

**Third Haven Friends Meeting**  
**Worship and Ministry Committee**  
**Quakerism 101: That of God and So On**  
10<sup>th</sup> month 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023

## **Introduction**

This paper has been edited from a version used 9<sup>th</sup> month 2012, in the 1<sup>st</sup> of 4 religious education sessions, offered by the Worship and Ministry Committee. These sessions were based on the Third Haven “Essence of Our Quaker Faith and Practice,” approved by the meeting for business on 4.11.10. The “Essence” addresses *That of God* in each person, the core belief of our *faith*, from which follow our principal *practices* – *silent worship*, *Testimonies* and *community*.

That of God is central to the faith and practice of Quakers. Unprogrammed meetings proceed, without designated clergy, without religious doctrine and without much authorizing hierarchy. Quakers turn to their own version of *Faith and Practice* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997, 2002 and 2018). Most all of the references that follow are from the 1997 version. We also turn to one another in our Third Haven faith community for opportunities to learn. This paper is informed by my own my own Spiritual journey, as a Friend, now over 34 years. I have had many Quaker teachers and mentors, many inspiring examples to learn from and follow. I am grateful.

This paper relies heavily on our *Faith and Practice* 1997 and my experience at Third Haven and in other settings in the Religious Society of Friends, including PYM, Pendle Hill and Sidwell Friends School and other Friends meetings. It is not authoritative, it is my own, for now, for what it may be worth. There are many quotations and references in what follows. I have borrowed extensively from *Faith and Practice* and other readings that have inspired me. This is my offering to Third Haven Friends, companions along the way on our Spiritual journeys. Our faith is a continuing journey, with opportunities for continuous learning and revelation.

## **That of God**

Quakers believe that there is *That of God* in every person. Quakers refer to That of God in different ways – the Inward Light, Christ Within, Seed, Spirit of Truth, the Divine, Spirit and God. These several words say a lot about the diversity of our faith and practice. That of God is the part of the Divine or Spirit that resides within each of us and in all others. While we may sometimes think, with good reason, that there may not be enough of God in some others, at some times, we *believe* that there is always a spark of the divine, That of God in all.

*That of God* comes to us from George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends.

“George Fox in his Journal refers to ‘that inward Light, Spirit and Grace by which all might know their salvation’ and to ‘that Divine Spirit which would lead them to all Truth.’” (*Faith and Practice*, 1997, p 16).

“The Light Within is the fundamental and immediate experience for Friends. It is that which guides each of us in our everyday lives and brings us together as a community of faith. It is, most importantly, our direct and unmediated experience of the Divine.” (p 16).

For Quakers, every person has That of God within. Friends have the capability to have a direct

unmediated relationship with God, “a holy communion with God.” Although there have been many diverse mystical traditions over the last several centuries, the ideas of That of God within and an unmediated direct relationship with God, were revolutionary in 17<sup>th</sup> century England.

In perhaps his best-known statement of the foundation of our faith and practice, George Fox urged Friends,

“...to walk cheerfully over the world, answering That of God in every one.” (p 16).

With all the problems in the world and our earnest efforts to address them, it is important to remember that Fox tells to go about *cheerfully*. Fox’s statement not only affirms that there is That of God in everyone but directs us to *answer* That of God in everyone. Accordingly, we need to not only understand and appreciate That of God in others, but we must also respect and *respond* to That of God in others. This *answer* idea powerfully directs and defines how we respond to and treat people, even when they might mistreat or anger others or us.

This Quaker *answer* or response is in accord with the Golden Rule -

“But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you.” - Matthew 5:44; and “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them: for this is the law and the prophets.” - Matthew 7:12.

## Views of God

It seems that many contemporary Christians think of God above us, in heaven, monarchical, as King, Lord, Master, Almighty Father, like a *New Yorker* cartoon. While the elements of such views of God are familiar to Friends, most Quakers see and experience God within ourselves, in others and all around us. Thus, God is often experienced an ineffable *presence*.

In the 2010 Spiritual Formation course, and before for some of us, Third Haven Friends found inspiration in “A Burning Oneness Binding Everything” (Bruce Birchard, “A Burning Oneness Binding Everything” Pendle Hill Pamphlet, PHP 332, 1997). Sallie McFeague, a contemporary theologian, who influenced Birchard, sees:

“... models of God as mother, lover, friend of the world and with the image of the world as God’s body.” (*Models of God*, 1987, p xi), and “the world or Universe as God’s body. .... We, as members of the body, are radically dependent on the life-giving breath of the spirit...” (*The Body of God*, 1993, p 140). “Everything that is in God and God is in all things.’ (p 149).

Quaker faith and practice provide for a direct and unmediated relationship with God. That of God in everyone entails essentially no doctrine, and very little church hierarchy or institutional authority. Worship and prayer do not need to be led by designated or authorized clergy. Quaker faith and practice allow and requires substantial individual responsibility for one’s faith, religious practice and spiritual journey.

“It is a vision of the Christian life as a journey of transformation, exemplified by the story of discipleship .... It leads from life under the Lordship of culture to the life of companionship with God. It is an image of the Christian life not primarily as believing or being good but as a relationship with God. That relationship does not leave us unchanged but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, ‘into the likeness of Christ.’”

(Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 1994, p 136).

## Jesus

George Fox wrote “There is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition.” (*Faith and Practice*, p 16). Quakers (some? many? most?) value the “life and teachings of Jesus” as a primary source of our understanding and expression of how to love God and live in the world. There is a great deal of diversity in the faith and practice of Quakers today. There is probably more diversity in the Religious Society of Friends per 10,000 members than in other contemporary religion. Nevertheless, the Religious Society of Friends was founded as a Christian faith and remains so for many Quakers.

There is a range of Quaker faith and practice along a Christocentric-Universalist continuum in e contemporary Religious Society of Friends. The understanding of the centrality and importance of Jesus varies a good deal among Quakers today. I expect this is increasingly so here at Third Haven. Marcus Borg, like many Quakers today, sees Jesus as a “spirit person, wisdom teacher, social prophet” and “movement founder.” (Borg, *Meeting Jesus*, 1994, p 30). Borg writes -

“Speaking broadly, the deist way conceives of God as a supernatural being ‘out there’.... The image of God that goes with the understanding of Jesus as a spirit person is very different. Rather than being an article of belief, God becomes an experiential reality.” (p 38). This “Shifts the focus of Christian life from believing in Jesus or believing in God to being in the relationship to the same spirit that Jesus knew.” (p 39).

Similarly, Fox’s understanding of the Scriptures was redefined by the Light, by the Spirit that existed before the Scriptures and gave forth the Scriptures -

“This I saw in the pure openings of the Light, without the help of any man: neither did I then know where to find it in the Scriptures, though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that Light and Spirit which was before Scripture was given forth, that all must come to that Spirit, if they would know God or Christ or Scriptures aright.” (George Fox, 1648, *Faith and Practice*, pp 87-88).

This suggests how many Quakers approach the *Holy Bible*. Quakers do not subscribe to a strict or literal interpretation of the texts in the *Holy Bible*. Quakers usually focus on the New Testament and “the life and teachings” of Jesus, especially the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

## Fruits of the Spirit

Over 30 years ago, when I first came to Third Haven, in a Worship and Ministry Committee meeting Jim Rouse read a passage from Paul’s letters that has remained important to me since then.

“But the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control: against such, there is no law” - Galatians 5:22-23.

These fruits of the Spirit, of a relationship with God, are the benefits of a life lived in seeking a closer and more lasting relationship with God.

James Naylor, an important contemporary of Fox, put it well -

“There is a spirit that I feel delights to do no evil, nor to avenge any wrong, but delights to

endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own end. Its hope is to outlive all wrath and contention, and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty or whatever of a nature is contrary to itself. It sees to the end of all temptations. It bears no evil in itself, so it conceives none in thoughts to any other.” (James Naylor, 1660, *Faith and Practice*, p 90).

Relationship with God is best achieved through Spiritual practice. The Spirit is available to those who earnestly seek it in prayer, meditation or silent reflection.

“The Spirit is always available, conferring strength and courage on those who seek it in their hours of need.” (Birchard, 1997, p 25).

“Spirituality combines awareness, intention and practice. I define it as *becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God*. (Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003, p 120).

William Penn advises us – “The Light of Christ within, who is the Light of the world, and so a Light to you that tells you the truth of your condition, leads all to take heed unto it out of darkness into God’s marvelous light; for light grows upon the obedient.” (William Penn, 1694, *Faith and Practice*, p 88).

## **Mystical Experience**

The Quaker way is very clearly not the only path to the Divine. Friends recognize variations in Quaker faith and practice across the Religious Society of Friends and various yearly meetings. In spite of this diversity in practice, there is a basis for fundamental unity in our faith.

“There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, that proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity.” (John Woolman, 1774, *Faith and Practice*, p 90).

Friends acknowledge the value of a variety of religious and spiritual forms, experience, expression and practice.

“Some of us place special emphasis on the historical Jesus as our personal savior; others on the Light within everyone, which is interpreted by some of us as the Holy Spirit, and by some as the Christ principle; while others emphasize the universal spirit of God. We see these as three aspects of the one God and rejoice in our unity.” (Mable Lugalaya, 1991, *Faith and Practice*, p 99).

“Our experiences of God’s Spirit indeed differ, but any true experience of God includes a conviction of the unity of all in that Spirit.” (Birchard, p 6). This more universalistic approach, of Friends like Birchard and Dan Seeger, is familiar and comfortable to many Third Haven Friends.

“The mystical experience of God has certain characteristics that are common to all faiths. It is a subjective experience that involves an interior journey, not a perception of an objective fact that outside the self; .... It is something that the mystic creates in himself deliberately; certain physical or mental exercises yield the final vision: it does not always come upon them unawares.” (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p 219). “The emphasis on unity harks back to the Koranic idea of *tawhid*: by drawing together his dissipated self, the mystic would experience the divine presence in personal integration.” (p 228).

As Third Haven Friends, we seek a relationship with God; we try answer That of God in everyone; we proceed on our Spiritual journeys; we practice our Quaker faith in a community. Third Haven Friends Meeting has a long rich Quaker tradition and a vital nurturing faith community to assist us. We are blessed with Friends and Spiritual companions along the way, as we seek God and answer That of God in everyone.

#### **References and Suggested Reading**

- Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993
- Bruce Birchard, “A Burning Oneness Binding Everything” Pendle Hill Pamphlet, PHP 332, 1997
- Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 1994
- Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003
- Holy Bible, King James Version (KJV)
- Sallie McFeague, *The Body of God*, 1993
- Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM), *Faith and Practice*, 1997

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11.13.23