

## Prayer and belief

Christianity, unlike so many other religions, has always prioritised specific beliefs about God the holy trinity, creator of all that is; about Jesus - his nature as both human and divine, about how his death and resurrection affects each of us; about death, judgement, heaven and hell, - all matters which are theological speculation, focused mainly on matters beyond this life.

To envisage most of these ideas requires people to use their imagination, and then search for appropriate language to explain what we seek to understand. Friends these days are less inclined to do that. We focus instead on our shared practice, experiences, relationships, values and aims.

When the first Quakers challenged the traditional ideas and practices of the Church of England and other churches, they began a process which has largely laid aside theological speculation in favour of valuing our common practice. Rather than “orthodoxy” - common belief, we prefer “orthopraxy” - common practice.

This common practice has the potentials to shape our thinking and behaviour, feed our spirit, alter or confirm our values and priorities, and unite us in a fellowship of Friendship and service. How we behave is more important than what we choose to speculate about - theories, concepts, doctrines.

Jesus’ teaching in what is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew chapters 5-7) is all about behaviour, not belief. Its key point surely is “by their fruits you shall know them”.

To grow and change as a person, to “turn round and trust in the Good News” as Jesus’ ministry challenged people to do, is to engage in a process that some people call “personal-development”, but Quakers often call it “transformation”; others might call it “re-formation”, or even conversion. It is about change!

We Quakers are inspired to Quaker faith and practice by the teachings of Jesus, as encountered and understood by George Fox and other early Friends. This practice makes a difference to our own and other people's lives, as we seek to be faithful to the Quaker way.

George Trevelyan in his classic *“English Social History”* (1944) wrote: ***“The finer essence of George Fox’s queer teaching, common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples, and to the ‘quiet’ Friends of later times, was surely this - that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas. No Church or sect had ever made that its living rule before.”***

In many other religious traditions, beliefs are not of primary importance. For Jews belief has never been as important as observing their common practices and obligations.

The Orthodox faith teaches that God is so beyond any human conception. This “apophatic” tradition as it is called, is a theology of negatives; we can only say what God is not, not what God is! Thomas Aquinas, the classic Catholic theologian of the 13th century stated that God does not exist in the same way that any thing we know of can be said to exist. The divine is a mystery.

An emphasis on what is done, rather than on what is believed, is common to many religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Taoism, and pagan religions. It is also true to a large extent of Islam. Islam is “submission” (also related to *salam - peace*) to the divine will. Beyond the sole credal statement: *There is no God but Allah; and Mohammed is his messenger* - Muslims are required to observe regular practice of prayer, almsgiving, fasting in Ramadan and pilgrimage to Mecca, and hope for heaven after death.

In Britain today, I think it is true to say that we have many members of churches who understand little of the theological teachings of their church; sit lightly to them, but remain committed to common practices of participation in services, prayers and sacraments.

The issue in BYM about theism and nontheism to me is a bit like the medieval debate about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Our common practice is what unites us; the experiences we share we may describe differently, but we unite in our largely silent Meetings, open to being led to speak, or to think, in a particular way as our insights and understandings change; and experiencing a unity in discernment in our business meetings.

If I feel led in a Quaker way, and if I happen to think this is a natural phenomenon which springs from within me in the environment of a Meeting of Friends, rather than a supernatural one which comes from beyond me; does it then matter that my Friend beside me is convinced her leading is given to her, or to us, from the Beyond in some mysterious way? We share a common experience: we may give different explanations for its origin.

So a concern of mine is to share with Friends spiritual practices which are valuable, life-enhancing, and Quakerly, that can help us grow in our relationships - that speak to our condition. They do not depend upon a particular belief, but can be used by an Friend whatever their understanding about life, about the Divine, about Jesus, or about any other religious tradition which has helped shape their thinking and practice.

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