

WHERE DO QUAKERS STAND?

I would like to speak in turn to three different audiences – firstly to the non-religious along with adherents of non-Christian faiths, secondly to Christians, and lastly to Quakers ourselves. I will be emphasizing different aspects of Quakerism, but I hope there will be no inconsistency (no “three-facedness!”). In structuring my essay in this way, I do not intend to prejudge whether Quakers count as Christians, for I will address that question below.

My impression is that contemporary British Quakers are pretty clear where we stand on moral and social issues, as expressed in our traditional testimonies to equality, simplicity, truthfulness, justice and peace (and in our recent decision to recognize same-sex marriage), but that we are much less clear about where we stand on issues of belief and theology, indeed we tend to shy away from these in embarrassment or in fear of division. I want to suggest some ways in which we might face up to these deep and difficult issues and clarify our thinking. My approach may be a tad more intellectual than some Quaker writing, but I hope to use such knowledge as I have to set our contemporary questions and debates in a wider historical, philosophical and theological context. (deleted to avoid identification) I sometimes think there is a danger that Friends talk mainly to each other, and read mostly Quaker literature. If that is so, I would like to broaden our horizons a bit.

1. To the non-religious, and those of other faiths

1.1 Quaker history

The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers for short, emerged as one of the new Christian sects in the period of the 17th century British civil war and its uneasy aftermath in the Commonwealth of Oliver Cromwell and the Restoration of Charles II. After the initial enthusiasm inspired by George Fox and other early leaders, the Quaker movement was tested by persecution, but consolidated in the organizational structure that Fox set up. There followed a more inward-looking quietist period in the 18th century, when Quakers were “a peculiar people” distinguished by their manners and dress. There came a more evangelical phase in the 19th century, and then a turn to the extremely liberal theology which has characterized British Quakerism in the 20th century. We now have less than 20,000 full members (there are many more Quakers in

the world, particularly in North America and East Africa, but the majority have developed rather different traditions).

The British Quaker practice has always been to hold "Meetings for Worship" in reverential silence, with occasional spontaneous "ministry" from anyone present who feels "moved by the Spirit". We have no priests or professional ministers, no creed, and no sacraments. Our business meetings are conducted in the same reverential spirit, seeking "the will of God" for our activities by collective discernment rather than voting. Nowadays we are perhaps most widely known for our social "testimonies" to the equality of all human beings, simplicity of life-style, truthfulness and integrity, and especially our peace testimony and anti-war stance. Quaker conscientious objectors were harshly treated in the First World War; later they served in Friends Ambulance Units.

1.2 Concepts of God

When British Quakers are asked what we actually *believe*, there is often a tendency to react with hesitation and embarrassment. The questions arise: *What* do you worship in your so-called "Meetings for Worship"? If you talk of "the will of God", surely you believe in God? But a typically evasive reply may be "Some of us do, some of us don't", or "It all depends on what you mean by 'God'".

A recent booklet *Twelve Quakers and God*¹ reveals an interesting set of views among some contemporary Quakers, which I excerpt as follows:-
 "absolute love, total goodness ... a power which is beyond me and is too great for my complete apprehension, yet is part of me, and of all others"; "a reality that cannot be named ... a warmth, a real presence in my life ... a disturbing one, too"; "a force ... within me and outside me, omnipresent in the world"; "a power to be drawn on and from which to receive strength"; "good energy will always be there"; "the life-force ... Being, unlimited by time or space ... purpose ... a presence in my heart and in my bowels ... a guiding force in my life"; "the power, the love, the challenge, that I call God"; "the song of the Spirit is everywhere ... I lay down God as noun, and take up the Spirit as verb"; "my God is not just personal; S/he is also power or energy, the Divine Source"; "I have never really been sure about God ... sometimes I think I am verging on being atheist ... one place where I feel God most strongly in Quaker meetings for worship"; "I use many names for the Divine ... I want to express my awe before the greatness of God, but have not - yet - found the vocabulary"; "what I worship ... is the fundamental Energy of on-going creation ... the ever-present Energy is there to be drawn on by anyone who opens himself or herself to it".

There is a vagueness here (some might say, a confusion or incoherence!) about what we are talking about, and how it (He? She?) should be described. Yet there is in almost all these cases a tested confidence, a deeply-held faith, that some version or other of this long-inherited and multi-faceted God-talk is onto something that is in some sense real and is of fundamental importance for our lives. I would like to defend this vague but real faith against the strident atheists on one side and the dogmatic theologians on the other, by offering some historical and philosophical reflections.

In the three millennia-long Jewish/Christian/Islamic tradition of monotheism, conceptions of God have varied considerably; and differences between tribal or universal, punishing or forgiving, timeless or changing, personal or impersonal, Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian conceptions are still around today. So if one is challenged: "Do you believe in God?", it is quite reasonable to reply: "If you tell me what you mean by 'God', I'll tell you if I believe in *that*!"

Most public debate still tends to treat the existence of God as a question of fact about the existence of a peculiar entity. In grammatical form, it sounds like the questions whether there is (or was) a Loch Ness Monster, a dark-age warrior king called Arthur, a cause of the Big Bang, or a square root of -1. And like those questions, the one about God's existence would seem to require a yes-or-no answer. I suggest, however, that the question whether one believes in God can be taken rather as asking how illuminating one finds some set of theistic figures of speech in thinking about life, and how committed one is to participating in the relevant tradition in one's own spiritual journey. Answers to *these* questions can be a matter of degree, for what is involved is more a matter of spiritual practice than believing a quasi-scientific hypothesis.

Back at the beginnings of monotheism, we find God described as a quasi-physical being in some of the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses talked with Him as one man speaks to another, yet he was not allowed to see His face - though at one point he was allowed a glimpse of His back (*Exodus 33:23*). God was represented as located in space, with a dangerous appearance:

The Lord came down on the top of Mount Sinai and summoned Moses up to the mountaintop.

The Lord said to him, Go down; warn the people solemnly that they must not force their way through to the Lord to see him, or many of them will perish. (*Exodus 19:20-21*)

The psalms portray God very variously as a shield, a lofty crag, as having fingers and a mouth, in *Psalms* 23 as a shepherd, and as a dragon-like creature riding through the sky:

When in anguish of heart I cried to the Lord, and called for help to my God; he heard me from his temple, and my cry reached his ears ...

Smoke went up from his nostrils, devouring fire from his mouth ... thick darkness lay under his feet.

He flew on the back of a cherub: he swooped on the wings of the wind. (*Psalms* 18: 6-10)

Did the ancient Hebrews take these descriptions of God literally? Who knows? But I presume that even the most traditionalist Jews or Christians will now take such lines as poetic pictures, not literal descriptions. In the New Testament too, some very physical manifestations of the divine are reported. God's voice speaks from heaven, and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove (*Mark* 1:10-11). The last book of the Bible deploys a phantasmagoria of apocalyptic imagery, including an embodied God sitting on a throne (*Revelation* 4:10-11), which is hardly consistent with the statement in *John* 1:18 that no-one has ever seen God.

In the developing Christian tradition, there was wide use of iconography, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church, usually focusing on the figure of Christ, but sometimes depicting the Trinity, rather literally-mindedly, as three angelic persons. Later on, Western artists such as Michelangelo and William Blake painted God as a bearded white male of a certain age, thereby exerting a stranglehold over our imagination that persists to the present day. Publishers continue to use these images on book-covers, thereby fuelling ridicule for the idea of God as an old man in the sky. Theologians will protest that these are mere images, and that anyone who thinks *that* is the sort of God the tradition believes in is missing the point. Yet we may feel some sympathy with the Mosaic ban on graven images, and the Islamic rejection of representational art in religion.

1.3 The metaphorical nature of talk of God

Are there any limits to metaphor in theistic thought and language? Many philosophers of religion want to draw a line in the theological sand, and insist that *some* talk of God must be taken literally, as implying a metaphysical proposition about the existence of an infinite personal Being, with the traditional attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and perfect benevolence. They will admit that the religious emphasis should be on the

attitudes of faith in God and obedience to Him, but they insist that such attitudes presuppose the existence of a personal Being to whom they are to be directed: "Whoever comes to God must believe that he exists" (*Hebrews* 11:6).

Much debate, both at the popular and the academic level, has thus assumed that talk of God has to be interpreted as implying the existence of a superhuman, but disembodied, person with the perfect properties of omniscience, omnipotence, and total benevolence. The psalms and prophets speak of God getting angry, hearing weeping, reviving people's spirits and guiding them on the right paths. So does God have perceptions and emotions, and does he act on individual people, like we do? Well, hardly *just* like we do – but whether God has mental states analogous to ours, or is totally unchangeable and "impassable" is a question that divides theologians. Some take it for granted that God is a person. But others deny it, for example Sally McFague:

A genuinely metaphorical theology ... recognizes the limitations of all models and abjures a "super model", such as the personal one is often assumed to be in [the Judeo-Christian] tradition. God is not a "person" or "personal" as such; this model does not cease to be a metaphor merely because it is a more inclusive model than many others in the tradition. 2

So does Nicholas Lash, an English Roman Catholic and Emeritus Professor of Divinity at Cambridge:

We address God as "you", and speak of God as "him", rather than "it", not because God is "a person" (which he certainly is not, for he is not *an* anything), but because our Christian experience of the manner of God's action requires us to acknowledge ourselves to be not merely produced but addressed, not merely made but loved, and speaking and loving are *personal* characteristics. ...

Guided by our use of "the proper metaphor", we may address the mystery of God in personal terms, and use personal pronouns in what we say about God, without falling into the trap of supposing him to be "a" person. 3

What we are pondering here is no new problem, but the classic dilemma of all theology - trying to use words to express matters that are

ultimately beyond words. The mysterious 4th-5th century writer known as "the Pseudo-Dionysius" is reported as saying that man cannot understand the names of God. Amongst the Muslims, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averrhoes) argued that the language of popular religion is metaphorical, and cannot be taken literally by philosophers. Mystics such as the Jewish Zohar, the Islamic Sufis, and the Christian Meister Eckhardt have strained language to breaking point in trying to communicate their experience. According to both Aquinas and Kant (two very different philosophers, of the 13th and 18th centuries), all our talk of God is analogical. 4 Many of these philosophers and mystics have got into trouble for questioning the literal truth of orthodox beliefs.

I suggest that crusading atheists and traditionalist believers are both being unduly literal-minded if they interpret religious talk as making quasi-scientific truth-claims about the world. Isn't there such a thing as poetic truth - as Austin Farrer eloquently argued? 5 And isn't that a guide to the kind of truth, if any, that we can expect in religion and theology? On this view, the personifications of so much God-talk are tradition-sanctified figures of speech by which we try to express something which is real, but transcends ordinary personality. Thus we can interpret talk of God as an overarching picture or metaphor that has provided various families of imagery that many people have found illuminating and inspiring in understanding and coping with their experience of life - its ups and downs, its delights and disasters, loves and hates, successes and failures, forgiveness, illuminations, and creative new possibilities.

Other Quakers have come up with similar thoughts. John Lampen wrote:

To apply the term 'God' in the Christian sense is to say that we perceive intuitively a connection between the marvels of the natural world, the moral law, the life of Jesus, the depths of the human personality, our imaginations about time, death and eternity, our experiences of human forgiveness and love, and the finest insights of the Christian tradition. To deny the existence of 'God' is to say that we cannot (yet) see such connections. But even the word 'God' is not an essential tool for grasping them. (QFP 26.33) 6

Here is my own rewriting of a passage by Rex Ambler: 7

The "surface grammar" of talk about God is reference to a conscious, purposive being of some sort - usually a

disembodied (yet male!) person. But if we interpret this language in terms of our actual experience and practice we find that its "depth grammar" is rather different. The concept of God is part of a story or theory or interpretative scheme we tell in order to convey something of the depth and mystery and creative power that we experience among ourselves and in the universe and that we are hoping to trust and act upon in the conduct of our lives. The concept of God is a metaphor for this kind of reality, which cannot be talked about literally, certainly not in scientific language, or in purely intellectual philosophy either. But the traditional monotheist language-game of God-talk is not compulsory for experiencing and responding to the reality it refers to; other religious traditions may use different figures of speech for the same purpose.

An eloquent recent passage by Beth Allen uses a little more of the traditional Christian language:

By 'God' I mean the energy flowing through all the created universe, beyond us all and yet at the same time giving God's nature to be known – transcendent yet immanent, loving yet full of truth, eternal, outside time yet working in time, the source of all that is, yet incarnate, given particular voice and form in Jesus yet also a light within every person, a powerful transforming Spirit, fluid, elusive, which is also a still small voice asking for our co-operation in cherishing real overflowing abundant life in every single thing.

Because of this, we can be held securely and confidently in our deepest being. 8

It is worth adding that other religious and non-religious discussions of the meaning of life and how to live it wisely also tend to use metaphorical talk of their own – for example the newly-popular secular (though often Buddhist-derived) meditation-techniques or therapies of "Mindfulness". So it would be an interesting exercise to explore how much commonality lies beneath the differences of language.

2. To Christians

I am going to suggest (with all the trepidation that is due when one strays into theology!) that the Quaker idea of direct revelation of the divine within

each person can be connected with a radical reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity that early Christian theologians developed, long before Quakers were thought of.

2.1 George Fox's "openings" to the Light or Spirit

George Fox was not a theologian, and certainly not a philosopher: he was something more than either - a spiritually inspired person, who was inspirational to many others. Fox and the early Quakers obviously thought of themselves as Christians (there was no alternative in 17th century Britain); but they were Christians of a very unorthodox kind, for they did without creeds, priests, and sacraments, but claimed to be restoring primitive Christianity, relying on the "inner light of Christ" in every person, and the inspiration of the Spirit to move men and women to live out their faith, and to "minister" in Meetings for Worship. In his *Journal* 9, Fox documented his early spiritual struggles, his profound dissatisfaction with all the religious options that were on offer in his time, and his great realization that the Lord "did not dwell in temples made with hands", but "in people's hearts", that "there was an anointing within man, to teach him", and that "the Lord would teach his people himself". He often put this in terms of experiencing "the Light":

Now the Lord God hath opened to me by his invisible power, how that every man was enlightened by the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all: and that they, that believed in it, came out of condemnation, and came to the light of life, and became the children of it; but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it; though they made a profession of Christ. (*Journal*, 1648)

William Penn expressed it similarly in 1694:

The Light of Christ within, who is the Light of the world and so a light to you that tells you the truth of your condition, leads all that take heed unto it out of darkness into God's marvelous light, for light grows upon the obedient. (QFP 26.44)

The question arises whether there is any distinction between this Quaker Light and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, Fox sometimes talked of "that Light and Spirit" in the same breath, as if these were alternative words for the same thing. The capital letters express the belief that it comes from God, and conveys divine truth. So what is meant is not just any old

thought or image, prompting, or impulse that comes to mind, only those that strike home as true, revelatory, and carrying divine authority. Fox emphasized that what he was talking about is the divine Light (usually with a capital 'L'), not just the natural light of reason or conscience. There was a trace of Trinitarian theology in his thought, for he implies that the Light is co-eternal with God the Father and God the Son, so it seems that 'the inward Light' is another name for the inspiration of the Spirit. A sharp distinction between divine and natural light was maintained by London Quakers in 1879:

The light that shines into man's heart is not of man, and must ever be distinguished both from the conscience which it enlightens and from the natural faculty of reason which, when unsubjected to its holy influences, is, in the things of God, very foolishness. (QFP 26.63)

2.2 The third member of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit

How does this Quaker approach connect with mainline Christianity? Tertullian is credited with inventing the term 'Trinity' around the end of the 2nd century, but the distinctive Christian threefold conception of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was not fully developed until after the Council of Nicea, based on various striking Biblical expressions of experience of the Spirit, found in the Old Testament as well as the New: The Lord said to Moses ... I have filled him with the spirit of God (*Exodus 31:1-3*); These are the last words of David ... The spirit of God has spoken through me (*2 Samuel 23:1-2*); Then a branch will grow from the stock of Jesse ... On him the spirit of the Lord will rest (*Isaiah 11:1-2*); When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth (*John 16:13*, see also *14:16-17*); God has given the Spirit to dwell in our hearts (*2 Corinthians 1:22*); To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying 'Abba, Father!' (*Galatians 4:6*).

The implication is that there is (or *can* be) something divine within human beings *generally*. For the early Church, the question arose what relation this "Holy Spirit" bears to God the Father, and to Christ. In the 4th century Gregory of Nazianzus saw revelation as historically progressive:

The Old Testament preached the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. ... by gradual advances and ... partial ascent, we should

move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine. 10

(Fox would claim that 17th century Quakers were making another step forward, increasing the clarity of the light of the Holy Spirit.) The 4th century Church, having decided at Nicea that Jesus was divine, was then persuaded that the Spirit had to be recognized as a third aspect of God, and thus came the paradoxical formula “three persons in one God”, which has puzzled believers and non-believers alike down the centuries.

But despite the age and grandeur of this doctrine, theologians admit that the Holy Spirit has been the Cinderella of the Trinity, getting less attention than the other two members. 11 The creeds start with God as Creator, and go on to say a great deal about Jesus, but they only mention the Holy Spirit (or “Ghost”) in one sentence, like an afterthought. Christian evangelists eagerly proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, but they are not so often heard saying that the Holy Spirit is equally divine. Yet in the order of actual human awareness, the Spirit may be the aspect of God that we can most readily experience. If we are fortunate, we can recognize in some of the people we meet such virtues and graces that may deserve to be called operations or gifts of the Spirit that Paul talked of: “The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control” (*Galatians* 5:22-3). Such talk of the Spirit receives the enthusiastic assent of George Fox and contemporary Quakers.

2.3 The status of Jesus

But what about the *second* person of the Trinity? Ever since the Council of Nicea, the dogma of the divinity of Jesus has been taken as the essential defining feature of orthodox Christian belief. And since Christianity has, at least until recently, been foundational to the culture of Europe and North America, it has been seen as a badge of identity. Until comparatively recently it was bold, even shocking, to declare oneself not a Christian – in some circles, it still is. (Far right voices in Europe, as well as the US, have tried to recruit Christian churches to join in the defence of “our indigenous people” and “our Christian culture”.) Most religious groups have been deeply concerned to define and maintain their identity, through some combination of belief and practice – but the result has been a diverging multiplicity of sects, especially amongst Protestant Christians.

How did this start? Why did the early Church decide that the man Jesus was also divine? Scholars have long debated what Jesus's conception

of himself was. Certainly, in the gospels he is *reported* as making various theological claims about himself. One of the most common titles used is 'the Son of Man' – though it is not clear what that means, without scholarly exegesis of the Jewish background. John's gospel, commonly reckoned to be the last to be written, is more explicit than the three synoptic gospels about the uniquely divine status of Jesus. There Jesus is represented as claiming to be the eternal Word (*John* Ch.1), the Messiah (4:25-26), the Son of God (5:16-47), the bread which comes down from heaven (6:30-58), and to have existed before Abraham was born (8:58). But the gospels were compiled some time after Jesus' death, by writers and editors who were already believers in his divine status and were concerned to propagate that view. We cannot be certain that any of these claims were made by Jesus himself - or if they were, how he understood them.

Paul's epistles to the early Christian communities, written *before* the gospels, have been some of the most influential writings of all history. Paul concentrates on the divine person and work of Jesus, and practically ignores his teaching and his ministry, but he conveys an authoritative, charismatic faith that God has done something of cosmic importance through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who Paul now identifies as God's Son. The central claim is that God was *uniquely* present in Jesus of Nazareth, and that God uses Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to restore the whole of humanity to a right relationship with Himself:

... as the result of one misdeed [i.e. Adam's Fall] was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act [i.e. Jesus' submission to crucifixion] is acquittal and life for all. For as through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one man many will be made righteous. (*Romans* 5:18-19)

With this inspirational new faith, available to gentiles as well as Jews, Christians multiplied within the Roman Empire despite persecution, and there came a point when the Emperor Constantine decided that since he couldn't beat them he had better join them, and so in the early 4th century he made Christianity the official religion of the Empire. One of Constantine's first moves was to call a General Council of the Christian churches, which met at Nicea in the year 325. He wanted them to help stabilize his newly-established regime by agreeing on a common set of beliefs, so he sent his commissioners to the Council to make sure that the assembled bishops did not go away before they had thrashed out a creed.

The central issue was the nature of Jesus. Jesus had addressed God as "Father", and he had encouraged his followers to do the same - which would seem to make *everyone* sons or daughters of God - in a metaphorical sense, of course (as is said in *John* 1:12). But as we have seen, Jesus was described by some New Testament writers as *the* Son of God, in a unique sense. The debate at Nicea focused on the question whether Jesus was of a lesser status or the same status as God the Father. The latter position was decisively accepted by the Council, so Jesus was affirmed to be both divine and human - a claim that has always been anathema to Jews and Muslims. The Nicene Creed has been accepted by most Christians over the centuries as setting the standard of Christian orthodoxy, yet the question of the divinity of Jesus has been regularly re-opened ever since. It is a nice question whether the Church would have fixated on this dogma if Constantine had not used his imperial power to bring about agreement at Nicea. Some may say that God used the Emperor as his instrument to guide the Church into truth: but they can be challenged to say whether God has equally guided the Papacy, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Coptic churches, and the Reformers - they cannot all be right! Others will wonder about the element of historical contingency in the development of theology.

2.4 Are Quakers Christian?

The doctrines of incarnation and atonement have been central to the mainstream Christian tradition. The basic claims are that God was *uniquely* present in Jesus, and that God performs some *universal saving role* only through him. But here I see a division between those who are happy to say that there was a *special* revelation of God in Jesus - but not necessarily absolutely unique to him, there being other great spiritual teachers such as the Buddha, Socrates, Gandhi, etc. in whom the nature of God is also to some extent revealed - and those who insist count there was a *unique* revelation and action of God in Jesus, different in kind from all other historical figures, past, present and future.

Identity questions have been taken terribly seriously by many religious groups, and Quakers are no exception. The question whether Quakers are Christian gets asked by people of various religious faiths or none, who wonder where to place this peculiar people on their intellectual map. And in recent years we also have been asking ourselves: Am I a Christian? Is the Religious Society of Friends Christian? Can we, with integrity, join in Councils of Christian Churches? But all these questionings presuppose some definition of what it takes to be Christian, so a first

response to them is: "If you tell me what you mean by 'Christian', I'll tell you whether I believe *that*".

There has been enormous amount of debate over this for two millennia. To take just one example, Keith Ward, a liberal Anglican theologian and Emeritus Professor of Divinity at Oxford, seems to want to have it both ways. In one place he takes a very open attitude to the definition of Christianity:

It seems to me very important that freedom to expand and intermingle should be encouraged, so that one does not look for and insist upon one true and inalienable core of faith, an 'essence of Christianity'. ... The term 'Christian' will be applied to signify a continuity of some sort with the historic origin of the Christian churches. 12

By that vague and liberal criterion (which I applaud) there is no problem about Quakers counting as Christian. After all, our *Advices and Queries* say we are "rooted in Christianity", and the official guidance on membership reads:

Membership is still seen as a discipleship, a discipline within a broadly Christian perspective and our Quaker tradition, where the way in which we live is as important as the beliefs we affirm. (QFP 11.01)

(Note that this does not say beliefs are *unimportant*, but that beliefs and way of life are *equally* important - which may come as a surprise to some contemporary Quakers.) But at the end of that same book Ward reverts to the more definite and exclusive line that has been characteristic down the centuries:

Christianity stands by the claim that the life and resurrection of Jesus, recorded in the New Testament, is the historical revelation of God. It is complete and final, in that no further revelation can surpass that of the love which was in Jesus. It is unique ... 13

Perhaps there is a tendency to use different language when speaking to everyone, and when speaking to fellow-Christians, who are usually quick to detect signs of unorthodoxy.

For traditional Christians, it has not been enough to say that Jesus provides an inspiring example of someone living for others, and being

prepared to suffer death rather than deny his most fundamental values. Socrates and the Christian martyrs (and a few Quakers in 17th century New England) also provide such examples, but they are not divinized in the same way. However, Quakers from the beginning have resisted being tied down to any particular verbal formula, however sanctified by tradition. If some Christians still want to treat us as non-Christian unless we express verbal assent to a certain form of words about the theological status of Jesus, whether from the ancient creeds or of more recent coinage, most contemporary British Quakers (myself included) will politely decline. (After the Restoration of 1660, a common way of persecuting Quakers was to “tender” to them the oath of allegiance, knowing that most would refuse, and thus find themselves on the wrong side of the existing law.) But that is by no means the end of the story: many of us will want to say that we are Christian in our *own* way, disciples of the teaching and example of Jesus, and we should certainly want to continue the conversation, trying to understand more deeply “what lies behind the words”, what in the experience and life of other people reflects the influence of Jesus.

Support for non-traditional interpretations of traditional Christian doctrine can be found in Nicholas Lash’s impressive study of human experience and knowledge of God, *Easter in Ordinary*, which manages the rarely-achieved balance of being both scholarly and spiritual. At the end of his long and winding discussion, he offers a grammatical rather than metaphysical interpretation of the Trinity in terms of three rules for Christian discourse about God (and he puts the Spirit first!):

- (a) To speak of “spirit” as “God” is to ascribe all creativity and conversion, all fresh life and freedom, to divinity.
- (b) The word “God” may not be used to refer to the world, or to any feature of the world, “visible or invisible” ... nothing that is may be said to be God, for God is the unoriginate, the unproduced, the creator of all that there is
- (c) [*here I offer my own paraphrase of Lash’s rather elusive discussion*] The revelation of God (the Word) is to be found in particular “prophetic” utterances, above all in the life and teaching of Jesus. 14

There is a tripartite structure here, but not an ontology - and certainly not the claim that God is three persons. Lash does not unequivocally endorse the traditional creedal formulas about Jesus, indeed he says that by divinizing him, the language of the early church became too easily “a new form of

idolatry”, encouraging the presumption that human beings had “laid hold of the *nature* of God, and made of God’s truth their possession”. Dare I suggest that Quakers can endorse this re-interpretation of the Trinity?

3. To Quakers

History suggests that British Quakers have been subject to periodic lurches of direction, presumably because we are a small sect without a unifying creed. What then is to be our direction in the 21st century? Religions typically involve three main components – belief and doctrine, institution and ritual, individual experience and spirituality. Quakers have of course very strongly emphasized the latter. We do have our own institutions, indeed the forms of church government and business method set up by George Fox have proved surprisingly durable. And although we are usually thought of as totally opposed to ritual, our practice of meeting in reverent silence with unprogrammed ministry can be described as a ritual or liturgy of its own, indeed one which has been maintained for centuries, while some of our beliefs have changed dramatically. 15 Where we have been vague, and perhaps weakest, is in the area of doctrine. Our reticence on questions of theology is, in my view, a virtue compared with the strident dogmatism sometimes found elsewhere, but the discussion above indicates, I think, that we are not devoid of beliefs, and need not be embarrassed about discussing them.

It may be that in recent years we have erred on the side of liberality in admitting to membership people who have rather little understanding of the history of Quakers and of the *religious* basis of The Religious Society of Friends, thus weakening our identity. There is, thankfully, no creed that has to be signed up to, but *Advices and Queries* is a vivid short summary of our whole approach, and in *Quaker Faith and Practice* we have a periodically-updated anthology of Quaker writings down the centuries, covering most aspects of life. I would have thought that applicants for membership should have thoroughly digested the former and read a good deal of the latter, and should feel so much in sympathy with this approach (without having to agree with every detail) that they want to join in this ongoing tradition (which like all traditions will have to adapt to new situations).

I would like now to use the remaining space to discuss some confusions about the notion of religious experience, which contemporary Quakers tend to appeal to as the ultimate foundation of all we are about.

3.1 The status of inner illuminations

There is a crucial problem: how do we know *which* of our inner leadings or illuminations really come from God? (For those who are not comfortable with 'God'-talk, there is a parallel question as to which of our moral intuitions or putative insights are valid.) How can we tell the promptings of love and truth from those of selfishness, pride, vanity, ambition, resentment, jealousy, or prejudice? How can we know when we are seeing things in "the Light of God" rather than in the light of potentially corrupt human considerations? This is not just an academic question, it is a problem we all have to face up to in our spiritual lives.

Towards the end of Fox's lifetime Robert Barclay offered a perhaps over-confident response. This able young Scottish theologian set out a Quaker theology in 15 propositions, explained and defended in some 400 pages! Such an exercise is rather out of keeping with the general suspicion by Quakers of theological theorizing (I know of no similar effort since), but if one has the patience to explore its 17th century wordiness, one can find much that remains in the spirit of Quakerism. Barclay's most crucial proposition is that "Concerning Immediate Revelation", and I need to quote his opening formulation at some length:

... the testimony of the Spirit is that alone by which the true knowledge of God hath been, is, and can be only revealed ... these divine inward revelations, which we make absolutely necessary for the building up of true faith, neither do nor can ever contradict the outward testimony of the scriptures, or right and sound reason. Yet from hence it will not follow, that these divine revelations are to be subjected to the examination, either of the outward testimony of the scriptures, or of the natural reason of man, as to a more noble or certain rule and touchstone; for this divine revelation, and inward illumination, is that which is evidence and clear of itself, forcing, by its own evidence and clearness, the well-disposed understanding to assent, irresistibly moving the same thereunto; even as the common principles of natural truths move and incline the mind to a natural assent; as, that the whole is greater than its part; that two contradictory sayings can neither be both true, nor both false ... (The Second Proposition) 16

Barclay thus wanted to claim the same kind of unassailable certainty for Quakerly inner illuminations as Descartes had for the

mathematical axioms and other self-evident truths that he invoked as the foundation of his philosophy, one generation earlier in the 17th century. But subsequent philosophical discussion has reached a widespread agreement that there is no hope of building all our knowledge on foundations that are infallibly certain. Of course, whatever is necessarily true cannot be false. But that does not mean that whatever someone “intuits”, or seems “clearly and distinctly” to perceive to be a necessary truth is indeed necessarily true (after all, we can all make mistakes in mathematics!). And there is a parallel point about putative divine illuminations. Whatever is communicated by God must be true – that is a rule of the language-game of ‘God’-talk. But it does not follow that whatever some individual - whether Jane Bloggs in a Quaker meeting one Sunday morning, or George Fox himself, feeling inspired to take off his shoes and proclaim woe to the bloody city of Lichfield - *takes* to be given by divine illumination really has that status. Our apprehension of religious truth (if there is such a thing) is always fallible.

I think we should therefore reject Barclay’s suggestion that putative divine revelations are not to be tested by appeal to the scriptures, or to our natural reason. Given our disagreements and fallibility even about the most important matters, and especially in view of the weird and sometimes terrible things that some cult leaders have claimed to be the message of God, there is often a need for further testing of putative divine illuminations. To his credit, Barclay later acknowledges this:

For it is one thing to affirm, that the true and undoubted revelation of God’s Spirit is certain and infallible; and another thing to affirm, that this or that particular person or people is infallibly led by this revelation in what they speak or write, because they affirm themselves to be so led by the inward and immediate revelation of the Spirit. The first is only asserted by us, the later may be called in question. (*Apology*, II.xiii)

But unfortunately he did not adhere to this insight in his opening summary (quoted above), or when he says that if we are asked “How dost thou know that thou art actuated by the Spirit of God?” we can dismiss the question as just as ridiculous as the question how one knows that the sun is shining at noonday, when one is there with one’s eyes open. For our senses are subject to illusions, dreams and drugs, and not even the judgment that one can now see the sun shining is literally infallible. Barclay thus gave the misleading

impression that he is offering a Quaker theology of infallible inner illumination, to compete with Protestant doctrine of the infallibility of scripture or Roman Catholic dogma of the infallibility of the Church. Quakers were thus subject to the sneers of Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, Hume and Kant, who were dismissive of religious "enthusiasm", being all too well aware of the bloody conflicts it had given rise to, and were keen to promote "reasonable" religion instead. 17 I suggest we have to realize that there is *no* infallible means of recognition of religious truth, so that we need to compare and contrast traditions and scriptures, reason and scientific evidence, and the experience of many people, and remain "open to new light, from whatever source it may come".

Hugh Doncaster has provided a very helpful account of the way any putative "illumination" should be tested:

This central affirmation, that the Light of the Christ-like God shines in every person, implies that our knowledge of God is both subjective and objective. It is easy to misconstrue 'Inner Light' as an invitation to individualism and anarchy if one concentrates on the subjective experience known to each one. But it is an equally important part of our faith and practice to recognize that we are not affirming the existence and priority of your light and my light, but of the Light of God, and of the God who is made known to us supremely in Jesus. The inward experience must be checked by accordance with the mind of Christ, the fruits of the Spirit, the character of that willed caring which in the New Testament is called Love. It is further checked by the fact that if God is known in measure by every person, our knowledge of him will be largely gained through the experience of others who reverently and humbly seek him. In the last resort we must be guided by our own conscientiously held conviction - but it is in the last resort. First we must seek carefully and prayerfully through the insights of others, both in the past and among our contemporaries, and only in the light of this search do we come to our affirmation. (QFP 26.65)

The capitalization indicates an objective truth - "the Light of God"; the small letter stands for an individual's subjective, fallible claim - "my light" is my present judgment about what the true Light of God is".

3.2 Spiritual experience

William Penn (the high-born English Quaker who founded Pennsylvania) wrote in 1692:

It is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true, or assent to or the subscription of articles or propositions, though never so soundly worded, that ... makes a man a true believer or a true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation, according to the dictates of this Divine principle of Light and Life in the soul which denotes a person truly a child of God. (QFP 26.78)

For the classic core of Quakerism, experiencing the Light means much more than judging the truth of propositions - it involves affective responses that are part of an ongoing transformation of heart and mind. The following passage from the 18th century American Quaker John Woolman suggests a religious universalism rather than Christian exclusivism:

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms or religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren. (QFP 26.61)

Quakerism has had as its central element this experience of divine presence, guidance and regeneration, and has traditionally used Christian language to describe it, albeit in a somewhat unorthodox way. But controversy has recently arisen between Quakers who think of themselves as definitely Christian, and those who prefer to call themselves "universalists". In 1990 Pam Lunn summed up the differences over the use of theological language:

Within the Society of Friends we have our own problems with the traditional language of Christian spirituality ... There are those who can comfortably talk in Christian language, because they experience it deeply as expressing truth and reality as they perceive it. For them it is not just "a language"; it is the truth. ... There are those who just cannot use that language at all, because for them it precisely does not express their deepest truths, and may in fact be felt to deny or even violate them. For these people, their deepest

experiences of spiritual reality, as they have encountered it, cannot be encompassed by a language that has acquired so many historical accretions and distortions that it has become at best meaningless and at worst a falsification of truth. (QFP 26.76)

If some contemporary Quakers are reluctant to use traditional Christian language, what concepts are we to use in articulating our spiritual experience? We cannot do without concepts altogether - that would be to try to reduce ourselves to the level of animals or infants. There may be a place in religious practice for inarticulate sighs and moans, for dancing and embraces, for genuflections, icons and incense, for music (with or without words) - and of course for silence. But words are usually used as well. All religious believers of whatever stripe need some conception of the point of what they are doing, to explain it to the next generation and to inquirers. And if they are to discuss possible adjustments and innovations in what they do, they need to give their reasons. So every religion uses some system of concepts to articulate what they do and why, and how it is supposed to relate to "spiritual reality": this cognitive element is ineliminable.

It is tempting for Quakers to say that underneath the different conceptual systems there can be the same *religious experience*. This is suggested by the quotations from Penn and Woolman above (though they do not use that phrase). Could it be the same experience behind A's talk of "the mercy of Allah", B's of "seeing the Light of Christ", or C "standing within the supportive, loving light of the Universe", and D "meeting my guardian angel", and E "realizing my Buddha nature"? But how can we know? By what criterion are we to decide whether these are the same experiences (or different, or only partially similar), apart from the words the subjects use to report them? We can, of course, look to the behaviour and way of life that the subjects display, and in some devotees of various faiths we may discern the "fruits of the spirit" that St.Paul wrote about. But we cannot strip off the concepts and discover underneath an unconceptualized core, which can then be compared for sameness and difference with other experiences in very different cultural and religious traditions.

What we can do is to use words that seem to us truthful (and beautiful), while being also aware of their inadequacy. This implies openness to reformulation and change. And it goes with a reluctance to fix on any particular verbal formula as uniquely authoritative. The Quaker astronomer Arthur Eddington expressed this eloquently in 1929:

Rejection of creed is not inconsistent with being possessed by a living belief. We have no creed in science, but we are not lukewarm in our beliefs. The belief is not that all the knowledge of the universe that we hold so enthusiastically will survive in the letter; but a sureness that we are on the road. If our so-called facts are changing shadows, they are shadows cast by the light of constant truth. So too in religion we are repelled by that confident theological doctrine which has settled for all generations just how the spiritual world is worked; but we need not turn aside from the measure of light that comes into our experience showing us a Way through the unseen world. Religion for the conscientious seeker is not all a matter of doubt and self-questionings. There is a kind of sureness which is very different from cocksureness. (QFP 27.24)

Eddington thus suggests that "sureness" in religion should be more like the confidence of scientists in the validity of the scientific method than like the belief of a scientist in any particular theory. For a scientific theory always remain hostage to empirical fortune, in that it may eventually be shown to be false (or only approximately true) by new observations and theoretical interpretations. Quaker faith is a religious practice, a method, "a Way" - rather than a set of propositions, a theology, a creed.

3.3 Continuing the dialogue, on several fronts

We can feel quietly confident that we are on the right road, and that we have been given sufficient light to proceed further down it, without tying ourselves to any particular creedal formulations - though we should acknowledge the continuing inspiration of our Christian heritage. The "measure of light that comes into our experience" does not depend only on our own individual experience (limited and idiosyncratic as that may be), it includes much that has been filtered down through the generations. There are influences from the Bible, above all from the life and teaching of Jesus; but there is also input from the sciences, the arts, and other religious traditions. Everyone inherits concepts from previous generations. Nobody invents religious language from scratch, any more than any other sort of language-use (Jesus himself spoke from within the Jewish tradition, and so did Paul). But traditions do not predetermine how they are to be continued into the future. As history goes on, we will find need to reinterpret the religious concepts we inherit.

Given our long-established non-dogmatic approach, Quakers should be specially well-qualified to engage in dialogue on three fronts – with the non-religious, with those of other faiths, and with other Christians. That is more demanding than talking to each other, and the opportunity does not come up so readily. Still, we could get out more - especially if we can find ways of spending less time on our own administrative affairs. However, public meetings with other denominations and faiths may not be the best context for dialogue, because they tend to take a confrontational form, with the representatives of each position feeling obliged to display loyalty to their party line. It may be better to try to *do* things together, and get to know individual people, rather than trying to start at the level of doctrine and theology. And in so far as we enter into real dialogue, involving genuine listening to what the others have to say, we cannot predict the outcome, and we ourselves may be changed. If our form of Christianity is not so much a notion but a *way*, we could do more to demonstrate that.

Footnotes

1. *Twelve Quakers and God*, Hampstead, Quaker Quest, 2004.
2. Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, London, SCM Press 1982, p.128.
3. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God*, London, SCM Press 1988, pp.276-7.
4. (deleted to avoid identification)
5. Austin Farrer's eloquent paper "Poetic Truth" was discovered amongst his manuscripts and posthumously published in A.Farrer, *Reflective Faith*, ed. Charles Conti, London: SPCK 1972.
6. I use 'QFP' to abbreviate *Quaker Faith and Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 1995.
7. Rex Ambler, *The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology*, London: Quaker Home Service 1994, pp.24-5.

8. Beth Allen, *Ground and Spring: Foundations of Quaker Discipleship*, London, Quaker Books 2007, p.113.
9. There are various editions of George Fox's *Journal*, including that edited by Nigel Smith in Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998.
10. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio theologica*, V.26, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 3rd edition 2001, p.312.
11. McGrath, *op. cit.*, p.307 – yet he himself does not give the Holy Spirit the full chapter in its own right that he says it deserves!
12. Keith Ward, *The Concept of God*, Oxford, Blackwell 1974, pp.169-70.
13. Ward, *op.cit.*, p.229. My good friend Keith recommends that we look also at what he says in his more recent book *Re-thinking Christianity* (Banbury, Oneworld Publications 2007). There he argues that “it is possible to have a Christian faith that is both liberal and orthodox ... liberal in accepting the legitimacy of informed critical inquiry ... in accepting a diversity of interpretations of Christian doctrine ... It will not be liberal, however, in the sense that it denies all the credal formulae of the undivided church ...” (p.222).
14. Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, pp.267- 270.
15. Pink Dandelion, *The Liturgies of Quakerism*, Aldershot, Ashgate 2005.
16. The most readable version is *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, edited by Dean Freids, London, Barclay Press 1991.
17. (deleted to avoid identification)