



# Not a notion but a way

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## 1. Introduction

*God, words and us*[subtitle] is a good thing to have done, thoughtful, worth reading but, for me, ultimately disappointing, an opportunity missed. Maybe focussing on the language that divides us was necessary, and the light this book shines on the nature of that division, what is and isn't important about it, is valuable. But it feels to me that it got trapped by its own success and never got past a fundamental assumption which guaranteed its eventual limitations: it gives good advice about what kind of language *not* to use, but is much less useful about what kind of language we *should* use.

The key, mistaken, assumption is that what we need to talk about as Quakers is what we *believe* (or don't believe). There are a few oblique mentions of alternatives in the book, but it's almost all about belief. That's not the right place to look for what unites us as Quakers. After all, we've all heard it said, indeed many of us have said ourselves, that the *single* thing we can confidently say unites the membership of Britain Yearly Meeting is that when we can we meet together in something called Meeting for Worship. Our identity is not fundamentally determined by what we believe, but by what we *do*.

If you only look at the language of belief, you miss a whole different way of looking at religious identity. Choices with respect to the language of belief are what distinguish many, even most, Christian denominations from one another, but that's actually a game we Quakers 'officially' declined to play a long time ago: we don't do creeds. And we're not the only religion that isn't best understood in terms of belief.

I was moved by my disappointment with where the theology think tank has left us to try to write down what I see as a better way to distinguish *us*, to try to shift the ground of looking for language that we can unite with, that works for us, from belief to practice, from orthodoxy to orthopraxy.

I don't claim originality in suggesting this: John Punshon, as quoted in QF&P 20.18, pretty much writes exactly this in 1967, and I think it's at the heart of what Ben Pink Dandelion has been writing and saying for some time. I'd be surprised if there weren't others who will read this and say "But that's what I've been saying for *years*". I can only apologise for not having read more widely or, increasingly likely, that I have simply forgotten what I *have* read. My excuse for writing this none-the-less is to try to encourage people to read *God, words and us*, but avoid the not unreasonable conclusion from doing so that belief-talk is what matters most.

## 2. We already know this

Quoting a few well-known phrases will help me make my point:

Let your life speak  
Be patterns, be examples  
A testimony to the grace of God as shown in the life of ...  
A humble learner in the school of Christ  
[For Quakers] Christianity is not a notion, but a way  
As Friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship  
Come regularly to meeting for worship

... in the manner of Friends  
Swear not at all  
Live simply  
[need a quote for equality/justice testimony]  
[L]ive in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars

And an old family story:

**visitor**

Are you a Christian?

**host**

[pause] You'll have to ask my neighbour

This emphasis on what we *do* as Quakers puts us, according to Karen Armstrong, right back at the heart of the origins of the great monotheist religions:

"Religion as defined by the great sages of India, China, and the Middle East was not a notional activity but a practical one; it did not require belief in a set of doctrines but rather hard, disciplined work..."

*The Case for God, 2000*

Armstrong suggests that contemporary Judaism and Islam have retained their original self-definitions centred on orthopraxy ("uniformity of religious practice"), whereas Christian denominations in the main have shifted much more towards defining themselves in terms of orthodoxy ("correct belief").

It's not surprising that, surrounded as we are by churches for whom orthodoxy is fundamental, as well as strident parodies of all religious people as little better (indeed more dangerous) than flat-earthers, we should have fallen into adopting their language for our own internal discourse.

### **3. And this [we know] experimentally**

But, what does that have to do with us, you may well ask? All that old language may be all very well, and give us a warm feeling of in-group-ness when we hear it, but what does it actually amount to here and now? It may be interesting in an intellectual sense to hear that historical Christianity and contemporary Judaism were/are founded on practice, but we're not about water baptism or attending Mass or circumcision keeping kosher. What's so special about Meeting for Worship that it can sustain us in unity, preserve the effectiveness of our business method and allow our disagreements about belief language to be recognised without fear?

It's simple, really. In Meeting for Worship, on a good day, we experience two things: a presence and a possibility. That's why we keep coming back, because at some level we know we need to keep having that experience.

What presence? The technical term for it is 'transcendence'. We're not very good at talking about it. We refer to a "gathered" meeting. We say "Meeting for Worship is not just meditation". We know it when it happens. It's elusive, and if we try to pin it down we lose it, that feeling that we are joined with one another into something more than just our physical co-location. Accepting that it is "not just me" isn't easy in the resolutely individualistic culture we live in today, but if there is one item of faith we *must* confess, at least to one another, it is the truth of that experience, joining with and encouraged by 350 years of history and hundreds of Meetings around the world today.

What possibility? The technical term for it is 'immanence'. We see and hear it in the witness of those around us: the possibility of living an inspired life. We *recognise* it most vividly in Meeting for Worship, when we hear authentic ministry, 'authentic' because it comes from someone we know is speaking as they live. It cannot be faked, it is unmistakable, terrifying and uplifting in equal measure. It calls us to what we aspire to. It is at once daunting (how can I possibly do what they do) and reassuring (it is possible). These are not celebrities or distant missionaries, they are each *one of us*.

Whole books have been written about both of these, I have barely scratched the surface. My point is simply that *this* is what we need most to be talking about, and we don't need to agree about the *words* in order to get started, we just have to acknowledge that there is a shared *experience* that matters, deeply, to us, and that its reality and its significance are *not* compromised by our unsatisfactory attempts to talk about it.

## **4. There's nothing wrong with talking about belief**

It's natural to want to dig in to *why* we do what we do. And it's not surprising that we struggle to come up with agreed answers. The key point to hold on to is *that doesn't undermine the validity of the doings*. Or, rather, it only undermines our faith if we *let* it. If we restricted ourselves to only doing things if we understood why they worked, we'd have very little left. And, as the previous section tried to explain, we know that what we do *does* work. So sure, keep trying to figure out why. But meantime, keep cheerfully practicing.