Or Whatever You Call It: Quakers Naming the Mystery

Have you heard a Friend talk about "God, or the Light, or the Spirit, or Allah, or whatever you want to call it”? Have you heard someone ask what kind of God Quakers believe in, or what it is we worship in Meeting for Worship, and heard an experienced Friend offer a list of possible answers? For many of us, the answer will be ‘yes’. You might even be the Friend who offered that answer (I know I am). If you haven't heard it on your own Meeting, you may well have read some Quaker pamphlet or other which invited people to 'translate' 'God' into their own preferred terminology. Somewhere along the way, this kind of comment became a normal way of speaking among Friends.

I grew up as a Quaker, and for years I said this sort of thing without thinking about it. Now I've thought about it a lot, and I'm much more careful about when and where I speak in this way – although I do still do it sometimes. Over the past few years, I have been working on a PhD project at the University of Leeds, supervised by Rachel Muers and Mikel Burley, which looks at exactly these kinds of remarks. Having established that they are common in recent British Quaker literature, I use Wittgenstein's idea that the meaning of words is created by the ways that we use them in particular contexts and try to explain why Quakers talk about God, or the Tao, or the Inner Teacher, or whatever you call it, in the way that we do. The answers turn out to involve the widespread acceptance of a universalist or pluralist way of thinking about religion – the academic version of this can be found in John Hick's work – and also the practice of multiple religious belonging, which allows people to be deeply familiar with and committed to more than one religion at once – and hence more than one way of speaking about God, or the Buddha Nature, or the Lord, or whatever you call it.

The structure of these remarks – using a list of terms which are presented as synonyms – is important to understanding them, too, because we use this list to signal our desire to include as many people and perspectives as possible. In the process of constructing a diverse worshipping community, in which there are already people who think of themselves as Christians and Buddhists and universalists and non-theists (or something else, or more than one of these) as well as Quakers, we need a device like this to show that all are welcome. When I talk to Friends about this work – and I'm delighted to say that a lot of Friends want to talk to me about this! – I hear over and over that individuals feel their perspective is not often represented. I have heard this from atheist Friends and Christian Friends as well as from universalist Friends and others, which makes me think that everyone would benefit from more open discussion of these topics.

Recently, I've been offered some money by the Gerald Hodgett Award and the University of Leeds Postgraduate Impact Fellowship scheme to offer one-day workshops to Quaker Meetings who are interested in exploring this topic with me. The deal is this: your local or area meeting provides between ten and twenty people who want to talk about how we talk about God (or whatever you call it), and a room in which to hold the workshop. I come one Saturday from 10am until 4pm, and provide all the philosophy – in bite-sized pieces – the framework of the session and the stationery and so forth. It would be sensible to book well in advance as I only have a certain number of free Saturdays.

For more information visit the website at http://orwhateveryoucallit.wordpress.com or email orwhateveryoucallit@gmail.com