

A Quaker Theology for the Next Three Hundred and Fifty Years? (At Least?)

For Three Hundred and Fifty years (at least?), Quaker faith and practice has largely relied upon the view 'that there is that of god inside every person'.

Friends, largely, take a view of a 'that of god' that is inherent: there, within each one of us. Inescapable and unalienable, an 'inward teacher' – for some 'the indwelling christ': with us, within us – each one of us – for the whole of our lives.

This theology – of god as a living presence here within the world, within each one of us - quite literally 'in-forms' our Quaker Testimonies. Thus, our peace testimony becomes clear when we accept that, if we hurt another person, we automatically hurt 'that of god' within that person, too.

[By analogy: if we kick a football, we kick the air within that football, too: if we hurt a person, we hurt god ('that of god') within that person, too.]

More widely, this theology/this morality/this ethic has had many recognisably relevant economic consequences (and more on this, below).

From Entheism to Panentheism?

Our present Quaker theology – of 'that of god within each person' ('entheism' if you will – 'god-within (all humans)') has all sorts of connections with previously discussed human religious/spiritual/cultural views.

The mystics, for example, have spoken of 'all in one, one in all', while much more writing than I shall ever tackle has spoken of 'immanence' ('god present within the creation') as, at least, complementary to, 'transcendence' ('god as an external agency': outside his/her/its 'creation').

However, I've been wondering if there isn't a considerable arrogance in the view that 'there is that of god' present within 'only' all human beings.

I'm suggesting, then, (and I'm aware that this 'leading' is active among many Friends) that a wider, deeper, and fuller, Quaker faith and practice might well arise if Friends were led to recognise, celebrate - and respond to - 'that of god present within everything, everywhere, at all times'.

I've suggested elsewhere that a word that sits comfortably with this wider, deeper 'that of god within all' is 'panentheism' – 'across-within-all-god'. This word appears a very few times within readings that I've found, and many others might be able to relate it to yet other writings.

However, before we proceed to examine the possible implications of panentheism, it's worth while distinguishing it from a much more widely used (and rather strongly reviled) word 'pantheism'. This latter word seems to imply that 'all is god' – as contrasted to the panentheistic notion of 'that of god present within all'.

It seems to me that the matter of violence clarifies a distinction between the two: within 'pantheism' there seems to lie the – to my mind repellent – notion that if 'all is god', then violence is also 'god': a ridiculous absurdity. However, within the notion of 'panentheism', 'that of god' might well be found within an act of violence, but, within those acts, the 'that of god' present, is being violated in the violent act. Hence, violence becomes inimical to 'active human care' of 'that of god', and, as such becomes repellent to the religious person. Thus our peace testimony becomes confirmed.

Speaking, now, from my experience as a research and teaching chemist, this idea of 'that of god within all' – panentheism – is immediately recognisable in any chemical experiment (at least those that are being carried out in the proper, 'true spirit' of science).

In this 'true spirit', the chemist (perhaps unthinkingly?) is engaging with 'that of god' within the materials and equipment being used, in an attempt to discover, or be shown, the 'truth of the matter' present within the object of study. I'm quite sure that research chemists will share a recognition of the sheer joyfulness that we/I experience when a particular new piece of knowledge is revealed (or, reveals itself!).

When the chemistry all 'hangs together' the beauty and thrill is 'just great'.

This foregoing, suggests how 'that of god' becomes present to us: in the actions and being of people acting 'within the spirit', as well as when we actively connect our own 'that of god' within, with 'that of god within 'the other' ' with which we are relating.

In the words of an advertising slogan 'one instinctively knows when something is right': god is revealed in the various qualities of truth, goodness, beauty, joy,

rightness, 'spot-on'-ness that we can experience in these 'heart connection' events. In these heart connection experiences, one aspect of god can lead us to a fuller appreciation of 'god present within all': as we connect with one aspect of god, we can be led to connect with the greater reality of god.

[By analogy, just as a physical object can be viewed from a host of different directions, and, also, with a host of difference characteristics (mass, volume, temperature, and so on), so, likewise, connecting with 'that of god' within all things, and at all times, becomes the full reality to us. Panentheism thus becomes deeply known to us, through an abundance of daily contacts with, and within, the creation: becomes a being-state of 'that of god within all time, and within all space': a holistic and universal, a 'pan-en-Gaian' panentheism.]

For some, this idea of panentheism becomes acceptable when other living creatures, only, are considered: the notion that 'all life is sacred'. For me, however, this is a restricting, less helpful view than the whole, which a deep and broad panentheism can be.

Accordingly, I sense that panentheism, nourishingly, applies not only to all humans and all living things, but also to all tangible objects – solids, liquids and gases – and to all non-tangibles as well: god truly 'within all'.

Thus the 'godly characteristics' – the full set of 'that of god' qualities – that one can sense (and connect with) in (for example), an animal, a flowing river, the air, the sky, an atom, a molecule (where-ever, what-ever), equally are 'connectable' within intangibles. Thus, god can be found within intangibles such as ideas, values, spirit, and so on (as my discussion of a panentheistic view of violence, above, suggests): truly 'all in one, one in all'.

Some panentheistic consequences for Quaker faith and practice?

Earlier, I suggested that our current Quaker theology has had deep economic consequences. One, in particular, has strong relevance for this discussion of panentheism.

Over two hundred years ago, our Friend John Woolman, among others, helped allow god to lead Friends to reject the notion of human slavery.

Others more well read than I might know more of the theology and history of those times, but, for me (as perhaps, for them), human slavery is a blasphemous act. Blasphemous because the claim to any 'ownership of a human being' necessarily, within our Quaker theology, becomes, too, a claim

to the 'ownership of that of god', axiomatically also, within the owned slave.
Outrageous!

Now, if there is 'that of god' present within the whole of the creation, then ideas and claims of 'ownership', 'debt', 'use for profit', and the other aspects of contemporary economics, become not only untenable, but actively blasphemous too.

Thus, as a joyful (if perhaps daunting) consequence of this 'whole presence of god' that panentheism implies, is that it clears the way to our co-finding a new human economics.

Accordingly, panentheism invites us to co-create -with and within the whole of the creation - a new way of 'caring for. and being within, the (whole global) household': a new economic way in which all good can grow, through co-operative mutuality with 'that of god present within all'.

Thus we are being led, it seems, to seek a new way of being and doing: one that joyfully and actively recognises that 'there is that of god' present within all, within all that we touch, within all that we do, and within all that we can be.

As a stumbling towards this, I'm caused to speculate that such a panentheistic economics might well be one that incorporates the principles of nonviolence (or at the very least, of actively minimised violence?), along with the principles of co-active, co-creative, respectful, co-operation.

Of course, such a nonviolent, co-operative, panentheistic economics must provide for two key elements: that of minimised human fear (through fair, guaranteed incomes and security for all), and a worshipful, 'twenty-four-by-seven' care by us, through a complete, 'twenty-four-by-seven' connectedness with the whole of the creation.

Thus: a commonweal of co-operative stewardship. An economics of love and friendship, if it be willed.

So, Friends, might we be so led? Shall we confront this current devil-inspired sea of darkness? And, so release the ocean of light (within all, for all!). I hope so!

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