy. Quaker understanding of unity.

We humans are fundamentally social creatures. We naturally interact with others in a social manner and place great importance on our relationships. We structure our life activities around relationships: family relationships, romantic relationships, professional relationships, recreational relationships, political relationships, and religious community relationships. Even when we are alone, we preoccupy ourselves with imaginary relationships. We indulge in relationships from literature, we remember relationships from the past, we project and fantasize about potential relationships in the future, and we experience spiritual relationships with what we call the divine or God. And then there is the palpable relationships we have with nature and all of her wonderful flora and fauna. We have wonderful and often healing relationships with our pets. We also sense or project relationships with inanimate objects such as machines (a ship is “she” and we attribute personalities to our cars) and we often feel deeply spiritually connected to the mountains, deserts, oceans, the sky and the universe beyond.

If we are denied these relationships, it is tantamount to death. This brings up our dark side. When we are fearful or threatened, we lash out to destroy relationships. Historically we humans kill. We go to war and slaughter the “other”, with whom we have no meaningful relationship, we occasionally murder each other -tragically often those who were close to us who may have cut off a relationship. If not literally killing, we use other methods of disposal of relationships. For millennia one of the cruel forms of punishment has been social isolation either by shunning, ex-communication, or in a penal environment, solitary confinement. The result of such punishment, if not murderous, can be suicide or mental illness. It's almost as if we humans can't have a positive relationship with something, we must fear it and destroy it.

This is the basis of dualistic thinking. “You are either with me or against me.” “You are part of the solution or part of the problem.” Good versus evil. (Change two letters and that comes out “God versus devil.”) We tend to want things simply delineated. In western movies it was white hats versus black hats. Love versus hate. Light versus

dark. But here's a Quaker teaser..... Inner Light versus what?

And this may bring it back around to relationships. Religious community relationships in this case. Part of our evolutionary social nature is the small tribes of communities we belong to. The strongest bonds are to our families or extended families, then out to our tribes and nations, and it is at the tribal level that religion arises. Cultural and religious relationship bonds are the strongest when we share a commonality of understandings and perceptions. But when close bonds are broken in family and religious relationships, enmity in relationships may follow. Sectarian violence has been with humans for a long time. On a larger scale it was Protestants versus Catholics in centuries of European wars, we see it now with Sunis versus Shiites in the middle east. On a smaller scale, an example is the sometimes murderous dealings of Mormon factions, and yes, Friends, we see the enmity in the branches of Quakers who for the better part of a century hardly even spoke to each other.

And how is it that the religious communal relationship bonds are broken down? For many, belief seems to represent a fault line. There seems to be a natural assumption that our bonds should be based on a similar world view. If we see things the same way, then we re-assure each other and take comfort that our beliefs and perceptions are correct and that we have each others' support. Others' beliefs are "unsound" or incomprehensible or even evil, but ours are comfortably correct. However, if we note that those in our religious community to whom we are supposed to be close have different beliefs, then we may be threatened. From an evolutionary tribal perspective it is hard to trust those who think or perceive differently so the tendency is to go back to dualistic thinking and exclude those who are different. "If you do not believe like I do, then you are not part of my group."

Quakers, of course, have seemed to work against this dualistic approach to religion. From the beginning we are self-consciously a non-creedal sect. Early Friends eschewed creeds. One did not have to officially sign on to any theological formulation of beliefs to be considered a Quaker. No membership lists were kept. You were a Quaker if you showed up for meetings and especially if you witnessed to the experience of the Inner Light. Without a creed, we Quakers have lessened the dualistic thinking tendency to seize upon a written belief litmus test for inclusion or exclusion.

Since the early days of Quakerism, things have become more codified and formal, but there are still some overall behavioral characteristics of Friends that hold. Some have observed that Quakerism is more concerned with orthopraxy than orthodoxy. (Correct practices or behaviors, rather than correct beliefs.) Here are some examples.

1. Is it your behavior that identifies you as a Quaker and not your "professions" (to use an old Quaker term?) In more modern terms, "Does your life speak?"
2. Are you a seeker? Friends do not demand that any of us have fully found Truth, but only that we are seekers. Are you comfortable with seeking spiritual guidance with illumination from the Light Within (even if that term is not your preferred idiom?)
3. Do you support Friends practices? While you may not totally agree with all of what you find among Friends, can you participate in a spirit of harmony in Meeting for Worship and Business Meeting?
4. Can you generally and, where able, specifically support traditional Quaker testimonies? Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, and Equality (and more recently Community)
5. Do you value building community based on love? (Early Friends placed great emphasis on re-creating what they understood as the loving communities of early Christians. The modern version of this may be more diffuse, but it lurks in the background for most Friends.)

Please note that we Quakers do not draw any "lines in the sand" with regard to any of these issues. We use queries to probe our position, but we demand no minimum level of achievement or any specific beliefs. Where there is apparent conflict, we often resort to the "Wear your sword as long as you can" rubric. We are patient with those who need more time. We no longer commonly "disown" those within our midst. (*Definition of "disown".*) It seems that we know that real change in the world is not achieved by exclusion and emphasizing the differences that separate us, but by inclusion and working harder with differences that arise internally. While to many this may seem like a paradoxical approach (and highly time consuming, energy draining, and inefficient) we Quakers are satisfied that this a valid method for making real change.

UNITY

Quakers use a process that seeks "unity" to make discernments. At its core, this means that we have faith that we can find a way forward within community even in the face of diversity of belief or opinion about a whole range of facts, perceptions, or world views. We Quakers trust in the power of seeking in the right spirit that we can discover a correct path to take even in the most difficult of circumstances. Sometimes we have to table an issue. Sometimes

we have to patiently labor with dissenting Friends while we are open to their views changing ours. Sometimes, we simply have to acknowledge disagreement, but find that there is unity to proceed nonetheless. This is a unique decision process that Quakers have honed over the centuries, and when it is working well it is marvelous. Our application of a process of seeking unity is a Spiritual process that can subsume differences and still move forward. We seek to be “led” in our discernment by an inner loving guide and not to fall prey to the usual methods of argument or debate and especially dualistic thinking which can be seen to truncate our own view of the possibilities for Unity.

Additionally, we know in our hearts that it is not a person's beliefs that matter in relationship, but her or his behavior. We are so attuned to loving intention that we can recognize it even in a heated disagreement where we can honor another's views by taking them seriously. In traditional Christian terms, this is what the “kingdom of Heaven on earth” can be about. It is one of the aspects of Quakerism that I find is truly a gift.

1:30 After a brief break for those who may need one, we will divide into small groups for our Claremont Dialogues. [Describe Claremont Dialogue] It would be good if we could be in the same groups we were in the morning. Can we re-convene and we can add some Friends who have recently arrived to the groups who need some additional memberst. *Hand out slips with questions on them. Ask each group to appoint someone to make a brief report to the whole group. Advise that we will re-convene at: 2:15*

2:15 Re-convene for reports and discussion

2:45 Is there any overall conclusion or message that we ca take from today's exercise?

2:50 Settle Out

Other Notes for further definition or discussion:

The Inner Light versus what? What does dualistic thinking pose as a the dark side of the Quaker notion of an Inner Light universally available to every human being? Are we to believe that there are those who are condemned to experience “Inner Darkness” and are to be shunned or excluded from relationship? This was certainly not there great opening of George Fox who proclaimed that the good news was that the spirit of Christ is directly available in everyone.

(From the internet...)

The idea of dualistic thinking, that there is a good and evil way to be, that people and things should be categorized according to certain standards meets the idea of toxicity and purity of thoughts. Dualistic thinking is the way most people think and act, it is the “us vs. them” syndrome. It brings to some the internal comfort to know that they are part of the inner circle. They then feel reassured that their thoughts are the correct ones and feel vindicated that they are right and others are wrong.

Dualistic thinking is a toxic way of thinking because it does not take into account the fact that there are two sides to each of us whether we like it or not and that we cannot deny one over the other completely. It does not take into account the fact that between these two sides there is an enormous range of grays and that some thoughts or beliefs can be changed instantly according to the perspective of the moment. How can we become more aware of the way we use our mind and be conscious of when dualistic thinking takes over and we are in a mode of not seeing anything realistic, all the while thinking we see the truth?

Dualistic thinking spells judgment; judgment that we are better than the other, that we know better. Yet, once you decide to suspend judgment and really look at what is around us, we see that everything is the way it should be, and that life is unfolding one moment , one minute at the time. We see that the flow of it is perfect and that we don't need to interfere. There is no reason to judge or assume anything. It is when we doubt, when we want to control everything that things fall apart.

Prejudging people and events is a very toxic way of thinking because it does not allow you to see the truth.

NEXT PAGE: Hand-out instructions for Friends to take to their Claremont Dialog small break-out groups.

CLAREMONT DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

Morning Session (3 rounds):

1. My name, meeting affiliation, something in my life that I enjoy. (*Very brief introduction.*)
2. My personal reaction to the panel speakers. (Observations, feelings, or insights.)
3. What do I think makes me a Quaker? What is truly important in that definition.

Afternoon Session (2 rounds):

1. What are my most important religious beliefs and significant related behaviors?
2. In what ways can I participate in unity among those with different beliefs?

Claremont Dialogue: (*A topical listening process developed at the Claremont Friends Meeting in the 1960s and widely utilized by Friends since.*)

Out of some silence, each person in the group has the opportunity to speak to the posed question or topic, but no one is required to do so. No one should make a direct response to another's comments. In each round, all group members must speak or "pass" before someone speaks twice to the topic. Only after all "rounds" are completed, may gentle questioning and more interactive conversation begin if time permits. (Since sharing may be deep and personal, it is generally acknowledged that information shared should be treated with tenderness and with measured confidentiality outside of the group.)

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