

Concepts of God (or Not) among Quakers

by *Bill Donovan*

My intention in this inquiry was to understand what my fellow Friends and attendees in Meeting for Worship believe. What are their concepts of God? What are they worshiping? Although I have wondered about these questions for a long time, not so long ago I experienced some negative feedback after quoting Christian scripture relating to the origin of the term “Friend.” I referenced the Gospel of John (the “Quaker Gospel”), quoting Jesus as saying, “You are my friends who do as I command.” (*John 15:15*), which is, “Love one another as I have loved you.” (*John 15:12*). I felt as if I had been eldred

After attending my monthly meeting for a year or so I had become wary of speaking during Meeting for Worship, and actually questioned whether I should submit my letter requesting membership, transferring from Southcentral Yearly Meeting to Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. In fact, I questioned whether I should continue calling myself a Quaker.

Looking back at my letter of January 18, 1981, requesting membership in the San Antonio Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, I used such terms as spirituality, worship, expectant waiting, faith, reverential, ethics, godlike inner potential, and divinity. Although I did not mention “God” per se, or define my concept of it, my expectations of my first monthly meeting were fulfilled. I never feared mentioning the word “God” or “Christ.”

Over the years I have worshiped with Friends and attendees of various backgrounds and persuasions—atheist, agnostic, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Humanist, and Buddhist—to name a few. I have generally felt comfortable despite often not knowing their avowed beliefs, but always have been curious to know. When worshippers have been willing to share, I have tried to listen, record accurately.

I should mention that my experience has been principally with “unprogrammed” Friends, whose meetings are held without clergy and in silence except for the periodic individual spoken messages. There is no discussion until the “Meeting for Worship” has ended.

Several times I have had the opportunity, with members of the monthly or quarterly meetings, to lead or co-facilitate groups in which we were able to explore their varying concept of “God.” When invited to attend these “God Groups,” some were eager to exchange their ideas; others were concerned about confidentiality, that those outside the group would find out what they had expressed. There were others who wanted to preserve the privacy of their beliefs, and yet others who did not want to know their fellow worshippers’ beliefs.

With notes taken on professions of faith made individually, in group, and in archival form, I have compiled these data in an appendix at the end of this paper. I have tried to record these data faithfully, capturing as much as possible the “flavor of the original” in their spoken and written words. In my writeup, I have shortened the salient responses in the service of brevity and coherence without altering meaning. The responses can all be reviewed by the reader and generally understood at face value.

I continued to add participants until I was getting a reiteration of prior responses yielding no more novel ideas or response categories. Those who participated were not selected; they volunteered, wanting to share their beliefs, and came from relatively homogenous groups of unprogrammed Friends, who worshipped in silence without a minister, liturgy, sacraments, or structured service.

There are infinite ways of viewing such data, but the responses, in my view, seemed to fall into nine categories, which I will describe in those words used by the participants. More than one category may be represented in the response of each participant. After each category name will appear the number of participants giving responses in that category, followed by actual words used by the respondents to describe the concept.

CATEGORIES

1. Big/Infinite Extent (21)—infinite, eternal reincarnation, eternal, ultimate, source of being, cosmic consciousness, all embodying, basic reality, source of being, the universe, totality, ultimate reincarnation, all embracing, pantheist.
2. Caring/love (21)—love, affection, humanness, Father, Savior, great physician, gift, lovingness, compassionate, unity.
3. Virtues, Qualities/Characteristics (21)—glory, inspiration, security, right, light, inner light, meaning, spark, rational, noble, divinity, not personal, awesome, not Christian, truth, secure, serene, fulfilment, inseparable, universal.
4. Power (15)—power, force, creation, order, controls universe, supreme, source of being.
5. Entity Named/Reified (15)—Heavenly Father, Holy Ghost, Jesus, Christ, it, Word, Holy Spirit.
6. Unknowable (14)—unamenable, beyond words, inconceivable, incomprehensible, no avatar.
7. Immanent (11)—within, ourselves, inspiration, inseparable.
8. Spiritual/Not Reified (11)—intangible, ethereal, transcendent, spirit, mysterious, invisible, unworldly, presence, mystical, beyond anything.
9. Non-theistic (5)—useless word. Voice within, it, okay to believe in God, depth of being, not a personal God.

DISCUSSION

By perusing the list of response categories, the frequency of the number of responders in each of the nine categories can be seen. It is not surprising that God is viewed in terms of extent, love, virtue and power. We realize that many use a name in referring to God. Also, we can appreciate how difficult it may be to know or adequately describe God. Some view God as being within oneself. Others see God as being a separate, being reified, or only spiritual. A few engage in worship, espousing Quaker values, good works and depth of being without using the term, "God."

The diversity, depth and richness of terms used to describe the understanding, meaning and experience of God is impressive.

Being a descriptive inquiry, the words pretty much speak for themselves, and clearly express the beliefs of those who are able to share with fellow worshippers. My concern is not knowing what is in the minds and hearts of those who are reluctant to express their beliefs and sentiments, and not understanding why they do not.

Generally, it was enjoyable exploring with these Friends and attendees their concept of God as well as understanding what they worship. Quite a few found it easier to talk about what they were not worshiping. They were often unfulfilled by the religion (or none) of their childhood. They often disliked being told what they should believe or hold sacred. They wanted to find whatever they were searching for on their own, but in the context of a safe, accepting and caring fellowship. They were generally comfortable not being controlled, and not controlling others.

My major concern is with those who are observing the holy silence, but are reluctant to speak or afraid to speak—those who did not volunteer and whose voices were not recorded.

Reluctance to speak one's mind in Meeting may come from one who avoids referring to God because it might offend another who is non-theist, but could be viewed somehow as a plea for help. A Christian may mention a verse in the New Testament that may be appropriate to a particular situation just as a Jew may quote the Torah. Yet others may be in the Spirit quoting the Buddha, Rumi, Lao-tse or Kahlil Gibran. As Quakers it seems that we should be able to find that of God in the prophets of other religions as well as Jesus Christ who inspired the founding of our own.

As in the Tower of Babel, those speaking in Meeting are often using words that do not have the same meaning for the others. It might be helpful to explain the underlying meaning. For instance, someone appealing for help from the "Almighty Father" might be viewed as expressing helplessness and wishing that the virtues of love, care and helpfulness will be acted upon. One person praying for another could be seen as holding that person in the Light.

If we want to continue to exist and expand diversity in the Religious Society of Friends, we will need to study the reluctance to speak and apprehension over the possibility of

disapproval. I believe we need to interpret what is said, not as foreign to our beliefs, but capture the shared feelings reflected by the words.

The meaning underlying the words of vocal ministry needs to transcend the content.

APPENDIX

1. A weighty Quaker, known for his activism and good works, grew up without any particular religion and attaches no meaning to the term God. As a musician he regularly experiences spiritual feelings of transcendence, ecstasy, and universalization when his band plays a song just right.
2. "That of God in every man."; great power which created the universe; more than intelligence; love; Light within; source of our being.
3. God is transcendental, also immanent, beyond our comprehension. I empty my mind of all thought, and thus let God be God in me.
4. I believe in Jesus Christ. A man, Jesus; and then a Christ, all spirit. He attributed all power, that is to say, all real power to God, his father, the father of all, supreme and infinite spirit, all power. In God is love.
5. I believe in one God and his only begotten son, my savior, Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary.
6. A single force, God, controls the universe, supreme creator. Holds the whole thing in the hollow of His hand. No words for things outside that experience. Quakerism does not attempt to limit God.
7. The ultimate certainty we seek beyond our personal perception. I hope someday to understand Christ. Become again a follower of the gentle Jesus.
8. God is the universe, everything and everywhere—a gift. I only use the term God in connecting with fundamentalist relatives. Worship is reconnecting to that loving place in yourself. More following Jesus, not worshipping him.
9. The totality of all the billions of galaxies, the entirety of the universe. Worship is connecting to the lovingness.
10. God is the supreme power, Love, Reality, Truth—embraces everything. I pray to God for help.
11. God is the basic reality upon which every other thing stands. Man cannot encompass it.
12. God is our heavenly father that sent his son to try and make this world better for us.
13. God is the source of all life and unknowable. The attributes and will of God are knowable by those who seek Him.
14. God is a contraction of the word "good." All human beings are part of God. The good we do lives on in others we help, making our life eternal.

15. A creator. God has a plan for us individually if we choose to be one of his followers. Each has a spark of the eternal light.
16. God is within us. We cannot be separated from Him—God is the Great Physician, the Creator, life, truth, love.
17. God is in truth a spirit within me always—a mystical realization. Language is inadequate to describe it.
18. God is the supreme power—unknowable and impersonal. Perfection always lies ahead.
19. Mother was a Lutheran, believed Luther did good things, but don't believe in a personal God. Was orphaned and grateful to be taken in by Quakers. In awe of that force creating the universe and its virtues.
20. I am a birthright Quaker. I believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God and the savior of all who accept Him.
21. Grew up a fundamentalist, still worship with spiritual protestants, pray for others in the Christocentric fashion, enjoy singing hymns. Feel inspiration during Meeting for Worship and revere the source of this, but have no belief in a personal God. Comfortable with Quakers and not being told how to worship.
22. I experience spiritual strength and the universe in prayer and meditation—the consciousness of this relation to the Inner Light which is God.
23. We see God by knowing the spirit of love exemplified by the historical Jesus leading to divinity within ourselves, becoming an instrument through which God's power can work in the world.
24. God is the source of that faith that inspired the courage to address social and ethical issues, to work to achieve inspired goals.
25. God is the ultimate plane of reincarnation, the source of all creation of love and spiritual power—cannot be conceived in human terms as a person, but we do not go astray by thinking of Father, source of our being and fulfilment of our ideals.
26. There is a force expressing itself in the universe too great for my mind to grasp. In the beginning there was the word—logos, meaning, rational principle, cosmic consciousness, Holy Spirit.
27. Not a mysterious invisible big bearded entity haunting the shadows. More meaningfully the inner light, that creative power that first dawned upon chaos and drove all things upward into nobler states of being (Howard Brinton). God is the outrush of power by which free souls take creative direction.
28. The universality of God is the presence felt in a variety of worship settings as well as simple places stripped of sound and trappings. Other worldliness.
29. God is the unity of all life, the deep unitive experience of the child in which the soul may know the glory and power or the essential order, the experience of love leading to the unity of God and man.

30. God is more believing in and following a life—more important than anything cognitive.
31. I don't believe in a personal God. You know God in the wilderness, meditate ala Thich Nhat Hanh. No avatar. Unable to understand the depth of being.
32. This year there was a miracle, was reading Jesus' word, but disinherited. God is unconditional love, no rituals or trappings—no one can speak for God.
33. God is companionship. Be still and I am God—knows I am here.
34. Raised with no theology except Martin Luther. No image of God, fearful of religion. Now it's pagan, early Christianity—the guiding force is loving.
35. The empowerment of love, but alienation from other worshipers. Meditate "beloved" and Thou art", experience the miraculous. Early Christianity now.
36. God is present in everything. After being Unitarian, a relief to be with Quakers and talk about God.
37. I am a non-theist. Either didn't understand or believe in the Episcopalian Church. Being a Quaker, it is the process of worship, without an object—discovery, connection, communication—intransitive. It's not what you believe, but how you do it.
38. God is "I am what I am", not necessarily a person. We should dialog with fundamentalists. Fox combined Christianity and mysticism. We can touch into nature in meditation.
39. I am a pantheist. I am pleased Quakers accept my belief.
40. I have difficulty putting "God" into words. As an activist I participate with Quakers, but I worship with fundamentalists. My faith is not expressed among Quakers. I frequently ask, "What would Jesus think?" I have glimpses of God cosmically, and am in awe.
41. God is love, the source of the universe. I am moved by what moves all else. Be still.
42. It's OK to believe in God if we need to. I wanted faith, had none, and created God. I would like to have more faith, but it's OK to be an atheist.
43. My belief in God has evolved from the belief in an anthropomorphic God (theist). I see God in all living creatures.
44. I believe God is entirely within myself. There is no God outside. It is a term describing the totality of all virtue within ourselves—love, truth, beauty, forgiveness, charity, kindness, etc..
45. God is an idea that subsumes the totality of the universe, its energy, life, and substance—limitless, infinite. Being alone with God.
46. I know God when I am able to go beyond anything I know or believe, attaching no words, thoughts or images to the experience.
47. God is the word we attach to experience of ourselves being inseparable from all humanity and the totality of the universe.

48. God is the unchanging presence at work in the world and in all of us bringing us into unity with God's self and with each other. God is infinite and cannot be fully described or understood.
49. Ineffable creative energy beyond form, but grounding all form.
50. After outgrowing the personal judgmental God of my childhood, seeking in the study of Buddhism, Hinduism, Vedanta and Sufis, I returned to Christianity. In Quakerism I found a place in which I could explore for myself what this longing is. I recall so beautifully of what Meister Eckhart as I learn to simplify: "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by the process of subtraction."
51. The true nature of reality is that we are all God, each individual a spark of consciousness in a cosmic soup of energy and we are all one. We are souls in physical bodies.
52. In stating the idea, "The word was God..." John 1;1, Jesus gave words to the idea of a transcendent, universal shared love. As such, Jesus should be the hero of humanitarian atheism. Man can be God just as Jesus was.
53. The sense of awe and wonder in response to the awareness of the overwhelming love of God and amazing gifts from the Presence-- near and unnamable.
54. I visualize the Divine energy as a ribbon of light coming into me and going from me through or around each person in the room, so that we may be attuned to what Love would say through one of us.
55. I do not believe in a personal God. Exposure to Christianity, spiritual experience, service work and the wilderness lead to a depth of being we are unable to understand.
56. I believe, as did Whitehead, that what we follow in life is more important than our cognition.
57. Having grown up in a family of "Free Thinkers," the concept of God, moral law, sin, intercession and other metaphysical questions seemed foreign and not meaningful. I share the teaching of the historical Buddha that pursuit of these sorts of questions interferes with the awareness of our own contribution to dissatisfaction and ability to change in ways that would help ourselves and others.
 - i. For me, a Quaker Meeting for Worship is a joining with others who are patiently waiting and opening themselves to hear a quiet still voice from a place different from the usual source, and to share with others what is found. This four-hundred-year-old process, and the kindly non-dogmatic tradition and spirit in which it is done is worthy of awe and reverence.
58. The experience of what I call God is beyond being, or may be all being. Love is central, and unknowingness. I have the image of Jesus holding me like a baby in arms.
59. It's the divine presence. Can't be defined. Not all powerful, not about power. God is the force that empowers us. We are the action.

60. God is the power greater than ourselves. We are unable to form a concept of God—only have inklings or perceptions. We have experiences of the divine—in scriptures, in nature, inspired sermons, gospel music. God is often absent in Quaker meeting.
61. Being offended by the mention of Jesus in Quaker meeting is Unquakerly. God is found in sharing of spiritual experience. Without that, God is not present in the meeting

Bill Donovan is a member of the Monterey Peninsula Friends Meeting, a retired, widowed, father of two—an anthropologist and a diplomat. He graduated in psychology from Cal, graduated in medicine from the Medical College of Wisconsin, and interned at Kaiser Foundation Hospital in San Francisco. He studied with Maxwell Jones in Scotland and instituted a “Therapeutic Community” at the U.S. Army Hospital, Frankfurt. His residency was at the Massachusetts General Hospital, following which he set up a clinical psychiatric service at the Diagnostic Clinic of San Antonio, serving several years as clerk of the local Quaker Meeting, and organized the Physicians for Social Responsibility. He is currently volunteering with the Western Neuropathy Association and was appointed as “facilitator of communication” by his Meeting.