

QUAKERS – still seeking, still learning

What human beings are prepared to believe never ceases to amaze me!

This springs, of course, from our apparently insatiable need to make sense of where we came from, why we are here and where, if anywhere, we might be going.

The legends and myths of the past lend credence to this, all civilisations have invented stories to try to explain the inexplicable.

Most have posited a god or gods of some kind, described variously as creator, king, ruler or benefactor. Sometimes the gods are benevolent and referred to as father, friend (as in many Christian traditions), sometimes they are potentially malevolent and need to be placated in order to look kindly upon human beings and their needs and activities. The notion of placation needing sacrifice is common, for instance the Aztecs sacrificing human beings. The old testament biblical figure of Isaac at least preparing to sacrifice his son and the new testament injunction to Christians to constantly remember the sacrifice of Jesus by eating the equivalent of his body and drinking his blood. To many people in the 21st century these ideas seem at the very least anachronistic. If Quakerism is to have a future it needs to continue to move away from the literal interpretation of these ideas, as indeed it has been doing for 350 years. For many of us the God out there has become the Good within and the exercise of conscience in differentiating between good and evil is a spiritual exercise. An exercise in seeking to know what love and compassion demand of us. We have always been seekers, seekers after Truth we have often said, and so, without negating the conclusions which appear to support others, we need to stay open to new ideas.

Alongside the god concept is the idea of their being an opposite force. This might include the biblical notion of the 'devil' coming to tempt man away from truth, morality and even immortality. Most of us recognise evil when we encounter or hear of it. Our founder, George Fox, saw the ocean of light, but he describes it as overlying a great ocean of darkness. Often I see Quakers as so keen to see "that of God", the good in everyone that they are unrealistic about the dark and difficult aspects of people and of life and at a loss to know how to behave in situations of conflict. True, we have individuals and small groups who are pioneering 'conflict resolution' but if we are to really fulfil our pacifist principles we need to work at this not only on the international stage but in our Local and Area Meetings and in our everyday lives.

The world has always been a place of great uncertainty; natural catastrophe, war, famine and disease. People have reacted in various ways to these threats and realities. Christian hymns and prayers are full of references asking for deliverance, patience, courage and hope. Which of us has not 'prayed' fervently in times of extremis?

While the temperament of some need to believe in the existence of a Supreme Being who will hear and respond to these cries for rescue and help there are an increasing number who reject all religion and all religious ideas because of their incredulity in such ideas or because their prayers have, apparently, not been answered. Quaker honesty has a place here. There are institutions aplenty who are touting certainty - in our increasingly fundamentalist world - but many of us as Quakers are about being open about uncertainty and mystery; reassuring people who doubt the assertions of

past certainties that it is OK , indeed positively good and healthy, to be questioning, exploring and searching.

One aspect of being insecure or lonely is to invent a 'friend'. When my sister was little she had an imaginary friend called 'Gubby'. She talked to him, blamed him for her misdemeanours, challenged him to do things for her and to keep her safe. The adults of course asked silly questions like "Where does Gubby live?" so a home was invented in the form of a rather mysterious blue police box on our local heath. She and we of course knew very well that Gubby was an invention of her imagination, and a mythical rather than a real being. For a while Gubby served a purpose and then vanished – or almost! So, in a broader context, the human race has perhaps to grow out of the childish certainties of the past and accept them as temporary, if previously important, myths and legends. God who lives in the heavenly skies, takes our side in war, cures our diseases, judges us when we die and sends us to heaven or hell may be a continuing reality for some but Quakers need to share with the world that it is fine to leave these notions behind in order to move forward to different, new realities and ideas. I have felt for some time that we are still in the Stone Age of the Spirit!

In order to explore these ideas our Meeting for Worship, perhaps now better thought of as Meeting for Worthship (rather than bowing before a mythical god) , remains a vehicle for exploring truths as we perceive them today. A place to acknowledge that human beings have a spiritual aspect to their nature that is not based on religious ritual or preconceived, authoritatively constituted admonition or enforcement. In silence, aside from the rush – or indeed the loneliness and separateness for some - of the everyday life, we explore and share together the mysteries and the experiences which can inspire us and help us to lead better lives and leave the planet a better place for future generations.

One aspect of many Religions is that of the social and moral control exercised by authoritative figures; it serves to try to ensure the 'good' behaviour of followers but also enables power and authority to be retained and exercised by a few. The hierarchy of some of the older traditions in the Christian church using the Inquisition to eradicate those who challenged their stated beliefs would be an extreme example. The control of behaviour in many fundamentalist groups today demonstrate that this still all too prevalent. Quakers have largely steered clear of the negative aspects of authority, though charismatic figures throughout our history have been held in high regard and their ideas followed. Leadership, of itself, is not a bad thing. Indeed, if Quakerism is to survive we need to examine the current contradiction we face. We seem to be deeply distrustful of those who take a lead – even when we have asked them to! While retaining a healthy scepticism of anyone seeking personal power for the wrong reasons, we need to accept that authority and leadership are necessary ingredients in maintaining an open group. If we mistake readiness to shoulder responsibility for seeking power we may continue to find that individuals will be reluctant to offer, or accept nomination for, the work which needs to be done. Increasingly however Friends are turning down nomination because they perceive that the work they are being asked to do is irrelevant, serving outmoded Quaker structures and procedures rather than concentrating on serving a humanity in great need. We need to encourage Local Quaker Meetings to explore and experiment with differing structures and ways of managing our affairs in order to free us for greater service in the world.

Although we live in a western society which often pushes aside the fact that we will all die sooner or later, the matter of mortality has exercised humanity for a very long time. If we have had a good life, we often do not want it to end: it is this that has driven the construction of some of the greatest monuments of the world – the Taj Mahal, the Terracotta Army, the tombs of the Pharoos to mention only a few. If we have had an awful life we hope for a better afterlife or a more satisfactory reincarnation, so we humans invent all kinds of myths and beliefs. The fact is that we do not know and we have to live with uncertainty in this as in so many things. For many Quakers this means trying to do good here and now for its own sake not to earn any future reward.

So, the future of Quakers in Britain rests on our being a group of people who accept the uncertainty and mystery of our lives, who gather together to explore our experiences, to shine a light on them in order to seek the truth by which to live. We are sceptical about externally imposed Religious Beliefs and interested in exploring the spiritual dimensions which seem to be an essential part of our human nature. We are inspired by some of the great Prophets of the past, we understand some of the legends and myths of the world and why they came about, but we are interested in being prophets and living fully in our own time. We do not strive to convert people to a particular way of thinking or behaving but welcome them to join with us in exploring creative, positive living on a finite planet. We need to speak to people in straightforward, honest language; even when we are seeking to express difficult, tenuous or provisional ideas and encourage them to understand that we are mostly on a journey not stating an arrival! That is why this essay is not full of academic references and quotations; we must try to speak from our hearts and our heads not from second hand words. We can and should draw on the richness of our Quaker and Christian history and heritage but unless we are fully on the pilgrimage for our own age, facing an unknowable future with courage and going where love takes us we will not survive.