

Illinois Yearly Meeting
Paul A. Lacey
July, 2007
Answering that of God

By training and temperament I enjoy close study of texts. I find that one way to understand our deepest inner convictions is to look closely at the words and phrases that have helped us discover and express them. Words can attract us or repel us. They can make other people attractive or unattractive to us. They can capture meanings for us, or drive us away from intended meaning. No matter how limited and even dangerous words can be, they are perhaps our greatest human gift.

We need language that will throw light on what we experience, language that accurately fits the words to our emotions and perceptions, words that can enlarge our understanding and make us feel we can be open to experience and insight from others. We feel enriched when we hear the apt word to confirm what we know experientially. When we feel addressed by language that helps open the world to us, that helps us learn how to live in it with integrity, we feel an aha! moment, an encounter that tells us we can trust what we are hearing. In that spirit, I hope to begin a conversation on what answering that of God in everyone might say to and for us today.

What can even the most powerful document from 351 years ago, say to us? Do we have to see the document and its context as a whole, do we have to take what it says as normative for us today, or can we lift phrases from it, because they comfort us, or confirm what we already believe, and ignore all the rest? How far may we re-interpret the older language into our own words, to give it resonance for us? How many of the words of the past can we appropriate for ourselves and rewrite, without, as Voltaire put it, playing tricks on the dead?

Sometimes we take all those approaches to our favorite texts. Sometimes we consciously intend to speak the normative language of the founding generation of Quakerism, for example, the words of the Declaration of 1660-1661 that give the first expression to our Peace Testimony – and sometimes we take their literal words and reinterpret them to mean things that the original speakers would not recognize. To treat the witness of our religious forbears respectfully, while also being true to both other influences and our own spiritual experience, are essential to our integrity. We don't wish to play tricks on the dead, but neither do we want to let them inadvertently play tricks on us. That can mean we listen carefully to a lot of different and conflicting voices in our minds, and try to sort them out according to which speak most authentically to us now.

Let us begin by looking at the epistle of 1656 from which you have chosen your theme, to reflect on how some of its key words either speak to us today or call for re-interpretation. Four words seem to have the deepest resonance for us: “answer,” and “that of God.” After we have looked at those four words, I will invite you to imagine how to enact what the words recommend to you, in some concrete cases in your own lives.

Fox dictated this epistle from Launceton Gaol and addressed it to Friends in the Ministry – Friends like himself who traveled and preached publicly, and who had probably already been themselves in trouble with the law or who could expect to be. The epistle is a long, energetic exhortation to keep their spirits up, to remind them of things they already know. Probably it had additional weight for them because it came from jail, just as Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter From Birmingham Jail took on more authority for its origins.

Here is a center of the epistle for us, the long, solemn and eloquent passage we are likely to know best and find most powerful.

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 every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you....

Fox intends to speak with great authority here: “this is the word of God to you all....” He also offers a global, universal sweep “be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come....” He says we should let our lives and our carriage the way we act preach for us. He asserts an if...then causal relationship here. If we are patterns and examples, then we will come to walk cheerfully..., answering that of God in every one. His language implies that we need to learn by trial-and-error how to perform each of these acts. Learning how to be a pattern or to walk cheerfully over the world do not seem easy.

The crux of this passage for me has always been discovering how to answer, and why Fox says, Instead of God, that of God? a phrase that at first seems imprecise, but is a foundational phrase, authentically from George Fox. In his 1989 edition of Fox’s epistles, T. Canby Jones writes:

Modern Friends frequently say that “There is that of God in everyone” is the basic Quaker teaching of Fox,” [but] “...It only occurs five times in the whole of the Nickall’s edition of Fox’s Journal. According to Lewis Benson it occurs only one hundred three additional times in the rest of Fox’s published writings. By contrast “Light” or “Light of Christ” occurs one hundred twenty four times in the Nickalls Journal....

The phrase “that of God in everyone” is precious and evocative to us, and it has in common with a number of synonymous phrases – the Light, the Seed, the Christ Within, the Inward Teacher – that it rests on the assertion in the Gospel of John that every human being who comes into the world comes already possessed of the Light Within. So That of God is a gift with which every person is endowed at birth. We are given a capacity to hear and to obey the Divine voice which speaks within us. In these parallel or synonymous images, Fox describes the inner principle, the gift from God, that he believes all humans have in our essential being. This gift is like the light, or like a seed waiting to come to life in us, or like Christ within us, an actual teacher, a principle that can instruct us inwardly.

If Fox is right, what does it mean to answer this inward principle? Think how we commonly use the word. You ask me a question. I answer your question. I offer an argument. You answer it with a rebuttal. We answer the phone, or the mail. The American Heritage Dictionary has a helpful note on synonyms for answer, that tells us that they all assert a reciprocal action, a response to some stimulus. Many gospel songs are built on the pattern named call and response. Somebody has to initiate a relationship, to offer a question or comment, before another can offer an answer. Perhaps most important, answering depends first and always on listening and hearing well. A good answer that does not rest on a good hearing of the question, is at best a lucky guess.

So our ability to answer that of God in someone rests on a natural gift sustained by a learned ability to know we are being addressed and asked for an answer. We are given a gift and taught a skill to discern that we have been addressed by a question and a questioner, and therefore we have the possibility of a reciprocal relationship with some other person.

In this epistle, Fox gives us a full explanation of what he means by answering that of God in someone. (I will be emphasizing some phrases, for effect.) He urges, “Friends, In the power of life and wisdom, and dread of the Lord God of life, and heaven, and earth, dwell, that in the wisdom of God over all ye may be preserved, and be a terror to all the adversaries of God, and a dread, answering that of God in them all, spreading the truth abroad, awakening the witness, confounding deceit, gathering up out of transgression into the life, the covenant of Light and peace with God.” (Nickalls, p. 263)

Notice, Fox is not urging us here to be sweet and gentle, winning people over with our soft responses, assuming the goodness and goodwill in everyone. Instead, he speaks specifically of adversaries. In the AFSC, we often say that no one is our enemy. But that does not mean we have no adversaries. In acting on our testimonies and our leadings, Friends frequently find groups and individuals who oppose what we stand for with great anger, vehemence and effectiveness. They may see us as their enemies, but for us they are opponent with whom we hope eventually to find common cause.

To review briefly – Fox urges us to spread the truth among our adversaries, to be a dread to them, to be a terror to them. How much more frightening that word is today. We shall do this by speaking the truth as we know it from God and thus by reaching the witness within them. We will answer that of God in them, even when our adversaries don’t want to act by what God wants of them! In thus answering God in others we may even disrupt their lives, becoming a continual problem to them. This seems to me a lot like the advice to love your enemies because it will drive them crazy.

Later in the same epistle Fox says, “So the ministers of the spirit must minister to the spirit that is transgressed and in prison, which hath been in captivity in every one; whereby with the same spirit people must be led out of captivity up to God...”

Witness is a powerful word; it always means having knowledge, and it always means truth-telling. Otherwise, we say someone is a false witness. I think for that first generation of Quakers, that of God is the witness God has placed in each of us, a witness for God’s will, and therefore sometimes a witness against us, a witness that we feel telling us that we are doing wrong. Fox often says the witness within is a captive in us until we learn how to respond in ways that will set it free. As I understand it, this witness is what is often called the primary or God-given conscience, as distinguished from the social conscience that may only tell us what the society around us thinks. The social conscience is what H. L. Mencken calls that still small voice that tells us somebody might be looking.

Fox urges direct confrontation with evildoers – he doesn’t think they are simply innocently mistaken; no, these are people doing rotten things for bad reasons, and they are going to have to quit! His strategy is to reach that of God in these doers of evil even despite themselves, to go over their heads and reach that inward witness which will show them the evil they do. Love your enemies; it will be a terror to them!

This is probably a good moment to pause and ask whether we find these several exhortations of Fox reflect our own convictions or speak our minds as much as we might have thought. If we have tended, for example, to think the phrase that of God expressed a fundamental optimism that every person is essentially good, and need only be loved into revealing that goodness, I don’t think we will find Fox to be that optimistic.

This is also a good moment to invite everyone here to ask one another how we experience answering that of God in someone. Not just in any other person, however. Take a few minutes to think of someone who is the political leader whose beliefs and policies you most disagree with, someone whose actions, and stated reasons for those actions, are consistently most offensive to you; someone whose motives you least trust. You need not name names! Simply think about that person, and what that person does and says and stands for that are most offensive to you.

Then think how you would try to enact answering that of God in that person. Imagine having a conversation with that person. What would you say and how would you say it? How well do you think you could bear to listen to that person explain his or her actions? If you would choose some other way to answer that of God in him or her, what would your words or actions be?

Take some time to mull over these questions, and then talk for about five few minutes with the people on either side of you. What are the difficulties you recognize in answering that of God in your least-favorite politician? What would you do to reach that witness within her or him, and why would that seem to you the best way to proceed?

Here is a test case from my own life. I believe in the efficacy of prayer, including intercessory prayer, but early in my life as a Quaker, I had to deal with an angry and hostile person who would say to an opponent, with clenched teeth, I will pray for you. Whenever he said that, it always felt that he was cursing us, and once when he said it to me in that way, I said, "Please don't." At that time, I could not pray for him because I knew I would want to pray against him. Were I to see him today, I would want to be ready to answer that of God in him, but our previous history might so put me on my guard that I would be afraid that I was only going to wrap myself in self-righteous language and behavior. To wait to answer that of God in him, I might have to remain silent.

My personal case study points to another question we might find it useful to consider. How do others answer that of God in us? Do we recognize it when it is happening, and how are we led to respond?

I want to return to an earlier question: how can we take the words of another time and speak them with integrity? How many of the words of the past can we change without injuring the integrity of those whose words we use? We cannot make Fox's words our own without recognizing that the great revelation of his life was that there is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition. In other words, he was a Christian. We can understand his perception of the Light as an expression of universalism, but it is, I think, Christian universalism. And our most familiar words for speaking of the Divine seem to take for granted that God is the Source of all being, the Creator. The most familiar words we use seem to express what is today called creationism, though we are, for the most part, people who accept the modern scientific world view. To what extent can we use metaphors but not be committed to their implied meanings?

Here is an example from AFSC's work. Before the US invasion of Iraq, the AFSC Board approved sending water purifying equipment to four institutions, orphanages and hospitals, in Baghdad. This equipment was forbidden under the embargo then imposed, and so we requested licenses from the US Treasury, though we also made it clear that, whether or not we received permission, we were led to send the water purifiers. It was my responsibility to write to the Treasury Department, to explain why we felt led this way. In my letter, I noted that, whenever he defined true religion, George Fox always did so by quoting from the General Epistle of James, that true religion was to visit the widows and orphans in their affliction, and to keep one self from the spots of the world. We could imagine no clearer test of visiting those in affliction than to bring clean water to orphanages and hospitals. We did not get the licenses and we did send the equipment. We do not know what has happened to it since the war began, though the need for clean water has become even more pressing in Baghdad. We broke the law, but we believed, then and now, that giving clean water to people in great need of it was one way to respond to that of God in them and in us. I believe we were being called to demonstrate love for people in need by giving them water.

Can the way Fox expresses his religious experience speak to our condition today? Some here were born into Quakerism and have family and personal histories to draw on that shape and express your experience. Some of us have come into Quakerism from other branches of the Christian faith, or from faiths other than the Christian, or from no faith tradition. It is likely that some of us have experienced both feeling estranged from our first tradition and relieved that we are not constrained by its vocabulary. Our Quakerism is not escapist, but we may well feel it has been our escape from the deadness of our prior religious traditions. I count myself among that group.

I once asked a group of Friends at a retreat I was leading to share their religious histories. A majority of the group had been Roman Catholics, and some spoke about their early religious disappointments with such vehemence that I said someone overhearing our discussion might assume we were part of a twelve-step program to be free of all religion. It was a joke, but I also think it is inevitable that some of us have come into Quakerism while feeling the need to be freed from all religion. How does that fit with the experience and witness of those who feel at home thinking of themselves as religious, even Christian?

Soon after becoming a Quaker, I went through a very difficult time, as I was moved from estrangement and found myself led to understand myself as a Christian and a Quaker. Some close companions soon distanced themselves from me. They were people who had come into Quakerism after they had been repudiated by their churches – especially in the Second World War for becoming pacifists. The language they had grown up with had been used to give them pain and had proved false to them. So it hurt them to hear me now finding that same language telling some fundamental truth in my life. We were trying to speak to each other sincerely, and to listen sincerely, but our most precious words stood between us. I assume at least some of you have had similar experiences. What did you do? Are our only choices in such settings to let ourselves be silenced, or silence the other?

Some scholars distinguish three kinds of words that may affect us beyond what their obvious meaning might be: code words, litmus-test words and magnet-words. Our life-experiences may give each of us two kinds of magnet-words that work in us: words that attract and draw us close, or words that repel or push us away. That is complicated enough, but what are we to do if, because of our previous experiences with religion or with religious people, your attracting-words repel me, and mine repel you? Certainly we know of people whose lives and witness are precious to us, yet who cannot bring themselves to use the word God, and others who find it hard to accept any suggestion that Jesus is anything more than one good teacher among many. Some Friends find it hard to use male or female pronouns to refer to the Divine. Do we apply litmus-tests to the words others use, not only being personally attracted or repelled by those words but making judgments about the rightness of others views according to whether they use our preferred ways of speaking?

Think back to the vocal ministry that has been hardest for you to listen to. If you are like me, much of it derives from specific language, ways of expression, that have been spoiled for me by my experience, or by the ways others have lived by these words. For so many people, God has been falsified for them by the terrible things others have done in God's name. With what words might I be able to answer that of God in another? With what words can others reach the witness within me? How may I discern the integrity of actions behind the integrity of those words?

Quakerism is both a faith and a practice. It is a movement that calls on humans to practice economic and political justice to all people, to live peacefully with people and with the natural world, to help build communities based on justice and on peace. There are abundant reasons why so many movements for social justice are fueled not only by a sense of injustice but also by fear, anger, resentment and envy. I think our particular Quaker contribution to such movements is to help people conceive of new opportunities, new richness, rooted in positive

spiritual strengths. As Fox tells us: “That of God” is waiting to be set free in us, between us and connecting us; but meanwhile it languishes in the prison of our own transgressions.

If I understand him, Fox believes that we become patterns and examples by minding our own inward witness, which then enables us to answer that of God, the witness, which is imprisoned in the spirit in us and in others – as long as we will not see what wrong we do. That lonely, strangled voice in them hears a response, a confirming voice – yes, this is how things should be. The image of “that of God” is always associated with listening, and answering, paying attention so that the pattern or example will be able to speak to our need, our condition. Words are inadequate to express all that we need to hear and know; but so are deeds. They are also liable to misunderstanding, to unwise expression. Our deeds can be as foolish as our words, even with the best of intentions.

We believe that human beings can hear and respond to the Divine. We are not only called to answer; we are called to wait for and receive answers. We wait to have that of God addressed in us, by the words and the witness of others. We also wait in hope that Fox is right, that the quality of our response to the call we have will be to walk cheerfully over the earth, responding and being responded to by others as children of God.