

# Quaker Quest

## A Mature Religion for Today

Knightsbridge Guide Hall

First Sunday in May, July, Sept, Nov 2008 at 11.30 am

Philps Reserve Cr Glynburne Rd and Rochester St Leabrook

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# **QUAKER QUEST**

## **EASTERN SUBURBS LOCAL MEETING**

**2007**

Twelve Friends from Eastern Suburbs Local Meeting of South Australia Regional Meeting joined together in a Quaker Quest experience in 2007.

The themes for the series of six meetings were:

- Quaker Worship
- Quaker Faith in Action
- Quakers and Peace
- The Quaker Way and its Christian Origins
- Quakers and God
- Quakers and Equality

Three presenters gave their own insights and experience on each theme followed by discussion leading into Meeting for Worship.

In this booklet the presentations are printed for further reflection.

## **Quakers and Worship**

For me, Meeting for Worship is the centre point of my Quaker involvement.

Religious people have a need to meet together to share spiritual experiences. I come to Meeting to spend time with others, and I come with a feeling of awe and reverence for the world and the people of the world we live in.

The meditative Quaker style of worship is my favourite approach for sharing spiritual experiences. There is the wish to contain all those present within the 'spell' of the Meeting irrespective of status, wealth, natural and hardly won abilities and virtues, political allegiances, and immediate concerns.

I am conscious of the people who are present and look forward to their contributions. The Quaker style of speaking positively from the heart allows diverse expressions on life issues that are relevant to us today. In regard to one's own immediate concerns one can look for help from the Meeting for support and new insights.

The deep silence of a gathered Meeting is a wonderful experience and it is great to feel the common bond of purpose, even in a totally silent Meeting.

Personally I do not miss forms of worship used by the different Christian followings and other faiths, yet I am always pleased to associate with religious people who seek to share spiritual experiences, including atheists and universalists.

When feeling the tragedy of life at a personal or global level, Meeting for Worship may be the place for the mind to try and settle, before returning to face the world outside.

The diversity of Meeting is wonderful. Whatever the issue, I do not expect others to agree with my concerns and my feelings. One looks for an integrity of the whole, providing support for genuine concern, whilst following alternative avenues that may superficially appear contradictory.

Others obviously enjoy different types of gatherings for worship and if there were no such thing as a Quaker Meeting, I would be looking elsewhere. But for now this is my option and my choice.

David Evans

Meeting for Worship for me at the end of the week is like sitting beside a calm, peaceful pool of water after following a swiftly flowing river the rest of the week. It is a time to slow down, in body, mind and spirit and to just be. I let go of the concerns and worries of the week. I let go of the lists of things to do, the worry about how little time there is, and how much there is to do, and try to just be.

Letting go of current concerns and responsibilities that are constantly in my head is not an easy thing to do. One way I try to do this at the beginning of meeting is to think positively of each of those Friends who are sitting around me. I might know some of these friends very well and others only a little, but I try to be aware of each person in turn and to give thanks for the presence of each one who is there. I know that there is no guarantee that any of us will be there the following week.

During meeting for worship my body becomes more still, my breathing becomes slower and I feel a sense of physical calm descend. My mind, instead of racing furiously towards the future or replaying events from the past, becomes more focused on the present, on being present in the moment, now, which will never come again. I become more aware of the environment around me, the trees outside the windows, the sound of leaves rustling, of bird song, and how beautiful these things are.

Friends call this early part of the Meeting for Worship “centering down” and I find this a useful phrase to describe how my body and mind gradually become more calm, more focused on being completely present at Meeting and open to the spirit.

The spirit I understand as the best part of us, the force for good, for compassion for love in the world and a sense of unity with all creation. Sometimes I become aware of this spirit of love through the words that are spoken during the meeting. A friend may speak about an event in their life, about a reflection or insight that was important to them, or they may read the words of someone else that had special meaning for them. I listen, open to the idea that these words may have significance for me too. I am frequently reminded, during Meeting for Worship, that we all have similar interests, concerns and feelings. That one person often speaks of the experiences many of us have had in the past or may have in the future. From the shared experience of us all, we grow in wisdom and understanding. We find comfort and reassurance that we are not alone, that our chaotic, disorganised lives also provide us with meaning, purpose and understanding. To quote Blake “We are put on earth a little space to learn to bear the beams of love.” I believe we become more aware of the love around us and within our own lives when we are open to the experience and insights of others.

When I visit other churches I realise that the experience of Meeting for Worship is special and important to me. Friends are remarkably free of ritual and ceremony, but symbolism is vitally important. We are all on the same level, we are all equal. We are facing each other, either in a circle or in some other physical arrangement because that’s how we need to be intellectually and spiritually too. We accept the words each has to offer, without criticism or comment, hearing with love and respect what each person has to offer. Some rarely speak during meeting, but all of us speak through

our lives, and we bring ourselves - body, mind and spirit into the Meeting for Worship.

Often, during Meeting, I find that I am guided towards some path that I was searching for but did not see. I may realise that another concern has higher priority than the one that has occupied so much of my mind during the week. I find that Meeting for Worship guides me in practical ways, to prioritise, to decide what is really important for me to do.

During Meeting for Worship, when I am open to the spirit, I feel physically refreshed, calm in mind and spiritually at peace. My next week may be no less busy, but I feel that I have a purpose and a sense of belonging which comes from my experience of Meeting for Worship. It's the best way for me to begin each week.

Jo Juchniewicz

My understanding and practice of worship is changing and possibly progressing. These statements just describe what I think at this time.

I understand “worship” as ascribing worth to a superior entity. At present I see the entity as a power, a force, energy. Call the entity ‘God’, in which all matter in the universe including me, is embedded.

I am in awe at the size, complexity and inter-relatedness of that system. Worship does involve respect for the marvellous universe of which I am a very tiny component.

Worship does not involve obeisance to a remote, powerful, paternal figure. The god-concept, the energy, is impersonal and indifferent to me. The god-concept is indifferent to praise, blame or intercessions. Talking to it would be of no value.

I believe it is necessary for me to align myself, to live in harmony, with that energy. By extension, I must live compatibly with the rest of the living world.

I hope to increase understanding of the way in which I should live; to become aware of my responsibilities and capacities; to evaluate past actions and attitudes; to make decisions and plans.

In the activity of worship I aim to become physically relaxed, and mentally unfocussed – a form of meditation. I hope to experience myself as “being” rather than doing. To experience an essence, a spirit, a reality without words. Sometimes I achieve the openness and emptiness necessary for the experience of “being”, hoping for an intuition or insight. Sometimes I am thinking about an idea.

As outcomes, I hope to gain calmness and a balanced perspective, a sounder basis for living in conformity with the nature of things.

Ray Mylius

Thinking about the theme for this session over the last few weeks has been a valuable exercise for me. Pondering the guidelines provided I found myself drawn to the first one, which states that

“Our spiritual experience requires us to respond with action in the way we live”

I was surprised that this spoke to me so strongly, having always regarded myself as a somewhat prosaic and down to earth person, not much given to spiritual experience and, indeed, rather mistrustful of the word. I would have expected to be attracted to the more practical interpretations.

Service is a sphere of action that has become synonymous, for many people, with Quakerism. Reforms and fields of service which are now accepted as standard practices were initiated by Quakers inspired and sustained by deep spiritual conviction arising from the Quaker testimonies of peace and equality.

For me, and perhaps most of us, life is lived on a less heroic scale. The idea of giving service, of putting the needs of other people first and of not living for oneself alone, was part of my upbringing, influenced both by my family and the Quaker schooling I received. My field of action has been small, focussed for most of my life on family and local community. Being neither particularly brave nor outgoing, I have taken comfort from the thought that for every leader a larger number of workers is needed, but I realise this may be or become avoidance or escapism.

Calls to service can impose choices: should we limit ourselves to the kind of service to which our talents are best suited, which may well be also what we most enjoy doing or should we, instead, accept the challenge of taking on a course of action which we feel to be right even though we may think ourselves ill-equipped or inadequate? For me the conviction that our environment, the earth we have for too long taken for granted, is in urgent need of help fits in very nicely with the satisfaction and enjoyment I derive from growing trees and the feeling of peaceful connection with the earth I feel when clambering about the hillside weeding exotic species in a small effort to protect biodiversity. It seems too easy. The greater challenge, which reflects the Quaker testimony of simplicity, lies in learning to live with less, to live more locally and to share what we have more equitably. I feel strongly that this more equal sharing needs to extend beyond people to the other species which are struggling to maintain a place in our crowded earth; but we will be discussing these ideas at another time.

The phrase “Quaker Faith in Action” encompasses, I think, all of what we are and how we live our lives. Service is the outward expression of the love that comes from the inner stillness which lies at the centre of Quaker faith.

Jane Duguid

Our Quaker faith is guided and strengthened in worship, but it acquires full meaning only when it is expressed by the way we in which we live. Or, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr. said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter".

The Advice "let your life speak" calls us to express our faith in our daily lives, while "answering that of God in everyone" is the Spirit in which we should do this. Our faith-prompted action may be undertaken in the name of the Society; in collaboration with other organisations; or as individuals in personal encounters or group situations.

There are many good people doing good works in response to need. Some do so in the name of their church, or from personal religious conviction, others are secular. So we must ask what distinguishes Quaker faith in action from other good works. I think it is in two aspects – the area of need that we choose to identify with and the way in which we go about responding to it.

There are plenty of examples of action, either in the Quaker name, or in which Friends are heavily involved. These include, for example, some we are directly or indirectly engaged in: QSA (Quaker Service Australia); the Friends School in Hobart; QUNO (Quaker United Nations Organisation) in Geneva and New York; the Quaker Shop; AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project); Friends Fellowship of Healing; the UN Peacebuilding Commission in Burundi, as well as protest marches and vigils for peace.

In various ways Quaker faith in action reflects the Testimonies of peace, integrity, simplicity and equality. We come to listen, not to provide answers but to share others' difficulties and help them arrive at their own decisions. Our action is always people-oriented.

Thus, QSA states that it "works with communities in need to improve their quality of life" on projects that "have been initiated by the communities themselves". Someone said of the Quaker Shop: "You serve with love". QUNO New York seeks conflict mediation between participants in the General Assembly. QUNO Geneva has a similar aim among the broader community – including such areas as trade and human rights.

In personal encounters our total acceptance of the "other" will be apparent. In group situations our input, formally or informally will serve to lessen tension.

In humility we should remember that the Spirit is universal and prompts others, not only ourselves, whatever faith or denial of faith they may profess.

Eric Gargett

## QUAKERS AND PEACE

Far too frequently in the everyday world one feels under surveillance – we never get it quite right. There are so many busybodies to make comments whether or not they know the facts.

So HOME is a sort of refuge, a place of quietness, where one can relax, and, most importantly, be oneself. A little centre of sanity. My father-in-law, J. Raymond Wilton, spoke of homes and centres of sanity: “I cannot see any better way, or any other way, for each of us as an individual child of God, than to make our own little corner of the world as safe, as sane, as beautiful as one can – in the words of the Friends’ Advice, to endeavour to make your own home an abiding place of joy and peace, where the presence of God is known”.<sup>1</sup>

In the home situation one must be careful not to “use” the other person. One must allow for mistakes, even little betrayals, but the home relationship should be greater than any passing differences. One must treat the other person with understanding, respect and discernment.

The international situation is the small family situation writ large. Only insanity reigns there. Might is right – but it isn’t: force never wins; witness the length of the Iraq war and the Vietnam war, both of which the great US with all its force has not won. This is playground mentality – “It wasn’t me, Sir, honest: it was them ratbags over there that done it – the ALP”. How often do we see that attitude in politics.

Recently I was heartened by the new British Government’s pronouncement about soft power. Soft power in preference to war as the answer to all problems. Soft power means a constructive regime of negotiation, discussion, the slow business of gaining confidence – far superior and cheaper a method than war, and probably just as long.

One of my Quaker heroes has long been Pierre Ceresole, the Swiss Friend who went to jail regularly each year for refusing to do military training. He was no crack pot: his father had been the president of the Swiss Confederation. And Ceresole founded the Service Civil International, an organization which rebuilds war-torn areas. Horrified in a church service to see the pastor preparing the bread for the sacrament with a military uniform under his surplice, Pierre called out from the congregation that this was sacrilege to the Prince of Peace whom they were celebrating. The upshot was the Ceresole was arrested. Yet, I wonder if all his witness ultimately really achieved anything.

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<sup>1</sup>

However, I like Ceresole's prayer, part of which says: "Strengthen our hands for the work that lies before us so that we may complete it without pride or self-centredness, cowardice or sloth"<sup>2</sup>. Cowardice perhaps, certainly sloth, applies to me when it comes to International Affairs.

Charles Stevenson

References used:

<sup>1</sup> 'Love God and Love Your Neighbour' in *These Three. Love Faith Hope. The Collected Addresses of*

*Professor J. R. Wilton, Sc.D.*, Adelaide, South Australia, 1945 p. 40

<sup>1</sup> *For Peace and Truth. From the Notebooks of Pierre Ceresole*, Translated and Edited by John W. Harvey and Christina Yates, The Bannisdale Press, London, 1954, p. 182.

I used to think that being "peaceful" meant being "passive" and that to be violent meant to be physically violent or aggressive.

I now know that being a peacemaker is a task much more demanding more challenging and more rewarding than just bringing physical violence to a halt. It is a way, in the words of George Fox 'of living in the power that takes away the occasion for all war'. That includes the way we interact every day, with our family and friends, with our colleagues and associates, with our employers and those in government.

I used to be fearful of conflict and to avoid it rather than have to deal with it. I realise now that conflict is an opportunity to bring about change, in a peaceful manner to create a more peaceful resolution. My husband, who is not a Quaker, taught me that I need to speak out clearly what I want, and how I feel, that I can't expect him to read my mind. We have had many differences, many conflicts over 36 years of marriage and each has been a learning experience about how we can respect each other's differences, hear each other's truth and work together cooperatively, towards a more peaceful life together.

A well known Quaker mediator and peacemaker, Adam Curle, said that one of the most helpful things that one can do for a person in any conflict situation is to listen to them with your complete and undivided attention. I believe that this is Friends' way and that listening is a crucial part of the peace process. When someone takes the time to listen with understanding I feel respected and valued. I know that in conflict situations I need to listen patiently and carefully to the other person, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable it might be.

Peace is not avoiding conflict, it is not pretending it is not there, it is about dealing openly and honestly with it and moving forwards towards a more peaceful, just resolution. Sometimes a mediator can help each person to speak their own truth and to assist the truth of each to be heard when feelings and hurts are very strong.

The Alternatives to Violence Project taught me that it is not respectful to put yourself or to put others down, although our culture is one where this happens all the time. I became more aware that workplaces and schools are places where sarcasm, teasing and subtle as well as overt bullying are more commonplace between adults as well as children and that these ways of interacting are disrespectful, unjust, even violent. I believe that I need to be alert to harmful ways of interacting, and sometimes, do something about them.

Quakers say that “peace is a process, a way of life” and I strongly believe that it is so. By being aware of my own thoughts and feelings, speaking my truth and taking time to listen patiently and with my whole being to the truth of the other person I can be truly peaceful.

Jo Juchniewicz

When I think about “peace” I think of two aspects – the external issues of peace between countries, groups or individual people, and the internal peace that one strives for. I want to try and hold both of these together.

As an active person I want to contribute to peace between people. This notion of peace is a positive and creative relationship that is more than absence of conflict or tolerance.

The most appropriate way to make that contribution is from a feeling of inner peace. So how do I experience that inner peace? The meeting for worship is a time when stillness can be experienced with a sense of inner peace. Also times of personal reflection and stillness that I think of as the still centre. A time of getting out of my head.

A contribution to inner peace is also greater understanding of people or groups with whom I am involved. At the Nunyara weekend the opportunity for in-depth conversation with people lead to an understanding that contributes to a sense of inner peace. Time given to listening and understanding

In our community there are many different groups where those differences produce tension and conflict – a lack of peace. I think of race, religion and socio-economic difference.

So I hope I can be a peace-builder in some small way by reaching across boundaries of socio-economic difference, race and religion. When people meet and understand each other as people the cultural and religious issues do not produce as much tension

or suspicion. However it is important that I do not become passive or acquiescent but find a way to discuss the differences in a spirit of peace, understanding and acceptance

In all relationships whether in the family, community or work differences between people will always exist as we are unique personalities. I want to be a peace builder in these relationships through the friendship and understanding, support and time that can best be offered from a sense of inner peace.

As the outline for this Quaker Quest offered: “Understanding ourselves, resolving inner conflicts, developing inner strength and attaining a measure of inner peace enhances our ability to achieve outward peace.”

Beth Mylius

## **The QUAKER WAY and its CHRISTIAN ROOTS**

I am grateful for this opportunity to think about a subject that I have always avoided in the past. When Beth asked me to speak on it, my instant reply was ‘I can’t think of a subject I would less like to speak on’. So of course, she talked me round.

Now, after having some time to contemplate why I reacted as I did, I realise that this is a subject that I have been strenuously avoiding for years, and now I think I know why ... and am reassured by what I’ve found.

I am no historian, and am depending heavily on information written by John Punshon, Cecil Sharman and more importantly, an Irish Friend, Matthew Lynn. So what follows is a personal reflection and certainly open to change!

During the period that we think of as the beginning of Quakerism, around the mid - 1600s, many people in England were functionally illiterate, and depended on their local priests or ministers (depending which particular group was in power at the time) for their information about their religion.

The formal teaching of the Church changed from Catholicism to Protestantism and back again depending on the faith of the ruling monarch. It is hard for us now to imagine the dearth of independent information available to people at that time – no newspapers, no news broad casts, few books and word of mouth communication was often suppressed if it opposed the ruling beliefs at the time. There was no real freedom to express dissident views on religion.

Although John Wycliffe had published the Bible in English in 1380, for some time Bibles were expensive and the poor had few alternatives than to follow the teaching of their church leaders, or to read the spate of tracts written by anyone with a new idea to put forward. Many dissident groups sprang up to oppose the formal teaching of the Church and were repressed.

Wycliffe had taken a mighty step forward in translating the Bible into the common language, believing as he did in inward and individual belief as opposed to the outward and imposed religion of the time. He wrote many of his prolific tracts in Lutterworth, near Fenny Drayton, where George Fox was born in 1624, nearly 250 years later. This part of England continued to retain its reformist character after Wycliffe's death and Fox would have been exposed to these heretical ideas in his early life.

After Wycliffe, many other English language Bibles were produced, culminating in 1611 with the production of the Authorised Version of the Bible known to us as the King James version. Greater access to the Bible in the decades before George Fox began his ministry resulted in a widespread renunciation of the authority of the established Church to dictate belief, for a probably equally dogmatic reliance on the Bible as the source of all religious understanding.

Wycliffe and other translators of the Bible who followed him, believed that the Bible should be available to individuals, in their own language, not needing to be interpreted to them by the educated few. He also held that a person's religion is part of their own inner life and should not and indeed cannot be imposed by decree, which fits well with our understanding today.

However, Fox went even further. He put forward the really astonishing and revolutionary proposition that not only the 'hireling priests' as he called them, but even the Bible did not have total authority in religious matters. This was revolutionary indeed.

Martin Lynn says that Fox's teachings, which not surprisingly, changed somewhat over his 39 years of teaching, can be summarised under five headings, the first being the most important.

Fox taught that 'Christ is come to teach his people himself'. Martin Lynn holds that 'If all of Fox's writings were destroyed but this one proposition survived, then we would still understand what Fox was about. It is a very straightforward idea, yet one that is profoundly revolutionary in its implications.' 'He rejected all outward forms of religion and taught that the inner personal experience of Christ was supreme.' To use one of Fox's phrases, religion should be experimental. This word also embodies our understanding of 'experiential'.

Here I must intrude my own opinion. I find it impossible to read Fox's Journal, filled as it is with phrases that have no meaning for me as they are written. Looking for

the real meaning behind his phrases may be rewarding, but is too exhausting. I wonder how his religious terminology would change if he were writing today?

In the circumstances of his time, there was no general debate about different faiths – the important issues were concerned with conformity to laid down Christian dogma. There was no official tolerance of diversity in Christian teaching, even though that could change overnight, let alone the possibility of not being Christian. The language used in religious debate was all ‘Christian’. So I believe that when Fox talked about ‘Christ’, there was just no other vocabulary for him to use.

I believe that one of our greatest handicaps today is that we have not been able to develop a vocabulary to describe our inner life in a way that does not draw heavily on Christian vocabulary. For me, much of the language used comes with extra meanings that limit my understanding.

Personally I make the tremendous jump from George Fox’s assertion that ‘Christ is come to teach his people himself’ to one which I can use without the cringe I feel when expected to use what I refer to as ‘God language’. I shelter behind my rather woolly thinking and transpose something like ‘the Spirit’ for ‘Christ’ and ‘the Other’ for God in this context. I feel acutely uncomfortable when expected to subscribe to or use phrases in wide use among religious people that seem to me to down play the tremendous meanings behind them. Many of us read John Robinson’s ‘Your God is too small’ when we were quite a lot younger, and that describes my dilemma.

I find it very difficult indeed to speak about what I really believe, because I don’t have adequate words to use. Also, without a functional vocabulary, it is hard to work out a communicable philosophy.

The comforting thing to me in all this, is that Fox made such an enormous leap in thinking when he proposed that it is what he called Christ within us who is our teacher, and more to be followed and trusted than anyone else’s opinions and even the Bible. No wonder he upset the authorities.

When we retain so much of the language and assumptions of the Christian churches I believe we miss the basic premise of Fox’s teaching – that we have within ourselves the means of contact with the Being we may call God, or Allah or whatever other word we have come to associate with the ground of our being, and that our understanding cannot be limited by outside teaching or writings. Revolutionary indeed!

I think that sometimes we may forget the thanks we owe to George Fox. Many of us have come to Friends from other denominations, and if in the past they have meant a lot and provided succour to us we may be a little wary of casting that aside in favour of navigating apparently uncharted waters of belief, relying on what some Friends call the Inner Teacher.

The further I go along this path the more confident and comfortable I am with uncertainty, and I revel in the journey.

Topsy Evans

#### References used

Martin Lynn 'Encountering the Light - a journey taken' published by William Sessions 2007

John Punshon 'Portrait in Quaker Grey – A short history of the Quakers' published by QHS 1984

Cecil W Sharman 'George Fox and the Quakers' published by QHS & FUP 1991

George Fox was grounded in the Scriptures. It was said of him that if the Bible were ever lost, it could be recovered entirely from his mouth. William Penn said of him that he had "an extraordinary gift in opening up the Scriptures". Fox spoke of the risen Christ as "the Light of the world". But he cautioned against reliance on the written record asking "What canst thou say?" and "what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" and asking us to seek the Spirit behind the words. Pennington took it further when he said "the humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion". In modern terms, Fox was Christocentric and Pennington Universalist. Those differences still exist today as do differences about the value of the Bible itself. After all it is a collection of 66 books, with possibly another 15 in the disputed Apocrypha, and there are others contending for inclusion. It is composed of manuscripts, remembered oral traditions, translations of translations and copies of copies. One can hardly claim it has divine authority.

Yet it is a record of the search of people to understand the nature of the divine – and we are still seekers today. An Advice says "Take time to learn about other people's experiences of the Light". Another says "Remember the importance of the Bible".

Eric Gargett

The title "Quaker Way" enables a distinction to be made from both Quakers and Quakerism. The focus is on the way of living rather than on individual beliefs or on a religious organisation.

I will deal first with what I understand to have been the historical events at the time of the foundation of the Quaker way, and then something about the practice of that way at the present time. We need to think about the significance of Jesus, and finally the Christian church which is taken to represent the application of Jesus' life and teaching...

## **The Origin of the Quaker Way**

The Christian basis for Quakerism is often asserted in the basic documents of Quakerism. *Advices and Queries* (1.01) describe Friends as "...a religious community which knows the guidance of the universal spirit of Christ, witnessed to in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth." A&Q (1.02.4) states "The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus." *Quaker Faith and Practice of the Britain Yearly Meeting* includes in its statement on membership that those wishing to join the Society should recognize its Christian basis (para.11.48).

Notwithstanding those assertions, the Christian relationship is somewhat ambiguous. Chapter 19 of *Quaker Faith and Practice* relates the story of the origins of the Religious Society of Friends. George Fox and early Friends had an experience of the presence of Christ and deep disillusionment with the behaviour of the clergy and members of the churches who professed to be Christians. Quakerism was initiated in opposition to the contemporary expressions of Christianity in the 17<sup>th</sup> C and claimed a more accurate understanding and expression of Jesus' life and teaching.

Fox has been described as being in the Gnostic tradition, a Christian heresy. Gnostics believed that 'to know oneself at the deepest level is simultaneously to know God'. They believed that the resurrection was not literal but a spiritual vision symbolizing the experience of God's presence. Gnostics often gave men and women equal place, and they challenged the authority of the hierarchical structure of the developing church.

Quakers consistently have felt that their inspiration comes from Jesus. It is more accurate to say that the origin of the Quaker way is in Jesus, not in Christianity or at least not in the Christianity practised in the churches of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We can also make a distinction between Jesus and the Christ-designation. The word "Christ", "Christos" in Greek, in the Old Testament meant 'anointed', one chosen by God to perform a special service. 'Christos' was translated via Hebrew "mashiach" into Greek again as "messias" and into English, 'messiah'. For the Jews the Messiah seems to have come to mean someone who would restore their power. Thus the Christos concept was expanded from that of a person of special character, into one of a powerful individual who would support religious chauvinism and Jewish nationalism. Jesus did not claim that he was the Messiah for which the Jews had been waiting for centuries. In Christian usage the word "Christ" lost its ancient meaning and became simply a proper name like 'Jesus' itself.

"Christos" events are said to have occurred repeatedly in human history in several different cultures. They have been periods of special insight and great social change usually related to a specially-gifted person. In that context Jesus was a Christ not the Christ.

The origins of the Quaker way therefore lie in Jesus rather than in Christianity. Jesus Christ is one of an unknown number of Christs in human history, not the unique exclusive Christ-concept of the Christian churches.

We can go on to review the three-way inter-relationships of Quakers, Jesus and the Christian churches.

### **Quakers**

Friends vary in their interpretation of Quakerism while acknowledging a shared religious heritage. . It is probable that from the time of George Fox to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> C and early 20<sup>th</sup> C Quakers were Biblical literalists until they embraced modern scholarship. There continue to be differing attitudes to theology and to mystical experience. It is probable that the widest differences are apparent in regard to ‘beliefs’, which are asserted by some, and by others rejected because they imply the need for a creed.

Quaker Faith and Practice Para. 9.02 states” In the world family of Friends there is a rich variety of experience .....” “Many Friends have a vivid experience of personal salvation .....” On the other hand, there would also be Quakers who are selective in their acknowledgement of the traditional tenets of Christianity – creation, adoration, repentance and forgiveness, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, atonement. Few Quakers would accept the traditional Christian myth of conflict and vindication: human sin alienates humanity from God; God acts to reconcile people to himself by becoming incarnated in Jesus and dying. God raises Jesus from the dead. Jesus returns to God and will return at the end time.

George Fox was a man of his time in theological terms, a scriptural literalist. Hi achievement was to apply his reason to the implications of the Bible account of Jesus life, and to question church beliefs and practices. The hostility of Fox and his followers to the church was reciprocated, and thereby forced the establishment of an organisation separate from the Christian organisations of the time. Fox was inspired by Jesus and hence Christian, but he rejected Christianity as it was represented by the churches of the time.

Quaker principles of integrity, love for people, equality, non-violence, truth and simplicity mirror those of Jesus. Women always played a crucial role in living the Quaker way, and men and women all suffered the brutal ill-treatment inflicted by both church and state. Most significantly, Quakers share with Jesus the understanding that people are able individually and directly to experience the essential nature of the universe, the Spirit, God, whatever name we use for that experience for which there is no word. Friends have always denied the need for any intermediary for access to the Spirit, holding strongly to the concept of the Light within themselves and maintaining their dedication to service to people.

Quakers did become evangelical. The courageous energetic dedicated early Quakers promoted their ideas vigorously and aimed to attract members. They formed an institution or perhaps a series of institutions which have exhibited the kinds of

conflicts and competition common to all human organisations. Conflicts and disagreements with the Christian churches have gradually subsided into mutual acceptance.

### **Jesus**

Jesus said repeatedly “I am”. In John 4:26 and other verses the statement is unqualified, signifying a direct connection with God and also his identity as an individual with integrity, authenticity and independence. In John 14:6 he is reported to have said “I am the way, the truth and the life”, and elsewhere he uses metaphors of bread, vine, light, and shepherd. (The completion of John 4:26 – “no-one comes to the Father except through me” indicated how Jesus revealed God for those in that particular group of followers. It is not a statement about the relative worth of the world religions and does not imply the exclusiveness often attributed to it.)

Jesus primary concern was for people. (John 15:12-13) “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Jesus opposed the hierarchy of the synagogue and intended to reform Judaism. He was unsuccessful and fatally rejected, crucified by the Romans for crimes against the state. He wanted people to follow his example and insights but not necessarily to become joiners and form a sect. After his death his followers decided to form a new organisation. An organisation is necessary for effective action, but almost always results in conflicts, excessive exercise of authority, and rigidity so that the institution becomes more important than the ethics which underlie it. There are examples of those defects in churches to the present time.

Jesus was non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, person-centred not institution-centred, and the institution killed him. His attitude to religious and political authority was neither rejection nor indifference, but one of defining the appropriate scope of authority. Jesus said to them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17) When he disagreed with authority he acted according to his own principles, and paid the price.

He dealt with women and men equally. His male disciples consistently disappointed him. The women who followed him were prepared to accompany him to the foot of the cross.

Jesus spent time in silence to think.

One might sum up Jesus’ example as including silence, love, independence, integrity, equality, non-violence - and conflict with religious and political authority. In those respects one could say that the Quaker Way is consistent with Jesus life.

### **The Churches**

Authoritarian, hierarchical, patriarchal, dogmatic, exclusive, competitive, prestigious, judgmental, traditional, evangelical, superstitious, nationalistic and militaristic. But

wait – they are not entirely bad. After all, the lives of most of us were strongly and favourably influenced by one or other of the traditional churches. They have freighted the Word, that is, the meaning of humanness, and met the need which people have for ritual, discipline and moral guidance. They have given opportunities for learning leadership, singing, and public speaking. They have influenced the laws and life of society for the better, provided social services, and offered strong support and a fellowship of a kind rarely available in any other human organisation. Add architecture, music, and art even if Quakers might reject the symbolism.

Early Quakers were forced by brutal opposition to be separate from the churches, and at times Friends groups have been rigid sects, isolating themselves both from the churches and from society in general. It must be acknowledged that at times there have been Quaker groups hostile to one another. Those days have passed. Q Faith and Practice para.27.16 states “the Society of Friends is but a part of the Christian church....” Quaker attitudes to the ecumenical movement have softened over time, so that at present the Religious Society of Friends is a member of the SA Council of Churches, and by virtue of membership in the National Council of Churches of Australia we are a member of the World Council of Churches.

### **Conclusion**

Does the Quaker Way have Christian origins?

Yes – but!

Yes – emulating Jesus Christ.

But – Quakers have been ambivalent about Christianity, the organised expression in the churches of the example of Jesus

Ray Mylius

## **QUAKERS AND GOD**

According to Wikipedia, **Yahweh** is a proposed English reading of יהוה, the name of the [God](#) of [Israel](#), as preserved in the original consonantal Hebrew Bible text. These four [Hebrew letters](#) are often collectively called the **Tetragrammaton** (from the [Greek](#) τετραγράμματον, meaning 'four-letter [word]'). Jews do not pronounce the name, but use e.g. HaShem ("The Name") or Shem HaMeforash (“the ineffable Name.”)

I have sympathy with the idea that no name is adequate to encompass the concepts of God or Allah or Creator or Supreme Being, etc, and thereby restrict them to the limits of human thought and understanding.

But I also find it incomprehensible that there might be no understanding of the world and the universe, past, present, and future. The weather keeps us humble, but who does control the planets, meteorites, and things way beyond human influence?

The mystical world is a reality to me and again something beyond my understanding. We can feel part of it. I think everyone knows what 'gut feelings' are, even if Quakers prefer a more acceptable description, such as 'taking note of the promptings from within'. The sense of goodness or lack of it belongs in the mystical world, as does an individual discovering a sense of purpose, or love, etc.

When I think of life outside our cognizance, I find myself flirting with the idea of timelessness. For this there are at least some Christian references that are suggestive of 'the other world', and I am always remembering Clive Sansom's poem, 'The Timeless Hour'.

I do have a genuine feeling of awe and reverence for the world around us, and for society at large including our need of each other. There is no doubt in my mind that we are all expected to do all we can to make the world a better place, and that there are consequences of our actions or inactions.

Will we ever know? Will we meet again? I don't know, but from a writing of Herman Hesse I adopt the idea that a maturing human loses the sense of self consciousness in favour of feeling part of the whole.

We live with faith that it is all worth while and worth working for, with hope that we will be excitingly surprised, and with love of our fellows and the world as a whole.

Quakers and God? Ask them and get more ideas.

David Evans

When I read the reflections of Quakers I find many different concepts relating to this word "G.O.D". At our last meeting on the theme of Christian origins we talked about the problem created by words and the way they do not reflect our changing understanding and indeed constrain understanding.

When I think about "God" for myself, using that word is a difficulty. Even though I can hold ideas of the attributes of "God", being a visual person, I have difficulty in ridding myself of those early visual pictures that reflect ideas that I have now totally discarded – concepts of intervention, personal relationship and in some way physical.

Last week Topsy referred to John Robinson's book "Your God is too small". It was in 1964 that a group of us in Port Moresby read that book and it set us on the path of thinking about "the ground of our being" and other similar concepts with words that enabled me to move away from any physical form.

Quakers have assisted me in two ways by moving away from any dogma and by the positive approach to "seeking" and to feel at one with people who realise that it is the search for meaning that matters and that being uncertain is appropriate and acceptable.

Perhaps we can say that for more than 350 years Quakers have been searching for an understanding of the concept of G.O.D. There are a couple of phrases Quakers use that help to show this search - "that of God in everyone" and "hold a person in the light" which seem to express more open concepts. I read another description recently - "God - whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere".

My own searching and thought at this point of time is that it is compassion which is the important human attribute - "Love your neighbour..."

Whether the capacity to show compassion is an entirely human characteristic and potential or is explained by "that of God in everyone" continues to be my search.

Beth Mylius

## QUAKERS AND EQUALITY

*'The word testimony is used today to refer to an active witness based on the central insight that "there is that of God in everyone"'*

from a Quaker Home Service paper on Quaker Testimonies

This phrase "there is that of 'God in everyone'" was often used by George Fox and is frequently quoted today. Perhaps as a result, most Friends would accept the testimony to equality as a basic Quaker belief.

Jonathan Dale writes in 'Engagements with Quaker Testimonies'

*'Our testimony to equality stems from our experience of a divine love for all at the heart of the universe.'*

I turned to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary for the meaning of equality. Clearly, we cannot assert that all people are equal in size or any other physical characteristic, in mental ability,

rank or power. We do not mean adequately fit or qualified – indeed, we often have to admit to ‘not being equal’ to a particular task. Fairness, impartiality, equity seems nearer the mark, but ‘the condition of being equal in value’ finally brings us to the Quaker position.

In a competitive world of examinations, qualifications, selection processes, celebration of sporting triumph and celebrity cults it is not easy to include all people, however different, as having equal value. Learning to accept and love the diversity is, in the end, the only way to recognise the value.

Equality is regarded as one of the human rights but, like all rights, it depends on the recognition and acceptance by others of the value in each person. Much is talked about rights, and human rights in particular, but rights in themselves are of little worth if they amount to no more than a hollow declaration. The rights or needs of one person, one section of society or one part of the living world need to be recognised and accepted by others to have any value.. There is an obligation on all of us to do this, hence our emphasis on listening and discernment in determining our way forward.

Quoting again from Engagement with Quaker Testimonies, Marion McNaughton writes

*‘We must remember that the testimonies arise from the same place of understanding, they overlap and illuminate each other. Our understanding of equality informs our witness to peace; our commitment to simplicity and integrity underlies our concern for the earth.’*

Quaker Faith and Practice links simplicity and equality together and as we become more and more aware of the limitations of earth’s space and resources we are challenged to accept that any chance of equality for most people of the earth depends on all of us accepting simplicity in our way of life.

John Woolman recognised this in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and Michael Lee, in 1976, wrote

*‘If John Woolman’s approach is the right one for the Society of today it is not enough to go over our own behaviour in detail, cutting a bit here and pulling back a bit there; we must be concerned with our and society’s attitude to life as a whole, to “live answerable to the design of our creation”.’*

Much of what I have said so far refers to our own species, the human animal, but I want to finish with some consideration of the rest of life on earth. I am no theologian and am on shaky ground here, but I have long been troubled by the arrogance with which humans have assumed themselves to be the superior species. Dominant we have certainly become, with all other species getting an increasingly raw deal as a result of our heedless greed, to the point at which we seem quite likely to destroy ourselves. Like all species we are programmed to favour our own survival but our

vast numbers together with our failure to recognise the interdependence which maintains our ecosystems risks endangering the whole planet.

Here the argument for love as the guiding principle in equality becomes difficult. Many of us find it difficult to love and live with snakes, spiders or other creatures which pose a threat to us. We are more likely to embrace the rights of other species as a matter of enlightened self interest as we learn more about interconnectedness, balance and the effect of extinctions on our own food chain.

We may be dismayed by the seeming impossibility of saving the environment while the human population continues to grow. Experience has shown that the most effective way of curbing this growth is by improving conditions for the most disadvantaged – that is, by granting them the right to equality.

Jane Duguid

I learnt about Equality before I found Quakers.

As a child my Mother, in particular, instilled in me a basic assumption of inequality. I was not allowed to play with most of ‘the village children’ as she called the other children in the South Australian country town in which I spent most of my formative years. One family, for some reason passed her test, but I don’t think she ever visited their home, for had she done so, I am sure I would have been forbidden to continue my contact with a family who had no such pretensions.

That would have been deprivation indeed, because among other things, they always had a supply of ‘literature’ including Superman, Mandrake and Ginger Meggs comics, to which I would otherwise never have been exposed! My reading at home was definitely far more erudite and ‘suitable’.

This assumption of superiority was reinforced by a gap between my exam results and those of the rest of my school class. I KNEW I was brilliant! The exams results proved it.

So until I went to do a Leaving Honours year, and then to the University in Adelaide, there was no challenge to my understanding that somehow, I was different, and far more important, intelligent and worthwhile than anyone else.

Then came a crash course in reality. In Leaving Honours, I failed one of my Maths subjects. I think this was as devastating to my parents as it was to me. Then at University I only achieved Passes. I had never learned how to study, do homework etc and it was hard to change long-held habits.

Then came marriage, and a shift to another country with a new-born baby, no extended family support and no child care skills. Challenges indeed! For once, life

was not easy, and I could see other mothers around me who knew far more than I did. Perhaps I wasn't the best after all!

Then the greatest leveller of all – I became a Child Welfare Officer with responsibility for the midlands of Tasmania. In those days, the concept of training for social workers and welfare officers was 'life training', and I was accepted because I had a University degree (in science, not the humanities) and had survived bringing up three children.

So I was plunged, untrained, into the welfare care of the very polarised inhabitants of rural Tasmania – polarised because there were two main groups of people; the 'squattocracy' of landowners, and the farmworkers and an increasing number of people who couldn't survive in the urban centres and had decided to live in the country.

There they found low cost housing in country towns and on country properties which often had so-called 'pickers huts' and which were formerly used by itinerant farmhands. The winters could be harsh, and these huts often had no internal plumbing, perhaps even earth floors, and were situated in very isolated areas.

Part of my job was to keep an eye on how these families were faring. There, apart from coping with the usual caseload of neglect, child abuse, incest etc, I found amazing stories of resilience, courage, generosity. Here were women who battled immense odds with cheerfulness, ingenuity and courage the like of which I had never seen before. I felt humbled for instance, by a woman who talked with me about her problems in stopping her children fighting. She had 6 children, some of whom were decidedly 'slow' and they lived in a dilapidated three room cottage, miles from anywhere with no electricity or running water. Her husband didn't believe in accepting 'welfare' and they had to live on the rabbits he could shoot or trap and the vegetables she could grow. She came to me because I was middle-aged, and she thought I would have answers. I felt close to tears, and very humble. I was not top of the pile any more.

I stayed in this job for 10 years, and was one of the dying breed of generic welfare officers who handled everything from Adoption at the top end of town to Neglect and Abuse cases. I had to write court reports for children appearing in the usual range of cases in Children's Court. This involved visiting the family and trying to work out why the child was doing what it was. There too I found that there was much more to life than good exam results and an assumption of superiority.

One such family was well known in Hobart for their high rate of incarceration in the local and interstate prisons. After working hard for a while, I was accepted by them and actually allowed inside the decrepit hovel which was the thorn in the side of the North Hobart Council, and offered coffee. The house was owned freehold, and stood in the way of the development planned by the Council. The Matriarch of the extended family who lived there wouldn't sell out and ruled her family with a rod of

iron. Her dealings with the family taught me a different way to look at the difficulties faced by families ostracised by most in our community.

Often I didn't agree with their ways of coping, but I had to admire some of the reasons they acted as they did. One day the 'Matriarch' ordered two of her sons to get arrested and remanded so they could be with one of their brothers in prison over Christmas. He was 'homesick' she said. Besides, all the family not in prison were coming home and she didn't have space for them all. This was outside my understanding. Any of the girls who became pregnant knew that they could take their baby home and be cared for. No-one was excluded.

I found that people I had regarded before as inferior, in fact could teach me a lot. I didn't always have the answers.

So when I found Quakers and realised that the statement that all people have 'that of God' within them, it all fitted. All people have an innate capacity to develop courage and to rise above difficulty. They also have the capacity to love their children and each other despite circumstances which would deter most people. They have the capacity to be loyal to their family, to respond to affection and try to help each other. Some don't achieve any of these things for a variety of reasons, but I began to wonder if I would do any better in their circumstances.

The concept that all people have an aspect of their lives which for want of a better name Quakers call 'that of God' in them leads logically, and now in practice for me, to a belief that all people have an equal right to demand respect from me, regardless of their circumstances and outward appearance of 'success' or otherwise. The years as a welfare officer taught me to try to see the struggling personality behind a personal front which was sometimes unlovely, or even downright aggressive and selfish, and try to make contact with the person inside.

Old habits die hard, and failures are frequent, but I don't think any of us can live happily with ourselves if we don't try to treat others as equals, and with respect.

What a turn around for the person who started out in life believing she was 'top of the pile' and no-one else really mattered!

Topsy Evans

I was five I think. I couldn't have been much more, for my father was present and he died shortly after I turned six. I had been taken to Monthly Meeting (the then title for Regional Meeting) with my parents. I know it was Monthly Meeting because the country Friends were present - among them the tall, white-haired, bearded and greatly respected Frederick Coleman. "Shake hands with Frederick Coleman and say 'how do you do'", my father prompted me. Shyly I put out a hand (the wrong one, I suspect). Frederick Coleman stooped a little, took my hand, shook it, and said gravely, "How do you do, Elizabeth Wilton?" In that moment I grew about two feet.

He had paid me the courtesy of addressing me as he would an adult Friend. I don't know what I replied, but I have never forgotten the moment – the experience of being treated with the respect normally afforded to adults.

According to the Oxford English dictionary 'equality' means "the condition of having equal dignity, rank or privilege with others... The fact of being on an equal footing". That was the priceless gift that Frederick Coleman bestowed on me that morning – my size and age were unimportant. At the time I didn't know why I felt that I had suddenly grown two feet taller, but as time went by and the incident remained vividly in my memory I realised that he had paid me the compliment of treating me with dignity and respect – with equality. He had, thereby, reached for my intrinsic self – that Inner Light for which we search in Meeting for Worship.

There are so many aspects to equality, and we (that is, Quakers) don't always get it right by any means. But we do try, and we are open to learning. We do give women equal status with men with the tasks that must be done in the Meeting. The Meeting for Worship requires that both men and women, of whatever race, age, sexual orientation, education, social status or anything else listen for the 'promptings of love and truth in our hearts which are the leadings of God' and if inwardly prompted to do so, share them with the Meeting. Ministry is the equal responsibility of us all – even if some of us (like me!) are over hesitant to offer it! I remember, that as a late teenager, temporarily divorced from the Meeting and attending another church, being totally shocked and horrified by the realisation that when the minister spoke of the 'highest calling' he was referring to his own job, that of a minister. It was not accessible to the 'laity' – the rest of us. We were undoubtedly of a lesser rank. These days, and especially in Australia's egalitarian society, we do not have lords and ladies, and very few 'sirs' but neither do we, Quakers, differentiate between those with doctorates, or those known as 'professor', or 'Mr.' Or 'Mrs.' Or 'Miss'. Mostly we don't know who goes with which title! The tasks necessary for the smooth running of the Meeting are shared around. We may, as one writer in Quaker Faith and Practice pointed out, be the Presiding Clerk of the Yearly Meeting for a time but may well be the person running around the Meeting with the microphone at another time. All tasks are of equal value. The important thing is, that in our dealings with others and in our attempt to answer that of God in everyone, we respect each person's dignity and each person's spirit. "I liked your class sir," I heard one of Charles's past students observe, on one occasion, "You treated us with respect." Respect enhances a person's sense of self-worth. For that moment one feels that sense of 'self worth', that puts us on an equal footing. I have no idea how the rough and ready chap who collected our rubbish felt when he found the envelope containing a ten shilling note that my mother asked me to tie (at Christmas time) to the lid of our rubbish bin. I asked why I had to do this (I was about nine at the time) and my mother replied that we thank people who perform a service for us. Collecting the rubbish was no less a service than that performed by anyone else. What the garbage collector felt I have no idea, but I never forgot the lesson. Everyone's honest efforts are worthy of respect.

"In the life of the Quaker Meeting there is a tradition of equality and respect that I have found to be of pure gold in value," writes Jean Brown in *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Meeting for marriage. No-one 'marries' the couple. They take each other in marriage, each making the same very simple promise. In *Faith and Practice* 22.38 Elizabeth Watson writes beautifully of her's and her husband's marriage. "George and I have been together for forty-two years.... Sometimes when I tell young people that I found marriage liberating they respond, 'You've got to be kidding'. But it's true. We have kept our goal of being equal comrades, granting each other space to be ourselves and to grow towards wholeness." That is what equality grants to us and to everyone... The opportunity to reach for the intrinsic self – to attempt to find (however inadequately) that of God in ourselves and to answer it in everyone.'

Elizabeth Stevenson