

## Dialogue for Survival

*Hello - you're a Quaker aren't you - you lot have a funny name ?*

Yes - I'm a Quaker - a judge called us that in the 17th century - he was being sarcastic - we adopted it and have used it ever since - our sense of humour.

*But even with that name you're still here 350 years later.*

Quaker were seen as good - it's still used as a brand name for oats !

*I believe you're the Religious Society of Friends - as you call yourselves.*

Yes - we gave ourselves that title later. An earlier name - was Friends of the Truth - we call each other Friends.

*Talking of truth - that's truth as facts of life and the world as we know them now - they've grown enormously. Any real understanding of evolution was only 150 years ago - very recent when considered against any history of religion.*

It's significant that Patricia Williams, in her book, said in 2007 - "Quakerism appears as science begins to permeate British culture and Science and Quakerism reject orthodoxy's trust in authority and ancient truth".

*But those are only words in a book.*

Not just words - we had successful scientists like John Dalton, Kathleen Lonsdale - astro-physicists Arthur Eddington, who gave practical proof of Einstein, and Jocelyn Bell Burnell who discovered pulsars - they stayed with Quakers after their discoveries - they didn't see the truth of science as contradicting their faith.

*Did they see their faith as dependent on a divine consciousness outside their minds ?*

You'd have had to ask each of them - all minds are unique. What we say is 'that of God in everyone' - I emphasise 'in' - we also referred to the 'inner light'. Our religion is essentially internal and experiential - we learn and grow from our experiences in life.

*In common understanding religion means priests, rituals, robes, reciting prayers, responses and a prescribed belief - as in a creed.*

We don't have any of those - so in those terms we aren't religious - but we are in ours - if not in the public's. We are spiritual

*But your roots were in Christianity.*

Yes - everything has to start somewhere - it was the culture then.

*Traditional churches are experiencing declining and ageing numbers - with those considerable differences you must be an exception ?*

No - sadly we're not.

*Like other Christian religions you have falling numbers then.*

Local Quaker meetings now are often members of Churches Together - churches, 'steeple houses' as George Fox called them - which we would have had little to do with in our past. Although we have Christian origins, we did rebel against the state imposed religious norms of the time - and only recently we expressed doubts about our membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland - we've always been separate from mainstream religion with our different style of worship.

*Although religious charities have been a major part of the Disasters Emergency Committee - it is itself secular - a practical expression of the common human spirit. Quakers are odd - they seem to be going down to the past rather than up to the future - it's like clinging on to the hull of a sinking ship - it's something to hang on to in the short term because it seems to be an immediate means of survival but it could result in eventual death. In your leaflet "Quaker Worship" about 20 years ago there was far less god language than in the current version, for example.*

That's interesting - but you never came to one of our Meetings then ?

*No - I know religions do good things - but that's just what's common across all humanity - bad things are also done - particularly using sectarian religious labels - as they do in Palestine, Iraq, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Nigeria, etc. - an endless list.*

There's still evil in the human mind - under any label.

Something about god that I've never understood - a common phrase such as 'God's care' - is used in a Chaplains' leaflet in prisons where all monotheistic religions, including Quakers, have to work together - an inference is that god is consciously aware and active - and, if believed, that would diminish our human responsibility. Do Quakers believe in god - yes or no ?

A simple answer like that is not possible. You assume a single meaning of God - and we don't have that. We do respect everyone's uniqueness - so I cannot give you a 'yes' or 'no' - it expresses a feeling in the individual's mind.

*You won't give me a simple answer then ?*

I can't give you a simple answer - Friends need to get at something beyond their superficial thoughts. We do this in our Meetings for Worship in stillness and silence - we feel others around us doing the same - we may learn from any spoken ministry. As our spirituality grows ideas about God and finding God's Will may help us let go of old certainties.

Letting go is a problem. I have faith in the human spirit but not in any divine and supernatural magic. Everybody has a need for community and in turn what that needs from them. We all need to get at deep thoughts - difficult though that often is - anyway as that's a need we all have - aren't Quakers just anything to anybody ?

No - that's a crude and negative put down - it's more positive to think of us as a friendly, caring and supportive community - essentially smaller than our ever larger towns - we all need a size of community where we can relate and belong. Years ago our Yearly Meeting

Epistle did ask - "Why isn't everyone a Quaker" ?

*Well, yes - why not - you tell me. I'm really curious about you lot - why, do people give up time and travel to join with others to do nothing - except what you call 'worship' in silence - there must be something in it.*

Early Friends lived in a culture when most believed and worshipped God. Quakers felt that there was a need to be in direct contact with God - and that the rituals of traditional religion were a barrier to that contact. God seemed to explain things which are now understood so differently - with our increased knowledge.

*I see where you came from.*

That, of course, was before there was any science or knowledge of evolution as we know it now. Also our whole way of living has changed dramatically - most of us - in the more developed world anyway - live far safer and easier lives than we did in the 17th century. With our sensitive and unprogrammed worship we can more easily respond to that increased knowledge and fast changing culture. Knowledge is now made so easy by increases in communication with books, radio, TV, internet, etc. Now through the TV everyone is made aware of what a wonderful, awesome and beautiful planet we live on - but on the same TV channels we're also made aware of terrible poverty and suffering in other parts of the world. You've asked me a lot of questions - now I'll ask you one - what about human society ?

*We humans are, or perhaps I should say have become, over millions of years, a highly evolved, very social, primate mammal with a brain that has enabled us to dominate other living species. This domination together with our ever increasing population growth with our inter-dependence on these species will increase our suffering - like all living things, organisations including Quakers, that don't evolve and adapt to the changes around them will die out . . . . . you're smiling !*

I'm smiling because you didn't talk about the wonder of this life. I see us on Earth as incredibly lucky because of a most unusual event - we only have life because of a particular orbit around the sun, the moon and water, etc. As yet, we've not found anywhere else in the cosmos that has life - and maybe we'll never find it - as we're used to it anyway. You mention over population - we are just one of the forms of life on this planet. Quakers value the environment with all its wonderful life forms - and have >humility about our luck in evolving here - in the way we have.

*You mention the sun - worship of it was rational, at the time - because it was so evident - seasons - and life were seen as totally dependent on it - as we are in fact.*

Worship of something unseen - something beyond the conscious awareness of the human mind has been an aspect of faith in the last few millennia. Worship of God has become a cultural inertia - it's difficult to change.

*Going back to what I said about population - it comes from thoughts about fishing quotas, extinctions of animals, sea acidity, climate change, melting glaciers and ice caps, enlarging deserts, etc., etc. We cannot expect those in the third world not to want things like cars, cookers and computers - and all the other things that we now take for granted - such economic growth can't go on for ever.*

I agree absolutely.

*A problem is that belief in a god I is by those who will increase their own suffering by over population. We can no longer pass the responsibility for humanity onto anything external to the human mind. I cannot rationally believe that there is something outside our minds - which thinks like our mind thinks.*

Few Friends - here anyway - see God as omnipotent and therefore ultimately responsible for everything.

*A belief in an omnipotent god, made us always expect the right answer in god's terms - life was god given - in that context there is no easy or comfortable answer - but over population is such an alarming prospect - the reality is painful - perhaps that's why it tends to be avoided by most religions - god has become to such truths. Scientific explanations are now expected - and always aim at facts - at truth. I know that there can be horrific application of that knowledge - as with nuclear bombs - although there have been marvellous advances in medical science - for example.*

Scientific and, on the other side, academic theology people often work only in their own defensive territories - perhaps Friends with their openness and scientific activities are a way of breaking across this boundary conflict. Perhaps it's better to think of the human spirit - rather than the Holy Spirit and its christo-centric bible beliefs which were put into many of us as children.

*The human spirit - what do you understand by that ? Is that something which you see as objectively observable and evident ?*

I mean such things as only the human mind has - and are evident and obvious in our behaviour - and not in any other species.

*Human spirit is only humanness then - or the good bit of it anyway - not dependent on religion ? The short Jhistory of religions is nothing against the long, long time of our evolution.*

Yes, such scientific facts and an understanding of evolution have been with us for less than a tenth of the time that Christianity has existed. We have to accept that knowing about the factual realities of our existence is overcoming belief in the supernatural. In February 2006 the Friend reported that only 13% of young Friends would take the Christian label - that is the younger more open thinking - we may not like it - but Quakers will change - in Britain anyway.

*As you've already said - everything starts somewhere.*

Quakerism started here in Britain - perhaps it has to start changing here. However we must not forget that well over 80% of those in the world using the Quaker label have programmed worship and belief in the God of the scriptures. The most open and free thinking about such things is here amongst Friends in Europe and much of the English speaking world - but sadly by only some Quakers in the USA.

*An obstacle is the all pervading, growing pressure for wealth, borrowing to buy, and material possession - that's the dominant drive - one reason why religions, including*

*Quakerism, are suffering such decline - despite a rise in population. Religions were vehicles for a personal morality which is now being drowned under the rising tide of rules and bureaucracy - which remove ever more free and personal moral decisions.*

Although Quakers are open to facts - there's always the unknown - the infinite. There is more to be learnt, understood or seen about every situation. When one thinks one knows enough about something - it's time to think differently - our silent meetings help open closed minds - there are no limits on thinking. It's said - 'true silence is the absence of self, not of sound'. We've always rebelled against 'thought police' - whether political, commercial or religious.

*What's that got to do with god ?*

Friends see our silence as a way of finding God's Will - revelation - although we may differ in our individual understanding of what that God is. It's often a call to action and can benefit from the Meeting's 'discernment' - we act as a community

*You believe in Darwin's idea of evolution - so god didn't suddenly create us with our amazing minds - but I can see that there's something within each mind which one can call god - but how does belief about an external god fit into the idea of evolution ?*

Fossils showed probable human evolution from Australopithecines  $\phi$  in Africa - and from homo heidelbergensis to homo sapiens. From existing evidence there was nothing like us until about forty five thousand years ago - when the skull was big enough for our marvellous brains - despite that brain we still have minds that lead us into conflict when our space is invaded - just like other animals.

*Oh - you do know your human evolution ! I can only see the development of the human spirit within that evolution - I have a faith in the present and visible - not in a holy spirit - there is the good human spirit - as well as the bad - all over the world - we are supremely social beings - most of us do care about, and for, others.*

Quakers challenged the legally enforced norms of the time - we then got together in our own caring communities - but if you ask Friends what they mean by God you will probably get as many different answers as Friends you ask.

*So there's no common understanding then ?*

Most will agree that beyond our conscious minds there is something - an 'inner light' - no description of God can be made with mere words - an early Friend said 'the word killeth'. Every mind is unique and develops its own meaning - easier when you don't have a prescribed creed !

*So the understanding of god varies in each of your minds - but you still use words which do imply a common meaning - but convey little to the general public - and only have meaning in an increasingly isolated, ever smaller, religious context - their very use acts as a barrier to those outside Quakerism.*

Despite what you say, we do aim for what we call 'plain speaking'.

*You use such words in your formal Quaker documents - perhaps not in everyday use.*

Words such as ?

*'Gospel order', 'divine guidance', 'sacred', 'holiness', 'worship', 'discipleship', etc. I see that you even use many of them in your Quaker Quest literature - which is directed at those of us outside your Religious Society.*

We now speak of 'spiritual' more - because spirituality seems to be more to do with attitude and action - and religion is mainly belief. We say 'let your lives speak' - to be practical we have to be rational to be effective - that's our way of being spiritual. Perhaps that's why the human spirit now means more to many than the holy spirit - Quakers can be an open edge to spirituality.

*I'm interested to know more precisely what you mean by the 'human spirit' ?*

I mean things like conscience, care, concern, love, compassion and altruism - they can be seen right across the world regardless of race or religion - and — they do have observable, practical outcomes - they're in everyone - even when they are suppressed by personal and social pressures.

*Of course I agree - I can only think all of those as essentially human - but they could only have come about by evolution. The ants and bees evolved to do more together than they ever could individually - with building nests and their division of labour. Humans evolved to become supremely social beings. Over several million years there was natural selection towards the survival of those who gave to, received from, co-operated, created, shared and fitted in to a community. To be a social being and to survive in those communities one had to 'do as one wanted to be done to' - to be reciprocally altruistic and honour trust. That instinct was passed down in our genes. It's an essential and defining part of being fully human.*

Yes - that's the human spirit.

*However that spirit is only the good side of things - just like other living creatures, we are born, consume, breed, defecate and die - and still have animal instincts for control, survival and consumption - as the advertisers know only too well. Religions cause killing and destruction - I know Quakers may not do it - but others using their various religious labels are certainly still doing it.*

Responding to that - we have our Testimonies - simplicity, truth, equality, environment and peace - they're demanding and developing. We're best known for our peace testimony - what most don't understand is that it's not just about a lack of war - a difficult and distant ideal - it's about a way of living, a process - an attitude of openness, listening, learning and negotiating so that conflicts are resolved - like mediation for example - whether between nations or neighbours.

*But aren't your testimonies just rules ?*

No, in the culture in which we find ourselves, they can only be moral guidance - in practice their level of action will vary between people and the pressures in their lives - but this guidance should be constantly in our minds. That's enough about us - what about your beliefs ?

*I only believe in the human spirit and what is factually evident - like evolution - or as a way of thinking - I also see what happens in my own mind.*

What do you mean by 'a way of thinking' - and happening in your mind ?

*If I allow time and mental space I become more aware of things - I don't know where such thoughts come from - whether they're a subliminally suppressed - open introspection - triggered by others - or just a way of thinking more deeply - or perhaps with freer imagination - my thoughts often come from what I call the human spirit. I do not accept that there is anything supernatural beyond my mind - my thoughts are themselves important. I do respect that god is the label that some give to that freedom and infinity of thought - but for me religious faith labels, with their rituals, just restrict that freedom and get in the way. If there is a god, it's inside, not outside my mind. I need to feel that the infinity of thought is open to me. All that I can know - is what's truly in my mind. No one ever really know what's in another mind.*

Jung, the psychologist, said - "Imagination is evidence of the divine". We all need to make space for that - it's so important to escape from the pace and pressure in our lives to a place of stillness and quiet - like Quaker Meetings. From what you've said you're an unconvinced agnostic rather than a convinced atheist then ?

*No - I'm probably the latter - but I prefer 'non theist' - I cannot believe in something I see no evidence of - what I do see is cultural beliefs in a god - in buildings and rituals - but they all started before scientific and evolutionary knowledge arrived. I know Quakers came in at the start of that. What hasn't changed for thousands, maybe millions of years, is a need for acceptance into a community - originally into a tribe - a need to relate and belong. So I have a social and spiritual dimension in my life - but not a traditionally religious one with its irresponsible belief in an omnipotent god.*

Doesn't that history of religious faith, which is still very much a part of our culture, effect you in any way ?

*No - my instinct is to reject things which are accepted without any observable proof - what I do see - is evidence of the human spirit all around me and that the world around us is changing at an ever increasing rate - survival will depend on adapting to that change - that's why I'm curious about Quakers - you do learn, grow and change - you've even accepted non theists and humanists into your so-called religious society !*

We are not only open to anyone - who wants to join us - but our latest slogan promotes us as 'simple, radical and timeless'. We are open - have no creed - and in our meetings there's no assumption of any prescribed belief.

*I can see sense in all three of those - as long as 'timeless' isn't limited by the religious beliefs of the last two millennia only.*

Our sense of community is really enhanced when we get feelings of a gathered meeting to do something practical - not only that but I see it as a way of linking myself to those around me in that community.

*That openness, flexibility and gathering, which you describe, is good - but the problem will be in holding any organisation together that does not have a 'bottom line' - or even self-interest in the sustaining of a paid hierarchy which the other religious faiths do have. However what appeals to me is that you don't proselytise, like some religions, by preaching, etc. - although that's another problem you have - with so many competing pressures. Although you do manage to get some publicity - despite being small in size.*

Our influence is probably greater than realised. One only has to look at a £5 note to see an image of Elizabeth Fry the Quaker - it's significant that they put Darwin on the £10. We were involved at the start of Oxfam and Amnesty - as well as being solely responsible for starting and administering mediation nationally and the Alternatives to Violence Project - although neither of them mention god or Christ - AVP manuals do refer to 'spirit' - perhaps it means the human spirit.

*I'm reassured - I often hear reference to the findings of ú the Joseph Rowntree Foundation - although not mentioned, I've always taken it as an example of Quaker openness and practical questioning.*

Our openness and diversity are a weakness as well as a strength. However what we do offer is a community where everybody is valued for their own unique potential - as everyone is able to offer their own contribution without having to observe any fixed or credal belief. Ours is a way of achieving a balance between stillness and action, between caring and truth, between inspiration and listening - the point of balance changes as circumstances change - particularly with age. However what are your thoughts about the way our Society of Friends might change more than it has already ?

*I must make clear - I'm not anti religious - I think the bible is a very meaningful mythology - Jesus Christ is a marvellous role model. But the bible was written and collated hundreds of years after Christ's death. I endorse what's called the Christian ethic - but do not see the bible as 'god's word' or any record of historical fact. I have a faith belief in the evident and obvious human spirit. Offering my suggestions - should I be nice and tactful - or painfully honest ?*

We try and use plain and honest speaking - so listening to it will be a good test.

*Stop expressing and presenting god as an external consciousness - god's much closer and in us. Three hundred and fifty years ago Quakers talked about the 'inner light' - you seem to have retreated from that. We now know enough about our planet's origin, life and us, that we no longer need to believe in the will of an external god to explain things. Religions were a part of our social evolution as a necessary vehicle for the human spirit. The history of this social and caring spirit is much older than any belief in a divine holy spirit. We have an increasing knowledge of cause and effect - as truth. In science there is healthy scrutiny, argument and corrections - but always in the direction of truth. There is now more need to be rational and to base our reasoning on factual evidence - not on religious beliefs. Extreme religious beliefs are horrific - as in the bombing of the twin towers - and in other suicide bombings - the terrorists needed a strong belief in an external not an internal god. To survive Quakers will have to let go of the rope that binds them to an external god - otherwise it's a noose of certainty that will strangle them and eventually deprive them of life.*

Yes - but what actual practical changes are you suggesting ?

Focus on the human spirit - not on god - god is a mystic maybe - humanity is fact. I'm told that in your commendably brief 'Advices & Queries' god or Christ are mentioned fifty times in 14 small pages - the human spirit can be expressed without these. There is a caring humanity from which these deeper beliefs come - not where they are specified, reinforced and controlled by a hierarchical authority - as in other religions. The freedom of minds is precious - do not allow religious or political beliefs to limit that freedom. You might call them 'Meetings for Worth-ship' - they're about the worth of the observable human spirit rather than the worship of an unprovable god. Stop retreating behind an ever diminishing defensive ring of Christian wagons - let go of your harness to history - face the future - the Quakers will be needed - if they survive.

But that's all about presentation and identity - one thing we feel strongly about is practical action - 'letting our lives speak' - as we do in our QSA, QAAD and QHA for example. Do you think we ought to change our work and our spirit of social concern - as well as our very different kind of worship ?

*I want to emphasise most strongly - please do not change your worth-ship or anything caring you do - except when conscience and 'discernment' cause you to change - no one focuses on god or Christ in any practical work - I imagine.*

Although they're now getting fewer, Friends certain about their belief in an external biblical God are enabled, with that unquestioning certainty, to be more outspoken and dominant in our Society.

Much certainty is used as a defence against ignorance, lack of enquiry and lack of the openness which can lead to thinking and doubt about many of those certainties.

Many, with such certainty, are refugees from other churches and do bring their cultural baggage about an external God with them - but they still come because they value our stillness, freedom and sincerity of care. How do we rediscover that bravery which we did have - to rebel against the cultural religious norm - and separate ourselves to achieve that difference and identity - which we did have ?

*Yes indeed - how ? But I don't think you've got so far to go - I feel that there's a big difference between individual Quakers spiritual feelings and the identity that the Society feels it has to project to fit into a religious expectation.*

There are few references to God or Christ in our ministries. But we'll have to battle against public expectations - perhaps, at last, we'll even reach the age of reason and enlightenment. We should think more about truth and the 'inner light'. As our Advice & Queries say - "Think it possible that you may be mistaken". We were entreated to live 'adventurously' - but perhaps we have now got so used to living too safely and comfortably within shrinking traditional external God worshipping.

*Where's the Quaker Meeting House ?*

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The thoughts above were often triggered by reading :

Stringer, C. & Andrews, P. (2005) Complete World of Human Evolution

Dennett, D. (1991) Consciousness Explained

Carter, R. (2006) Mapping the Mind

Dawkins, R. (2006) The God Delusion (1989) & The Selfish Gene/Gene Machine

Doidge, N. (2008) The Brain That Changes Itself

Tallis, R. (2008) Kingdom of Infinite Space

Beazley, M. (2008) Where We Are Now - Issues That Shape Our World

Boulton, D. (2005) The Trouble With God

Jaynes, J. (1990) The Origin of Consciousness In the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind

McGilchrist, I. (2009) The Master and his Emissary - The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World