

Transcript of contribution from Hazel Nelson, Quaker Universalist Group, to:

LONDON DIALOGUE 17: What do we think about God?

held on 7th February 2015 at Friends House, London.

I'm not going to try to add anything to the theist/nontheist debate you've heard this morning - because I just don't have any answers to these questions. I can't describe myself as either a theist or a nontheist, but I do want to look at the debate itself, because I think there's good news and bad news here. The bad news is that I think it's just not resolvable, however much we discuss it – the good news is that that *really doesn't matter*, it's really not important.

[A] Let's look at the bad news first. And I think, in a way, we fall at the first hurdle, here.

(i) Most theists, certainly Quaker theists, say that God is 'beyond definition' - so how can we discuss something, or disagree about something, or come to a meaningful decision about something, if at least one party to this discussion (if not both) doesn't even know what this 'something' is?

(ii) Given that, perhaps it's not surprising that there's no agreement as to what does, or even could, count as valid evidence that would or could prove or disprove the existence of God, or the nature of God. I've noticed that whilst theists tend to give ultimate authority to their subjective feelings and intuitions, nontheists tend to give ultimate authority to logic and the scientific approach. For any issue, not just one, without agreement as to where the 'ultimate authority' lies with respect to what constitutes valid evidence, there can be no way forward on resolving the issue.

Listening to Friends having these discussions, it seems to me that the disagreements between theists and nontheists arise not over the *fact* of spiritual experience, but over the *explanations* for the experience. In particular, for theists, their feeling of absolute certainty that their experience comes from God, because this IS their experience, is all the evidence they need - whereas for nontheists there could be other explanations for someone's 'God experiences', explanations in terms of the human brain that don't involve or require an external 'God'.

The problem with this "I just know it's true" type of evidence is that our feelings of certainty *can* be wrong. I'm sure we can all recall times from our own lives when we've felt absolutely certain that something was true but that turned out later not to be, or beliefs that at one time we were sure were true but that we've changed since. And there are millions of people out there today who hold *with absolute certainty* religious beliefs that none of us here today do – and indeed not all religious beliefs *can* be true because some are totally incompatible with one another. So the feeling of absolute certainty that we humans get *is* a fallible one – and indeed in some instances can be downright wrong. Which is why, of course, although my feeling of certainty is totally persuasive to me, it's not persuasive to other people.

Nontheists tend to rely on logical reasoning and a scientific type approach to these issues. The problem with this is that humans developed these very sophisticated scientific methods of enquiry to investigate and explain the space-time world in which we live, but if God is essentially ‘different from’ and something ‘other than’ this material space time world, then this must call into very serious question the validity of using these scientific methods of enquiry to apply to a ‘God’ of this sort.

And I’d go further than that. It’s not just our science. As we humans have evolved over the millennia our very ways of thinking, including our logic, and the languages we use for thinking, including mathematics, have been shaped by, and honed to, this space-time world around us. That’s why we’re such a successful species. But is it surprising, then, that we’re so inadequate when it comes to trying to communicate or even think about something which is ‘other than’ this world?

So to summarise. The ‘I just know it’s true’ type of argument of the theist isn’t acceptable to the nontheist, and I think for good reason – and the ‘rational, scientific’ type of argument of the nontheist isn’t acceptable to the theist, again, I think, for good reason. They represent fundamentally different ways of viewing the world which do not have common ground as to what would constitute valid argument or ‘proof’ of their different positions. So there is no ‘meeting point’ as to how to decide between them. Put another way, ‘never the twain shall meet’.

[B] But even if that’s right and it’s not even *potentially* possible to resolve the theist/nontheist debate through discussion, I’m aware that many of us *do* find it a fascinating subject, and so will discuss it anyway. Which wouldn’t matter, except that some Friends can and do get very upset and disturbed by these discussions – and that *does* matter. So this is where the ‘good news’ comes in – that this whole issue really isn’t important, and certainly not worth getting upset about. It isn’t important for the very simple reason that **WHAT IS - IS**. And nothing we can do or say or think can change that.

WHAT IS - IS. So it doesn't matter how long we spend discussing and theorising about God's existence, or how clever or persuasive we are in our arguments, it won't affect the situation one jot. If God exists, God exists. And if God doesn't exist, then God doesn't exist. No amount of belief or nonbelief on our behalf can in any way alter that. And similarly, if God does exist, then God's nature will remain exactly the same however accurate or inaccurate *we* are in our perception and understanding of that God, and whatever the characteristics, intentions, etc. that we humans attribute to God - none of this can have any effect at all on how God actually is. Or is not.

So at an individual level, when we’re discussing these questions with Friends who see things differently from us, we don’t need to get upset or feel threatened by what our Friends say, or the fact that we can’t persuade them to our way of thinking (which, by the way, we almost certainly won’t be able to do). If our beliefs are correct, then they’re correct, and that will remain the case however elegantly our friends argue their opposing beliefs, and however many of them there are doing so. (I think it may be helpful to ask ourselves *why* we get upset in these situations, when other Friends see things differently, or think we’re wrong – after all, why does it matter? But that’s a different issue.) The main point I’m trying to make here is

that discussing it, arguing about it, laying down creeds about it - nothing will change how 'it' actually IS.

I find that a wonderfully comforting thought.

As with us as individuals, so, also, for us as the Society of Friends. Surely there is absolutely no need for these discussions to be divisive; or, worse case scenario, for Friends to seek to exclude other Friends who have different beliefs about God, or about discernment, or vocal ministry, etc.? We may have different understandings and explanations about what's happening in a gathered Meeting, but the different beliefs of the individual Friends present in the Meeting cannot affect what is actually happening there. If it's God led then it's God led – and if it's not, then it's not. So as we centre down together into the silence of a Meeting for Worship, does it matter if the Friend next to you believes that the experience of the gathered Meeting comes from God, or believes that it comes from within his own brain? If it comes from God, then it comes from God, and I would suggest that it comes from God just as much for the non-theist as for the theist, even though the non-theist doesn't realise it. Conversely, of course, if the experience is actually generated from within ourselves, then that's what it is. And the theist's experience is none the less real because she's mistaken about where it comes from.

In reality, I think our humble human brains are never going to be able to grasp what's actually happening in these precious moments of spiritual awareness – or probably get anywhere near to understanding it, or conceptualising it, so I think our different beliefs about it are probably all far from the mark, anyway, but the point I'm trying to make here is that our beliefs about what's going on are essentially irrelevant because *they do not* and *cannot* change what is going on. [Because **what is – is.**]

Surely the really important thing here is that when we all come together to meet as individual Friends, or join together in the gathered Meeting, something very special and valuable happens – for all of us, whatever our beliefs about it may be - something precious and mutually enriching and beneficial, something that helps to sustain us all, theist and nontheist alike, in our shared Quaker values and in the way we live our lives. Our flawed and fallible beliefs about these things are unimportant, and *really don't matter*.

(Which is why, as universalists, we prefer to focus our energies on exploring and celebrating the 'spiritual other', from wherever it may come, rather than trying to solve what we suspect are, in any case, fundamentally unsolvable questions about God's existence and nature.)