

The Witness of God in Everyone: Toward an Inclusive, Contemporary, Quaker Theologizing

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It is lovely to be back at Pendle Hill, where I had the marvellous opportunity of spending a number of months as the Cadbury scholar during my 2014-15 sabbatical year. While here I worked on a project that proved to be as complex and as difficult as I expected it to be, and I am profoundly grateful for the time and space for the exploration and contemplation that such a project demands, especially as part of this vibrant and important Quaker community. This evening, I would like to present a *précis*, or an overview, of that project, which is very much (like everything, I will suggest) a work in progress—and so I beg your patience and forbearance as I struggle here to articulate, sometimes a bit too convolutedly, ideas that I am still wrestling with myself. The presentation will unfold across four sections: in the first I will articulate the **problem** I hope here to address; in the second I will provide a **diagnosis** of that problem; in the third I will offer some further **analysis** of it along specifically Quaker lines; and in the fourth and final section I will dare to suggest a possible, and hopefully fruitful, **way forth**.

I. The Problem: Quakers, and “God”

I would like to preface what I am going to share tonight with a bit of context:

I am a lifelong Quaker, with deep roots in, and connections with, Friends from across our several branches, and am deeply committed to our Quaker tradition and to the work that I believe we are called to do in the world. Now, a tradition always simultaneously functions in at least a couple of ways. On the one hand, there is the way in which the energy and the force of the tradition is outreaching, a kind of centrifugal force starting from what we have, with what we've been given or gifted, and concerning ourselves with what it means to share that gift in terms of fulfilling our calling in the world, starting from where we are and reaching out. The other, simultaneous force in any tradition is a centripetal one, a force and a focus that turns us inward upon ourselves, whereby we ask ourselves who we are and what the meaning of being who we are is. In a healthy tradition, I suggest, these two forces work in concert with each other, for on the one hand we need to be doing what we are called to do in the world. But to do that most effectively, we also need to be focussed on ourselves, on who it is that we are, and making ourselves into who we need to be *in order* to be most faithful to our callings. I, in my own academic work among Friends, focus primarily on the centripetal moment,

asking who we are as Quakers, about the integrity of our society, about who we are called to be, so that we can function in the world most faithfully.

One of the things that I like to do, and that because of my training in philosophy I feel somewhat capable of doing, and called to do, is to look for those places within our tradition broadly conceived where there are internal tensions—not the productive tensions, of which there are also many, but the destructive, divisive tensions that keep us from functioning as effectively as we could *as a society*, as the Religious Society of Friends, and therefore with all that we as a society are tasked with doing.

Indeed, we very often get irretrievably hung up on our disagreements. Our standard recourse in such situations (and I will be arguing here that this recourse is a product of the very way in which we have been become acclimatized to think today) is to attempt to overcome the problem by convincing others of the truth of our own perspective *over against* Friends on the other side who disagree with us. That is, we try to *solve* the problem by *resolving* the problem, by winning the argument. And, failing that, we tend to withdraw into the comfortable cohort of Friends with whom we do agree, leaving “the others” to their own, erroneous views, and getting on with things largely in isolation from each other. My strategy, as a philosopher, is to step back from these tensions and, rather than trying to decide which side should “win,” and throwing my weight behind one side or the other, instead ask: why is it that we have the disagreement that we do?; how is it that the question has been so framed that we find ourselves at an impasse as to how to work it out?; why is it that, beyond mere disagreement, we even sometimes find ourselves largely unable to even speak meaningfully to one another about these disagreements?

Last year, when I was at Pendle Hill, I repeated a set of lectures that I had given earlier at Canadian Yearly Meeting, in which what I try to do is to take an area in which Quakers are divided against one another, a point of tension—in that case the question of the relationship of Quakers and Christianity—and think that through in a manner that perhaps reframes the question in a way that helps move us forward.¹ We have Quakers who are thoroughly Christo-centric, and those for whom Quakerism needs to move past that, and I tried to provide a framework within which *both can be perceived as part of the same dynamic process*, namely, that the aspiration to transcend any and every form of Christianity is in fact a deeply Quaker way in which to be Christian.

The project on which I was working last year at Pendle Hill last year was strategically analogous, though it demanded a wholly new conceptual working through. This time, what I wanted to address was how Quakers from across the spectrum variably, and too often antagonistically, think and speak about God, because “God” is another of the issues that radically divides us, for within the living, contemporary Quaker traditions we have those who are probably fairly called fundamentalists, those for whom secure,

¹ These lectures are being published by Friends United Press under the title of *Radicalizing Spirit: The Challenge of Contemporary Quakerism*. As I write this the book is at the printer, so should be available sometime in November of 2015.

positive claims about God constitute the bedrock of faith and life, we have evangelicals, for whom a personal relationship with a personal God is the fulcrum of daily existence, orthodox believers, who find their compass in the essential teachings of the historic, Christian tradition, liberal Friends, who have soaked up the milieu of modern² theology that emphasizes a rationally circumscribed personal experience over the deliverances of revelation, universalists, who do not believe it matters much what we call God (or which God upon whom we call), and a growing even if still small number of non-theist Friends, i.e., Friends who believe it is best for us to get past the whole God thing altogether. And so, it was into this morass that I had the good common sense to throw myself, to the interest, but also to the bewilderment, bemusement, and sympathy of all and sundry. Indeed, when in response to the inquiry of a member of the Pendle Hill board I shared that as the Cadbury scholar I was working on “Quakers and God,” he provided me with my favourite response of all, by kindly yet perspicaciously quipping: “Good Luck.” Exactly! And thanks. I’ll need it. And a lot of grace besides.

So why, then, take the impertinent leap into this thicket at all? If “theology,” in the straightforward, etymological sense of “thinking and speaking about God,” is among the things that divide us, should we not rather stop talking about God, to discourage rather than encourage theological discourse among Friends? I suggest, however, that it is not, in fact, our speaking about God (our respective “theologies”) that divides us, but our unwillingness on all sides to wrestle with the issue of God seriously enough. For we *are* divided on the issue of “God,” and our inability or unwillingness to speak meaningfully together about God is among the things that keeps us that way. For not only is there a lack of vibrant discourse about God *across* the branches of Friends, I want to suggest (far more controversially, I know) that there is a lack of vibrant discourse about God *on both of the major “sides”* of the Quaker theological divide as well.³

There is certainly a perception among liberal Friends (and not without some truth!) that theology, in this simple sense of speaking about God, divides us, and the at least tacit, and often explicit, agreement in many liberal meetings is that we therefore do best not to engage in this project, at least not in any serious way. God talk, if it occurs, is taken with a grain of salt, made as ambiguous and as unchallenging as possible (“Spirit” or “the Divine” are therefore frequent substitutes), and allowed to mean to each whatever his or her own personal sensibilities dictate. God, meaning almost anything, ends up often meaning almost nothing. One can have whatever personal sense of God one likes, but communally it is best not to talk about it, at least not in any serious way,

² In this case, by “modern theology” I mean a particular theological “school” of the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries, over against the broader way in which I will later use the term “modern” in this work.

³ Ironically, the most vibrant “theological” discourse among Friends today may have its home among our non-theists. While it seems to me what they stand against is often the most literalistic and simplistic version of God possible (which impoverishes their own reflections and convictions), at least they are “questioning” and “imagining” alternative formulations for things, both of which I will argue are essential to the theological task.

resulting in our own Quaker version of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Many Friends love this, and both actively celebrate it and enforce it. Some became Friends for this very reason! Some think that that is simply who we are. “God,” whatever that signifies, if anything at all, is a mysterious presence, and is best left that way. And why get hung up on arguing about that when there are so many more concrete, and important, matters at hand? Conversely, Evangelical and Orthodox meetings and churches often speak of God as if there were no mystery there at all: God has revealed Himself (and it is almost always *Himself*), we believe and obey. And this unquestioned and unquestionable way of speaking about God is enforced as dogmatically as the restrictions on God-talk are enforced on the liberal side. At the risk of alienating myself from everybody, I am suggesting—against the grain on both sides—that seriously raising the *question* of God promises not only the possibility of greater spiritual depth across the society, but the possibility of forging a certain kind of unity as well.

So I am tempted to give this project a very pretentious heading, and refer to it as: “a prolegomena to any future pan-Quaker theologizing.” By that I do not mean to provide a “Quaker theology.” I am not, in the first place, a theologian. I read theology, and appreciate theology, and think that it is a very important discourse, one that we should take very seriously, for reasons that I will outline in this presentation. But I am not going to propose a theology. I understand and share the allergy that our tradition has most often had to what that too often entails. I am not going to try and tell anyone what they should think about, say about, or believe about God, or that they should believe in God at all. But I am interested in creating the conditions under which Quakers from across the theological spectrum can enter meaningfully into a *shared project of theologizing* whatever their theological predilections, whether Evangelicals, Orthodox, Conservative, liberals, or even non-theists. Indeed, I suspect that each of these groups already has a “theology,” if by that we mean a set of beliefs, or disbeliefs, whether more or less explicitly stated, about what God does or does not mean, and that sets the parameters for the accepted ways in which God is, or is not, spoken about within that particular community. And that “theology,” whether held explicitly or implicitly,⁴ profoundly affects how we think of ourselves, *and* how we relate to Friends of other theological persuasions.

So what do we do with our Quaker “others”? Convince them? Ignore them? Or speak with them? Flying in the face of the traditional Quaker testimony against gambling, I am betting the farm on the latter option, wagering that the beautiful risk of vulnerable exposure to our Quaker others in the end brings us all into deeper communion with each other, and closer to “the witness of God in everyone.” If it were a matter of seeking agreement on these issues, of making liberals and evangelicals, the orthodox and non-theists, all believe the same thing, then I really would be as crazy as I at first appear. But, I am not proposing *a theology*; I am issuing a call to *theologizing*, an invitation to enter into a discourse about “God.”

⁴ And often when held implicitly affects us even more profoundly, because it then does so “behind our backs,” and as such does not present itself for thoughtful consideration.

II. Diagnosis: The “modern” dilemma

So we are divided, and those divisions—when not lived, as is most common, as mutual solitudes—*are* taken up antagonistically. But what I want to suggest, by way of a diagnosis of the problem, is that this is not entirely our fault. And this because we all, despite our deep differences, share a way of framing the questions that we ask, and that this way of framing things sets in motion the antithetical way in which we take them up. And this because we are, all of us, moderns, and *the very way that think* about things—the way in which the imaginative space in which we live is both facilitated and delimited—is shaped by the fact that we are moderns. On most standard readings of the history of philosophy, of the history of the Western intellect, the “modern” period comes into formation (under a number of simultaneous influences) in the 17th Century (and so roughly contemporaneous with the birth of Quakerism), although its more pervasive influence had to await the Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th Century and the popularization of their ideas across the 19th, such that the modern way of thinking has—over the past four centuries or so—come to increasingly dominate the very way in which we understand ourselves and our world. So, when I say that all of us are moderns, what I mean to say is that we are children of our age, inheritors of the modern mind. We think the way that we do because we are modern people, and the influence is so deep that we do not even notice it; the very structure of our thought is modern through and through.

But I want here to make a crucial distinction. Modernism, in the sense that I am using it here, does not refer to “*what*” we think, but to “*the manner in which*” we think whatever it is that we think. If our world seems today (and the Quaker world too!) to be divided between progressives—those who embrace modernity—and conservatives—those suspicious of modernity—this, I am claiming, while perhaps true, is a surface phenomenon, one that masks the deeper truth (and the one I will pursue in this work) that “modernity” is more profoundly understood as shaping the very structure of our thinking, as the framework within which the opposition between progressive and conservative (among others) is itself understood, solidified, and perpetuated. That is, not only are progressives “modern” in this sense, but so are conservatives, as modernity is the shared understanding that encourages progressives and conservatives to oppose themselves to each other in the way that they do—namely, as opposing camps in a battle that must ultimately end in the triumph of one of the factions—the one with the “truth,” that is, my side—over the other. So, I am not using the term “modern” in this “factional” sense, wherein modern progressives are opposed to conservative traditionalists, but as a name for the way in which we today, at the end of the modern era, conceive of opposition itself, or how we come to conceive of things in terms of opposition.

That is, in league with the emerging modern approaches to science and its methodological approach to knowledge acquisition, modern thought is “analytical” to its core, which is to say that it proceeds by breaking things down into the smallest possible discrete units which can be *clearly distinguished from one another*. At the basis of

modern thinking is, therefore, the drive to *distinguish this from that*, to secure the knowledge that, at base, something either is this or that—more complex entities being taken as reducible to the effect of lawed interactions between these fundamental units. One of the interesting (and often destructive) implications of this drive to demonstrate that, at base, something is either this or that, is academic and professional “specialization,” resulting in the arguments between the disciplines (on those rare occasions when they speak to each other at all) whether the fundamental explanatory units of, say, a human being, are purely physical, or biotic, or psychic, or social, or spiritual. A human being either *is* a selfish gene (its social interactions explicable as the effect of this reality, as in sociobiology) or *is* a product of its culture (which determines the way in which it is structured biotically), or ... what have you.⁵

Indeed, at the apogee of modern thought is computer technology, a technology by which we can do all things up to the creation of virtual worlds, all based upon the most fundamental of analytical distinctions: one or zero, on or off, yes or no. But computers did not come out of nowhere. We do not have analytic, either-or thinking because we have computers; we have computers (and trust them to regulate almost every aspect of our lives!) because we think analytically, in either-or terms. That we are increasingly turning the regulation of our lives over to computers—however strangely uneasy we might occasionally feel about this nevertheless “inevitable and eminently practical” eventuality—demonstrates the implicit faith in the “thought-world” that gave rise to them. (And if you doubt me on this one, I’ll send you a text later to clarify.)

Now, there is no quarrelling with the power of analytic, either-or thought for scientific and technological progress; members of my home meeting are watching this lecture live, 2,000 miles hence, a distance that I myself covered yesterday in a few hours at 35,000 feet. Remarkable. But we have been, until very recently (as I will shortly suggest), so bedazzled by this power that we rarely slow down (and then usually only when something goes wrong) to wonder about the wisdom of it all, and this because wisdom is irreducible to analytic thought and its mechanisms, and as moderns whose very way of thinking is analytical we are hard pressed to even imagine what wisdom would be. When we want to know what to do we ask an “expert,” i.e., an aficionado of modern analysis in some area or other (someone who has done, or knows, the research, and can tell us the truth about this or that isolated issue), rather than someone who considers the larger context in which knowledge plays a role—because for analytic thought context is irrelevant, as facts are precisely isolatable things. Meanwhile, the erstwhile purveyors of wisdom, gurus, priests, patriarchs and matriarchs, elders and overseers, are shunted into the domain of personal consolation, if not, as is more often the case, ignored or eliminated altogether. When the lab coat replaces the surplice, especially on those occasions in which we are in trouble (for we

⁵ This analytical way of thinking is so deep that we are all but incapable of working on problems in a more comprehensive way: the environmental problems we face are either a problem for the chemists (who thus work on “carbon capture”) or economists (who suggest selling “carbon credits”) or “naturalists” (who think the planet will only recover when the human species finally drives itself into extinction).

might want to keep the latter around for certain ceremonial occasions) we know that we are moderns—root and branch!

But analytic thought, either-or thinking, does not work so well for theology. We moderns, on all sides, have conspired to make theology, in its literal sense of speaking and reasoning about God, into a science—issuing in a series of claims, called beliefs, that are taken as being either true or false.⁶ Either God exists, or God doesn't. Either God is objectively out there, independent of us, or is an expression of our own, deep, spiritual aspirations. Either Jesus is the Christ, or he is a man, however venerable he may have been. And so, we divide ourselves up: theists on the one side, and non-theists on the other; the orthodox on one side, and liberals on the other; Christocentric Friends on one side, and universalists on the other. And we oppose ourselves to each other because we cannot all be right: either God exists, or does not; is out there, or is not; is incarnated in Jesus, or is not. Either-or. Either-or. Distinction. Division. Confrontation, ... or mutual dismissiveness.

But what if theology, or, better, theologizing, were conceived neither as an analytic science, making claims about God that were either objectively true or false, nor as the expression of merely subjective projections, but a worshipful pursuit of communal wisdom? Then challenges to our own theological understandings, whatever they might be (theistic or non-theistic, liberal or orthodox, etc.), would not be a threat (for it would then not be a matter of being right or wrong) but an invitation to an inspired imaginativity, to a seriously playful and playfully serious communal attempt to articulate our sense of that which calls to us across that to which we are called, as part and parcel of our attempts to be faithful to our callings themselves.

For if knowledge is concerned with the accumulation of facts, wisdom is a concern with how we, collectively, understand and organize our world in a manner that best permits of and encourages flourishing. And to ask exactly what “flourishing” means in this context is again to attempt to reduce wisdom to knowledge, as working out what flourishing means in any particular context—not only theoretically but practically, existentially, spiritually—is the first and ongoing task of wisdom. That wisdom can be reduced to knowledge—that we do not need priests or gurus or wise men and women, or scriptures or gods, but only scientists, those with knowledge; that myth and opinion can be displaced by reason and knowledge—is an Occidental dream that has roots as far back as Plato,⁷ but that reaches its climax in modernity, and this is something that affects us all, as all claims and assertions, including theological ones, are taken either

⁶ Ironically, the fundamentalists and the new atheists share the distinction of being the greatest zealots of modernity, and thus share the belief that theological claims are truths in the scientific sense—even if they are dogmatically demanded on the one side and ridiculed on the other.

⁷ Plato thought that those with knowledge of the “forms” (the “ideas” for things beyond the particular things themselves) had true knowledge and were thus rightly called philosophers (lovers of wisdom), and that it was these that should exercise political power, calling them “philosopher kings.”

as claims to knowledge, or as mere myths and metaphors that, however interesting and even inspiring, are not any longer really worth reading for their “truth” value, since we now have the sciences, a much better source for that, instead.

That is, I am not gainsaying truth. All praise and gratitude to the kingdom of facts and its beneficence. But wisdom, and, I am arguing, theology as a wisdom seeking discourse, has a truth of its own, irreducible to facts (and to the realm of mere metaphor that nevertheless presupposes the priority of facts)—namely, “truth” in an older and deeper sense than that of facts, truth not as “true about” but as “true to,” as “faithfulness,” a concern with “meaning,” with the “truth” of our factual truths themselves.

III. Analysis: ‘The “witness” of God in everyone’

My thesis is that the pressures of modern thought have impoverished the theological imagination, including the Quaker theological imagination, and thus limit the ways in which God can be experienced, and that *by reconnecting with early Quaker religious experience* we can reinvigorate a pan-Quaker consideration of, and connecting with, “God,” or, in other words, engage meaningfully again in the project of communal Quaker theologizing. That is, by returning to theological formulations that preceded the dichotomizing, either-or, tendencies imposed upon us by an increasingly hegemonic modernity, we can perhaps open up a space for renewed theological expression, leading to a deeper and shared religious experience, one less beholden to the either-or thinking that influences us to articulate our experiences in ways that place us over against one another, and that have led to the current impasses in which we find ourselves at present. But with this proviso: I am *not* suggesting that early Quaker religious experience is paradigmatic for us, that our experience should echo theirs. My project is not intended to be nostalgic, or conservative in the sense that early Quaker religious experience was somehow pure, and that our experience has been a mere falling away from that, presenting us with something we need to get back to. Early Quakers operated under their own limitations; their experience was no more “pure” than is ours, or than experience will ever be. I am not arguing for the “right” experience, but for a “richer” experience. So I am not suggesting that we, per impossible, attempt to “go back,” but, given the current state of our polarized theological field, rather that we “circle back” to retrieve possibilities for moving ahead, hopefully together. That is, I suggest that we reconnect with our tradition as a way of re-negotiating, and navigating our way out of, some of the dead ends into which the tradition itself, under the pressures of modern dichotomizing thought, has veered.

What I am recommending, then, is that we make the soundly Quaker practice of grounding our theologizing work in experience, in “knowing experimentally,” the core of our theological practice. Our beliefs about God, whatever they may be, need to resonate with, and find their compass in, lived experience, lest they, as our Quaker forebears would have it, be merely empty notions. This means, in the first instance, that everyone’s experience needs to be respected and taken seriously regardless of where each finds herself on the theological spectrum; not only should no one be forced to

admit into their experience something that is not there, or deny something that is, in order to be admitted into the discussion—rather, they should be positively dissuaded from doing so. But this also means that if we are to engage in the richest possible project of Quaker theologizing based upon experience, we need the richest possible understanding of experience, one that opens up rather than closes down what we are and are not permitted to experience, and the *ways in which* we experience them or do not.

Indeed, I would argue that one of the most fundamental, and destructive, dichotomies introduced by modern thought divides and impoverishes experience itself. I am speaking here of the (in)famous “subject-object” split, where knowing and experiencing subjects, like us, see ourselves as standing over against the distinct realm of things “out there” that we know and experience, setting up the intractable philosophical debate between subjectivists, idealists, or relativists, on the one side, who believe that “the world” we experience is principally a function of the way in which subjects conceive of it, and objectivists, realists, or dogmatists on the other, who insist that knowledge (i.e., *true* experience) consists of subjects conforming to objects, and not the other way around. The profound and often dire effects of bifurcating our experience in this way are ubiquitous, and deserve our apt attention—if we have any interest in thinking in more holistic ways about, for example, humanity, politics, or the environment—but I would here like to focus on the effects this split has on our Quaker theologizing. For it is precisely this split “within experience,” this splitting up of experience itself, that issues in the split within the broader Quaker community between those who advocate for a religious experience that is *largely indifferent to what is experienced* and those Friends for whom experience is celebrated *only insofar as it conforms* to doctrinally pre-established, objective truths. If on the one side the fullness of experience (experience as the “experience of something”) degenerates into “experientialism”⁸—a view grounded in the claim: “*that* we experience something is what counts, not *what* we experience”—tending toward theological anarchy, on the other it coagulates into a suspicion of experience, tending toward “creedalism.”

Now, early Friends did trust experience, *above and beyond* all doctrines and teachings and declarations (and so sound in that respect closer to liberal Friends today), but they did so not because experience was itself authoritative, but because they sought an experience *of the Truth* (and so in this respect sound more like Orthodox and Evangelical Friends today). For early Friends it was not the case that when it comes to experience, anything goes—authentic experience was always experience of the Truth (which itself always transcended my experience of it); and yet, my experiencing of it was constitutive of that Truth itself (that is, I could only know the Truth across a full

⁸ On the liberal side we sometimes think that having the richest possible *range* of theological experience (which means not judging any, except those that would claim superiority or exclusivity) is what the richest possible theological experience means, but his most often encourages indifference about (and thus the privatizing of) theological experience, since any is as good as any other—indifference both in the sense of “no matter which,” and, therefore, in the sense of “it doesn’t really matter.” But is there more to richness than “range”?

existential participation in it, such that it was “realized” [made real] in me). What we experience is not incidental to experience, but at the core of our experience itself, but only insofar as we genuinely experience it. That is, prior to the “forced choice” between “experientialism” (which claims that whatever comes to me across my sincere, subjective experience is “true,” at least for me), and the “distrust of experience” (except insofar as it echoes what is considered objectively true independent of my experience), early Friends held these aspects—which function dichotomously among Friends of different varieties today—in dialectical tension. If for us today, our experience, and therefore our theological imagination, is delimited, and I maintain also impoverished, by the modernist pressures to live that experience through the filter of either-or thinking, the experience of early Friends, which was not yet channelled through these dichotomizing pressures—and thus provided a richer field for the theological imagination (by means of a richer sense of experience itself)—might help us transcend the impasse into which our current formulations (and our understanding of experience) have led us.

To illustrate what I have in mind, allow me to evoke a phrase from George Fox that, under the influence of a certain “modern” interpretation, is very much in currency particularly among liberal Friends, and for that very reason is suspect among theologically conservative Friends, but that, if read in its original context, I believe holds greater theological promise than the options currently on offer on either of these “sides,” precisely in undermining the dichotomy this modern reading establishes amongst us. I am speaking of the phrase, “that of God in everyone,” which is best known from the following statement from 1656 that appears, mostly abridged and edited and removed from its context, in many of our current Books of Discipline. I cite this “epistle to ministers” from the Ellwood (1831) version of Fox’s *Journal*.

“This is the word of the Lord God to you all, 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 life and conduct 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 every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you: then to the Lord God you shall be a sweet savour, and a blessing.*”⁹

Indeed, beyond its appearance in this famous passage, the phrase “that of God in everyone” was frequent in the pastoral writings of Fox (though, interestingly, appears hardly at all in his doctrinal works), and thus was “in the air” among 17th Century Friends, but largely disappeared for the following two centuries before being revived and asserted as the core Quaker doctrine by Rufus Jones in the 20th Century as a way of buttressing his innovative reading of Quakerism as a group mysticism. We are all of us participants in God, this reading goes, and so have within us something like a divine

⁹ Quoted from: http://lightandsilence.org/2007/02/walk_cheerfully_over_the_world_1.html, my emphases.

part or orientation or faculty, or faculties—reason, conscience, will—that predispose us to participation in the mystery of God, and that await only to be fully realized for God to be all in all. Such a teaching fit well with the optimistic, progressivistic, humanistic tendencies already current in turn of the Century liberal culture, and so was adopted by Friends already so leaning as a fact, indeed, *the* fact, about the Quaker “God,” and in fact this “doctrine” has set the agenda in a remarkable way not only for 20th and early-21st Century liberal Quaker religious life but for our social agenda and politics as well.¹⁰ More theologically orthodox Friends, on the other hand, themselves influenced by the also vibrant evangelical influence of the day and its emphasis on human sin, rejected this sanguine view of humanity, and thus the doctrine of “that of God in everyone” (at least as this was read by Jones *et al.*), which deepened and consolidated already existing rifts among Friends by cementing the factions around this theological “either-or”: either there is that of God in everyone, or there is not.

However, for early Friends (or at least I would argue) this phrase does not denote in the first instance anything like a natural human faculty or capacity or divine part, something we might or might not possess. So, what, for them, was “that of God in everyone”?¹¹ The next line of the famous Fox quotation clarifies: it was “the *witness* of God in everyone.” That is, *based on their experience of God’s call to them*, Friends extrapolated that God witnesses to all, calls each and everyone, as he had called them, beyond themselves to new life and participation in a renewed world. That is, everyone has a vocation (from *vocare*—in Latin: “to call”), and this is an experience that I think all Quakers share today, despite the variety of ways in which we understand that call. We are gifted with a vocation; we are gifted with a calling, something to which we are called, and to which we respond across our various ministries and activisms. Fox here witnesses to the witness in the Quaker ministers to “answer to,” that is, to “witness to,” this witness in others. And the expected result of this, as we see in the passage, is that the witness of God in others, as others respond to it, will be a “blessing,” that is, “a witness” also to them, will be a witness to their witness to them. This circulation of witnessing, witnessing to our call, and being witnessed to by the witness of others (and that early Quakers did not hesitate to designate “the witness of God”), is, I am claiming, the foundation of theological discourse.

What I want to suggest is that this early Quaker phrase be understood at core as itself *an articulation of the experience of early Friends*, who experienced themselves as called to “answer ... the witness of God in everyone.” That is, they experienced

¹⁰ The “peace testimony” is sometimes now supported by the inadmissibility of destroying “that of God” in the other, whereas for early Friends it was that of God (the testimony of God) in me that supported the prohibition against violence.

¹¹ Lewis Benson provides a comprehensive analysis of this phrase and its meaning for early Friends, along with a commentary on its reconceptualization by Rufus Jones, in his article in *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Spring 1970, entitled: “‘That of God in Every Man’—What Did George Fox Mean by It?” This article can be found on the web at: <http://www.qhpress.org/essays/togiem.html>. My reading concurs with, without echoing, that of Benson.

themselves, as individuals and as a body, being witnessed to by God, and, extrapolating from this experience (and buoyed by the ways in which they experienced the witness of the Bible opened to them) they found themselves compelled to appeal to this same witness *in each and in all*. This phrase, for early Friends, in whatever ways they may have simultaneously or subsequently understood it, was not, therefore, in the first instance, and in its primordial sense, a claim about *some fact of the matter* as opposed to alternative *claims to truth*, but a way of giving articulation to their experience, and specifically here their experience of being called to *do* something (to “answer” to the witness of God in others, based on their experience of God’s witness to them), an attempt to be faithful—that is: *be true*—to the witness of God in their own lives. The locus of truth here is not in reference to some factual condition in reality (some “state of affairs” as the philosophers often put it), but in experience itself, and that to which this experience called them.

I am suggesting, that is, that early Quaker religious experience was not founded upon the affirmation or denial of any particular theological teaching, but took its bearings from their undeniable sense of being witnessed to, being called (to join with God in the re-making of the world, beginning with themselves), and that any and all theological claims that they made were attempts to give faithful articulation to that experience—grew out of and answered to that experience.

God, here, then, is the name given to that which calls to us across our vocation, designates “that which calls” in our being called. Our beliefs, our claims about God, are therefore founded in our experience, our experience of having been called. God is not something first—either existing or not existing, either subjective or objective, either all-powerful or coming to us across weakness; all of those are ways in which we attempt to give articulation to our sense of that which calls to us in our vocation. But then why concern ourselves with that which calls, and how we conceive of it? Is it not enough that we are called, and is not what counts that we respond to that call irrespective of what it is that calls to us across it?

My thesis is that what we take the “caller” to be affects in a significant way that to which we experience ourselves as being called, and thus the manner in which we respond to that call. For instance, if we take that which calls, “God,” as a personal being, our sense of that to which we are called tends to be understood differently than if we understand “God” to be more of a life-force, or a principle, because it affects that to which we are attentive. So, last year, when events in Ferguson, Missouri, exploded as the flash-point of simmering racial tensions, many liberal Friends, who tend to have a version of God as a call to justice, responded to the situation as a call to political engagement. At the same time I was undergoing a personal crisis in my life, and of those who were aware of that, it was my Friends far more from the Evangelical and Orthodox sides who took the initiative to follow up and care for me. It is not that theologically conservative Friends don’t care about injustice and politics, and it’s not that theologically liberal Friends do not care about individual people, but *in our role as Friends*, in terms of our *religious obligations*, if we think of God as a personal God, we tend to be attentive to callings that attend to persons, and if we understand God as an impersonal force, we tend to hear

the call as a call to matters of principle.¹² So, in short, whether we conceive—however more or less explicitly or tacitly—of the “caller” (that which lies behind the call we hear to make the world over as a better place) as a personal God, or an impersonal force of life or justice, or the expression of the human spirit, or as the product of evolutionary forces, affects what kind of call we hear, and thus how we are and what we do as Quakers within the world. And that is why providing ourselves with the richest possible access to experience, which engenders the richest, most imaginative, and “truest” possible articulation of “that which calls,” matters—and matters to us specifically in our identity, and thus for our ability to respond to that which we are called as the *Religious Society of Friends*.

IV. Proposal: “God” willing

Now, if we are to ground our theologizing discourse in experience, rather than in some dogmatic assertion of what is or is not the case prior to, independently of, and as circumscribing the range of, our experience (something that our Quaker forebears insisted upon in their rejection of creeds), then before we can speak of God we must discern that of God across our experience—and I want to suggest that it is on this score that “God” enters human thought, that the very idea of God suggests itself and comes to mind, as our way of thinking and naming that which calls to us in our being called. But caution must be exercised here, because it is not quite right to say that God has a place *within* our experience—rather, the call is precisely an invitation beyond our experience, a beckoning beyond that is constitutive of our experience itself.

And if this is the case, then “God” is not given to us directly, even in what we call revelation (a topic I will have to take up more fully another time), but only *indirectly across the call*. “God” is, as it were, before a being that does or does not exist, or who is identified as this or that, something more like a placeholder, a cipher, a non-name that names our sense of that which calls to us across the call, refractory to the call, withdrawn behind it, hidden, mysterious, but entering into relationship with us by means of our experience of vocation, and, since who we are is determined by how we respond or fail to respond to that to which we are called, by how we conceive of our being called and of that which calls to us across it, in this sense God is closer to us than we are to ourselves, as Augustine has marvellously put it.

Everything we say theologically—all of the ways in which we attempt to give articulation to that which calls to us across the call that we hear—is therefore part of our response to our call, and therefore our responsibility. We must never forget that, even if we believe that we are created in the image of God, we create God in our own image (and

¹² Likewise, as a young person growing up among Evangelical Friends, I never once heard about FCNL, but I saw great resources of time and energy and money being put into disaster relief, where again it was persons and not principles that were at issue, unlike many of my Friends who grew up in liberal Friends traditions, for whom internships in Quaker political action organizations was always a viable option.

that is as true of those who conceive of that which calls in non-traditional terms, as of those who are allergic to God talk altogether). And yet, as called, as ourselves a response to that which calls to us, theological discourse is not *simply* subjective even while it is *thoroughly* subjective in the sense of arising within my own, our own, experience. Some ways of naming that which calls are better than others, i.e., more “true,” i.e., more “faithful” to our experience of being called, and more responsible in allowing us to better respond to that to which we are called. To say, for instance, that “God is good” is perhaps a phenomenologically faithful way of articulating our lived experience of being called to goodness, rather than to malignity, as the claim “God is life” is perhaps a phenomenologically faithful way of articulating our lived experience of being charged with promoting, respecting, and honouring life wherever we might find it, rather than a blind participation in structures that destroy it. The theological assertion of the existence of God may well be responsible in articulating our experience of the presence and constancy of the call and our sense of being somehow encouraged and supported in our attempts to respond faithfully to it, but may be no more responsible than the theological assertion of the non-existence of God in the face of our often strangely simultaneous sense of abandonment in our commitment to that which we nevertheless “know” to be sacred. As we enter into open discourse with others who articulate their sense of call in ways that challenge our own, and into a deep wrestling with our tradition, we expand our theological repertoire, and thereby open up a richer space in which to imagine and re-imagine how we might best articulate our calling, and that which calls to us across it. Any and all of our theological claims both open up possibilities for deepening and expanding our religious experience, and our capacities for faithfulness, even as they limit them. Our theological claims, our beliefs about God, whether we believe in God or not, and whatever God we believe in if we do, are therefore *contingent, but not arbitrary*. Some lead to greater faithfulness than do others. So we need them, but, as our Quaker forebears consistently warned, we must not get stuck in them. They are constitutive of how we understand our vocation, part of our response to this call, and thus essential to it. They are therefore ignored, or marginalized, or taken for granted, to our peril.

Our shared “theologizing” task—insofar as we are to be the Religious *Society* of Friends—is to communally engage in the always threatening task of giving “articulation” to “God,” to that which calls (or in principle refuse to do so—which is also a form of “articulation”), one that best allows us to respond faithfully to that to which we are called—in action, in reverence, praise and prayer (before in theory). And *that*, more than any claims to matters of fact, is the measure of the *truth* (which means faithfulness) of our theological assertions—as the Jewish prophets, Jesus, and early Friends all knew. And that is a task that requires wisdom before knowledge, or wisdom as the context for what for us will count as knowledge.

Finally, it is now broadly (though not universally) acknowledged that, over the course of the past century, but particularly in the past few decades, we have transitioned from modernity into postmodernity. What exactly is meant by that is not clear. The term “postmodern” is indeed used by everybody in almost every possible way, whether by means of celebration or as something to bemoan, as something deep or something

trivial. This is frustrating, if what we want is a simple definition, something that we can understand and evaluate in one way or another—but there is little hope that such is forthcoming. Indeed, a sign of our postmodernity is precisely our inability to arrive at a univocal definition of what postmodernity is—something that modernity would have demanded of us as both possible and necessary, if it was to be considered anything at all. Indeed, postmodernity is, on my reading at least, nothing other than our sense that the modern beliefs and ways that still govern our lives in almost every aspect are at least in some very important respects failing us. If at the turn of the last century Rufus Jones and company took it upon themselves to drag Quakerism, kicking and screaming if necessary, into the *modern* world, perhaps now, as our faith in modernity falters, and on the threshold of a new millennium, we need to invite Quakers from across the spectrum to re-imagine a faith no longer polarized by modern demands upon our thinking.

The reality is that for most of us, products of a tradition polarized around largely mutually exclusive belief systems, our Quakerism will likely continue to play itself out along currently established lines. But perhaps it is incumbent upon us, at this moment of crisis and opportunity within the history of ideas (where the clash between a dogmatic secularism and its dialectical twin dogmatic religion polarizes us globally and locally, even while the apparatus that supports such dichotomizing is itself crumbling beneath our feet), to begin to pry open an imaginative space, including theological space, in which a future generation of Friends can transcend the limitations imposed upon us by our increasingly suspect modernity, toward mutual enrichment, and as part of our testimony to the world. To that end I, at least, feel a call, and it is to that end that this project—if it be within the Divine will—is a modest contribution.