

## UNDERSTANDING QUAKER RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE IN ITS COMMUNITY CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines a trend in British Quaker use of religious language towards using lists of names for 'that which we worship', especially lists which include terms from other religions as well as traditionally Quaker terminology. It offers some tools for understanding language, drawn from the work of Wittgenstein and Lindbeck, and some key contexts, including a discussion of Quaker universalism about truth and the role this plays in the way that Quakers now speak about God. It finishes with a worked example which enables us to see how all these factors play into the construction of Quaker multi-theology remarks.

### KEYWORDS

language, universalism, diversity, Wittgenstein, theology, Lindbeck.

### 1. QUAKER MULTI-THEOLOGY REMARKS

It has often been observed of modern, British, liberal Quakers that a diversity of language for discussing religious experience has become common. I begin with a quotation from the introduction to *Advices and Queries* (1994 edition), which reminds members of the Religious Society of Friends that:

Within the community...there will...be diversity of experience, of belief and of language. Friends maintain that expressions of faith must be related to personal experience. Some find traditional Christian language full of meaning; some do not.<sup>1</sup>

There are many fascinating cases in which Quakers use religious language from a variety of different faith traditions or contexts. For example, in the acknowledgments section at the beginning of *Spirit Rising*, published in 2010, the editorial team remark that:

We have many names for the Divine—Spirit, God, Heavenly Father, Universe, Papa, Mother, Light—and we know that without it this work would not have been possible.<sup>2</sup>

In this context—an edited collection of writing by young Quaker authors from around the world and across the spectrum of Quaker theology<sup>3</sup> and practice—this comment reflects the lengthy and complex process which the editorial team undertook in their quest to understand one another’s language and belief. It describes a theology of diversity within unity, in which the ‘many names for the Divine’ nevertheless refer to a singular Divine ‘without [which] this work would not have been possible’.

This theological approach is in keeping with attempts made in the Quaker literature to be open to a variety of ways of discussing ‘that which we are seeking to worship’. For example, volume 5 of the Eldership and Oversight handbook series, *Quality and Depth of Worship and Ministry*, phrases it as a simple question:

What do you call that which we are seeking to worship?

The ground of our being,  
the ultimate reality,  
the meaning,  
the father,  
the mother,  
the everlasting arms,  
the spirit,  
God...<sup>4</sup>

This is the (British part of the worldwide) background against which the young Quaker editors of *Spirit Rising* are able to write their list of names for the Divine and the context in which Ben Pink Dandelion, in the opening paragraphs of *Celebrating the Quaker Way*, asks readers to “‘translate” or hear where the words come from’ when he chooses to ‘talk of God in the way Friends have traditionally talked of the divine’.<sup>5</sup>

Two major assumptions underlie the picture of (religious) language found in recent British Quaker texts.<sup>6</sup> The primary assumption is that words are secondary to experience. The story goes that people have experience, mundane or religious, which is not mainly or at all verbal, and then must choose language in which to express that experience. Something gets lost in this process, because words are not experience, and so any language used will always be inadequate to the task. This makes Rex Ambler say, in a remark typical of the Quaker position I am outlining, that the problems of formulating experience into words are so extensive that in the end, we must leave religious experience as a ‘mysterious and finally inexpressible common ground’.<sup>7</sup> As well as containing this primary assumption, this quotation points to the other key assumption found in these texts, namely that even when different words are in use, religious experiences are fundamentally the same—this leads to repeated claims or even an insistence that ‘we mean the same thing’ by our many choices of words. Although there is sometimes a slippage between the two, encouraged by an understanding that religious experience is a direct, unmediated experience of ‘God’, it seems that it is religious experience which is held in common, and not notions about ‘God’, so that there is room for a variety of understandings and renamings of the latter without any threat to the commonality of the former.<sup>8</sup>

These two assumptions can be found embedded within the first six points of John Lampen's twelve 'suggestions for finding the words we need':

1. There is something more in reality than whatever we can perceive with our senses and measure or hold in our minds.
2. This 'something more' is not merely the object of belief; it is experienced by the individual as a presence—and an absence. Some of us experience it as an encounter with something personal. It is not simply an individual experience since we can also meet it as a group.
3. We believe that all people have the potential for this experience.
4. This is the experience which has been given such names as 'God', 'The Light', 'The Tao', 'The Inward Christ', 'The Spirit', and 'that of God in everyone'. It is not the naming which is important but the experience.
5. The heart of worship is the desire and attempt to experience this presence.
6. The 'something more' is essentially indescribable. Theologies, at best, can only point towards it; but they can be helpful, even essential, to some of us, while unnecessary for others. So tolerance should be the rule in religious discussion, and there is nothing incongruous in people worshipping together who have wildly differing beliefs—systems, if they are trying to experience together the reality which underpins all creeds and honest seeking.<sup>9</sup>

To be precise, the names he lists are not for the experience itself, but the thing which people take themselves to be in contact with during such experiences—what he earlier called the 'something more'—but his meaning is clear enough, as is his dismissal of any idea that the names we give to the 'something more' are significant. I would highlight the beginning of point 4—'this is the experience which has been given such names as...', which together with point 6 amply illustrates the presence of an assumption that experience is primary over language—and point 3—'all people have the potential for this experience', which in referring to the experience as singular implies that all people have the same religious experience if they have any at all. These assumptions—the primacy of experience over words and the inherent similarity of all human religious experience—underlie other observable features of Quaker talk about language. For example, there is often an acknowledgment that words are emotive and that many Friends are uncomfortable with a substantial subset of the terms available for describing religious experience, where the discomfort seems to be more visceral than intellectual.<sup>10</sup> However, this is not always treated in the texts as genuinely important, with Friends who do name their own discomfort preferring to point to worldviews rather than specific words, and the possibility of 'translating' held up as an optional method for Friends to use in dealing with their discomfort.<sup>11</sup>

The trend does not always move towards new language, but can work to reclaim more traditional terminology as well. Peter Eccles writes that although he is uncomfortable with the Christian religious worldview, he loves the language associated with Christianity which, he says, 'reflects an experience of reality which is ours, too'.<sup>12</sup> This acknowledges the social dimension of language choices, while keeping a basic framework which holds that we use language to express our experiences.<sup>13</sup> With this wider picture in mind, we can see that Quaker

multi-theology remarks, comments that include terms which imply a variety of religious claims, are a relatively small sub-set of related comments about language for the Divine, their closest cousins being the requests for the reader to translate and the ‘or whatever you want to call it’ statements, the latter usually having a list format, ending with the key phrase, and sometimes (although not always) being multi-theological as well. In order to understand them more fully, I turn to philosophical and theological tools which can help us dig down into what is happening in these cases: some from Wittgenstein and some from George Lindbeck.

## 2. WITTGENSTEIN’S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

In the *Philosophical Investigations* and various notebooks and lectures, we find a record of the approach Wittgenstein took to language in his second attempt at philosophy—he explicitly rejects much of the view of language laid out in Wittgenstein’s first book, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The new approach is not a systematic philosophy or a theory of language, but rather a method of working to understand language as it is actually used. This method can be introduced by reference to Norman Malcolm’s work on Wittgenstein in the context of philosophy of religion. In a discussion of the task of philosophy (the new, Wittgensteinian, philosophy rather than the old, explanation-seeking, philosophy), Malcolm observes that, ‘By careful description of the use of a word, [philosophy] will show how this same word changes in meaning from one context to another’.<sup>14</sup> Accepting this, we will want to give careful consideration to the multiple previous and relevant contexts of any particular term. Such an exercise will also need to bear in mind another point Malcolm makes: that there may be ‘no *unity* behind the irregularity’ of the various usages. Malcolm quotes from Wittgenstein, about the word ‘thinking’: ‘It is not to be expected of this word that it should have a unified employment; instead the opposite should be expected’.<sup>15</sup> Because there is no essence of the word, just a collection of uses, the boundaries are free to shift and change. Although this can seem like a problem—from the standpoint of traditional philosophy—it is in fact necessary to the continued vitality of language, and it does not, in everyday life, present a communication problem. The same point, that a word does not have an essence and should be assessed by its use, applies to most if not all words; Malcolm notes that:

We don’t often get into quarrels as to whether some object is or isn’t to be called a ‘chair’. This is surprising since the things we call ‘chairs’ differ so greatly in shape, size, materials, structure, etc.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, we have an ‘agreement in judgment’<sup>17</sup> about what constitutes a chair within our usual way of life, and can move forward from there. As Malcolm says in ‘The Groundlessness of Belief’, justifications exist within our ways of speaking, and cannot be removed from that context in order to justify the use of particular words or phrases.<sup>18</sup> If language and the patterns of language use we encounter are ‘just there’, just part of life, we need to observe and understand

them but should be wary of seeking explanations, especially those which move outside the framework of the language-game itself.<sup>19</sup>

What is a language-game? This term has been used variously by Wittgenstein and others, and deserves some detailed attention so that we can fully understand the view of language which I will be using throughout this article. A good beginning is a passage in which Wittgenstein describes for us an imaginary language for which the description of language he rejects—in which all words correspond to an object in the world or a state of affairs—is correct.<sup>20</sup> Builders A and B can use a language with only four words—“block”, “pillar”, “slab” and “beam”; if A calls out one of these words, B brings the corresponding item. Wittgenstein accepts that this can count as a complete system of communication, but notes that, importantly, ‘not everything that we call language is this system’.<sup>21</sup> That is not to say that this system is not a useful one; indeed, Wittgenstein says that it might be thought of as ‘one of those games by which children learn their native language’.<sup>22</sup> This is the context in which he introduces the much-used term ‘language-games’: he says of the games by which children learn a language that he ‘will call these games “language-games”’ and that he will ‘sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game’. However, in the same section he goes on to say that he will ‘also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a “language-game”’.<sup>23</sup>

Of all the things which have been called ‘language-games’, both by Wittgenstein and by others, one of the most intriguing is the application of this term to religion—often, in the secondary literature, with the implication that because words gain their meaning through the roles they play in the game, religious words have meaning only to religious believers and those outside the specific religion cannot be expected to understand them.<sup>24</sup> I reject the idea, implied by some applications of the term ‘language-game’ to religion, that there are firm and impermeable boundaries between a religious group, other religious communities, and secular society, but it will remain important that the game being played, and hence the observable rules, may change between different contexts. The language-game approach to religion will also allow us to see ‘how we are initiated into the use of the word “God”’—and other religious terms. Kerr lists as parts of the religious language-game ‘such multifarious activities as blessing and cursing, celebrating and lamenting, repenting and forgiving, the cultivation of certain virtues and so on’, noting that ‘there will be little place [in our process of learning to use the word “God”] for the inferring of some invisible entity’s presence’—which once again pulls us away from the traditionally philosophical view of God and towards the complexity of the word’s real use.<sup>25</sup>

It is worth noting that Wittgenstein also sometimes uses the phrase ‘language-game’ to encompass ‘the whole’. This is important because it clarifies that Wittgenstein’s view of language encompasses not just words but practices. In his expansion of the slab/block language, the builders A and B add not only extra words (such as a numbering system), but also pointing gestures to go with the terms ‘this’ and ‘there’ and a series of colour samples which can be shown at certain times.<sup>26</sup> Returning to the issue of a language-game itself, Brian Clack

helps to clarify this further when he says that Wittgenstein's new 'characterisation of language as a practice (or an activity), rather than as the "phantasm" presented in the *Tractatus*, highlights what [he] came to see as its essentially *social* nature'.<sup>27</sup> We will see that Lindbeck takes this view of language and extends it, by analogy, to consider the nature of religion.

### 3. LINDBECK: RELIGION AS A LANGUAGE

With Wittgenstein's view of what language actually is and how it works in mind, George Lindbeck turned his attention to the problem of religion, and especially the issue of how the doctrines of religion are preserved and changed through time. Having rejected views of religion which focus attention on either claims about belief in particular propositions—the cognitive-propositionalist—or on the expression of experiences and emotions without factual claims—the experiential-expressivist—he suggests a third view, the cultural-linguistic perspective on religion.

A central contention of the cultural-linguistic view of religion is that languages are the most apt analogy for religions.<sup>28</sup> This has implications for the ways that we talk about them: for example, we see more clearly that the full practice of a religion cannot be learnt from outside observation (as by listening to or reading translations from a foreign language), but only by practice and engagement—i.e., from inside the religion.<sup>29</sup> This sounds like it may lead to complete fideism,<sup>30</sup> but it does not automatically do so: because there are no sharp boundaries between natural languages (a speaker of one can often pick out some of a related language), we are not surprised if we can make some, but not total, sense of a religion from outside.

Although talk of 'learning a religion' is not our typical usage, this phrasing seeks to capture the distinction between learning about a religion without any community engagement (for example, learning about a community's liturgical year from a book without any experience of participating in those festivals), and the process undertaken by children raised in a religion and adults who convert to it, in which the behaviours, practices, and characteristic language of a religion are learnt as an interconnected whole.<sup>31</sup>

The change in our view which interests Lindbeck most, though, is the way that once we embrace the cultural-linguistic perspective, we are consequently enabled to see doctrines as second-order intrasystematic claims, analogous to claims about the grammar of a language, rather than as first-order claims about metaphysical realities (though he allows that doctrines may also represent the metaphysical state of affairs).<sup>32</sup> One result of this is that the stability or ongoing identity of a religion can rest on the second-order grammatical claims rather than the first-order truth claims. Lindbeck says that 'the first-order truth claims of a religion change insofar as these arise from the application of the interpretive scheme to the shifting worlds that human being inhabit', but that despite changes in understanding (he uses changing understandings of Christology as an example), the second-order

part is stable: 'the story of passion and resurrection and the basic rules for its use remain the same'.<sup>33</sup> He says that there is nothing supernatural about this, but returns to the analogy between religion and language, saying that it 'is simply the kind of stability that languages and religions...observably have'.<sup>34</sup>

He notes that the cultural-linguistic view of religion has often been used by scholars of comparative religion, but usually from an atheistic standpoint; those same scholars may have a religious belief, but not use their cultural-linguistic analysis of religion to support it.<sup>35</sup> He singles out Peter Berger as 'particularly interesting' in this regard because he uses the cultural model for sociological work but is 'basically experiential-expressivist' (a term of Lindbeck's which I will be exploring shortly) in writing about his own religion; he has, Lindbeck says:

...failed to make theological use of his own cultural theory, not because it is intrinsically unusable for religious purposes...but because it belongs to a way of thinking about religion that has heretofore scarcely ever been employed except 'atheistically'.<sup>36</sup>

Lindbeck aims to correct this oversight by taking the cultural-linguistic model of religion as developed by Berger, Clifford Geertz, and others and applying it to theological problems, in particular the eponymous issue of the 'nature of doctrine'.

The key strength of Lindbeck's argument is the usefulness of the 'religion as language' analogy. Lindbeck says that religion 'can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought'.<sup>37</sup> He contrasts his perspectives with the other views which he is rejecting, showing in the process that it can encompass some aspect of each of them:

...[religion] is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (though it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather, it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiences of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments.<sup>38</sup>

Significantly, we can see here that the cultural-linguistic view makes causation around religious experience happen in the opposite direction to that supposed by the views which Lindbeck calls experiential-expressivist: rather than many people having a single kind of experience which due to cultural forces they describe in different ways, the cultural forces which make description possible also make possible the experiences themselves, which are therefore naturally as different as the descriptions.<sup>39</sup> Later in the chapter, Lindbeck states this result as follows:

Buddhist compassion, Christian love, and... French Revolutionary *fraternité* are not diverse modifications of a single fundamental human awareness, emotion, attitude, or sentiment, but are radically (i.e. from the root) distinct ways of experiencing and being oriented towards self, neighbor, and cosmos.<sup>40</sup>

In the meantime, he also points out that 'the relation of religion and experience' is 'not unilateral but dialectical'—it is not just the case that religions produce experiences, but he takes this to be possible and (in the light of the emphasis placed upon religious experience by the experiential-expressivist position)

important to emphasise.<sup>41</sup> The debate over this relation, conducted within the framework of the cultural-linguistic view, is impossible to settle because if we thought that we had agreed with its conclusion, we would merely have changed the rules of the language game in which we are engaged; or to put it another way, if we agree with Lindbeck that the language we use shapes our experience, it is no surprise when we experience ourselves as having experiences which are shaped by language, because we have accepted in advance a principle, a self-fulfilling prophecy, which says that this will be so. In any case, the terms of the topic as laid out above—‘the relation of religion and experience’—demand a separation between ‘religion’ (a category into which we put certain types of behaviour, language and even experience) and ‘experience’ per se, which as good Wittgensteinians we cannot make. The category of religion, when examined closely, turns out to include some experiences, and so the dialectic breaks down as the categories become unclear. These positions, both Lindbeckian and Wittgensteinian, are also quite different from the Quaker assumptions outlined earlier which tend to accept that there is an experience, which comes first, and a religious description of it, which uses certain language but is secondary.

Lindbeck also emphasises the multiple dimensions within which religions, like cultures, function. He understands a language-game and a form of life to be equivalent to a language and a culture, which have ‘both cognitive and behavioral dimensions’, ‘so it is also in the case of a religious tradition’. He elaborates this by saying that a religion’s

...doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops.<sup>42</sup>

We should therefore, if we agree with Lindbeck on this point, expect the things which Quakers say to be deeply related to their ways of behaving and the contexts within which they are speaking; to understand the remarks I outlined in part 1, we will need to understand the community norms to which they relate. Again, this is in contrast to the expectations produced by the usual Quaker assumptions, which point us to the universality of religious experience and the idea that language is inadequate to expressing and hence almost irrelevant to understanding it and would therefore de-emphasise the particular words and the settings in which they are used. The ideas drawn from Lindbeck and Wittgenstein give us a new way of reading multi-theology remarks.

The foregoing observations raise a meta-level issue, about the way in which the Quaker users of religious language are seeking to ‘step outside’ their own language-game. It is not clear that this is possible, and it would be interesting to explore this in greater depth. However, in this article, I am going to focus on the latter project, because there are other, equally interesting, results to be obtained from setting the meta-level issue aside and focussing on Quaker uses of religious language as examples of context-dependent meaning.



#### 4. QUAKER UNIVERSALISM

There is a strong streak of pluralism about truth in much modern British Quaker writing. The idea that there is a single deity underlying all religious experience is found in, for example, this quote from Jim Pym:

Christians call [the Pure Principle] ‘The Mind that was in Christ Jesus’, or ‘The Cosmic Christ’. In Buddhism, it is the ‘Unborn Buddha Mind’ or our ‘Original Face’. In Hinduism, it is the *Atman*, in the sense of the Self that is One with God. In China, it was known as the Tao, while the other monotheistic religions speak of ‘the Soul’ or ‘the Spirit’ or use phrases similar to the Quaker term ‘That of God’.<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not we agree that Pym’s terms are truly synonymous, he clearly intends them to be, taking a pluralist view which says that under all these names is a single truth. Quakers tend to describe their pluralist position as ‘universalist’, and that term will be used in this paper to refer to Quaker pluralism.<sup>44</sup>

In this section I am going to talk about universalism as if it is singular and monolithic. This has the advantage of keeping it comprehensible, but also involves some simplifications. Quakers as a group take a wide range of views; even within those who self-identify as Quaker universalists there is a spectrum of opinion on all of the topics which I am about to discuss. When I talk about ‘the’ Quaker universalist position, I am discussing a rough average taken between the many Quaker universalist positions, many or most of which have never been articulated in writing or at all. I suggest, though, that they have enough in common that we can produce a reasonable, if approximate, outline of a single position which can then be available for discussion without undue misrepresentation or the construction of an artificially weak or strong characterisation.

To look at the Quaker universalist position in more detail, I want to retread some ground first visited in part 1, beginning with the first four items in John Lampen’s list of twelve ‘suggestions for finding the words we need’.<sup>45</sup> Here, I want to focus on the logic of these first four points, and see how it creates a universalist position. It begins with an observation of what might be called ‘religious experience’—an experience of direct contact with ‘something more’. This on its own does not create universalism; religious experience of this kind, for both individuals and groups, can easily be taken alongside a discounting of ‘religious experience’ from other people or groups. Point 3, however, is well on the way to producing universalism. If ‘all people have the potential for this experience’ then we need to take everyone’s reports of religious experience seriously, even if they are apparently different (in part 1, I identified this as an underlying assumption about the universality of religious experience). In point 4, Lampen confirms this. His multi-theology remark, the list of names for the experience (actually for the thing or being with whom experienced), makes the claim that there is only one kind of religious experience, and that throughout history and around the world it has been given a range of different names.

The main distinctive feature of Quaker universalism compared with other possible forms of universalism (such as the pluralism of John Hick) is that it takes direct experience as central—as the Quaker Universalist Group puts it, they

believe that ‘spiritual awareness is accessible to everyone of any religion or none’.<sup>46</sup> They see this as a core of Quakerism. Ralph Hetherington quotes William Penn’s 1669 book *The Christian Quaker* to argue that Penn’s belief in ‘Gentile Divinity’ (glossed as ‘heathen spirituality’) is what we would now call universalism. Hetherington goes on to frame this in the pluralist or multi-theology terms with which we have become familiar, and links it to the Gospel of John, always a Quaker favourite:

[Penn] asserted that the inward Light of Christ was present in all men and women everywhere. It was this light that led to spiritual insight, redemption and salvation. If this is so, it would be hard to argue that this light is not equivalent to the Buddha Nature of Buddhism, the Brahman of Hinduism, and the Tao of Taoism. Moreover, it is directly in line with the teaching of the Fourth Gospel which refers to the ‘true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world’.<sup>47</sup>

This grounds the Quaker universalist view deeply in the Christian background from which Quakerism arose, but also makes the claim that equivalent ideas can be found in other religions. Although the Friends involved would rightly deny that this universalist position was a Quaker doctrine, it can nevertheless be thought of as taking the kind of second-order role which Lindbeck, as we saw in part 3, ascribes to doctrines—in other words, it tells you what kinds of things can correctly be said within the language-game at hand. Later in the pamphlet, Hetherington argues that this inward Light can be—indeed, should be, if we are reading George Fox correctly<sup>48</sup>—understood as equivalent to ‘that of God in everyone’ or ‘that of God in all consciences’.<sup>49</sup> Whatever the understanding of ‘God’ at work here (and it does sometimes seem that there is truth in Alistair Heron’s charge that ‘that of God’ is no more than a ‘vague catchphrase’<sup>50</sup>), the mechanism for this universalism has become clear: all religions (not even all major or world religions, but all religious traditions and movements) are likely to contain some measure of truth if they reflect the genuine spiritual experience of the participants, since that experience has been brought to them by the same inward Light which guided George Fox, and which can guide people today—including, but not only, Quakers.

##### 5. EXAMPLES OF QUAKER MULTI-THEOLOGY SPEECH

I use many names for the Divine, sometimes lingering with one sacred name, but wary of becoming territorial, my god shrinking to mere possession...

My experience is that God is beyond all our imagining, bigger than any one name we humans use. Dios, Gott, El, Yahweh, Allah, Ahura Mazda—I could never learn enough languages to pronounce all the names of God; I cannot in this life explore all these understandings.<sup>51</sup>

This passage, which together with its surroundings I will be exploring in detail in this final part of this article, was written by an anonymous Friend initially for the Quaker Quest booklet *Twelve Quakers and God* and republished in the edited volume *New Light: 12 Quaker Voices*. Quaker Quest is a recently developed and quite

specific recipe for running public meetings with the aim of engaging those who are interested in Quakerism but perhaps know little about it; an evening session includes presentations on a topic (such as God, Jesus, evil, or social action) from three Friends (who will usually demonstrate thereby some of the internal diversity within the Society), a short Meeting for Worship, small group discussions, opportunities to ask questions, and time to socialise. The authors of the *Twelve Quakers* pamphlets were all active as presenters in Quaker Quest events, mainly in London, and according to the preface to *New Light*, they ‘agreed that no one should see anyone else’s contribution until all twelve were complete, and all pieces remain anonymous’.<sup>52</sup> The resulting pieces do, as we would expect, show something of the theological diversity which is present among Friends.

I cannot discuss all twelve in detail, but some offer intriguing extra points relating to Quaker use of God-talk. Passage 7, for example, says that:

Quakers use many words for God—Spirit, the Divine, etc.—perhaps because they have associated the word with some, now unacceptable, picture of a vengeful old man in the sky. I have always used God because that is the word with which I am most comfortable. It represents for me in its many translations the way humans have sought to give a name to explain the spiritual and the moral. So I shall use God, and I hope it will not be a barrier for you.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, the Friend writing this does not find a barrier to exploring Hindu concepts or finding ‘deep unity in our encounter with God’ with a Muslim friend.<sup>54</sup> Many of the twelve writers focus on experience of God rather than belief in God, and conceptualise God as energy or a force rather than in anthropomorphic terms. Most acknowledge that there is a variety of religious experience, and the author of passage 5 writes that:

Another metaphor for God [besides ‘God as energy, force, direction’] is a ball of many mirrored facets. We all see a part of it, and what we see reflects back to us a unique perspective, which is a true reflection yet only part of the whole. In this way, I can accept that others will have a different view of God, different words for God, different experiences of God, and yet all these are but glimpses of fragments of the same thing, which is greater than anything we can comprehend.<sup>55</sup>

With this background of universalism in mind, it is no surprise to turn back to passage 11, quoted at the start of this part of the paper, and find the author of that passage quoting George Fox: ‘every man and woman in the whole world must come to the spirit and truth in their own hearts, by which they must know the God of truth’.<sup>56</sup>

‘Talking about God’ might be thought of as a language-game, as described in part 2, and these authors are playing it by the distinctive Quaker rules. In American football you can do things which would never be allowed in association football, and similarly in Quaker God-talk you can say things which would sound strange, if not simply wrong, in another context. The list of names presented in the quotation at the beginning of this section—‘Dios, Gott, El, Yahweh, Allah, Ahura Mazda’—is curious in a couple of ways. First, it does come closer than other examples given in part 1 to being a list of translations of the word God,

including as it does Spanish, German, Hebrew, and Arabic. The first five seem to be words which could reasonably be used by Christians or other Abrahamic monotheists; one has a particular role in Judaism but is also used by Christians, two are from European languages where the majority of the speakers will be Christian but there seems to be no theological issue with Jews or Muslims using those words for God, and although 'Allah' is especially associated with Islam, it is also used by Arabic-speaking Christians.<sup>57</sup> In this sense, the Old Iranian/Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda seems to be the odd one out in this list, and because the author of the passage does not give us any clue about how they came by it, it is difficult to know in what context it should be taken—except the general Quaker setting in which deity names or descriptions from a wide variety of sources are cheerfully and sometimes uncritically absorbed under the assumption that all, or almost all, such names reflect real religious experience of a single Divine.

In part 1, we saw some of the underlying assumptions about language which inform the ways in which Quakers talk about their own patterns of speech about God, and in passage 11 we can see them in action. Of the two main assumptions I identified there, the idea that experience is primary over words is not a main theme in this passage, although it is visible when the author says that, 'I want to express my awe before the greatness of God, but have not—yet—found the vocabulary'.<sup>58</sup> The other key assumption, the inherent similarity of all religious experience, is found here as an implied claim—when the author treats a string of names as all naming the same thing, a move which would not be permitted in some other religious language-games—but is also challenged with the idea that 'some gods are not-God'. The author writes that, 'I cannot accept the Maya and Aztec god, who demanded human sacrifice... I have difficulty even learning from this view of God.'<sup>59</sup> The principle of the primacy of experience, then, is tempering the universalist view here, so that the author of this passage can say, 'The God I find to be real and whom I worship is just, loving, ethical, and much, much more, but not capricious or cruel'.<sup>60</sup> There remains here an underlying confidence that we have what I called in part 1 an 'agreement in judgment' about the Divine—we might get into debates about borderline cases (is the Aztec god really God? is that a chair or a stool?) but after the thoughts about the limitations of the universalist view outlined in part 4, the author of this passage can still conclude: 'This has turned into a love song to the One Who is my Life and my End (God is clearly Capital Letters too!)'.<sup>61</sup> In the setting of twelve collected passages from a group of authors, it is clear that there is an assumption that they can and will speak about the same thing even if they name and describe it differently.

The challenge posed by the Mayan and Aztec gods evidently does not put the author off from universalism as a whole, perhaps because such universalism is actually grounded in personal experiences and a cultural context which supports universalist interpretations of them. This returns to the issue of the relationship between experience and the interpretation of it through religious viewpoints, which as we saw in part 3 is a more complex relation than sometimes supposed. In the Quaker setting, which provides forms of life such as the Meeting for Worship as a background, the universalist interpretation is widely supported by

apparent experience (especially of people with quite different theologies worshipping successfully together), and so this interpretation is strongly appealing to many Friends even in the face of some conflicts around the issues of naming.

The passage does acknowledge exactly these conflicts in the form of considerable differences in emotion towards different terminologies. The author says that 'Light is probably the word I use most of all', citing the early Quaker use of it, and picks out favourite images from the Bible: 'I do like God as mother hen..., God as artisan, delighting in Wisdom (who is also God, and female)'.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, some words do not appeal at all: 'Some cannot bear God as father or mother, for only cruelty and betrayal come to mind; perhaps those who have suffered need Friend, Comforter, Healer, Ground of Being, or Truth to me feel cold and abstract, yet feel warm to others—how wonderfully odd!'.<sup>63</sup> This final comment, 'how wonderfully odd!', points to another significant feature of Quaker multi-theology remarks; there is a distinct sense that diversity is to be celebrated. Other people's preferences may seem odd, but this strangeness is wonderful, part of the splendour that is God (remember the mirror ball) rather than a negative.

Drawing on the idea, outlined in part 3, that religion is like a language, we might think of this celebration of richness as a celebration of extensive vocabulary. There is a level on which this is straightforwardly true—many words treated as roughly equivalent names for God do constitute a wide vocabulary—and also a metaphorical level on which a diversity of theology is like a vocabulary, from which Friends can choose those ideas which most appeal to them or resonate in some way with their experience. This is a claim made within the Quaker language-game, however, because it might not make sense outside the universalist context to treat these many names as referring to one thing; Lindbeck, as we saw, firmly insisted that we should not treat religious experiences occurring in different frameworks as equivalent.

We might also think of the importance we placed, in both parts 2 and 3, on the connection between speech and other forms of practice. In the British Quaker context, the celebration of theological diversity sits alongside a broad unity of practice—in particular, the general form of the regular Meeting for Worship is well-agreed and (although it can be varied, with all-age Meetings for Worship being semi-programmed and the length of Meeting adjusted at times) for the most part quite predictable and regular. The silent form of Meeting for Worship has been observed to encourage a certain amount of independence (and this is usually considered a good thing; as a centrally produced Outreach poster said: 'Thou Shalt decide for yourself'), although vocal ministry, conversation over tea and coffee, and written materials such as the one under consideration can all temper this somewhat. Within the even more specific context of a series of Quaker Quest sessions, features of the programme such as the use of three different speakers on each topic point to a deliberate presentation of Quaker diversity as a positive aspect of the community.

With all of these philosophical tools in hand, the task of explaining Quaker uses of religious language has not become a simple one, but, by becoming aware of the underlying principles and assumptions—the rules of the language-game

—which enable Friends to understand and use multi-theology and list-format remarks about the Divine, we have both come to comprehend them more clearly and to see why Quakers regard them as so uncontroversial while non-Quakers can find them extremely puzzling. To understand religious remarks, we need to consider a range of real and specific examples and place them in their context within a community of speech and of religious practice.

In closing, I would like to address a possible objection to this method. Someone might say: Why do you need all of this extra philosophical work, all this Wittgenstein and Lindbeck, when it is clear that what is happening here is simple? People actually are referring to the same thing using different names—as we refer to Venus as both the morning star and the evening star—and there is no need to explain that further at all because it is as simple as it appears.<sup>64</sup> I have three answers to this objection, each working at a slightly different level.

The first response admits that it is indeed possible that this is the case, metaphysically speaking, but cautions that we should not leap to this conclusion. We should be careful because taking this apparently straightforward position, which brings us into line with Quaker universalism and some other forms of pluralism, leaves us open to the critiques which are made of those kinds of pluralism. For example, Gavin D'Costa critiques Hick's pluralism for falling into the very arrogance which Hick critiques in others: reinterpreting the religious beliefs of other people and communities such that they fall into line with your theory is a morally and philosophically problematic thing to do. It suggests first that you are short of respect for people and the integrity of their belief systems, and secondly a significant reinterpretation leaves open the possibility that you did not understand the beliefs properly in the beginning. Responding to this critique and others like it, without falling back on pluralist assumptions, is difficult, and an awareness of this issue holds me back from fully endorsing pluralism as a philosophical position although I understand the attractions it holds and have identified in this study some of the roles it plays in creating the British Quaker community today.

The second response asks what evidence we would expect to see if this claim were true. We call Venus by two names because we see the planet at two times of day, but the many and very varied descriptions of religious experience suggest that nothing so simple is happening.<sup>65</sup> If everyone were experiencing the same thing, would there not be a higher level of agreement between individuals about the details of that experience? To account for the amount of diversity in descriptions of those experiences we categorise as 'religious', something more is needed than the variation between natural languages used to describe them. If this argument is accepted, then the pluralist claim that each person experiences contact with the same 'reality' but expresses it differently seems weak: instead, it may be necessary to consider the possibility that multiple deities or 'realities' are involved—a form of multi-centric pluralism or polytheism—or that some of the experiences are not of 'reality'. This claim would need some further evidence, however (Hick would probably look to the fruits of religious belief or practice, for example), for pluralists to accept it, as they are unwilling to accept that differences in language are enough on their own to ground claims of difference in that which is being described.

Finally, the third response says that simply accepting that the users of multi-theology remarks are right, and looking no further, may be acceptable for some purposes but a detailed exploration does prove useful. It gives us, as discussed throughout this paper, a series of insights into the role of such remarks in community formation. Whether the claims implicit in such remarks are correct or not, the remarks themselves have a particular role to play in the creation and maintenance of a worshipping community which accepts and supports a wide range of theological perspectives. The British Quaker community from which these remarks emerge is a single, complex, unified and diverse community, and this situation is continually created and maintained through the use of ways of speaking which acknowledge this diversity and bring many perspectives together into a single list.

#### NOTES

1. Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 4th edn, London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2008, 1.01.

2. Conti, A., *et al.* (eds.), *Spirit Rising: Young Quaker Voices*, Philadelphia: Quakers Uniting in Publications, 2010, p. xiv.

3. I use the word theology to include a wide range of perspectives about God. It is descended from the common word 'theology', from the Greek for 'speech about God', but it is also related to two other more recent coinages: 'a/theology' and 'thealogy'. A/theology captures the concepts of atheism and theism together in the context of discussion, allowing secular, humanist, agnostic and religious positions which do not accept the existence of God to be represented in the conversation. Thealogy is a term widely used by feminist theologians to denote theology done with an awareness of the Divine feminine. In order to capture these ideas succinctly I use the schwa vowel, pronounced 'err'—in English, this sound represents hesitation and doubt. By embedding ə in the centre of the word to make thealogy, I avoid statements about God's gender and existence, while recognising that other people have beliefs about these matters.

4. Committee on Eldership and Oversight, *Quality and Depth of Worship and Ministry*, London: Quaker Books, 2001, p. 3.

5. Dandelion, P., *Celebrating the Quaker Way*, London: Quaker Books, 2009, p. 3.

6. And perhaps some older material, since list-format remarks related to this can be found in historical Quaker material—in William Penn's *Fruits of Solitude*, for example. However, this possibility lies outside the scope of the present paper.

7. Ambler, R., *The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1994, p. 29.

8. The Quaker picture ignores the possibility that people having 'religious experiences' are perhaps having entirely different experiences, assuming that 'religious experience' is indeed a common experience—in terms of intellectual genealogy, this is traceable to the claims about universal mystical experience made by William James and especially the Quaker Rufus Jones. In terms of forms of life, the communal setting of Meeting for Worship (in which people have religious experiences while behaving outwardly in similar ways) perhaps tends to support this impression.

9. Lampen, J., 'Quaker Experience and Language', *The Hope Project* (n.d.), p. 6. Online: [http://www.johnlampen.webspace.virginmedia.com/The\\_Hope\\_Project/Welcome.html](http://www.johnlampen.webspace.virginmedia.com/The_Hope_Project/Welcome.html)

10. Partly because it is not addressed very directly, a variety of possible kinds of 'discomfort' seem to be confused here.

11. See, for example, Dandelion, *Celebrating the Quaker Way*, p. 3, and Jarman, R., *Breakthrough to Unity: The Quaker Way Held within the Mystic Traditions*, London: The Kindlers, 2010, *passim*.
12. Eccles, P., *The Presence in the Midst*, Swarthmore Lectures, London: Quaker Home Service, 2009, p. 9.
13. A framework closely related to that which George Lindbeck calls 'experiential-expressive'. Lindbeck, G.A., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, London: SPCK, 1984.
14. Malcolm, N., *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, ed. Winch, P., London: Routledge, 1993, p. 78.
15. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein*, p. 47; Wittgenstein, L., *Zettel*, trans. Anscombe, G.E.M., Oxford: Blackwell, 1967, p. 112.
16. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein*, p. 62.
17. Malcolm, *Wittgenstein*, p. 63., quoted from Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Anscombe, G.E.M., Hacker, P.M.S., and Schulte, J., Chichester: Blackwell, 2009, p. 242.
18. Malcolm, N., 'The Groundlessness of Belief', in *Thought and Knowledge*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 208.
19. Malcolm, 'The Groundlessness of Belief', p. 216.
20. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §2.
21. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §3.
22. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §7.
23. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §7.
24. Kerr, F., *Theology after Wittgenstein*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, Chapter 7.
25. Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein*, p. 155.
26. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §8.
27. Clack, B.R., *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 18, italics original.
28. The term implies that cultures may also be an analogy for religions, but Lindbeck does not explore this possibility in nearly as much detail.
29. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, p. 35.
30. Nielsen, K., 'Wittgensteinian Fideism', *Philosophy* 42/161 (1967), pp. 191–209.
31. The 'religion as language to be learnt' metaphor occurs in other places, too—for example, Hauerwas, S., *Learning to Speak Christian*, London: SCM Press, 2011.
32. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, pp. 80, 106.
33. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, pp. 82–83.
34. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 83.
35. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 20.
36. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 20.
37. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 33.
38. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 33.
39. A few Quakers, such as the American Calvin Keene, have worked more dialectically, but Lindbeck's characterisation of the 'experiential-expressivist' position remains close to one commonly found among British Quaker writers. Keene, C., 'God in Thought and Experience', *Quaker Religious Thought* 19/2 (1981), pp. 3–22.
40. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 40.
41. It is also important to note that this emphasis within the experiential-expressivist position is one that Lindbeck has put there himself through his characterisation of it; 'experiential-expressivist' is not a label any group or thinker claims for themselves, and the position as found in Lindbeck's writing is not identical with that defended by any particular scholar—although it does have much in common with some which we will find among the Quakers and the liberal theologians with whom they have much in common.
42. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 33.



43. Pym, J., *The Pure Principle: Quakers and Other Faith Traditions*. York: Ebor Press, 2000, p. 11.
44. Quaker universalism about truth should also be distinguished from the general Christian use of 'universalism' to mean belief in universal salvation.
45. Lampen, 'Quaker Experience and Language', p. 6.
46. The phrase 'or none' appears to have been a recent addition when David Boulton quoted this phrase in 1997. Boulton, D., *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*, Torquay, Devon: Quaker Universalist Group, 1997, p. 18.
47. Hetherington, R., *Quakerism, Universalism and Spirituality*, London: Quaker Universalist Group, 1995, p. 11.
48. That is, according to the rules of the Quaker language-game as Hetherington understands them.
49. Hetherington, *Quakerism, Universalism and Spirituality*, p. 24. He uses Joseph Pickvance's work on Fox's journal to support this argument.
50. Heron, A., *Caring, Conviction, Commitment: Dilemmas of Quaker Membership Today*, London and Birmingham: Quaker Home Service and Woodbrooke College, 1992, p. 62.
51. An anonymous Friend writing in Kavanagh, J. (ed.), *New Light: 12 Quaker Voices*, Ropley, Hants.: O Books, 2008, p. 24 (passage 11 in Chapter 1).
52. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. vii.
53. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 15.
54. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 17.
55. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 12.
56. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 25.
57. Although not always without controversy; in Malaysia a court has enacted a ban on the use of 'Allah' by non-Muslims. BBC, 'Malaysia Court Rules non-Muslims Cannot Use "Allah"', BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-24516181>.
58. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 24.
59. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 25.
60. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 25.
61. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 25.
62. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 24.
63. Kavanagh (ed.), *New Light*, p. 24. The punctuation of this sentence may have been misprinted slightly, as it would make more sense with a full stop somewhere in the list—perhaps between Healer and Ground of Being.
64. I am grateful to postgraduate colleagues at the University of Leeds who have argued along these lines.
65. I acknowledge that accounts of how much variety is found in the category 'religious experience' do differ, but only a relatively small amount is necessary to create a disanalogy between this case and other more mundane one thing/many names scenarios.

#### AUTHOR DETAILS

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