

Journeys in the Spirit

inward outward upward downward



Youth Work Edition

Issue 16

June 2012

Theism and non-theism

The youth edition of Journeys in the Spirit provides a range of ideas to use with 12–18 year olds in a Quaker context. It offers activities for one-off sessions or weekends and comes out three times a year. Some suggestions are made about age suitability. Timings are not stated, as this will depend on the group and how the activities are used. Each issue explores a theme.

Journeys in the Spirit is offered with the intention of providing an opportunity for exploring, creating and learning in an atmosphere of worship in partnership on our shared journey in the spirit. There are four directions to our spiritual journey: inwards to ourselves; outwards to others; upwards (or is it further inwards?) towards the deeper mystery; downwards to the world we live in.

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The theme for this issue

Do you have to believe in God to be a Quaker?

This issue explores some of the following questions:

- Is God an old man who lives on a cloud?
- Images of God – what do they say?
- How do Quakers define God?
- How do Quakers view atheism?
- What do theistic and non-theistic Quakers say?
- Definitions of God: God is....? God isn't.....?



Using the material

These activities are designed to be used over a weekend or week long event for young people with these themed sessions interspersed with other activities and free time. They could also be used on one-off sessions or a series over a number of weeks.

The material can be used as several consecutive sessions for the whole group or run in parallel with participants choosing between different activities that are undertaken in small groups or individually. Try to include at least one activity from each of the different points so that you cater for different learning styles.



Gathering Points

Games are an effective way of helping a group of young people to get to know each other and work together in a group. For the games listed, all participants need to be sitting in a circle.

Name games

- **Adjectives names** – put an adjective before your name and go round the circle e.g. *Angelic Amy, Perfect Peter etc*
- **Silly name game** – each person says their name and does an action with it that everyone else has to copy as they repeat the persons' name; go round the circle.

Listening games

- **Zoom, eek, zap** – send a word and corresponding action around or across the circle. 'Zoom' – put 2 hands together and point to the person next to you and say 'zoom' at the same time, the 'zoom' gets passed round the circle at speed, then explain that anyone can change the direction of 'zoom' by saying 'eek'. This changes the direction of the 'zoom' and sends it back round the circle the other way. 'Zap' can then be introduced. If a person chooses to say 'zap', they can send the 'zoom' across the circle by putting their two hands together and pointing across the circle. The game requires the participants to listen and look at each other in a nonthreatening but fun way and is a good ice breaker.
- **The sun shines on....** – one person has to stand in the middle of the circle and say *'the sun shines on everyone who is... wearing blue socks...'*. All the people with blue socks then have to change places and the person in the middle will aim to sit on a vacant chair during the changeover. One person will then be left without a chair who stands in the middle and has to say the next *'....the sun shines on everyone who is.....etc'*
- **Wink ministry....** – one person goes out of the room and a person in the circle is chosen to be the 'murderer'. The first person is invited back into the room and stands in the middle of the circle. The murderer can kill people by winking at them but first they have to stand up and give spoof ministry as if they were in a Quaker meeting. They can then do a 'spectacular death' and fall on the floor or slump in their chair to 'die'. The person in the middle has to try and guess who the murderer is. If they succeed, that person then has to go out of the room while a new murderer is chosen and the game continues.
- **Talking and listening in pairs** – in the circle, ask participants to tell their neighbour two or three things about them that they don't already know for a few minutes. The information that they give can be trivial and fun or more serious depending on the makeup and context of the group. Then go round the circle and ask each individual to introduce their partner and tell the whole group what they have learnt about them.

Ground rules for the group

Explain to the participants that they need to agree ground rules for the group before activities begin on the theme. Whilst exploring this theme, it will be important to remind the participants that they need to remember and agree to the following, as well as other ground rules they may suggest.

- To listen respectfully to each other's views and opinions and not to criticise or put down others who have different views to themselves
- To own what they say e.g. use 'I' statements, rather than stating their opinions as facts
- To maintain confidentiality within the group



Starting Points

What do we mean by God?

Read a twentieth century and seventeenth century extract from QFP, in which God is described using different words and language by Quakers.

e.g.

- George Fox, 19.06,
- Advices and Queries 1.02.7



Write a list of different words that are used to describe God by Quakers e.g. the light, divine, that of God, the Lord, love. Explore which words people feel comfortable using and which words they find difficult. Ask questions to generate discussion such as 'is God male or female'?

Activity: Play the game – 'If God was aplace, animal, kind of food, what would it be?'. Ask the young people to draw pictures and then to share their pictures and discuss why they drew their images. Divide into smaller groups for discussions and share back in the larger group or stay in one group if the group is small.



Reflection Points

Who or what is God?

Play the song 'God is not a white man' by Michael Gungor (download from Youtube or itunes).



Activity – give each participant a copy of sheet 'Images of God in Christian culture' (select Reflection Points at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-youth> choose 'Who or What is God'). Ask them to jot down words or phrases in response to each visual image. Share and discuss their responses in pairs or small groups, then feedback to the whole group.



Listening Points

Download from Youtube or Itunes some of the following tracks which can be used to help stimulate discussion, ideas and worship.

God is not a White Man – Michael Gungor. This is accompanied by an interesting cartoon on Youtube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WybvhrU9KU> After playing the song / video you could pose the following questions for discussion:

- What race / gender do you think of God as?
- How has religion 'owned' God?
- How do sovereign states use the concept of God?
- What does 'God is love' mean to you?

Amazing Grace – Leann Rimes. This could be played as an introduction to a meeting for worship.

Morning has Broken – Cat Stevens. This could be played as an introduction to a meeting for worship.

With God on our Side – Bob Dylan. This song could be used an introduction to a discussion about what is meant by the word God. (See sample of lyrics below)

With God on our Side

But now we got weapons of the chemical dust

If fire them we're forced to, then fire them we must

One push of the button and a shot the world wide

And you never ask questions when God's on your side



Viewing Points

What do Quakers believe about God? An 8 minute long film on Youtube from Watford Quakers, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-rdlmcwTFw>. The DVD can be bought in the Quaker Centre in Friends House. This could be used as an introduction to the Action Points activity on theism and non-theism.

Being a Quaker in Today's World. A 4 minute long extract on Youtube from Patteos.com, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dGZjEPhYmo. Featuring an American Quaker talking about what Quakers believe in. This could be used an introduction to the Action Points activity on theism and non-theism.

Richard Dawkins talking about atheism. A 9 minute long extract on Youtube from the John Harris National Conversations (Guardian website) www.youtube.com/watch?v=62ZoLaup-0g. This could be used as an extra resource to supplement quotes for discussion on atheism in the Talking Points activity.



Talking Points

You may do this in the following ways depending on the size of your group:

- Large group: divide into three smaller groups, each group rotates around the three facilitated discussions. Have a facilitator for each group who leads the discussion. Read the quotes and consider each question and discuss. Finish by feeding back into the larger group.
- Small group: divide into threes. Hand out the quotes and discussion questions as below one at a time. The threes read the quotes and consider and discuss each question and then feed back into the whole group. After this then hand out the next quote and question and repeat the process.

Is God an old man who lives on a cloud?

The theistic definition of God as a personal being with expanded supernatural, human and parental qualities, which has shaped every religious idea of the Western world, came into existence not through divine revelation, Freud argued, but out of human need. Today this theism is collapsing. The theistic God has no work to do. The power once assigned to this God is now explained in countless other ways. The theistic God is all but unemployed.

Bishop John Spong, 1998, Liberal Christian theologian



- What 'supernatural, human and parental qualities' did the historical Christian church assign to God?
- How has science challenged this idea of God?
- Is God an old man who lives on a cloud?

Do you have to believe in God to be a Quaker?

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

George Fox, 1656, written in a letter from Launceston goal. QFP 19.32.



- Do Quakers define God differently to other Christian groups?
- What might George Fox have meant when he used the phrase 'that of God in everyone?'

What about atheism?

But insofar as theology studies the nature of the divine, it will earn the right to be taken seriously when it provides the slightest, smallest smidgen of a reason for believing in the existence of the divine. Meanwhile, we should devote as much time to studying serious theology as we devote to studying serious fairies and serious unicorns.

Richard Dawkins, 1998, scientist and atheist



- Do you need scientific proof to believe in God?
- Do you have to believe in God to be a Quaker?
- Can you be a Quaker and an atheist or non-theist?



Action Points

Theism and non-theism

- Theism – definite belief in a deity or the existence of God.
- Nontheism – absence of a belief in a deity or the existence of God.

Explain the meaning of the two terms as above.

Working with quotes

Around the room stick the four quotes up that can be found at <http://www.quaker.org.uk/resources-youth> selecting Action Points and choosing 'Theism and non-theism'. Give some time for young people to read each one without discussing them, perhaps playing one of the tracks from Listening Points while this is happening.

When everyone has had a chance to read each quote, bring people together as a whole group or in smaller groups and pose the following questions:

- Which aspects of what you have read did you like and why?
- What parts of what you have read did you find difficult and why?
- Why do you think Quakers often don't talk about their beliefs about such things?

There are obviously no right or wrong answers to such questions. You could suggest that this discussion happens as worship sharing, perhaps with a talking token that is held when someone wants to speak and people asked to make no more than one contribution per question, with contributions being personal and not commenting on the thoughts of others.

Use chalk or a piece of rope to make a line on the floor. Put pieces of paper saying 'agree' or 'disagree' at each end of the line. Read out the quotes and get participants to position themselves on the line. Follow this up with a discussion.

Debate

Split the group into two or four groups depending on numbers present (a group size of 5 – 8 people is perfect). Ask each group to prepare to make an argument either for or against the existence of God. Groups should be ready to present their case to everyone in a way that involves each member of the group. In turn each group has the opportunity to present their case to the whole group. After each presentation have a short time for questions from the floor to the group who have made the presentation. Once each group has presented open the floor to general debate, in which people must continue to argue for the case that their group presented. Perhaps have an independent panel who at the end of the debate judge which argument has been the most compelling.

Speaker session

Invite two adult Friends from a local Quaker meeting who describe themselves as a theist and non-theist to give a short talk each to the young people about their beliefs and ideas. Finish with a question and answer session. If possible encourage some of the young people to approach potential speakers. Discuss with the young people beforehand how they will respect the views that speakers will express.



Worship Points

God is.....God isn't.....

Give out post it notes. Ask young people to finish sentences beginning with 'God is....' and 'God isn't...'. Put the post it notes on two large pieces of paper to be displayed.

Move into a worship sharing session. Sit in a circle with the large pieces of paper in the middle. The facilitator may begin the worship sharing by playing a piece of music such as 'Morning has Broken' by Cat Stevens (see Listening Points) and then ask the question – *what is or isn't God?* Any person may speak if they wish on the topic leaving a few minutes silence between spoken ministry.

OR

Move into a meeting for worship. Place the large pieces of paper in the middle of the circle. Play a piece of music such as 'Morning has Broken' by Cat Stevens or 'Amazing Grace' by Leann Rimes (see Listening Points) as a short introduction to the meeting for worship.



Ending Points

Ending activity on the theme

Begin with a few minutes of quiet. Ask the young people to think of two things they will be taking away with them. You could add some structure to this session by asking questions such as:-

- Is there anything you have learnt that you didn't know before?
- How important are the differences between theist and non-theists Quakers?
- Have you changed what you think about theism and non-theism?

Ask individuals to think about whether they think that there is a place for non-theists in the Religious Society of Friends? You might mention that a survey of British Quakers conducted in 1998 and in 2003 showed that at least a quarter of British Quakers stated that they do not believe in God or are unsure about the existence of God. Ask individuals to consider whether they think it is more accepted amongst other young Quakers to believe in God or not. Ask them to think how they can be accepting of people whatever their beliefs.

Have an evaluation time at the end of the last session on the theme. Draw a happy and sad face on a large piece of paper with a line down the middle. Give the young people post it notes and ask them to write their feedback on the sessions that have considered theism and non-theism on the post it notes and place them on the happy or sad face depending on their feedback.

Review and discuss in the large group thoughts and feelings about the sessions.

Review

With those responsible for the sessions consider the thoughts and feelings that came out of the review of the sessions that the young people did.

Some questions for session leaders to consider:

- Did the young people engage with the sessions?
- What worked well, what was less successful and why?
- Did the young people show interest in having any follow up activities linked to the theme?

Think what else you might now do in relation to the theme.

Consider how the thinking that has taken place might feed into the wider Quaker meeting.

Additional resources & links

Twelve Quakers and God – booklet by Quaker Quest (sold in the Quaker Centre in Friends House)

Godless for God's Sake – Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism, by 27 Quaker Nontheists, edited by David Boulton.

An Introduction to Watford Quakers DVD – on sale in the Quaker Centre in Friends House.

www.nontheistfriends.org – for Quakers and others interested in non-theism amongst Friends.

Connecting as a Community – a range of ideas on how to develop relationships and make links with each other and across different ages

www.quaker.org.uk/journeys/special-issues-children

Links to other organisations

Christian Aid:
mpower resource for young people
www.christianaid.org.uk

Cafod Youth Topics:
monthly activities on world issues
www.cafod.org.uk

Youth Work magazine:
a monthly Christian youth work publication
www.youthwork.co.uk

Russell House Publishing:
resources for working with young people
www.russellhouse.co.uk

Oxfam:
resources for youth work on global issues
www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet

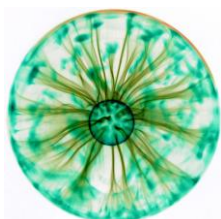
Leaveners:
Quaker performing arts project
www.leaveners.org

This issue

This issue of Journeys in the Spirit Youth Edition was written by Emily Janes. The editor was Howard Nurden.

Next issue

The next issue of Journeys in the Spirit Youth Edition will explore 'Young Quakers and Membership' and will be available from 8 October.



Available free by subscription.

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