

## CHANGING VIEWS

### One Quakers Journey

More than three years after discovering Quakers, I have become a member. It has been an interesting journey and I've come a long way, which surprised me because I had already given a lot of thought to matters religious before that and knew where I stood - even if where I stood was an awkward balancing act. In this essay I want to recount some of the steps along the way. I will also be revisiting two themes, both of which have been caught up in my journey and are, I think, challenging to both Quakers and to society as a whole: the first is Global Warming and the second is the argument over the existence and relevance of God.

I decided that I could attend meeting for worship after I read a pamphlet in which non-theists explained how they could be Quakers. A good friend had told my partner and me that she was sure it would suit us. We were a little chary as our beliefs lay more towards agnosticism than Christianity which is why she gave us the pamphlet. I found it insightful on two counts. Firstly it became clear to me that I was not a non-theist. I very much doubted the existence of a God separate from the world or any idea of afterlife. I like to accept a factual scientific basis for things and the rule of probability. But I had experienced periods of spiritual depth and revelation and any theory that saw these things as delusional was unacceptable to me - even if it were right. The second thing that became clear was that there was room for me in Quakers. If these non-theists whose views I was reading could fit in and make it work, there had to be room for me.

I had been going to Meeting for Worship for maybe six months when I remembered a thought I had had years before concerning Global Warming. I had wondered how it would be possible for enough people to change their behaviour to make a real difference. A fanciful thought struck me. The one thing I knew that had the power to convince and change behaviour was religion. I wondered what a religion that revered the earth and was wide enough to appeal in modern times, but nevertheless was spiritually deep, would look like. Then I wondered whether it would even be a religion that would suit me.

It was a strange thought that maybe Quakerism fitted this concept. It was different in feel to what I had imagined; I had thought of something more militant and more new-age. However it definitely did fit the outline criteria.

There followed a period, not unusual I am sure for someone coming into a faith, where I held a more ambitious and romantic vision of Quakerism than it did of itself. I wanted it to encompass everyone and to save the earth, no less. Maybe it could not manage all this on its own but from this time I began to hold the Religious Society of Friends up to this vision and see how far it fell short. I was heartened by joining in the thinking for the 7 year plan. Here we began to seriously look at our role with regard to Global Warming. I found a little *real* action more satisfying than any amount of fanciful conjecture.



Eighteen months ago I moved from Hebden Bridge to Skipton and discovered a very different Meeting. Hebden Bridge is a vibrant Meeting with many more attenders than members and more than a dash of new age spirituality. By contrast Skipton had many older members and felt very different. It felt more traditional, but the silence in Meeting for Worship seemed to have an extra depth.

Getting to know the Quaker community in Skipton has been a great privilege, and discussing things with some of them is perhaps where I have grown most in my views. I remember I had a little obsession with the fact of kindness. Kindness is something we experience in our lives every day. We all know what it feels like both to give and receive. And yet it is never ordinary; has a quality that puts us in a better place; is a Godly thing. "Of course," said my friend Richard, who is in his eighties. He explained that our view of God is made up from the composite of all these various Godly things. After all who really knows God?

My understanding took another leap forward after a ministry at Meeting from Peter. The children had just got up to go to children's meeting, and Nina who is four greeted Anne with a spontaneous hug. This hug came up to just above Anne's knee. Peter, who is a more Christ-centred Quaker, likened this to people's relationship to God. We can't get hold of all of God but whatever we grasp we should hug tight and hold on to. Each person holds something different of God and each person would be a fool to give up what they hold.

So I can treasure those things that I find transcendent without worrying that I am different from others in my views. I can find enlightenment from others as they can from me. Perhaps the difference between Christians and non-theists is just the overlying structure of belief in which they frame things. Which is not the experience itself but the filing cabinet in which those experiences are placed.

In this light I find it easier to talk and listen to Christians and to people from other religions. I find I can now use what I call the "God language" without feeling in any way hypocritical. Surely I am talking about the same thing. If I still do not believe in a separate God or in an afterlife, well that is secondary. I do believe in a Kingdom of God that is with us at all times: that transforms our lives.



Being a constant reader of *The Friend* nowadays, I have read many letters arguing backwards and forwards over whether non-theists can really be (or should be) members. I sometimes wonder, if there *was* a great sort-out, on which side of the line I would be judged to fall. In fact, even among Skipton Quakers, where the majority are over 70, I know there is a very wide kaleidoscope of belief. To try to divine the dividing lines of belief among Quakers would be a hugely destructive act. Even those people I have met who express clear non-theist views look and act and minister like Quakers.

Where I completely agree with those who are more conservative, though, is that we are a **Religious** Society of Friends. We are not a philosophical organization. We are jointly and independently seeking the revelatory truth that underlies and uplifts our lives. We are seeking God.

I have found that Meeting for Worship greatly benefits from having some more deeply Christian members. Their ministries are more likely to move me to a deeper place. As a person who likes a factual, straightforward explanation for things, I find I am sometimes reluctant to submit myself to an empty, hopeful waiting for enlightenment. I can't see what the mechanism is; what would make it work. This can make me draw the curtains of my windows, which makes no sense - even to that large factual part of me. I think that for people with a more traditional belief this is less of an issue: there is less fear involved.

So I would want to say to those who feel threatened by the influx of people from less Christian backgrounds that they should definitely fight - fight with all their considerable power and strength to maintain that which is deeply spiritual and religious in our Society. I think also that scripture, especially the gospels, can be a good guide to that deeper place, more full of mystery and potential than our own *Faith and Practice*.



So now from an inside view, from the position of being a convinced Quaker, from knowing three meetings well (I also attend a small meeting at Airton) how does Quakerism look compared to that idealised concept I had of a religion that is wide enough to encompass everyone and with the strength to tackle the crisis of our times which is Climate Change. Yes I do believe Quakerism has the capacity and the potential to speak to everyone. Our experience-based, non creedal and yet spiritual and disciplined standpoint can speak to most people without triggering the knee-jerk rejection that would be met by other faiths and dogmas. This does not mean that I think everyone could or should become a member.

But I wonder whether we meet the challenge of Global Warming with our full strength and energy and commitment. We don't need to just act for ourselves in this, we need to act as leaders in our communities and in our countries. After all who is better placed to do this than we are?

*What kind of effort would this take?* Wrong question! We cannot produce the appropriate time and energy as a matter of will, we need enlightenment. We need to do our research and to think deeply about it both individually and together. We need to work out what we can do and where we can be effective. We need to hold the whole issue in the light. We need to be discerning. Then we will find the energy and the time that we need. It will happen.

Is there something in our way of doing business that uses up our time and energy without producing appropriate action? I think there often is. I sometimes find Meeting for Business a little claustrophobic and stultifying. This is maybe not surprising as I am

impatient and I do need to learn a little more discipline. However it is not just me, I have seen other new members struggling to adapt to this more than to any other aspect of Quakerism. Many choose simply not to attend Meeting for Business.

I think we have to update and change the way many of us go about our Meetings for Business. Not because our concept of the way Quakers do things is fundamentally wrong but rather because it is fundamentally right. Any changes must be made carefully and wholly in this spirit. And that is the point: it is the spirit not the letter that counts. Always we change to meet modern needs and challenges. Always we hold fast to the Quaker way of doing things.

I'm not only glad to be a Quaker, I'm excited to be one. At this time where we face the greatest challenge of our generation, I can think of no better camp to be in. I can also be frustrated at being a Quaker. I wonder do we have the courage and the strength to look this huge issue in the face?