

Answering that of God in Everything: Recollections of the Worship Sharing and Discussion

during the Annual Retreat of SYM Quakers in
Montmirail, Neuchâtel, 6-8 February 2026

Every quotation is a saying taken out of context. Putting it back into context gives a nuanced perspective on what the author meant. Such is the case with the quotation of George Fox taken as the initial subject of the 2026 retreat of Quakers in Switzerland at Montmirail, Neuchâtel: “answering that of God in every one”.

Quakers are familiar with this sentence fragment. Advices and Queries, Chapter One of *Quaker Faith and Practice (QfP)*¹, closes with Fox’s appeal to Friends in 1656 to “[b]e patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.”

With the retreat’s preparatory readings, Friends could remind themselves of the historical context of George Fox’s appeal. The quoted passage is from Fox’s epistle to his followers from Launceston Gaol. Strongly missionary in tone, the letter urged Friends to help other people turn to God as their inward teacher rather than to ‘false’ human teachings, churches and worship practices. Quakers were to be courageous and not to limit themselves in what they say and write, but just to be certain that their actions are indeed led by God’s guidance. Implicit in the letter is the belief that Quakers have had a transformation and are connected to divine guidance from within. By attending to the inner voice of God’s wisdom, they are qualified, through their visible example and humble words, to help others be reunited with the Spirit of Christ dwelling within them. The reward will be more righteousness within each person and justice and peace throughout the world.

Answering that of God in everyone: What canst thou say?

What do Switzerland Yearly Meeting (SYM) Friends make of this quotation today? The well-quoted notion of “answering that of God in every one” is at the heart of the Quaker way, understood as diverse practices that centuries of Quakers worldwide have found help to align one’s outer life with the Inner Light. Friends at Montmirail began by exchanging in small groups their prior understanding of Fox’s entreaty. How have they been practicing the advice so far in their lives as Quakers? Has their practice transformed their experience of people and events? Have others been transformed by their bearing and words?

Answering that of God in all things

The advice to Quakers to answer that of God in everyone has persisted over time, as evinced by its retention in five editions of *QfP*, a living document revised over time as society changes and Quakers’ collective understanding of right practices grows. Moreover, the advice is not exclusive to Quakers. For example, Ignatius of Loyola urged his followers to “seek God in all things”. In Ignatian teaching, *every aspect of life*, including one’s labour, is a meeting point with the divine. Jewish spiritual leaders taught that *every created entity* has a spark of Godliness within it. The divinity is in its function and design: in using something, we reveal its divine essence.

¹ Quaker Faith and Practice, fifth edition, the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

When people worldwide and from various spiritual traditions separately intuit that it is right and important to orient one's thought and behaviour to that of God in others and in all things, they are tapping into what might be considered a universal, ontological truth.

Therefore, Friends in Montmirail felt emboldened to move beyond George Fox's explicit wording and consider rather 'answering that of God in *all things*'. What does this notion mean and what does it imply for our behaviour? If Fox's original quote meant that by preaching by example – by one's bearing, words and deeds – Quakers can inspire other people to awaken to the inner light, what changes in our attitudes and actions when we are 'answering that of God in *all things*' rather than 'every one'?

Eduard Dommen, member of the SYM Geneva group and author, retired economist and former UN official, began by sharing the argument in his book *Aimer la création comme soi-même*.² Mankind's existing moral codes and rules designed to limit harm to other humans, especially the most vulnerable, can be extended to the rest of creation, including future generations of non-human species. He recalled the South African concept of Ubuntu ("I am because you are"), which understands that every creature is shaped by its surroundings, living or other, and is, remarkably, itself a community of beings (when we consider internal biotopes made of microbes). The fact that humanity cannot exist without what surrounds it and within it is a call to action. Our calling is to attend to the welfare and conservation of all life is a message underscored also in John Calvin's teaching. 'Answering that of God in *all things*' can be interpreted as hearing creation's need, providing what it needs to sustain itself today and into the future and avoiding harm. Every form of life has intrinsic worth and warrants respect, regardless of its perceived utility to humankind.

In the ensuing discussion, Friends reflected on finding the inexpressible, call it God or love, in the relationship with oneself, other humans, other living beings and created objects. Relationships between human individuals can be tight, wherein comfort and strength is found in community with others whose patterns of behaviour and convictions aligned closely with one's own (symbolised by the fasces in ancient Rome) or relationships can be loose, wherein diversity is accepted, enjoyed and seen as a source of robustness (such as in the Quaker global community). Perhaps the greatest challenge is finding God in the relationship *between* those who prefer 'tight' relations and those comfortable with 'loose' relations. Friends in Montmirail reminded themselves of the importance of not thinking that they have the answer. Truth is not a certainty and the preserve of the individual mind; rather it is something intuited and approached when light is shined upon it from many different perspectives in processes of group discernment.

Friends felt resonance with the insight that finding that of God in the relationship with all living things requires seeing eye to eye with other creatures, acknowledging that the relation is truly equal. They recalled the work of the primatologist Jane Goodall, whose respectful same-level observation of chimpanzees in their habitat led to revolutionary findings such as discovering that chimpanzees, not just humans, create tools, which itself required a rethinking of the definition of mankind. By approaching other living creatures with radical respect – in seeing that of God in them – we have the possibility of making groundbreaking discoveries.

What does it mean to find that of God in our relationship with created objects? For some in Montmirail, it means being mindful of the resource consumed by the creation of the artefact and how it serves us during its functional 'lifespan'. When we include the life force invested by

² Dommen, Edouard, *Aimer la création comme soi-même*, illustré par Jane Le Besque, préface de Michel Maxime Egger, Genève, éditions Nicolas Junod, 2018.

those involved in creating an object, our behaviour may become more respectful, encouraging us to live the testimony of simplicity. The notion of ‘finding that of God in the things we make’ can also suggest that we have a duty to understand deeply the workings and function of objects and systems, however technical or complex they may be.

When individual interests conflict

Already touched upon in earlier discussions, Friends in Montmirail addressed deeply the meaning of the injunction to answer that of God in everyone, including those whose interests or views directly conflict with one’s own. How do you engage with people who don’t agree with you or with whom you don’t agree? What tools are available to you when walking away is not an easy option?

Lindsey Fielder Cook, Representative for the Human Impacts of Climate Change, Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), gave Friends valuable advice on this challenge based on her life and work. It helps to consider all voices as equal, including one’s own. Social and professional hierarchies might claim that some voices are more authoritative than others, but everyone, regardless of power or status, are equally worthy and equally fallible.

Be even-handed in discussions. Parties to difficult negotiations have different needs and interests. Allow every party a hearing on important issues. Listen and take the time to discover what has shaped people’s views. Separate the conviction from the person, realising that sometimes someone speaks or acts not even on an opinion or a belief, but rather a personal hurt or an unexpressed need.

Have the courage to advocate your position based on your personal witness and values. Give energy to those values. It’s alright to demonstrate that you see and hear the other as well as to explain why you disagree with them. Leading by your example, by your ‘carriage and life’, is more effective than argument.

But boundaries exist. Is a person willing to engage constructively in the conversation? It may happen that someone is socio-pathological or deeply ideological such that they either cannot hear or may even enjoy destroying discourse and negotiations. The Light might be in everyone, but healthy boundaries may include moving beyond those who show destructive or closed behaviour. We may decide it is wise to move on and spend our time engaging with those who are likewise seeking in good faith a solution or a new insight.

“That of God”

What, then, do Friends in Montmirail understand by “that of God” in George Fox’s appeal?

Friends recalled the tension between the modern liberal Quaker understanding of “that of God”, associated with Rufus Jones [1863-1948], US Quaker philosopher, co-founder of the American Friends Service Committee, and that of historical Quakerism, as re-asserted by Lewis Benson [1906-1986], US Quaker educator and lifelong student of the writings of George Fox. Does “that of God” inhere within every person like a divine spark (Jones & modern liberal Quakerism)? Or is “that of God” to which Fox refers a yearning, a capacity, within each person to be guided by God, while God’s substance stands apart from humankind (Benson & historical Quakerism)?

The Montmirail group also recalled that nontheist Friends view the phrase “answering that of God” as shared vocabulary within the Quaker community. “That of God” can refer to human

moral capacity, for conscience, empathy and insight, and “answering” may involve bringing attention and presence to others and respecting their inherent value.

Quakers are not obliged to constrain themselves to given theology. Friends in Montmirail were therefore invited to do the theological work themselves and justify what they understand by “that of God” based on their own experience. The most important thing is to live in a way that brings about peaceful, just and sustainable outcomes for humans, fellow creatures and the environment. What is the source of this inspiration, and where does it reside? That is, they asked each other again “What canst thou say?”, leaving the door open for new Light to enter.

Perhaps surprisingly, this part of Fox’s advice was not a point of debate for the retreat participants. The intuition that God is beyond good and bad is not contested. Friends are familiar with different terms for the ineffable: life, force, spirit, wisdom, power, presence, light, strength, energy, the divine aspect, and so on. The label for the ineffable in George Fox’s phrase is less important than how we are inspired to look at and act in the world. Some Friends wonder whether God must be invoked at all. Is it adequate to bring respect and kindness to our interactions with all living creatures and to use created objects with informed awareness? Is it enough to say we are responding to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts?



Seeing the state of the world today in 2026 might justify a good portion of despair. The appeal of George Fox to his followers to walk cheerfully, i.e. courageously and enthusiastically,³ over the world, preaching by example and inspiring others to open themselves to God’s guidance available within them, can seemingly offer little hope in 2026 as a means of bringing about substantial change in public affairs, global politics and environmental conditions. Without hope that following Fox’s advice will transform the world today, we might ‘answer that of God in everyone or everything’ – as we understand it – merely as a courtesy and because the alternative is unappealing. More substantively, we might also be strengthened in following this path because of what our speaker, Lindsey, reminded us: “The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not vanquished it” (John 1:5). No matter how much darkness exists in a space, be it grief, ignorance or malice, it takes only a tiny spark of Light to displace this darkness and to transform the space radically.

February 19, 2026

Helen Addison & Rorie Nazareth
Co-organisers, with Eduard Dommen, of the Retreat

³ For a discussion of the historical use of term ‘cheerfully’, see George Amoss Jr., “Answering That of God”, *The Postmodern Quaker* blog, July 20, 2011. <https://postmodernquaker.wordpress.com/2011/07/20/answering-that-of-god/> [last accessed 18/02/2026].