THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

THEISM AND NONTHEISM: LANGUAGE AND TEXT

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Aims:
To discuss:
- ❖ **Whether the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is *going forward in discomfort.***
- ❖ **Ways of thinking about language, texts and narrative which may offer fresh approaches to the theism-nontheism dichotomy.**

Abbreviations
References
Note: All the images in this essay are available on the Web.

Part 1: Crisis (*Turning Point; Texts; Continuous Revolution*; *Numbers*)

Crisis: Turning point, esp. of disease; time of danger or suspense in politics, commerce, &c [Greek κρίσις – decision] (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*).

Turning Point

The Religious Society of Friends in Britain {RSOFB} has always been in crisis, because its public statements and its Members' beliefs and principles are at odds with the ways of the world. But the nature and management of the crises vary over time, and this essay is concerned with a particular aspect of the current crisis, because if that is not well managed the future of the Society might be one of decline.

The following extract from a Report of Quaker Life Central Committee {QLCC} to Meeting for Sufferings {MFS} describes three, inter-related, aspects of the current crisis, in terms of membership, theology and organisation:

> 1. For the first time since the early days of the Quaker movement convinced Friends with no previous Quaker background now greatly outnumber those raised by Quaker parents and that therefore assumptions about obtaining understanding of our peculiar ways of being and doing through osmosis can no longer be made.

> 2. Whereas a generation ago the largest theological divide among us was expressed as between the Christ-centred and the universalist, it now appears to be between those whose experience is of a transcendent God and nontheists, for whom 'God' is a metaphor for entirely human experience.

> 3. A significant number of meetings, local and area, are experiencing considerable difficulty in filling key posts and may have had to lower their expectations of what understanding of our traditions and practices can be expected of clerks, elders and overseers, trustees and treasurers or, alternatively are having to reappoint those who are tired and jaded to these posts. The death of seasoned Friends results not only in personal loss but also in the diminishment of the pool of Quaker understanding (2008).

The RSOFB is, then, at a turning point, in suspense, facing the dangers of failing to maintain the structures and traditions which have enabled it to survive for 350 years, of falling into chaos, of losing the cohesion of shared beliefs. So the question is whether or not it is making the right decisions to deal with these problems and secure its future. My focus is on QLCC's second point, the present "theological divide" between "those whose experience is of a transcendent God and nontheists, for whom 'God' is a metaphor for entirely human experience." For convenience and brevity I call the first group 'theists.'

Coping with crises, though vital to the welfare of the organisation, is uncomfortable, as it means abandoning previously comfortable, but now moribund or outdated thinking and structures, a process described by Margaret Amor in MFS in 2008:

Only when we go forward in discomfort can we hope to find our feet in a troubled world (quoted in *A framework for action, 2009-2014:* 3).

Cristiano Banti's (1857) painting dramatises the theological crisis arising from Galileo's astronomical observations. His conclusions invalidated the Ptolemaic universe and thus the supposed location of God. The theological crisis for the RSOFB concerns not the location but the very existence of God as an objective reality.

<Cristiano Banti, Galileo Before the Roman Inquisition, 1857>

Texts

The reference to Galileo and the Banti painting introduces ways of thinking about language and texts which may facilitate an approach to the theological divide. This relates to three inter-related ideas, which are here summarised but which provide themes throughout the essay.

- ❖ European culture consists of a vast mesh of mutually referring 'texts,' that is, images, writings, sculptures, operas, equations, buildings – every kind of artefact and product. Banti's painting refers to Galileo's personal history, to his science, to the Church.
- ❖ Texts invite symbolic interpretations: the painting dramatises the conflict between the original thinker and the repressive regime, or the God-inspired seeker after truth and the thought-police thwarting God's will.
- ❖ Language always already carries transcendent meanings, because it is a symbolic system referring not directly to reality but to ideas.

The history and literature of Judaeo-Christianity consist of a vast mesh of mutually referring and mutually reliant texts, largely those given canonical status in the first few centuries after the Crucifixion.

A fascinating feature of the Synoptic Gospels is how the narratives entwine their accounts of his life and ministry with the texts of the Old Testament prophets. He is programmed by the these, his story following the trajectory they have determined. For example, there is a moment in Luke when he actually consults a text

> He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Rolling up the scroll he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (IV, 16-21).

Quakers have their own vast mesh of mutually referring texts, not least in the form of *Quaker Faith and Practice* {QFP}(1995-2008), which consists partly of quotations, intended, individually and collectively, to give guidance, comfort and support. This compilation is periodically updated in the light of new ideas and insights and revisions of procedures. As an example, Chapter 16, *Quaker marriage procedure*, is being revised in the light of the 2009 Yearly Meeting {YM} decision to celebrate same-sex marriage in Local Meetings.

Continuous Revolution

To discuss how an organisation goes forward in discomfort a convenient model is needed, and an authority hardly in accord with Quaker thinking provides one.

In a 1958 text, Mao Zedong criticized Stalin and the USSR Communist Party for treating as permanent the institutions used for the post-1917 economic and social transformations. He urged that the measures taken were merely the first steps towards socialism and pointed out that the current management was derived from capitalist models, while the dialectical process should be applied to socialist systems as well. He therefore proposed the necessity for 'continuous revolution,' to ensure progress towards the realisation of a truly socialist state. Without this, movement would be backwards not forwards. So the role of the Communist Party was not to form an authoritarian bureaucracy but to ensure dynamic change.

Inter-relating this text with Banti's painting and its symbolism, the image of Mao can be see as the wise, fatherly Mao raising his hand in a gesture resembling a Papal blessing. This contrasts with the gesture of the Inquisitor, pointing downwards, perhaps to a Bible text as he demands Galileo's acceptance of its ultimate authority.

The challenge of crisis is both intellectual-spiritual and organisational, as seen in the QLCC's three aspects of the present crisis. How does an institution reshape its thinking-believing and its structures to keep abreast of internal and external changes?

Mao's analysis assumes a future political condition which will be the realisation of an ideology via an ever-evolving structure, with that process itself requiring constant correction. Whether it also involves updating of the ideology is not so clear: probably not, since, like Qaukers, it has foundational texts, laying down the 'creeds' of Dialectical Materialism and Marxist-Leninism.

The theological crisis in the RSOFB suggests that a number of Friends no longer regards the foundational texts, Christian or Quaker, as compelling allegiance. That proportion is discussed in David Rush's 'Facts and Figures: Do Quakers Believe in God, and if they Do, What sort of God?' (in Boulton [Ed], 2006).

Numbers

Rush considers several surveys of Quaker belief and his conclusions certainly support QLCC's observation about the 'theological divide' between theists and nontheists:

> When asked, the majority of British Quakers will assent to believing in God. This is somewhat less common among a sample of American Quakers from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, part of the unprogrammed tradition of Quaker worship, but the question asked was not the same as in the British surveys. At least a quarter of the British Quakers either say they do not believe in God, or that they don't know. Among PYM Quakers only 44% believed in a traditional God, one who responds to prayer (106).

A divide between one quarter and three quarters is sufficiently stark to merit the label 'crisis,' but Rush continues:

Many Quakers who say they believe in God do not mean this in a traditional way. A reasonable conclusion is that when many Friends talk about God, they frequently mean something different from the traditional and generally understood meanings of the term. Only a minority seem to believe that God is all-powerful, available for a personal relationship, or will directly respond to supplicant prayer (106).

Rush goes on to observe, however, that:

One very important gap in knowledge concerns what Quakers means when they speak of God, quite apart from the question of belief. This writer senses that the theist/non-theist divide is far more fluid than we have supposed (106).

Rush's eventual contention is discussed in Part 3. Meantime the history of the RSOFB in relation to the wider theological situation is discussed.

Endnote

Jekuthiel Sofer (1678), emulation of the 1675 Decalogue at Amsterdam Esnoga synagogue.

An influential Judaeo-Christian text: the 10 Commandments.

Part 2: History (*Early History and Quietism; The 1895 Manchester Conference; The Poverty Line; The Sea of Faith; Feminism; A framework for action; RECAST; Global Crisis; We are but witnesses*)

Early History and Quietism

The prime question about the current theological crisis in the RSOFB, whatever the numbers of nontheists, is how it came about. Is it recent or longstanding?

The crises of early Quaker history, involving the persecution and imprisonment of its earliest Meetings and Ministers, including George Fox, are evident enough. Such vicissitudes abated at the end of the 17th Century and what followed is described by A. Neave Brayshaw (1969), who stresses the 'quietism':

> The effect of this quietism was a binding together of Friends in a rigid uniformity, emphasizing the separation that had from the first existed between them and world. From other Dissenters they were…separated as much as they were from the Anglican Church, and now their secluded life found few interests beyond the management of their businesses and homes, the organisation of their religious body and the calls of philanthropy (179).

This suggests that they had successfully abolished crises, but the biographies of individual Friends and Quaker families indicate that some, at least, were active in the world and participating in pioneer roles in political, economic and social contexts.

The Tukes of York are a good example: William Tuke encouraged his son to train as a doctor and founded the Retreat, still a creative and progressive centre for the treatment of mental illness. Having founded a chocolate factory as an adjunct to their grocery business, the Tukes also founded the Mount and Bootham Schools and the Friends Provident Institution. They were behind the campaign to have William Wilberforce elected MP for the county of York in 1807, and we should also, in relation to the Abolition of the Slave Trade, remember the vital contribution of the Quaker Thomas Clarkson.

The above paragraph draws on John Punshon's (1986) *Portrait in Grey*. He also cites influential Friends in other spheres than business:

> The success of so many Friends in the world outside their little Society was having long term effects. John Fothergill was part of what we might call the scientific establishment of his day, which included a number of other eminent Friends, many of whom were also fellows of the Royal Society. Jeremiah Dixon, F.R.S., is immortal. He was one half of the surveying team which drew the Mason Dixon line which settled the boundary between Maryland and Pennsylvania. South of this line you are in Dixie. George Graham, F.R.S., made important contributions to the equipment at Greenwich Observatory.
> In chemistry, a man of the next generation made a lasting contribution to scientific progress. John Dalton, a highly gifted child and autodidact, became Professor of Mathematics in 1793, when he was 27 (113).

Thus, as Punshon shows:

> Through science, medicine, trader and banking, Friends were achieving eminence and enjoying stimulating, professional lives outside the Society (147).

Such Friends were initiating and contributing to the social, economic and material turning points and moments of decision of the century

Although individual Friends and families and the majority of Quakers maintained their separation from the rest of world, and their adherence to the faith of the founders and forebears. Change on a larger scale is usually taken to originate in:

The 1895 Manchester Conference

This was the crucial event in recent Quaker history. As Brayshaw explains:

> Questions that were stirring in the minds of both younger and older members were definitely faced, the message of Quakerism to its own day, the attitude of the Society to modern thought, the effective presentation of spiritual truth (1953: 314).

> The Conference was the visible sign of a turning-point in the life of English Quakerism. From many minds a cloud was lifted, and if as yet there was but little building up, the necessary work of clearing the ground had begun (315).

Without the decisions taken then the Society might not have survived or would have remained a withdrawn and ineffective Christian sect. Brayshaw continues:

> To the infinite relief of many, they heard Friends, held in honour for their Christian character, openly declare that there was no need to "accept the Hebrew chronology or the Hebrew cosmogony as a necessary part of an all-rounded and infallible word of God," that modern thought, far from being an evil, was largely a blessing, that Friends would do well to accept the general principle of evolution, and that the doctrine of the total depravity of the human soul was no part of Quakerism. They heard it said that Friends had a unique opportunity and, therefore, unique responsibility, and that they must regard as intolerable all social conditions that went far toward preventing the true development of character and the exercise of responsibility (314-5).

The Poverty Line

In the spirit of the last sentence Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954), inspired by the work of Charles Booth in London, launched a massive research project into conditions among the poor of York. His inspectors visited over 11,500 working class families, and the findings were published in his book, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1901).
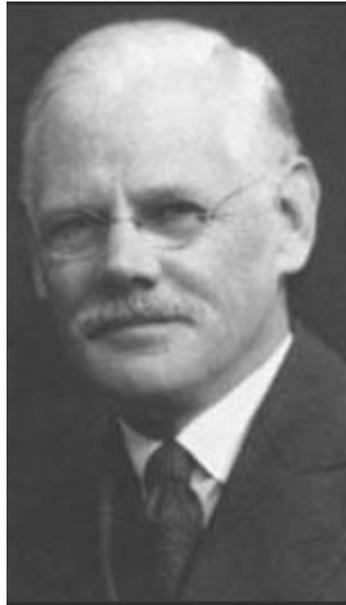
This text had tremendous impact, as it demonstrated that poverty was not for the most part the fault of the poor themselves. Rowntree calculated that 28% of the total population of York lived below the poverty line that he himself drew, and later revised, which has itself been an influential text. There has been a continuing concern for the plight of the poor, oppressed and exploited in the Society ever since.

The Sea of Faith

The Society has also striven since then to keep abreast of scientific discoveries, educational and sociological research, and the challenges of theology and religious thinking. John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), for example, rejected the concept of a God 'out there,' redefining God as the ground of all being, which is Love, offering a pioneering nontheist text over 45 years ago.

Robinson, a New Testament scholar, also criticised his exegetical colleagues for failing to question assumptions and engage in original research. One result has been a plethora of publications about the life and work of Jesus. Examples are the recent *Who On Earth Was Jesus? The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History* (2008), by a well-known nontheist Friend, David Boulton, and James D. Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty* (2006), which traces Jesus's possible familial origins and legacy.

Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* television broadcasts and accompanying book (1985) launched a nontheist network, with the same title, which attracted many Quakers. The quartered section of the movement's logo presumably depicts the geographical setting of Matthew Arnold's (1862) 'Dover Beach,' which provided the title for series, book and network. Perhaps the major part of the image symbolises the ocean of possibilities made possible by the abandonment of an external God.

Sea of Faith Network: "Exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation..."
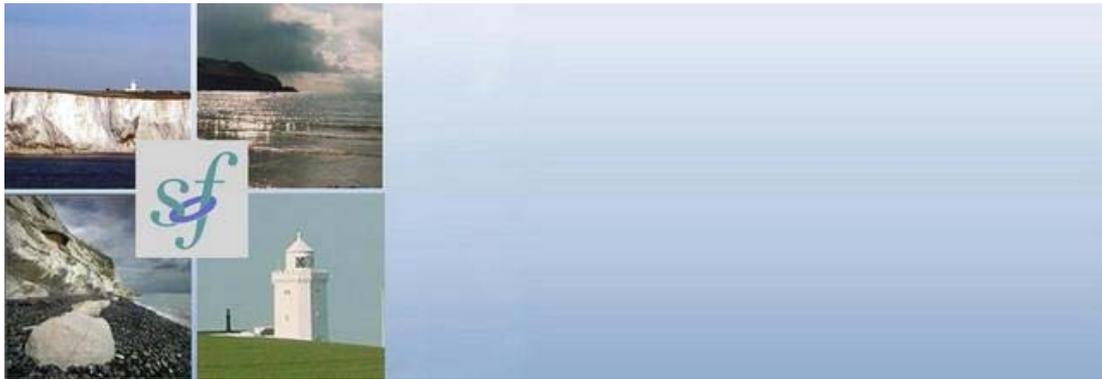
Feminism

Another major factor in theological change stemmed from the feminist movement. Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1968) analysed the patriarchal, anti-female, nature of traditional Judaic and Christian texts. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983) provided the scholarly basis for feminist theology.

Many women in the Christian churches, including Quakers, were seeking not a nontheist solution to their oppression but reinterpretations of traditional Christian theology and organisations to provide a theist system in which women were validated.

Quakers had always been proud that sexual discrimination in the RSOFB was less marked than in other churches, pointing to the vital role of Margaret Fell, the inclusion of women in the Valiant Sixty, the appointment of women as both elders and overseers, and to key roles in local and national bodies. Nonetheless Friends of both sexes nonetheless found that they needed to re-examine their assumptions about the roles and position of women in Christian history and contemporary religious contexts, including the RSOFB. Friends were highly sympathetic to and supportive of the Movement for the Ordination of Women in the Church of England.

Other women sought spiritual homes outside the traditional churches, some becoming pagan and replacing the male God with a Goddess or goddesses. Some Quaker women, too, combined their membership of the RSOFB with paganism.

The experience of a young woman adapting to the new theological climate and adopting new ways of living and expressing her spirituality is exemplified by Alice, who, at age 20, replaced her given names with 'Morning Star':

> She refers to "godde", clearly inclusive of God and Goddess, and states that she has become "more comfortable with" Goddess language (Nesbitt, 2001: 136).

Feminist reinterpretations of traditional belief systems were naturally reflected in a continuing outpouring of texts of all kinds, not least in the visual arts, such as:

[Cynthia Mailman, *Self-Portrait as God*, 1977]

A Framework for Action

Looking to the immediate future, the RSOFB, as if attempting to engage in continuous revolution, used a questionnaire with Friends in Area and Local Meetings to determine priorities for the next quinquennium. The result, a booklet, *A framework for action, 2009-2014: Together in worship and witness* (2008) {*A framework*} is now examined interrogated to determine whether it prescribes progress with discomfort.

The cover-image might have been better chosen, since it can be taken as implying that the RSOFB is at the end of its day:

In line with the principles of continuous revolution, the writers enjoin:

> The mode of Friends' working throughout Britain requires a change of mindset and some new competences to make us fit for purpose (4).

The writers address a perceived crisis in working methods:

> This is a challenge for every part of the Quaker community – individual Friends in various worshipping groups, those staff and committees who provide support from Friends House, those who give training and education, in particular Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, and those who write and speak about their faith and values (8).

Annique Seddon's preamble also implies that the RSOFB should revise its 'ideology':

> The Religious Society of Friends values its roots and traditions.
> One of its most radical traditions is to explore the world, as it changes, in the light of the evolving testimony of Friends (2).

This suggests that Friends' explorations of the world would be conditioned by this 'evolving testimony': they would conduct these exercises from an established theological position, itself open to revision. Presumably it would be the exploration of the world that determined the evolution of this 'testimony.' The latter would be amended in the light of insights gained from these explorations.

A framework repeats the word 'faith' ten times, the first in the opening sentence of the Introduction:

> The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain is a small church with a radical history, expressing a faith through worship and action (3).

'A faith' is followed by seven uses of 'our faith' and 'their faith' (meaning 'our' or Quaker faith), but it is difficult to know what this 'faith' might be, not least because it is not a word commonly used in Quaker literature. It seems out of place, even obtrusive, as if the writers were unconsciously, or even consciously, aware of the theist-nontheist divide and were trying either to reinforce the theist position with a positive phrase or to invite Friends to imbue it with the meaning of their choice.

The use of 'our faith' even undermines the idea of something shared, as in the first aim of Priority (a), *Strengthening the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves*:

> …the common spiritual base from which action can spring, learning from those who went before, bringing together our prayer life and our practical life and strengthening our ability to express our faith and hear that of others (8).

The 'our' suggests an individual code of beliefs rather than a collectivity. Further, it is not clear how this relates to the concept of 'the common spiritual base,' which is not explained.

'Roots' and 'rooted' are used seven times, which both weakens all the uses and confuses the reader, because the metaphor shifts as it goes, as in these examples:

> The Religious Society of Friends values its roots and traditions.
>
> The roots of Friends' witness are in the openings that the Spirit offers each of us and what we reach together (2).
>
> It [*A framework*] builds on the complex lives and experience of Quakers over 350 years, drawing on our Christian roots (3).
>
> Strengthening the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves (6).
>
> We wish the renewed emphasis on speaking our truth and on outreach work…to continue locally and nationally, grounded in stronger spiritual roots in our meetings and members (11).

Are the Society's 'roots' the same as 'our Christian roots'? What exactly are 'spiritual roots,' and how do they relate to 'our Christian roots' and the Society's 'roots'? In what ways is sustainability 'rooted' in Quaker testimony? Presumably through the testimony to simple living.

This raises another problem, in that these 'priorities' are not the same as, though they are related to, the Quaker testimonies which have come to the fore in Quaker literature lately and which are referred to in the Introduction, and in Priority (f), *Crime, community and justice*:

> It [*A framework*] reflects in particular our testimonies to truth and integrity, equality, peace and simplicity (3).
>
> The basis for all this work is our belief in that of God in everyone, and our testimonies to equality and peace (19).

The document uses the phrase 'that of God' four times, the first time echoing traditional Quaker usages:

> We seek to nurture and challenge that of God within, individually and together. If we are open to God, we can be open to that of God in everyone and so our work may bear witness to God in love, truth and hope (2).

Several times in his *Journal* George Fox uses the phrase 'that of God in everyone' or 'that of God in every man,' but the best known instance is in his injunction:

> Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one, whereby in them ye may be a blessing and make the witness of God in them to bless you (1656).

There is a tendency, as in Geoffrey Hubbard's *Quaker by Convincement* (1976: 11), to stop the quotation after 'every one.' This not only distorts the text but also its full meaning, suppressing the possible reciprocity of Friend and stranger.

This passage is actually alluded to in *A framework*, without attribution:

> We are called upon to be patterns and examples, taking responsibility for our individual and corporate environmental impacts, and engaging in local, national and international politics (15).

If omitting the last part of Fox's injunction is a comparatively minor textual travesty, the above is a flagrant misuse of his text. It comes in Priority (d), *Sustainability*, which was far from the context of the original exhortation. Fox was not advising early Friends to take responsibility for their individual or corporate environmental impact, or to engage in local, national and international politics.

A framework exhorts Quakers to be more active in promoting 'our faith' and values. Conversely, Fox's instruction is about inter-personal encounters, not public engagements. Indeed, 'answering that of God' suggests that Friends rather wait for and respond to communications, verbal and non-verbal.

Further, with the quotation restored, and bearing in mind that it is not about sustainability and politics, it is possible to question the wish of the writers of *A framework* that Quakers should broadcast their beliefs and values. In Priority (b), *Speaking out in the world*, they write:

> We wish to see meetings and individuals confidently expressing their Quaker faith and values wherever opportunities arise, whether by talking in the bus queue, by their example as neighbours or work colleagues, by taking up issues with the media or by uniting with others (11).

Fox's proposal is not that we should button-hole people in the bus-queue or take up issues with the media but that our 'carriage and life may preach…' thus invoking that of God in others and receiving their blessing. However, as often with imprecise documents, there is later a flat refutation of the writers' wishes. On page 17 (unnumbered) an American Friend, David Yount, reminds us:

> To this day Friends everywhere disdain pressing their faith on others, preferring them to be led by the Spirit (from *The Friend*, 02 11 07).

There are language problems, too. First, the register is uncertain. Traditional Quaker vocabulary reinforces the idea of continuity with the past: 'traditions,' 'history,' 'roots,' 'concerns,' 'speaking our truth,' 'testimony' and 'witness.'

Alongside these there are jarring current usages which suggest the mission-statement of a business: 'strategic focus,' 'allocating resources,' 'use of resources.' 'ineffective duplication.' 'competences,' 'fit for purpose,' 'networking,' 'hub for information,' 'facilitating that access' (4), 'good governance,' 'testing value for money' (5).

The second language problem relates to the theist-nontheist divide. Some phraseology is apparently theistic, 'God' being perceived as external, judging by 'open to God' and 'bear witness to God' (2). But 'God within' and the four uses of 'that of God' are easier to treat metaphorically, to 'translate' into an abstract quality, such as 'goodness.' Thus, 'God' is not obtrusive, and it is even possible that the 'our faith' usages are intended as a means of avoiding the word.

The result, is, however, another layer of uncertainty, not least because the document does not overtly tackle the theist-nontheist issue. But since that did not figure in the questionnaire, it is not surprising that no reference is made in the resulting document.

There have been criticisms of this text. It is pretty but it also looks more like primary school teaching material than a briefing for action. There were objections to the cost of publication, given how little writing there is amidst the images and generous spacing (see page 15). Perhaps the space is the text.

The authorship of the document is also problematic, since the 'we' who wish Friends to take specified actions, and who adopt a somewhat head-teacherly tone, are never named: there is not even an attribution to a Friends House department or a Central Committee, though it may be that the final words on the back cover, the address of the Recording Clerk's Office indicates the originating agency.

Amusingly, across the foot of pages 2 and 3 is the image of a twilit coastal scene. Bearing in mind that texts refer to each other, this recalls Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach,* the source for Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* book, thus unintentionally referring the most influential nontheist text.

I have been hard on this attractive but really rather empty publication, querying its authority, suggesting that its use of authorities is dubious, criticising its use of other texts, and regretting its failure to address the 'theological divide,' while apparently endorsing the theism which is still the official stance of the RSOFB. Sadly, I do not see it as providing much of an action plan for the next five years, as where there is text it consists largely of pious but imprecise and insecurely based exhortations.

Some passages in QFP (2009) indicate awareness amongst British Quakers, before Robinson and Cupitt, of the shift of consciousness which so changed the culture around and within the RSOFB. For example, Harold Loukes (1955) writes:

> We live in a rationalist society that has shed its security of dogmas it found it could not accept, and now finds itself afraid of its own freedom. Some look for an external authority, as they did of old; but in this situation there are many who cannot just go backwards. They ask for an authority they can accept without the loss of their own integrity: they ask to be talked to in a language they can understand…With these people our point of departure is not a mighty proclamation of Truth, but the humble invitation to sit down together and share what we have found…(28.08).

After the history and a review *A framework,* I now discuss recent re-organisation within the RSOFB, and two crises.

The RSOFB has followed the principle of continuous revolution at least in examining its organisation. Unlike the Soviet Communist Party it has not been burdened with a bureaucracy enforcing orthodox doctrines. Friends House staff has, until recently anyway, been the servants, not the masters, of the committees gathered to formulate policies and prescribe action in the light of Quaker traditions and current concerns.

Sustainability

Strengthening local communities

Crime, community and justice

Using our resources well

RECAST

The most recent organisational upheaval in the recent history of the RSOFB, involving changes in nomenclature and structure was recommended by the Working Group on Representation, Communication and Accountability in our Structures {RECAST} and agreed at Yearly Meeting {YM}, 2005. These changes were intended to simplify the organisation locally by reduction of Meetings to three kinds, Local, Area and General, and centrally by devolving management from the 150-200 strong MFS to a group of 15 BYM Trustees.

At the 2007 YM the Recording Clerk, Elsa Dicks, reflected on the pace of change:

> As Quakers we have always valued good governance; that is what mutual accountability and gospel order are all about. And governance has dominated our affairs in the last 10 years. I've worked on a relay of reviews, the Memorandum Group on Constitutional Review, the Corporate Witness Organisation Group, Local and Regional Groupings Working Party, the Representative Councils Review and RECAST. Then Quaker Stewardship Committee and the Yearly Meeting *Quaker faith & practice* Drafting Group. They have all played a vital part in continuing what George Fox started, ensuring that our structures support our spiritual lives. I welcome our positive approach to stewardship, the flexibility of the new chapters four and five, I'm sure we'll continue to change and adapt to our changing context, though perhaps we could do with fewer reviews in future, and I do hope that we will hold on to RECAST's vision of simple flexible structures.

She hints, however, at the lack of attention being paid during her decade as Recording Clerk to the three points later raised in the QLCC Report, not least the theological:

> As a people we are very good at tasks; seeing a need and doing something about it. But we can get too task-focused and inward-looking, so busy that we forget the bigger picture, neglect our wider membership, our responsibility for one another and even the fundamentals of our faith.

BYM went forward in some discomfort from the RECAST revisions, but the accompanying theological discomfort was not addressed.

Meanwhile, the RSOFB was also orientating itself towards an external crisis, that of climate change, and the possible effects of human activity upon it.

Global Crisis

Friend Laurie Michaelis, who is qualified by scientific and employmental experience, has issued texts urging Quakers to set an example and commit themselves to reducing their environmental impact. An example is his presentation to a 2007 Meeting for Sufferings {MFS}, reporting on the flurry of Quakerly activity in 2007, in which:

> …a constellation of Quaker groups coming together to explore environmental issues, especially our response to climate change. A Quaker Green Action conference in January included representatives of…central committees and departments, Quaker educational centres and listed informal groups.

> Climate change was the focus of the Friendly Science Conference and Quakers in Business this year. In September QPSW hosted a 'Conversation' on Quakers and the Environment. This involved representatives from Quaker service agencies, informal groups and Yearly Meetings in Canada, the US and Europe. Our Quaker family is forging links and beginning to share responses, concerns, insights and resources.

Laurie Michaelis is also Co-Coordinator of the Living Witness Project, which:

> …aims to support the development of Quaker corporate witness to sustainable living and explore ways of taking it to the wider community in Britain and elsewhere.

Quakers have also, following their pacifist principles, been active in many campaigns and movements concerned with peace and disarmament: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Amnesty; the Fair Trade Movement; Liberty; the Campaign Against the Arms Trade; Trident Ploughshares.

We Are But Witnesses

At the same time as the RSOFB was responding to the climate change crisis and moving on from the RECAST crisis, another potential, internal crisis, was being discussed at MFS: the possibility of celebrating same-sex marriages in Meetings, though recognising that these could not be legally registered. A Minute was recorded in November, 2008, beginning with a Report received from a Working Group which had organised a conference on this subject at Woodbrooke. This conference had:

> …brought together Friends with different interests in the subject. This brought to the surface both the frustration of those eager for change and the discomfort some Friends feel with equal status being given to same sex and opposite sex partnerships. It is evident that levels of experience and the practice of celebrating committed partnerships of different kinds vary considerably around the Yearly Meeting. Some Area Meetings have as yet no experience of celebrating same sex partnerships. The working group's report recommends that the time has come for our Yearly Meeting to move forward on this issue.

The Minute recorded what was to become the crux of the matter, the Quaker Testimony to Equality:

> The testimony to equality is central to our Quaker experience and is, for us, a theological imperative. Yet, despite this testimony, work remains to be done to raise awareness throughout the Yearly Meeting of the equality issues surrounding same-sex partnerships and their celebration among Friends. Before it would be appropriate to propose any legislative change, we need to establish common practice for such celebrations throughout the Yearly Meeting.

The Minute was forwarded to the YM Agenda Committee and scheduled for discussion at YM, 2009. Some Friends were uneasy at both the speed with which the issue was being dealt with and some with the whole idea of same-sex marriage.

Others could accept the celebration of same-sex unions but objected to the use of the word 'marriage.' However, the YM, 2009, Epistle reads in part:

> We have worked with openness and courage to discern the next stages in the recognition of same sex committed relationships, following the extensive consultations that have taken place over the past three years. Over many years attitudes within our yearly meeting have developed and shifted radically. We are now resolved to make significant alterations to our procedures, whilst remaining sensitive to those who would like us to move at a different pace.
>
> Hearing personal accounts of a variety of patterns of relationships has greatly helped our discernment. We have heard moving examples of experiences of meetings for worship to celebrate committed relationships. We are led to enable same sex marriages in a meeting for worship under the care of a meeting as we currently do for opposite sex marriages. We see this as embarking on a new phase of our life together. Registering officers are not, however, asked to step outside the law at this time. Revisions to Quaker faith & practice will be prepared. We are led to uphold this affirmation to the testimonies to truth and equality. Marriage is God's work and we are the witnesses.

The decision was made, but it was, and continues to be, controversial, as noted in a MFS Minute of October, 2009:

> We recognise the distress felt by some Friends over the Yearly Meeting decision and are glad that Quaker Life Representative Council will be considering this matter at their next meeting.

This matter has, then, constituted a crisis, but the Minutes and Epistle claim theological bases in the Testimony to Equality and in a pronouncement by George Fox. I want to question both.

The Testimony to Equality springs from Friends' belief in spiritual equality, that no one human being is more valuable spiritually than another. At the same time Quakers have cherished sexual equality (already noted: page 10, **Feminism**).

The logic appears to be that the concepts of spiritual equality and sexual equality imply that same-sex unions and heterosexual unions have equal spiritual validity.

QFP says nothing about spiritual equality, and its texts on 'spiritual growth' could be taken to run against this concept. Spiritual growth and development are several times stated to be possible, for example in 10.15:

> We know that the spiritual growth of the meeting is inextricably linked to the growth of its life as a community, and that spiritual development is a continuous process for both older as well as younger members of a meeting.

The implication is that some Friends are further advanced in spiritual development than others, which suggests inequalities in spiritual terms.

More important, spiritual equality does not mean that all kinds of relationships, especially sexual ones, are necessarily spiritually equal. Individuals may be spiritually equal, but that does not mean that their relationships are. I am not arguing that heterosexual unions are spiritually superior to homosexual ones: I am suggesting that 'spiritual equality' is not a viable justification for regarding the two kinds as spiritually equal. In other words, I consider that the texts which might be thought relevant have been inappropriately interpreted, that meanings have been falsely derived. The misappropriation of texts observed in *A framework* comes to mind (pages 13 and 14 above).

Following YM 2009 a pamphlet was published called *We are but witnesses*: *Marriage equality and the decision of Britain Yearly Meeting to recognise same sex marriages* (2009). This and the last sentence quoted above from the YM Epistle, 2009, are themselves quotations from that powerful authority, George Fox. His pronouncement (published 1698) is also quoted in QFP:

> For the right joining in marriage is the work of the Lord only, and not the priests' or magistrates'; for it is God's ordinance and not man's; and therefore Friends cannot consent that they should join them together: for we marry none; it is the Lord's work and we are but witnesses (16.01).

The difficulty here is that Fox was not considering same-sex marriages, so that taking his text to include these is also dubious. Again, I am not suggesting that Friends should not celebrate same-sex marriages or campaign to have them legally registered: I am proposing that Fox's text cannot justifiably be used as authority for doing so.

In regard to the objection raised by many Friends to the use of the text 'marriage,' I must, however, argue against the objectors.

Words change their meanings over time. We do not argue now that the word 'nice' should mean 'precise' or 'exact.' We have forgotten that the word 'gay' in 19th Century colloquial usage did not refer to homosexuals but to sexually active women. 'Punk,' descriptive of persons who not long ago adopted a particular style of dress and of dyed hair, in Shakespeare's day meant 'homosexual.' 'Gothic' previously referred to a language, an ethnic group, a style of architecture and a literary genre: not to someone wearing black clothing and cosmetics. So the past meaning of 'marriage' is not sacrosanct, and indeed the dictionaries are not all strict about its application to heterosexual unions.

Like any other individual or group, Friends are free to apply the word as they wish, much as they have applied such words and terms as 'leading,' 'gospel order,' 'meeting for sufferings,' 'that name would not have occurred to me.' Over time the word will probably be accepted without question as applicable to both kinds of union, facilitated by the fact that the text of the promises made by two Friends marrying need very little amendment to be appropriate, or by the provision of two versions.

Having considered some recent crises, Part 3 reviews some 20th Century and older texts to bring forward the 'theological divide' observed by QLCC.

Endnote
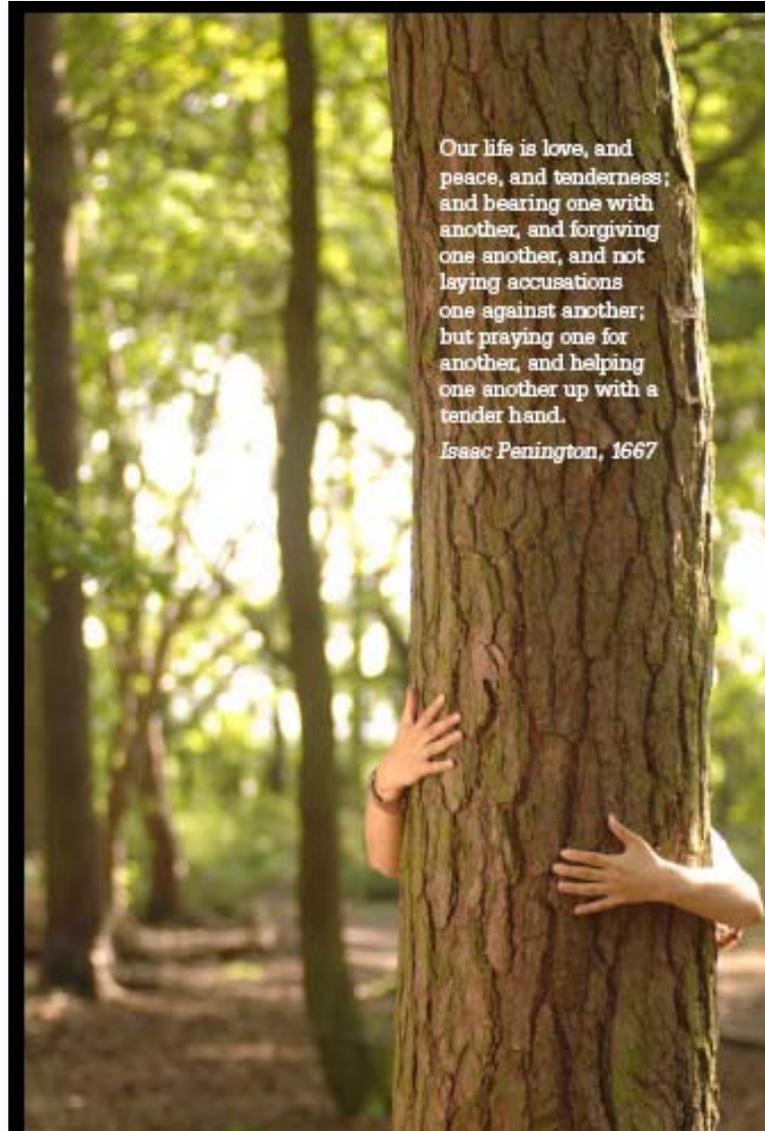
This image from *A framework* may be appropriate to the *Sustainability* section, but the common allusions the media to 'tree-huggers' as harmless eccentrics are not likely to help promote the serious concern about the environment and the public witness the writers wish to encourage.

Part 3 Evidence (*Faith and Practice; Theological Divide; Atheists, Agnostics and Humanists; Nontheism and A Theology for Our Time*)

Faith and Practice

The first text to refer to in discussing contemporary theist and nontheist texts is QFP, and here the evidence for their recognition is twofold. First, there are no overtly nontheist quotations. Its position is predominantly theist and Christological, as would be expected in texts drawn from the past, collected by an officially theist organisation:

> …I had been enabled through unutterable mercy to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour; now I saw something of His unspeakable preciousness as 'the Good Shepherd' and 'Counsellor' of His people, 'always unto the end of the world' (Joseph Bevan Braithwaite, QFP 18.01).

One of the fascinations of QFP is that Friends' testimonies quoted is almost always express inner awareness of God or Christ. Although theist writers probably perceived their experience as having an external source, nontheist readers may interpret such testimonies metaphorically. The writers can be recognised as expressing in contemporary conventions and concepts experiences which may occur today, without need to refer to an external source:

> In the beginning of the year 1655, I was at the plough in the east parts of Yorkshire in Old England, near the place where my outward being was; and, as I walked after the plough, I was filled with the love and presence of the living God, which did ravish my heart when I felt it, for it did increase and abound in me like a living stream, so did the life and love of God run through me like precious ointment giving a pleasant smell, which made me to stand still. And, as I stood a little still, with my heart and mind stayed upon the Lord, the word of the Lord came to me in a still small voice, which I did hear perfectly, saying to me in the secret of my heart and conscience, 'I have ordained thee a prophet unto the nations…' (19.17).

This passage from Marmaduke Stevenson (who was executed at Boston, in 1659, because Quakers had been banned from Massachusetts on pain of death) is a reminder of textual relationships, and early Friends knowledge of the Bible.

There is a positive network of allusions in progress here. First, 1 Kings: 19 tells the story of Elijah hiding from the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel in a cave on Mount Horeb and hearing the still small voice after the rushing mighty wind, the earthquake and the fire. Second, this is the same mountain as Sinai on which Moses received the tablets of the Law. Third (and this is surely why Marmaduke Stevenson makes the reference) having heard in the still small voice the instruction to anoint Elisha, Elijah comes straight off the mountain, like Moses bearing the tablets, with a divinely-inspired mission, and finds his successor Elisha, like Marmaduke, at the plough. Without a word Elijah puts his cloak on Elisha, who at once recognises the call of God, kisses his parents, sacrifices the oxen and becomes Elijah's servant.

Another textual relationship is evident in QFP, for James Naylor's (1656) testimony not only foreshadows Marmaduke Stevenson's but also refers obliquely to Elijah and Elisha:

> I was at the plough, meditating on the things of God, and suddenly I heard a voice saying unto me, 'Get thee out from thy kindred and from thy father's house.' And I had a promise given with it, whereupon I did exceedingly rejoice that I had heard the voice of that God which I had professed from a child, but had never known him…(10.09).

The second piece of evidence about theist and nontheist texts in relation to QFP is that the previous version of the Book of Discipline was called *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Religious Society of Friends* (1968), and the title change was made in the light of the perception   expressed by the QLCC Report that 'a generation ago the largest theological divide among us was expressed as between the Christ-centred and the universalist.' That is, that many Friends had by the early 1990s become uneasy about being classed as Christian. Thus a revolution in belief, which was occurring alongside the *Sea of Faith* revolution, was being acknowledged.

Theological Divide

To open discussion further discussion of theist nontheist texts, here again is the key clause from the QLCC Report to MFS:

> …it [the theological divide] now appears to be between those whose experience is of a transcendent God and nontheists, for whom 'God' is a metaphor for entirely human experience.

This statement makes the use of such a phrase as 'our faith' in *A framework* problematic, because it confirms that there is no 'our faith.' But it is itself open to objection in several ways:

First, because 'a transcendent God' must be 'an entirely human experience,' as, obviously, no other kind of experience is possible for human beings.

Second, because even for the theist, 'God' must be a metaphor for something conceptually beyond human comprehension and therefore beyond textualisation. Yet since all language carries transcendence with it, the nontheist must also regard the 'God' as being at least symbolic, referring to spiritual experience, whether or not originating outside those experiencing.

Third, it could be argued that the 'divide' is not 'theological' at all, because nontheists could contend that if there is no external God, no *theos,* their position must be non-theological. The divide would then be between those with a theology and those without. This may possibly be countered by referring to a definition of the field of study involved and to etymology:

> *Theology.* Study of or system of (esp. Christian) religion; rational analysis of a religious faith (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1984).

The recourse to rationality is interesting, implying that the theists and nontheists are not so much divided by belief as by conclusions derived from analysis of 'faith,' that is, by philosophical procedure.

Meantime another means for closing the debate might be to remind Friends that it is always the inward reception of spiritual inspiration which has been stressed, from George Fox onwards, whether or not this be taken as a response to an external stimulus. Thus, the first query, 'Take heed…to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts,' would be readily accepted by nontheists. The injunction which follows might also be acceptable, 'Trust them as the leadings of God,' if 'God' were understood as a metaphor, as suggested in the QLCC statement.

The etymology of 'theology' is also useful. *Theos* is Greek for god or God, while *logos* is speech or writing. 'Theology' is, therefore, spoken and written utterances about 'God,' and whether or not this entity exists need prevent nontheists studying texts and discussing perceptions of a divine being.

Indeed, texts offering histories and overviews of Christianity, other religions and religion in general, are popular with nontheists. The books of Karen Armstrong are much read by nontheists. The popularity of Karen Armstrong's many books is evidence that there is a thirst for knowledge about the nature and sources of religion(s). For example, *A History of God* (1993), *Islam: A Short History* (2000) and *The Bible: A Biography* (2007).

Atheists, agnostics and humanists

A theist-nontheist debate dominated the correspondence in *The Friend* in Autumn 2009, with the theists in the majority, as reflects their numerical dominance. Here are some excerpts:

> It puzzles me why atheists and nontheists who have no sense of God or a spiritual awareness are drawn to Quakers rather than to Humanists. Peter Arnold (21 August) says he likes and accepts our Quaker ways. He seems to miss the point that, in the way we try to live our lives, we seek to be guided by God, the Light of Christ within, the Inner Light, Truth of the heart, however you wish to express it (Clare Norton, 04 09 09).

> Are we a religious Society or are we not? If we are, then surely the atheists must go and sit quietly elsewhere. If we are not, then come and join me under the trees at Westonbirt where the worship is divine! (Jeanne Bower-Robinson, 04 09 09).

> I may be wrong but I have assumed that the word 'atheist' means someone who believes that there does not exist a God or any kind of supernatural being or power whilst 'nontheist' includes 'agnostics' and 'humanists' and that these believe that these are matters that are unknowable (Eric Walker, 18 09 09).

> I believe in God, the Light Within, through which we respond to beauty and sublimity in nature or art or to suffering and need among creatures; the power and presence that has evolved with us and is an essential constituent of our human nature. I believe in Jesus Christ, who shows us that the human can also be divine. I believe in the Holy, wholly human, Spirit, who gives me my faith, who gladdens, rebukes and empowers me through whom come the promptings of love and truth in my heart. Please don't tell me I can't be a Quaker (Joanna Dales, 09 10 09).

An article in *The Friend* by Edward Hoare (16 10 09) reminds readers that such splits are by no means new and refers to the conflicts in the early 19th Century between the Wilburites and the Gurneyites and moves to opine that:

> The place in the Society for those who deny all possibility of transcendental experience must be questioned because the Meeting will never become gathered unless all present are participating.

While the QLCC Report to MFS had identified two tipping points in regard to membership and Friends qualification for holding office, Hoare concludes by extrapolating from the QLCC Report's second point to suggest another such point:

> We are approaching a tipping point, the pressure on Friends who uphold Quaker teaching is increasing; if they become a minority group in a non-religious organisation the distinctive Quaker voice will irrevocably be lost.

Several correspondents, in the spirit, or Spirit, of reconciliation, sought a middle way, and Robin Brookes echoes Harold Loukes's (1955) observation already quoted, which is as near as QFP goes to acknowledging nontheism:

> We live in a rationalist society that has shed its security of dogmas it found it could not accept, and now finds itself afraid of its own freedom. Some look for an external authority, as they did of old; but in this situation there are many who cannot just go backwards. They ask for an authority they can accept without the loss of their own integrity: they ask to be talked to in a language they can understand…With these people our point of departure is not a mighty proclamation of Truth, but the humble invitation to sit down together and share what we have found…(28.08).

> I see that nontheists come in many shades but all ask a very interesting question: Do we need a God to lead spiritual lives? Buddhists presumably think not. What is interesting about this question is the many other vital and cogent questions it spawns: Who you do you mean by God? What do you mean by spiritual? Quakers first called themselves 'Friends of Truth.' We know that while we constantly seek truth it is never completely found. The important activity is searching and questioning. When we ask if God exists or is needed we open refreshing new ground. We are then open to the task of defining anew what we mean, what is valuable, what gives our lives meaning…I hope we will continue to welcome all friends, devout Christian and nontheist, be interested in them and carefully consider what they have to say (Robin Brookes, 23 10 09).

Clare Norton lumps nontheists together with atheists and thinks that neither has any 'spiritual awareness,' which relates also lumping to a 'sense of God.' Texts defining nontheism are cited later, but some of my differentiations between atheists and agnostics may be helpful here.

Atheists and nontheists share a positive belief that there is no external God, which distinguishes them from agnostics who are uncertain whether there is or is not a God. So why do not Quaker nontheists simply define themselves as atheists? The best answer is given in one of the texts to be discussed, *Godless for God's Sake* (2006).

Writing about discussion among the contributors to this volume about a suitable label for their stance, Editor David Boulton explains:

> Some were happy to be labelled "atheists" as the simplest and most straightforward way of signifying their position, ready to accept the opprobrium that often comes with the word. Others, however, rejected the term because of the implication it has acquired of militant opposition to all forms of religious expression and practice (6).

'Nontheist,' and therefore 'nontheism,' were eventually settled on as 'the least disliked option,' though as Boulton remarks:

> It is not perfect, not least because it defines us negatively as *non*-believers in this rather than positive believers in that (7).

Positive statements of belief are to be found later in the book. Meanwhile it is worth pointing out that it is possible to have 'spiritual awareness' without having a 'sense of God.' One may 'take heed to the promptings of love and truth' in one's heart, which I take to require spiritual awareness without needing an external God to plant it there.

Edward Hoare raises the interesting question of whether a meeting can become 'gathered' without all present sharing a belief in a transcendent God. I can only argue that if all present have a spiritual awareness, through which they are conscious of love and truth, there is no reason why they should not be united in a shared spirituality.

That spirituality may be shared seems to me to be proven by the existence of all the manifold products of culture, which, as I have argued in Part 1, always carry symbolic or transcendent meanings. This sharing is the more certain if we allow the possibility that we human beings are capable of communication by other means than texts. This is not necessarily to claim the existence of some transcendent medium so far not discovered but to allow the possibility of purely human means of becoming aware of each other's states of being – 'empathy' being one terms used for this capacity.

Following from the above, my tentative answer to whether or not 'atheist' is synonymous with 'theist' gathers up previous contentions and argues:

- ❖ Spiritual awareness arose in human beings as a concomitant of language;
- ❖ Language is always a medium for the transcendental;
- ❖ Nontheists may be as spiritually aware as theists;
- ❖ Nontheists consider that their spiritual awareness is endogenous;
- ❖ Theists consider that spiritual awareness is wholly or partially exogenous.

I now define 'atheists' as those not accepting the idea of spiritual awareness, because they perceive as deriving from theism. An 'atheist' or 'humanist' who does accept the idea of spiritual awareness is, for my purposes, a nontheist.

Robin Brookes is advising theists that new insights may be gained from discussion with nontheists, because 'the important activity is searching and questioning.' His letter is a good text from which to proceed with this Part, because it opens things up by endorsing questioning, rather than closing them down with assumptions.

Nontheism and A Theology for Our Time

I now draw upon two recent books in search of differences and common ground: David Boulton (Ed), *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism* (2006); Patricia Williams, *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time* (2007).

David Boulton explains that the book he edited takes its title from Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), a Mediaeval theologian and mystic tried for heresy, a predecessor of Galileo as a victim of a Church unwilling to adapt to new thinking. Eckhart's sermons are attractive to Quakers, as they value the difference between what we might wish to be true and what we know 'experimentally,' through experience. Quaker theists and nontheists are united in deriving their beliefs and insights from experience.

Nontheist Miriam Branson was, like many Friends, 'a refugee from another church,' who found Anglican beliefs 'at odds with rationality' and Anglican ideals 'impossible to live up to.' In her early days as a Quaker she felt there was some kind of God but felt free to define this as she wished:

> Later my previous agnostic ideas began to return; mention of the supernatural made me acutely uncomfortable. Any experiences I have had which could be called Good have been mediated to me through human beings. Similarly some bad experiences. We have immense capacities to behave in ways which embody some of the most significant religious doctrines and I think this is where I am now; what matters is how we behave, all the rest is optional (in Boulton [Ed],125-6).

David Boulton himself, with Os Cresson, presents a series of vignettes of figures of the past, some of them Quakers, who contribute to what the writers call 'The Making of a Quaker Nontheist Tradition.'

The first of these, Gerard Winstanley (1609-76), eventually became a Friend but is best known for leading the group called 'the Diggers.' Boulton and Cresson quote his still startling conceptions of 'God':

> …you are not to be saved by believing that a man lived and died long ago at Jerusalem, but by the power of the spirit within you treading down all unrighteousness of the flesh. Neither are you to look for God in a place of glory beyond the sun, but within yourselves and within every man…He that looks for a God outside himself, and worships God at a distance, worships he knows not what, but…is deceived by the imagination of his own heart (88).

Boulton and Cresson remark of the American Henry Joel Cadbury (1883-1974) that he 'showed how it was possible to be both a Quaker and a nontheist. They publish two texts from his unpublished talks for his divinity students:

> I can describe myself as no ardent theist or atheist.

> Philosophical studies of an elementary kind – left me without assurance for or against God or immortality (97).

Patricia Williams discusses the necessarily oblique nature of language, one aspect of the inevitable slippage, in her 'Appendix 2: On Metaphor':

> People who have (or think they have) direct, unmediated experiences of God all speak of the ineffability of their experiences, and all who try to express those experiences wrestle with the difficulties of language and logic. They say they must use metaphors, because a direct, literal description is impossible. When they try to be direct and literal, they only speak of what God is not. We know now that here, too, we must depend on metaphor (155).

Here we are, then, back with the second point of the QLCC Report to MFS, though Williams is actually blurring the distinction the Report makes, by conceding that even for those claiming direct experience of God, expression of this experience must be through metaphor.

The question now is precisely how this experience is experienced if not through language. The difficulty is that only when an experience is expressed in language, inwardly or outwardly, does it become experience.

Before that there may well be emotion, confused, inchoate, thoughts expressed in scattered words and phrases, but only when some organised account of the event arises can the event become an experience. Before metaphor, in other words, there is only feeling. It may be powerful feeling but the understanding of its source has to be verbalised. As Willliams puts it:

> Thus, the term *God* often refers to a notion, a philosophically and rationally derived concept, based metaphorically on bodily experience, but not on direct experience of the divine. To talk of unmediated experience of God also requires metaphor. Now we know why. Language is fundamentally metaphoric (155-6).

Since this implies that theists and nontheists are both using metaphor, the QLCC Report's point of difference almost disappears. It cannot quite disappear, because the theists will naturally claim that although they are forced to use metaphor, they are nonetheless referring to a reality exterior to themselves.

However, agreement that metaphor is the medium is a step forward. Agreement about the use of language may enable agreement to disagree about what the language refers to. Both can use the word 'God' to signify whatever transcendent concept they wish. With 'God' or 'Good' or whatever word used, nontheists are invoking transcendence, referring to something not physically present and having a symbolic meaning.

The metaphor-transcendence point can also be approached through Williams's exposition of the much-used metaphor of 'Light':

> The great theological principle of the early Quakers is the universality of the Light. Sex does not exclude. Poverty or wealth, sickness or health, do not exclude. Behaviour does not exclude. Beliefs do not exclude. Everyone, without exception, possesses the divine Light within (138).

But this image of Light, its transcendence symbolised in the capital, is a metaphor! At the same time it depends on language always encoding the transcendental, for to say that all humans possess the light is actually tautologically saying that all humans are human. That 'divine light' is their humanity, at once physical, mental and spiritual.

Returning to *Godless for God's Sake*, here is a contribution from Lincoln Alpern which offers a fascinating, quasi-intermediate position between theists and nontheists:

> I am a nontheist. Though I am not a member of the Religious Society of Friends, I am a deep believer in the values of Quakerism. I would not say that I am not religious. I hold spiritual beliefs that do not center on a God figure, but rather a fundamental driving force in nature. I don't have a word for this force, but I would define it loosely as a guiding ideal that was created *with* the universe but did not *create* it. I would also define it, even more loosely, as peaceful and benevolent. When we go against these ideals of peacefulness and benevolence we go against this force of nature. It is one of those things that no human, no matter how advanced, can ever rise above. But the idea of it as an omnipotent, omniscient entity…no, that I can't believe (140).

Having promised, at the end of Part 1, to return to David Rush's contribution to this book, I will close this Part with his final paragraph, before his survey tables. His solution to the divide is simply to find it irrelevant:

> Given the Quaker commitment to seeking unity in all affairs, exemplified by how we conduct our Meetings for Business, being in the majority or the minority should be operationally irrelevant. It is a fact that there are theists and there are nontheists in the Society: the actual proportions are irrelevant. We generally use the same conceptual language. All of us are Friends, and the sooner we can accept this reality, the sooner we can continue to build loving and supportive communities (107).

Endnote

Louis Hersent (1777-1860), *Elijah Reviving the Son of the Widow of Zarephthath*,

Part 4: Language

The essay now moves to consideration of means for other ways of considering the theist-nontheist divide in the first of two discussions of language and narrative. The second discussion is in Part 5, Virtue.

The Origins of Language

James T. Dooley Riemermann (in Boulton, 2006) remarks:

> Of all the mysteries which resist our intelligence, perhaps the greatest is the one that gave rise to intelligence and mystery itself - consciousness. Or, more precisely, self-awareness – the usually unshakeable sense we have of ourselves as distinct beings (49-50).

The recent discovery of a 4.4 million-year-old female hominid, *Ardipithicus ramidus,* popularly named 'Ardi,' (skeleton and reconstruction below) raises the question of when humankind, of whatever species, acquired language.
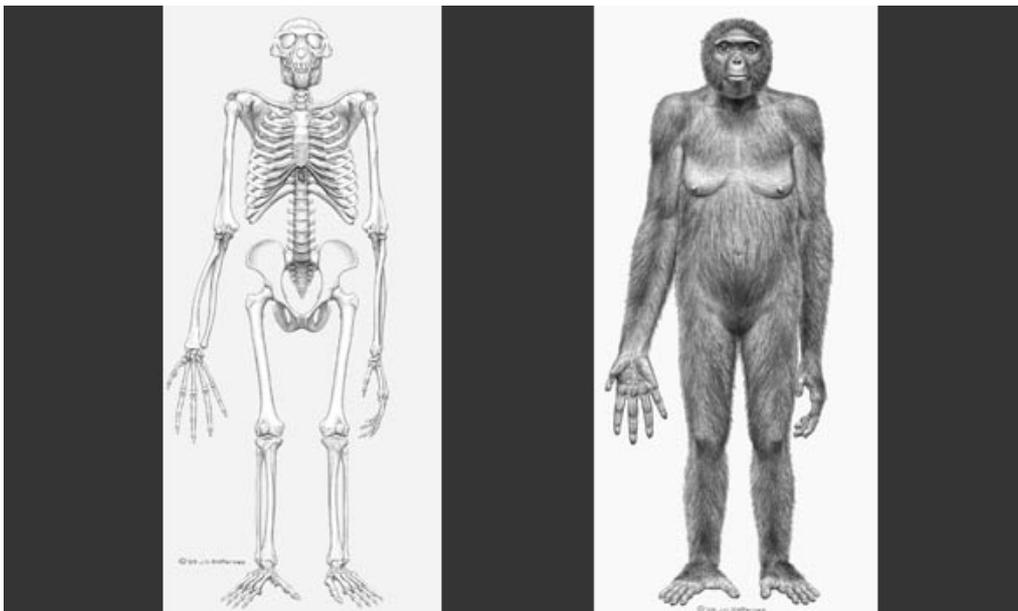
Did 'Lucy,' the merely 3.9 million-year-old Australopithecine, the oldest hominid discovered before 'Ardi,' speak? Did Lucy's larger brain give her a linguistic ability that 'Ardi' lacked?

> Ardi would have been about 4ft tall, and weighed about 9st, almost a foot taller and twice the weight of Lucy. Her brain was only slightly larger than a modern chimp's and considerably smaller than Lucy's, suggesting that our ancestors evolved an advanced intellect much later (*Times Online*, 02 10 09).

Probably language with a lexicon, grammar and syntax was first spoken somewhere in Southern Africa between 50 and 100, 000 years ago. How it evolved is a mystery, but its effects were profound.

Although the development of language was not as sudden as the revelation of the 'universal translator' at Pentecost, with it came not only the ability for human beings to understand one another, but, as Riemermann observes, the awareness of the self as distinct from the world at large. There was now, necessarily, a viewpoint from which to speak, the ability to share whatever was seen and felt. But identity, knowing yourself to be separate from surrounding reality, brings alienation.

Alienation brought fear and wonder, and the capacity to share them with others, another aspect of Pentecost. Thus was generated culture, which was both the expression of responses to perceptions of the world, and to the thoughts and feelings which came with it, bringing art and religion together. As Karen Armstrong puts it:

> This was not simply because they [early humans] wanted to propitiate powerful forces but these early faiths expressed the wonder and mystery that seem always to have been an essential component of human experience of this beautiful but terrifying world (1999: 3).

Evidence for the emergence of language is the plentiful evidence of the art and religion of flourishing cultures 40,000 years ago. As Karen Armstrong confirms:

> Men and women started to worship gods as soon as they became recognisably human; they created religions at the same time as they created works of art (1999: 3).

 In regard to the art, *The Local: Germany's News in English*, 31 10 09, reports:

> The oldest works of art in the world went on display on Friday in Stuttgart as part of a major Ice Age exhibition. Some of the spectacular artefacts, found over past years in the Swabian Alb, are being shown for the first time.

> Among the must-see pieces is undoubtedly the 35,000 to 40,000-year-old "Venus of Hohle Fels" feminine figurine, found in 2008 by Tübingen archaeologists. Believed to be the oldest of its kind, its recent discovery was a worldwide sensation.


The figurine, dubbed 'The Ice Venus,' may well have been a religious image, and the exhibition also contained that other species of human being which did not survive long after the arrival of our *Homo sapiens* ancestors:

There is also evidence of music alongside that of visual art:

> Visitors can also catch a glimpse of an ivory mammoth from the Vogelherdhöhle, and a 40,000-year-old bone flute thought to be the oldest musical instrument in the world.

That pictorial art was prevalent around the world is clear from cave paintings, from the 3,000 year-old art of the San in South Africa to the 10,000 year-old art at la Cueva de los Manos, Argentina, to the 32,000 year-old murals at Lascaux.
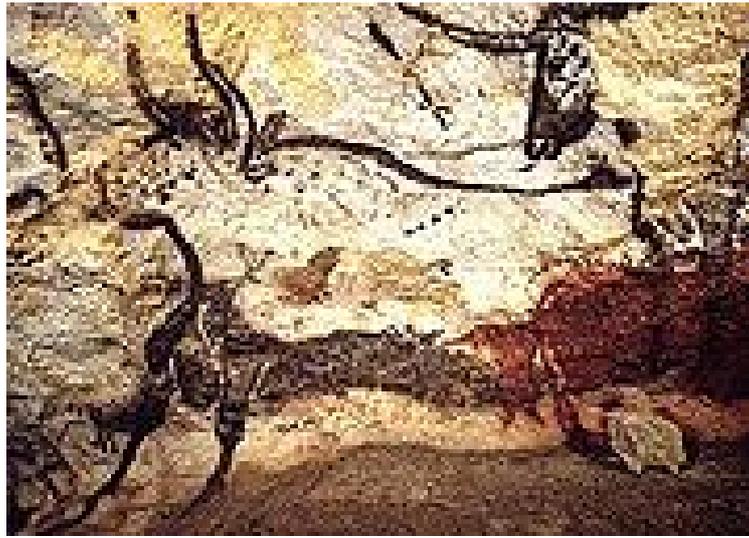
Cave art, notably that at Lascaux, has often been interpreted as having religious significance, although any evidence for this cannot be explained here. Art can be regarded as both expressing religious belief and as an adjunct to religious experience. Karen Armstrong signposts this:

> Like art, religion has been an attempt to find meaning and value in life, despite the suffering that flesh is heir to (1999: 3).

Visual religious texts were, perhaps, being created over 30, 000 years ago. The development of phonetic writing in the Middle East, in Sumer and Egypt, over 4,000 years ago, enabled spoken language to be recorded, and thought and narrative to be encoded, and literature was born.

Religion, Narrative, Epic

The Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh,* dating from about 2,700 BCE, is in cuneiform script. Like nearly all early written texts, *Gilgamesh* has a religious theme inextricably blended with the human theme, for the hero, the king who lived in Uruk, is two thirds god, since his mother is a goddess. His quests and adventures are concerned with gaining understanding of the gods, of the forces beyond human control, and of what it is to be human, for he has become cruel and purposeless. Through friendship with, and the death of, the wild man Enkidu, Gilgamesh learns about justice, love, how to live, and how to die.

Cuneiform Tablet

It is possible to compare the story with that of the *Gospel According to St Matthew*, for that, too may be read as an epic concerning a human with divine origins whose life involves relationship with a deity and the living life to the full and dying in the fulfilment of both his human and divine nature. This is to read the *Gospel* as narrative, without necessarily privileging its possible historical or biographical content, and this is the approach to all texts which is proposed in Part 6.

Egyptian priests even referred to their hieroglyphics, the pictographic texts on temple walls, as 'the words of God,' which were eventually deciphered, using the Rosetta Stone, by Jean-Francois Chompollion (1790-1843), who realised they were phonetic:
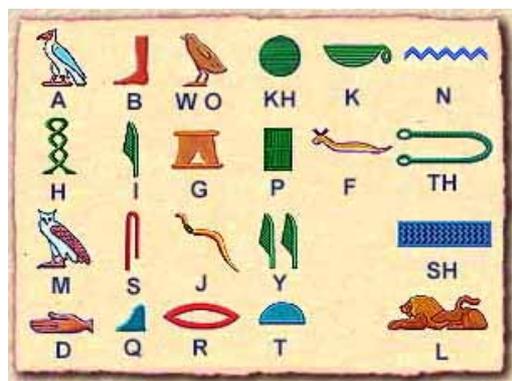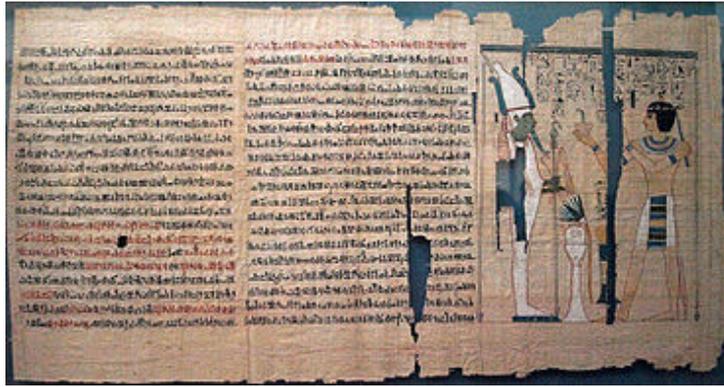
Amongst the papyri consisting of genealogies, prophetic texts, the Book of the Dead – wisdom papyri, and a gynaecological treatise, there are narrative works, such as the story of King Neferkare and General Sarsanet. This is an early cloak-and-dagger story. Like *Gilgamesh* it has its religious theme, too, in allusions to the Sun God Ré and the God of the Dead, Osiris.

The development of writing in Ancient Greece enabled the epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* already old in oral form, to be written down in the 6th Century BCE. Here are the same close intermingling of human and divine, gods and goddesses descending from Olympus and participating in the action. In the *Odyssey* Athena disguises herself as Odysseus's friend Mentor, in order to aid Telemachus. Odysseus first appears in thrall to the goddess Calypso, and he owes the disasters of his voyage home to the enmity of Poseidon. In the *Iliad* the gods ruthlessly intervene to further their favourites, and the denouement follows a pattern resembling that of *Gilgamesh.* Just as Gilgamesh has to learn compassion and humanity through his relationship with Enkidu, the implacable wrath of Achilles is only finally assuaged in shared sorrow with King Priam, who has come to his tent, alone, to plead for the body of his dead son, Hector. The Greek hero weeps, like Gilgamesh, with his grief-stricken guest.

In the 5th Century BCE Aeschylus's great trilogy, the *Oresteia*, presented at the spring religious festival of the Dionysia, dramatises the moment at which human society almost breaks through conflict between incompatible divine imperatives. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia for a favourable wind to carry the Greek fleet to the siege of Troy, violating the paternal duty of protection. On his return his wife Clytemnestra murders him and his son Orestes must kill her in turn in service of the required vendetta. Hence Orestes is pursued by the Furies, the fearful goddesses charged with the pursuit of matricides. Only the intervention of Athena saves him and then only by the use of her casting vote at his trial.

Alasdair MacIntyre, whose *After Virtue* (1985) is drawn on in Part 5, summarises the religious and ethical dilemmas dramatised by the two great Greek tragedians:

> Tragic drama has very early explored the conflicts that could arise in a post-Homeric framework. Aeschylus relied on the contradictory imperatives of kinship loyalties and the equally contradictory imperatives of the theology that sustained kingship. But it is Sophocles who systematically explores rival allegiances to incompatible goods, especially in the *Antigone* and the *Philoctetes,* in a way that raises a key and complex set of question about the virtues (142).

As MacIntyre himself argues, until the Enlightenment religion and ethics are indissoluble. The point I make here is that as language imbued with religion found expression in literature it established a tradition which continues to this day, whether or not ethics appear to be divorced from religion.

Art, religion and literature continued inseparably through succeeding centuries, constantly seeking expression in epic form, with the succeeding works consciously using Homer's and their other predecessor's forms and conventions, as with Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BCE) and Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1308-21).

The epic continued, indeed, through the centuries, usually presenting a hero like Odysseus or Gilgamesh battling against fate and the gods and himself to experience and fulfil his humanity. Odysseus is even offered the chance to become a god, and declines in order to live life to the full as king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope and father of Telemachus.

Examples of Renaissance epic are: Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581)*,* Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), deliberately recast in twelve books to echo Virgil. From Homer onwards there is always a descent into Hell, called the *Katabasis*, it being the major element in Dante and Milton. The greatest epic in musical form is Johann Sebastian Bach's (1727) *St Matthew Passion*, realising in Baroque compositional style the *Gospel According to St Matthew* Chapters 26 and 27.

There is no space to trace the epic through the English Romantic and Victorian poets (for example: John Keats [1818-19], *Hyperion,* based on Dante; Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound* [1820]; Alfred Tennyson, *The Idylls of the King* [1845-85]). There is no space to follow it into the novel (Lev Tolstoy, *War and Peace* [1865-91]; Thomas Mann, *Dr Faustus* [1947]; Günter Grass, *Danziger Trilogie* [1959-63]).

These examples confirm that the epic survived the Enlightenment, despite the replacement of religious and theological authority with Reason that MacIntyre describes, because language and literature have always encoded the transcendental. They refer outside themselves to the spiritual awareness which is part of being human. The epic is the form in which the narrative not only has a transcendental dimension but traces the protagonists' spiritual journeys, which are also their journeys as a human beings. The narrative vignettes of QFP echo this theme.

There is a further point to make about the relationship between language and what it indirectly refers to. It is a commonplace of linguistics, dating back to its founding father, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) that there is always a slippage between 'signifier' and 'signified,' between the word or image and what it ostensibly refers to.

This 'slippage' is the key. For if the meaning of every text was fixed, with an exact correspondence between it and what it encodes, interpretation would be superfluous. There must be that intervening creative silence in which the text is generated from the idea, as if every text was ministry, and, since Quakers believe that the whole of life is sacramental every text is ministry. This brings me to Part 5 and last, Virtue Theory.

Part 5: Virtue

The Story so Far

Part 1 began with the current tripartite crisis in the RSOFB and proposed the necessity for continuous revolution, in organisation and 'ideology.' It suggested also that culture consists of a vast mesh of inter-related texts, that these texts and language always have transcendental meanings.

Part 2 traced Quaker history, stressing the importance of the 1895 Manchester Conference, and the nontheist influence from Robinson and Cupitt. It criticised *A framework for action* for failing to further continuous revolution and for illegitimate inter-relating of texts. Reference was made to the organisational crisis of RECAST and the external crisis of climate change. Documents recording and disseminating the decision to celebrate same-sex marriage were criticised for false logic in the use of texts.

Part 3 presented theist and nontheist texts to demonstrate the role of language.

Part 4 discussed the origins and nature of language, the origins and continuation of literature, especially in epic form, and the 'slippage' between signifier and signified.

Certain themes or ideas have been present. Texts referring to other texts have been exemplified in Marmaduke Stevenson and James Nayler both drawing on the story of Elijah and Elisha, thereby making these texts also resonate together. There are legitimate and illegitimate ways of inter-relating texts, the latter being the case in *A framework* and the texts referring to same-sex marriage.

Ethics

I now continue from Harold Loukes's (1956) observation in QFP, already twice quoted, because it provides a convenient transition into Virtue Theory, my source for approaches to fresh ways of dealing with the theist-nontheist dilemma:

> We live in a rationalist society that has shed its security of dogmas it found it could not accept, and now finds itself afraid of its own freedom. Some look for an external authority, as they did of old; but in this situation there are many who cannot just go backwards. They ask for an authority they can accept without the loss of their own integrity: they ask to be talked to in a language they can understand…With these people our point of departure is not a mighty proclamation of Truth, but the humble invitation to sit down together and share what we have found…(28.08).

Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd Edn, 1985), traces the history of ethics, from Aristotle to the 20th Century. He finds a major discontinuity at the major cultural change usually called 'the Enlightenment.' This occurs at the end of the 17th Century and the beginning of the 18th, the period when the RSOFB is passing through its initial turmoil, acquiring its structures and moving into its quietist phase. What happens in terms of ethics is, MacIntyre argues, the disconnection of ethics from religion.

The rationalism of the Enlightenment made it impossible for philosophers to accept any longer the authority of the Church, or theology, as justification for ethics. As MacIntyre puts it (60), 'the secularisation of morality' -

> by the Enlightenment had put in question the status of moral judgements as ostensible reports of divine law. Even Kant, who still understands moral judgements as expressions of a universal law, even if it be a law which each rational agent utters to himself, does not treat moral judgements as reports of what the law requires or commands, but as themselves imperatives. And imperatives are not susceptible of truth or falsity.

MacIntyre proposes that this cultural shift changed our psychology, with huge social and political effects stemming from a new kind of individualism. The result is:

> The problems of modern moral theory emerge clearly as the product of the failure of the Enlightenment project. On the one hand the individual, freed from hierarchy and teleology, conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority. On the other hand the inherited, if partially transformed rules of morality have to be found some new status, deprived as they have been of their older teleological character and their even more ancient categorical character as expressions of an ultimately divine law (62).

This is the situation Loukes is describing, in terms of theology and authority, amongst Quakers 150 years later, after they have emerged from the quietist period which effectively protected them from the full effects of the Enlightenment.

Quakers were, and possibly still are, partly protected from the full effects of the Enlightenment in relation to external authority. Authority for Friends has always been the inward power of truth as they perceive and conceive of it. They rejected any external church or theological authority. Thus, the loss of divine authority mediated through any organisation but their own was irrelevant. However, having re-engaged with contemporary thinking at the 1895 Manchester Conference they were now vulnerable to the changed cultural climate, and some would be ready victims of Cupitt's arrows.

MacIntyre examines the attempts by philosophers to establish new, rational bases for ethics during and after the Enlightenment. He discusses especially the efforts of Hume, Kierkegaard, Smith, Mill, and above all Immanuel Kant, to create new ethical frameworks by which to judge and prescribe moral conduct. All fail. MacIntyre finds the flaws and unjustifiable assumptions in all of them. For example, it is evident that Kant did not detach himself sufficiently from the moral code inculcated in him as a child: he tended to assume that the ethics he absorbed must be right and set out to make them what 'any reasonable man' would agree to.

Even Kant's famous 'categorical imperative' fails to satisfy MacIntyre, though it has been enormously influential ever since it was propounded in 1788. It instructs us:

> Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

This actually sounds like a good Quakerly principle. However, it is easy enough to refute this imperative, if only by observing that I might choose to act according to the maxim which becomes the universal law that everyone should do what I decree. The other problem is a perennial one for philosophy: the assumption that people will, or will want to, act rationally.

In contrast to this imperative, the supposedly ethical theory propounded by G.E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* (1902) attracts MacIntyre's contempt. Moore ethics are largely a reformulation of Utilitarianism and conclude with the judgement that the ultimate and fundamental truth of Moral Philosophy is that personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments constitute the greatest goods we can imagine (15). No wonder, as MacIntyre remarks, that Bloomsbury loved it.

Quakers would at once perceive that ethics with that basis are completely egocentric. Treating as a categorical imperative the injunction to pursue as the greatest good our personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments would obviously be a recipe for utter selfishness and universal misery. And this was, apparently, until the 1980s, about the best advice that philosophy had to offer.

The first major point that I take from MacIntyre is that, not only was the intimate link between ethics and theology irretrievably broken at the Enlightenment, but with it went the only evidence for an external God. The cultural shift and the introduction of reason as the primary intellectual activity swept away the justification for the dogmas and doctrines on which Christian practice, Catholic, Protestant and Dissenting, had been based. This occurred just as the Quakers were also rejecting the traditional dogmas and doctrines.

In a sense, early Friends were responding to the onset of Enlightenment thinking, because they saw those doctrines and dogmas as the constructs of an illegitimate authority: that is, there was no reasonable basis for them. However, their deeper motivation was to recover the beliefs and practice of the early Christians, before the imposition of an unwarranted power structure.

Yet even Quakers, who have minimised the doctrinal content of their beliefs, were and are not immune to the impact of the Enlightenment, because they share some of the traditional Christian doctrines espoused by other churches, as seen in Joseph Bevan Braithwaite's testimony already quoted:

> …I had been enabled through unutterable mercy to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour; now I saw something of His unspeakable preciousness as 'the Good Shepherd' and 'Counsellor' of His people, 'always unto the end of the world' (QFP,18.01).

Narrative

As modern ethical philosophers tend to do, MacIntyre falls back on Aristotle, whose *Nicomachean Ethics* are still the most stimulating and helpful guides to ethical thinking. But, more helpfully for those interested in literature and narrative, and an essayist seeking a fresh perspective on the theist-nontheist divide, he turns to literary sources for the most helpful guidance to ethics, notably to Jane Austen:

> It is her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context that makes Jane Austen the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues which I have tried to identify. She thus turns away from the competing catalogues of the virtues of the eighteenth century and restores a teleological perspective. Her heroines seek the good through seeking their own good in marriage. The restricted households of Highbury and Mansfield Park have to serve as surrogates for the Greek city-state and the medieval kingdom (240).

MacIntyre identifies the virtues that Austen advocates. For example, 'constancy,' which is the prerequisite for the possession of the other virtues. It is also the prime virtue of the two heroines often regarded as the least attractive, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot. The latter argues (1818), indeed, that it is a virtue more possessed by women than by men, and MacIntyre urges:

> Constancy is reinforced by and reinforces the Christian virtue of patience, but it is not the same as patience, just as patience, which is reinforced by and reinforces the Aristotelian virtue of courage, is not the same as courage. For just as patience necessarily involves a recognition of the character of the world, of a kind which courage does not necessarily require, so constancy requires a recognition of a particular kind of threat to the integrity of the personality in the peculiarly modern social world, a recognition which patience does not necessarily require (242).

Fanny Price is often thought unattractive, especially when compared with Elizabeth Bennett or Emma Woodhouse. She lacks charm. But that, MacIntyre suggests, is the point. *Mansfield Park* (1814) values are betrayed by those who possess charm, the Crawfords. Charm is not a virtue: in their case it is a means of concealing their true nature. Fanny rejects marriage with Henry Crawford because, 'She pursues virtue for the sake of a certain kind of happiness and not for its utility' (242).

The use of literature as a source for consideration of virtue and ethics brings me to Martha Nussbaum, whose major theme in her writing is the vital function of literature for developing character and values, that is, virtues and ethics. In a chapter called 'Reading for Life,' in *Love's Philosophy: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990), she writes about the development of David Copperfield, who as:

> …the narrator of his own life story, reminds his readers of the power of the art of fiction to create a relationship between book and reader and to make the reader, for the duration of that relationship, into a certain sort of friend. Novels are David's closest associates; he remains with them for hours in an intense, intimate and loving relationship. As he imagines, dreams and desires in their company, he becomes a certain sort of person. In fact, the narrator clearly wishes us to see that the influence of David's early reading has been profound in making him the character we come to know, with his fresh childlike wonder before the world of particulars, his generous, mobile and susceptible heart.

This perception of literature is out of favour at present. The arts tend to be categorised as merely for entertainment, the serious purposes of life, restoring the economy and tackling climate change, require science and business expertise.

Nussbaum pursues her theme to the point of asking readers of literature to reflect on its psychological, and spiritual effects on them:

> And the novel as a whole in its many self-referential reflections, calls readers to ask themselves, as well, what is happening to them as they read: to notice, for example, that they are sometimes too full of love for certain morally defective characters to be capable of rigorous judgement; that they are perceiving the social world around them with a new freshness of sympathy…(230).

She does not refer to the spiritual, but a Quaker would readily agree that love for morally defective characters and seeing the social world afresh are spiritual qualities. If reading can have such effects, then, its value can hardly be doubted. These, among others, are the effects upon Quaker readers that the testimonies in QFP are expected to have, including those passages in which theist writers record their experiences of God and Christ. Nontheist readers can enter into these, and feel and think with the writer, just as they can with David Copperfield, or Odysseus or Orestes. The point is not whether readers share the beliefs of the literary personage but whether they can sympathise, better, empathise, with the believer's attitudes and feelings.

In other words, Nussbaum's book advocates the value of literature as source of moral education, which I extend to mean spiritual education: the best source indeed, expanding on MacIntyre. Many of her book chapters and articles consist of exhaustive commentaries on Henry James's fiction, demonstrating how his characters are making detailed, subtle moral judgements moment to moment.

For example, her 'Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism,' makes use of James's views on the functions of fiction and defends her writing against a hostile critic, referring again to Dickens. She explains, for instance:

> Focusing on the analysis of compassion and on the role of the imagination in promoting compassion, I argue that certain specific literary works develop those imaginative abilities in a valuable way and are therefore helpful to citizens--although they need, here again, to be closely allied to arguments in ethical theory that will make their contribution plain. But I begin further back, with an analysis of the very basic human ability that Charles Dickens calls "fancy": the ability to see one thing as another and one thing in another. I argue, following Dickens, that this ability lies at the heart of the ethical life. The kind of thinking a small child does when she asks, "Twinkle twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are," has a crucial role to play in the life of a citizen. We see personlike shapes all around us: but how do we relate to them? All too often, we see them as just shapes, or physical objects in motion.

This is so close to Fox's injunction to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone! Nussbaum is not writing theology and her focus is on virtue and ethics, but that focus enables her to urge the recognition of one person by another, arguing that this is what reading, stories in childhood, teach us. Of course, her analyses of Henry James demonstrate how adult reading, too, possesses this vital educative dimension. Stories are not just for fun, they teach us about being human:

> What story-telling in childhood teaches us to do is to ask questions about the life behind the mask, the inner world concealed by the shape. It gets us into the habit of conjecturing that this shape, so similar to our own, is a house for emotions and wishes and projects that are also in some ways similar to our own; but it also gets us into the habit of understanding that that inner world is differently shaped by different social circumstances. These abilities, I argue, must be acquired in early childhood, by the early practice of story-telling. But they get an especially sophisticated and valuable development in novels such as those of Dickens, which take us into the lives of those who are different in circumstance from ourselves and enable us to understand how similar hopes and fears are differently realized in different social circumstances (1998).

I have quoted at length because MacIntyre and Nussbaum provide better than I can the bases for the case I now put forward, a case which has two stages.

The first stage is to propose that what has happened in the RSOFB over the last century, since the 1895 Manchester Conference, is the substitution in its literature of ethics for theology, or, better a shift in the balance between them. As the theology has become less assured the values have compensated by becoming more assured, even strident. This is possibly because the eventual awakening after the Enlightenment brought with it the probably unconscious awareness that the theology could no longer be sustained without some extra ballast. That extra ballast is the 'values' which feature so prominently in recent publications, such as *A framework.* We can all sign up to the 'values,' theist and nontheist alike.

The evidence for this first stage of the case has already been quoted, and now needs bringing forward again with further comment. For instance the misuse of Fox in:

> We are called upon to be patterns and examples, taking responsibility for our individual and corporate environmental impacts, and engaging in local, national and international politics (*A framework* 15).

The writers are so keen to exhort us to be concerned about climate change and politically active that they do not pay attention to the theological, or simply spiritual, origin of the quotation, bearing in mind that the whole document is *A framework for ACTION.* Action is easier now than theology, not least because we can unite for it. Yet the first priority chosen by those who answered the questionnaire and endorsed by the writers of *A framework*, was the strengthening of the spiritual life of members and meetings. This may be partly achieved by uniting action, but the document itself implies that action should flow out of Friends uniting in spiritual sharing and insight.

The same, rather febrile, exhortation occurs in the *Speaking out in the world* section:

> We wish to see meetings and individuals confidently expressing their Quaker faith and values wherever opportunities arise, whether by talking in the bus queue, by their example as neighbours or work colleagues, by taking up issues with the media or by uniting with others (11).

Here is that give-away word 'values,' which is lumped together with 'Quaker faith' as if the two were more or less synonymous, or as if there were a composite belief package called 'Quaker faith and values.' Such a package would offer a convenient formula, more or less discouraging, even defying, analytical unpacking.

I venture to suggest, too, that the same hankering after some decision or action requiring and producing unity explains the logical and theological deficiencies in the documents relating to the acceptance of the idea of celebrating same-sex marriages in Meetings. It is not that the decision was necessarily a mistake, that it was not a leading, it is that the justifications adduced do not stand examination. I would argue that the decision was a right one, that it was a true leading, if considered in terms of ethics. It is respect for the human and spiritual experience of love of our fellow human beings, in this case of gay and Lesbian Friends, that should motivate such decisions, as for all decisions about all human beings.

Ethics are, though MacIntyre and Nussbaum never quite say so, spiritually, not religiously, based, in other words. The breakdown of church authority and theology at the Enlightenment did not abolish spiritual awareness of others, ourselves, the social and material world. This is the spiritual awareness in which theists and nontheists can unite. In the most extreme view, theology is irrelevant!

 Miriam Branson's contribution to *Godless for God's Sake* endorses the ethical basis of her nontheist membership of the RSOFB.

> Later my previous agnostic ideas began to return; mention of the supernatural made me acutely uncomfortable. Any experiences I have had which could be called Good have been mediated to me through human beings. Similarly some bad experiences. We have immense capacities to behave in ways which embody some of the most significant religious doctrines and I think this is where I am now; what matters is how we behave, all the rest is optional (125-6).

The second stage of the case I am making extends what I have said about MacIntyre's and Nussbaum's use of literature, and their argument that this is now the source for ethical judgement and discussion of virtue(s).

The personal stories told in MFS and YM 2009 were highly influential in the threshing process before the decision was accepted. Quakers from their earliest days have always valued personal testimony as ministry, and the many of the QFP quotations are cherished personal stories, such as those of Marmaduke Stevenson and James Nayler. It is from these personal stories, and from the third person narratives which feature in Quaker history, that much of Friends' inspiration is drawn.

There is the same emphasis on testimony from personal experience in *Godless for God's Sake*. Indeed the section of the book 'This is my Story, This is my Song…' is presented in the same format as QFP, with an introductory sketch of the contributor, followed by his or story.

Language eventually found expression in literature, and progressed through epic after epic, always imbued with the transcendental, Quaker history and literature began in the stories of individuals and groups in search of the transcendent and abundantly able to express it, and live it. Even then the emphasis was, as Patricia Williams reminds us, of the Light *within*. The early Friends believed they were witnessing the Second Coming, *within* their own hearts, a powerful metaphor of transcendence.

David Boulton's *Who on Earth was Jesus?* and James Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty* readily confirm the historical Jesus. One does not have to accept that this man was the Son of God, died for our sins, was resurrected and dwells with God, to conceive of his being born again within one's heart. Because we know his epic story with its narrative and transcendent power, finds ready acceptance in our minds and spirits, because the advent of language and response to narrative gave us the ability to receive and rejoice in it.

Steven Pinker argues that there is a 'language instinct, in his (1994) book, *The Language Instinct*. I wish to extend this idea to propose that there is a literature instinct arising from the language instinct, which parallels language finding expression in epic. Thanks to our capacity for language, we are also born with the capacity, and the need, to hear, relish, compose, read, repeat and live with and through narratives of many, many kinds. This is the vital media through which we experience spiritual and ethical education. The medium comes primed with transcendence, whether or not it is overtly present, and that is what, consciously and unconsciously, we respond to.

While the personal testimonies at YM 2009 spoke powerfully to the assembled Friends and rightly influenced the Minute and Epistle, there is little sense of story in *A framework*. The two quotations, from Annique Seddon and David Yount, therefore stand out, providing human voices.

God is a story. Karen Armstrong traces it from Abraham onwards. The significance of it is not whether God exists or not but what the story tells us about ourselves and each other.

Let us shift attention from whether or not God is entirely within us or external to us before being also within us, to the narratives which tell us about ourselves as minds, bodies and spirits. There is a narrative which says God is – and we need go no further.

Endnote
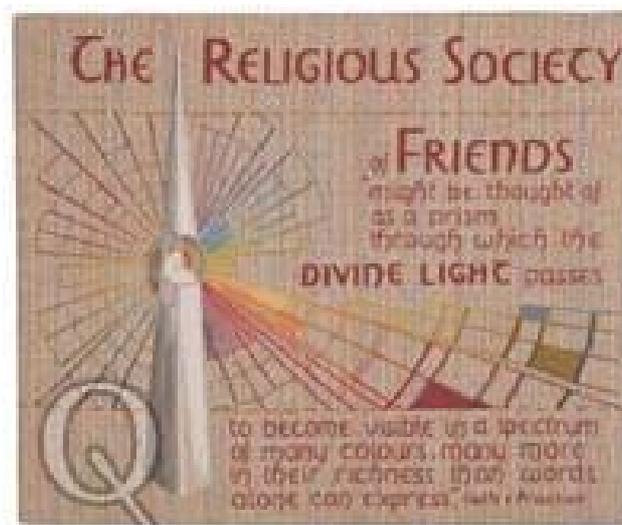
Quaker Tapestry, 1

ABBREVIATIONS:

BYM   Britain Yearly Meeting.
MFS   Meeting for Sufferings.
QFP   *Quaker Faith and Practice*.
QLCC   Quaker Life Central Committee.
QPSW   Quaker Peace and Social Witness.
RSOFB   Religious Society of Friends in Britain.
YM   Yearly Meeting.

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