



TRAVELLING LIGHT

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Ben Vincent is a life-long member of the Society of Friends and one of the three Honorary Members of the Quaker Universalist Group. Originally trained as a teacher of classics he has made a close study of the biblical texts, early church history and comparative religion.

In this essay, the author encourages us to unburden ourselves of some of the surplus luggage which our Christian inheritance has loaded upon us. As a particular example he chooses the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus which he examines in considerable detail drawing on his extensive knowledge of ancient languages and of early church history.

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by

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Insofar as this paper expresses opinions, they are my own and not necessarily those of other Quaker universalists nor of the Quaker Universalist Group. I shall propose that it might be well for us to unburden ourselves and others of the surplus luggage which our Christian tradition has loaded upon us. As a particular example of this I shall examine the credal doctrine of the resurrection, explaining how I think it can be dispensed with.

Quaker Universalism

In my view, Quaker Universalism is a marriage of mysticism and rationalism. It is not offered by its adherents as a body of doctrine but as an attitude of mind; it is not sectarian in the sense of 'You should leave them and join us because we are the ones to whom God has revealed hitherto concealed truths'. Neither is it an attempt to concoct a stew out of the best in all religions. Many universalists would accept the possibility that all religions are flawed from the start, that all idols have feet of clay. Many religious people would think that this attitude of mind would lead to chaos. I think the plurality of religions leads to chaos and, at times, to bloody chaos. If only people could be persuaded to abandon tribalistic loyalty to the divisive elements of their religions, all might come to appreciate the profound mystery of existence and at the same time the value of their divine human reason and to trust their experience rather than the formulae handed down from the founders of religions. This is what I mean by *travelling light*.

The Resurrection Myth

Myths can be allegorical and/or psychological. Allegory may be seen as aesthetic for it is a picture and is meant to appeal to those who see it as a symbol representing reality. The myth of a dying god who is reborn or resurrected is symbolic of sunset/dawn and

winter/spring and the language of the artists of the myth sometimes reveals this, as for instance, when the New Testament speaks of the buried seed which does not really die but becomes fruitful. This has an aesthetic appeal and only a very austere rationalist would quarrel with it, though of course the botanical and seasonal cycles are not analogous to the myth. But the language can and does lead to notions about the death of Jesus on the cross as being necessary for our salvation. The philosophical notion of the burial of a seed as a stage in nature's plan and therefore not to be grieved at (as though anyone would grieve at sowing) has an elementary sort of charm, but I do not think many Friends see the death of Jesus as part of God's plan.

Friends accept the death of Jesus as history and his readiness to die as an example to us all, but the notion that the life of Jesus was futile except for the way he died is repugnant to us. It seems to me that more and more adherents of churches are feeling as we do about the resurrection, although there are, of course, still many who hesitate to say so openly because they wish to temper the wind to the shorn lamb. The reason for our refusal to display in our Meeting Houses portrayals of the crucifixion is that the result of such displays is a wrong emphasis, and paradoxically, that it also diminishes the reality of the death of Jesus by providing a pictorial substitute which trivialises it. It is enough to face the facts. We do not need them to be institutionalised or idolised or fitted into a liturgical structure.

The use and value of symbols

Tony Grist, writing in *The Independent* of 30 April 1988, tells us why he resigned from the priesthood of the Church of England. He says, 'This was not just a simple matter of being unable to believe in the virgin birth and the physical resurrection, but a far deeper disquiet about the spiritual truths these dogmas seemed to be trying to express. I accepted that they were symbols but I did not like what they symbolised'.

Tony Grist clearly means that he found the myths did not even have a psychological value. It is a common thing for people to have lost belief in, say, the historicity of the Bible but who are attached to its dramatic quality. They speak of it as beautiful, moving symbolism, but what the symbolism represents they cannot express. They cannot face the fact that the *meaning* of much of it is no longer acceptable to people who have been brought up in a modern developed civilisation, knowing so much that was unknown to the biblical authors. There are probably not many who believe in virgin births today, and few believe there is anything wrong with fruitful sexual intercourse or anything unclean about it; few people believe nowadays that women should be merely acceptive. In short, few believe the ideal woman will be like the 'mother of God' in the Bible. It is only the picture we like, not the wider reality. In any case, those who invented the myth of the virgin birth did so for a reason that no longer seems valid: the grafting on to Judaism of a pagan notion in order to make the transition from paganism to Christianity easier for gentile converts, for gods and even emperors had virgin births. Symbols lose their psychological value. Even if they for a time help us to bear reality, they cannot long rival demythologised truth. In any case, once we realise that the myth has no more than a therapeutic purpose, or in fact, any purpose, it cannot be effectively re-used. A placebo no longer works when we know it is a placebo. We can say, 'I've got a headache, I'll have an aspirin which cured it last time'; but can we say, 'I am losing my faith, bring me a myth which cured me last time.'?

Belief based on experience

I wish this essay to be in itself an epitome of what I hold to be the Quaker testimony against believing anything just because it is in the church creeds, the Bible or even Quaker tradition. It must be authentic in the sense of coming from one who 'owns' it in the seventeenth century sense, or one who knows it experient-

ially. I do not go so far as George Fox who managed to persuade himself that he had come to believe spontaneously truths which he found only subsequently in the Bible. An example is in paragraph 163 of *Christian Faith and Practice*, 1959 edition, which quotes the *Journal* thus: 'This I saw in the pure openings of the light, without the help of any man, neither did I then know where to find it in the scriptures though afterwards in searching the scriptures, I found it.' It is significant that when he wrote this he did not give the chapter and verse in the Bible to which he was referring. Biblical fundamentalists always give chapter and verse because they wish their readers to go to 'the source of all truth'. Fox was claiming personal, authentic knowledge of what the light has to say to us all. He did not realise his indebtedness to his subconscious memory of reading or hearing something in the New Testament. Today it is realised that there is little or nothing that is original in our minds even when it is truly spontaneous. We should, I hope, be highly suspicious of anything that was. Our modern version of Fox's testimony is to exhort everyone to test every notion by experience, to suspend judgement until we are able to do so and to hold fast only to what we must. Let 1 Thessalonians 5:21 continue to be a favourite Quaker text: 'Test everything; hold on to that which is good.' And let us never empty a notion of the meaning which it originally held and substitute our own interpretation in order to avoid controversy or the appearance of heterodoxy.

Scientists have much to teach about faith. Their first lesson is that although we should never dismiss the teaching of predecessors out of a passion for being sceptical, we should never stick to it out of loyalty when our experience points in a different direction. We Quaker universalists must not be caught saying, 'We are taught that . . .' or even 'We teach that . ..'. We should for ever be saying, 'It is held that . . . but what do you think of it?' Our favourite quotation from George Fox will always be 'This I knew experimentally' (That is, 'from experience'.) But it would be a dry faith which held only to experiential knowledge. Yet what we

believe other than that from direct experience must always be derived from and related to experience of some sort whether it be acquired in maturity or earlier. Modern scientists and theologians also appreciate that many truths are too deep or too subtle for simple verbal expression, so they construct models which convey as far as possible the substance of the real, but these must never be allowed to deteriorate into absolute dogma or to become an element of liturgy.

Evidence for the doctrine of the Resurrection

Let us apply this critical method to the doctrine of the resurrection. This is an important element in the New Testament and is one which until recently was considered as absolutely essential in Christian doctrine. In the New Testament the Greek word for resurrection is *anastasis*. This means a rising again or getting up after lying down. It is one of the least ambiguous of all early Christian dogmas that Jesus rose again after lying dead. Perhaps we should qualify that. We know little about what the earliest Jewish Christians held to be essential since we do not have a single document from the pen of any one of them written before the movement became dominated by the Pauline, mainly gentile, circle. We have no Christian document written in the language Jesus spoke. We are told that there is a good deal of the existing Greek which echoes Aramaic idiom. It is more than surprising that the documents in Aramaic which underlie the Gospels were not preserved, and one cannot help wondering if they were inconvenient to the institutionalised church of Paul. Otherwise one would have expected it to have preserved their actual words in their original form. Aramaic ceased to be a language of culture in the early days of the church, and it re-emerged as Syriac. Yet when the Syriac church required Gospels, they were translated from the Greek because there was no copy of a related Aramaic gospel to be found. What is more, there is some evidence that the earliest Gospel, Mark, is an abridgement of an esoteric book which was cut down before publication.

The last verses of Mark are missing and have been replaced in our Bibles by verses borrowed from later Gospels. This must surely lead us to wonder if the original account of the end of the gospel story did not fit in with the orthodox account of the resurrection appearances and had to be edited out. It is also astonishing that the ascension of Jesus is described only in Acts, a sequel, and not in the Gospels. Yet, of course, the Gospels were written long after the ascension is supposed to have happened. To return to the resurrection and Mark. In 16:6, Mark uses the word *egerthe* instead of a verb from which *anastasis* is derived. It is translated by the New English Bible as a passive, 'He has been raised'. Our Friend Norman Marrow in his *The Four Gospels*, translates the word as 'He has been brought back to life'. Certainly 'raised' is a strange way of talking and certainly the church meant he had been brought back to life or revived. A more literal version would be either 'he has been lifted up', implying carried away, or 'he has got up'. The word *anastasis* does not mean quite either. It refers to one standing up, implying he walked off. An examining counsel or coroner would have real trouble in getting at the facts and might begin to wonder whether the whole story was not concocted. This is in fact what a large proportion of rigorous critics of the New Testament text now believe. I observe the number is growing who are convinced that the story of the empty tomb is fictional, especially as crucified malefactors were thrown into a common grave by the Roman authorities.

The Gospel accounts of the Resurrection

There were Christians before the period when the New Testament was written who did not believe in the resurrection in any sense. But the Gospels and the Acts go out of their way to emphasise the physical elements in the story, starting with the empty tomb and adding other circumstantial details, though as often happens with this sort of evidence, the details do not agree. If we read the stories one after the other we

soon discover contradictions in them. If these disagreements were minor or few, we should regard them as positive evidence that the witnesses were telling what they believed to be the truth to the best of their memory, but the cumulative inconsistencies are just too devastating. Matthew talks about a violent earthquake, but no-one else noticed this event which, according to him, caused the guards to shake with fear and lie down as if dead! Then an angel removes the stone and sits upon it. In Mark there is no earthquake, and the angel is simply a young man sitting inside the sepulchre. In Luke there are two angels and they make a stilted speech, Greekish in tone, reminding the women of how Jesus had prophesied his death and resurrection on the third day, though this is not mentioned earlier in Luke's account. If it were true that Jesus had explained during his life that he would be crucified, but that it was all right because he was going to be resurrected, this would ruin the argument of some liberals for the resurrection, that it was that which restored their morale after the crucifixion had broken it, and that if it had not happened they would have been too devastated to preserve his teaching and pass it down to us.

The story of the empty tomb is so different in the Fourth Gospel that only the most ingenious apologists for biblical Christianity can reconcile the differences. The drama in John is splendid and realistic and the author forgets to write in his somewhat literary style because he himself is so carried away. It is one of the most beautiful pieces of Greek of any period and matches Sophocles and Aeschylus. Paul mentions that there were Christians who did not believe in the resurrection (I Cor 15:12) and he argues that the Christian faith is undermined if we do not believe that the body of Jesus was raised, since this is the promise of the raising of our own bodies at the end of time. It does not seem to occur to him that the important thing about Jesus is the ethic he taught by his words and life.

Beliefs about the resurrection of the body

Paul obviously feels worried himself about the notion of dead bodies coming to life and walking around. He understands that materialistic thinkers like Jews and some Greek philosophers will find the idea hard to swallow, and he does a bit of what is nowadays called fudging: he talks about a psychic body. The word he uses is *psychikos* but it is nothing to do with mind as is the English word 'psychology'. The Greek *psyche* means the whole person, not a discrete soul or mind. It would therefore seem that Paul is thinking of the notion that we begin as an animated body and not just flesh-and-blood. So he means a natural human person. When we die our body lies down, sleeps, and the element of it which makes a whole person is temporarily held in suspense until the Day of Judgement. When that day comes all bodies will get up out of their graves as 'pneumatic' bodies. The *pneuma* is God's breath which breathes life into the bodies. In Jewish biology the *ruah*, God's breath, was what gave life and in Paul we are reborn by it. Here we have the embryo of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The word 'spiritual' in English has a subtler meaning than in the Bible, some would say more vague. In the Platonic tradition, which Paul followed, abstractions were made real things in themselves and not just notions that exist only in the human mind.

The resurrected body was said by Paul to be pneumatic, spiritual. But that did not mean that he thought of it as a phantom, ghost or hallucination. It is still the same body, and calling it spiritual does not make it intangible and invisible. The ancients thought of me as my body and when a deceased person was buried they said HE or SHE lay there. Friends usually think otherwise and a Monthly Meeting Clerk making a minute about a funeral, says that the body or remains were cremated or buried, not the person. In fact, this is one of the many reasons why Quakers were held to be heretical. The mediaeval burning of heretics was a merciful act, it gave the victim pain but briefly,

for he was then likely to be spared the pains of hell since he could not rise again on Judgement Day. Until quite recently, both Catholics and Protestants practised interment rather than cremation because the latter would mean that the deceased would not enjoy the after-life. Christians from the earliest days insisted on the resurrection of the body as is evident from the New Testament and the creeds. However, many of the Jews who followed Jesus would find it hard to believe that bodies were resurrected, although some would think it possible that that of Jesus was, since Elijah went to heaven without leaving his body. It was therefore necessary for the Evangelists to lay emphasis on the bodily reappearances of Jesus, though they do not give the actual numbers of the faithful who actually saw Jesus after the crucifixion, as Paul does when he says it amounted to more than 500 at the same time (I Corinthians, 15:6.)

The Resurrection story as an allegory

When Jesus rises from the tomb, he casts his head-kerchief aside, a curious detail when so much that would be more helpful is not mentioned. One can only guess that the kerchief was later displayed as an object of veneration, though it is possible that for the author of John 20:7 and his esoteric circle the kerchief had some secret significance. It does not add anything to the vividness of the narrative, as literary considerations of that sort do not figure in the style of the time and you may be sure that every detail that is mentioned has some significance, sometimes being just a reminder that the whole thing is intended to echo something in the Old Testament. I do not think this is the case here, however. The fact that all the versions of the story mention that the stone was moved aside is meant to prove that the risen Jesus was no poltergeist, but a solid person. This is in conflict with his passing through closed doors when he subsequently appears to the eleven in John 20:19. But inconsistencies of this sort did not bother the writers or the readers until the Higher

Criticism began to be applied to the text in modern times.

John has a ravishing story of Mary Magdalen encountering the risen Jesus, thinking at first that it is one of the cemetery staff, until he speaks her name and she recognises his voice. We moderns can find only one thing in it that jars: when Mary realises from his voice that she is talking with Jesus, she naturally flings herself into his arms, but he tells her not to touch him as he is still technically dead, and it was taboo for a Jew to touch a dead body. Modern dramas are meant to touch our hearts when the characters symbolise their emotional ties with an embrace. Whereas this one is clearly intended to convey a christological dogma: that it was a real body which Mary saw when it had left the tomb, and not a ghost. In John 20, there is a second inconsistency, for here Jesus tells Thomas to touch him although he has forbidden Mary. Here too, the point of the story is to emphasise that the risen Jesus was tangible.

It is a mystery in the proper sense of the word, for a *mysterium* was a drama or liturgy in which verisimilitude is not only not required but a sort of operatic or balletic performance, or even a bit of conjuring, is of the essence. This is so for the Christian eucharist too. We are to be like little children who do not wonder how the wolf was able to masquerade as the granny or how Cinderella's pumpkin became a coach. We love the drama which has also usually a moral or cathartic value. Imagine how we should feel about the child who spoiled the story by adopting a sceptical attitude! But when we grow up we should put away childish things.

In the story about the meeting on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24: 13-31, we again have a story which as it stands is incredible and contrived: why should Jesus reveal himself to his disciples in this devious way? Where does he appear from and where does he vanish to? How is it that his disciples recognise him only when he is performing a minor ritual act? The story is certainly charming but is full of improbabilities, however reluctant we are to doubt it on such an important

subject. Who was this anonymous disciple? When any disciple is introduced into the narrative even for a single occasion, he or she is usually named, like Joseph of Arimathea, Susanna, Salome, Nathanael, but here he is so insignificant that he goes nameless.

There is another names problem in the anonymity of the phrase 'the disciple that Jesus loved', (John 19:26.) Why on earth this sort of anonymity? He is usually thought to be John, but Lazarus has also been suggested and the Fourth Gospel attributed to him.

It has also been guessed that it was the gentile Clopas or Cleophas, short for Cleopatros, for he would be standing at the cross with his wife as wives did not generally appear in such places without their spouses.

If this is so, it would help to explain why some regarded the incident as being an allegory with the message that henceforth the Jewish faith was being handed over to the care of the Christians, that is the Pauline, predominantly gentile, church. This would certainly be in the esoteric spirit of the Gospels, rather than a touching story of Jesus at the cross considering the welfare of his earthly mother. It is hard to believe that this story, or the Emmaus one, is intended as simple modern historical anecdote. The Gospels are not anecdotal or meant to be interesting or appealing, even when to us they are.

It is certain then, that we cannot say we believe the Bible stories of the resurrection unless we understand them as the authors did, as an allegory which is paradoxically about a real resurrection of the body of Jesus, foretelling the rising from the graves of the dead to be judged on the Last Day when the faithful would be chosen to live for ever in the earthly kingdom of God.

Quaker beliefs about the Resurrection

In the current *Book of Discipline* (1959) there are two passages which refer to the dogma of the resurrection, 188 and 189. The former is dated 1685 from the hand of George Fox when he was 61. By then, Friends were seeking how to live at peace with their persecutors and be as inoffensive as possible. The passage is in

obscure and allegorical language and is not Fox at his pungent and explicit best. The latter passage is from Penn's works as published in 1726 and its tone is apologetic towards critics, who doubted if Quakers believed in the resurrection of the body. There were also Friends at that time, who felt pangs of anxiety about whether Quakerism was Christian. This is always happening in our Society, as people join Friends without any theological interrogation and often, if not always, because they feel at home with us and our form of worship. They also warmly approved of the traditional 'testimonies' of Friends, especially as regards peace and war, human relationships, equality of men and women and even of members and attenders, and in fact the avoidance of theological language and routine reading of the Bible in worship and of the frequent utterance of the name of God. It is only later that many of them realise that all this is not just reticence, but a positive testimony to the integrity of doubt as well as belief, to awe in the presence of the ineffable and to the avoidance of controversy about what all Friends regard as secondary to letting our lives preach. Yet many newcomers from other denominations feel uneasy when it is borne in upon them that Friends really do hold that in matters of faith nothing can be spoken and that all we can *talk* about is real life and not notions, even notions originating from the Bible.

Most of us today in all denominations consciously brush aside these theological niceties as futile and tendentious, though Friends almost alone virtually banish them from their worship. These niceties are not about anything except words which have to be constantly reinterpreted to make them seem meaningful. Some Christians insist that but for the resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christian religion. This is the same as saying that if Jesus died and never rose again the light of the world would have gone out. The light of the world was there before Jesus, and is visible in people who have never heard of Jesus, even in people who are filled with fear at the name of Jesus because of the atrocities of some of his followers. We here have

something to thank George Fox for, that he verbalised the element of Quakerism which argues that the light being universal it follows that if the New Testament had never been written its precious message would have been mediated for us all in some other form.

The true mystery

If the life of Jesus followed normal biological laws, as I believe it did, we do not have to explain away the resurrection story. A simpler way of dealing with it is to infer that the history as we have it, is interwoven with pious fiction by devotees who were less concerned with banal events like his death than with the propagation of the faith that he was more than human. In the first and second centuries most people and the great majority of ordinary citizens had no idea of a politically transforming public morality. Their only hope of a better world lay in *supernatural* intervention. It was far from the ethos of modern political parties which lay emphasis on mass movements of citizens to improve the life of all through democratic legislation. The religious sects of today which are nearest to the biblical concept, are contemptuous of political reform or humanistic ideas of public benefit: all that is to be swept away when God takes over at the Last Day, and then only a small number, the chosen, the saved, will survive, and they will not ipso facto include members of parliament or directors of charitable organisations, doctors or people who run children's homes.

We Friends believe otherwise, and believe that the teaching of Jesus of Galilee points to that ideal society which must be ushered in by reformers who set the rest a good example of how people should live and what should be their concerns. Although we may take some interest in whether he died on the cross or survived it and died later, it is his life and teaching which we regard as vital to us. I do not think any universalist Friend would feel it is profitable exercise to examine closely the fairly convincing arguments of the few experts who justify the case for believing Jesus was not

dead when he was taken down from the cross and that he subsequently recovered. This would do no more than give a naturalistic explanation of the resurrection narrative and we should be inclined to say, 'So what?'

The precious teaching of Jesus does not require credulity. It is also something beyond rationalism and secularism. It has been, from the start, a great bane to religion and religious tribal chiefs. Our Friend H G Wood spoke of it with a wonderful phrase: 'the cosmic significance of ethics' for it is no ordinary ethic about just how to behave. It has the challenging element of the truly supernatural which makes us aware that it is not enough to be good, that is hard enough, but you have to be perfect. The word used in Matthew 5:48 is *teleios*, a subtle term which means, I think, 'hitting the mark', 'reaching your aim or goal'. In case we think this is too intimidating a requirement, we might do well to remember Pelagius' comment *si debeo possum*, that is, if God says I ought, it means I can. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus is depicted as exhorting his earliest disciples to be perfect. It is typical of the Sermon on the Mount, of which this sentence is part, to present the teaching in extreme language which is characteristic of the ancient near-eastern style, and is here intended to convey urgency, because of the imminent approach of the Day of Judgement. What is it to be 'perfect' in a world which is about to come to an end? We have the answer in the book of Micah, written possibly about 700 years before Jesus was born. In paraphrase it would be: 'What more is required of you than to go around being fair to everyone, to be forgiving and not to forget you are human just like everyone else, a tiny creature in a wondrous eternity?' Micah is not the only prophetic book to describe perfection like that. This does not make one single demand on our credulity or require one single 'act of worship', one single ritual sacrifice or ritual belief, but encourages us to travel light.

THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST GROUP

The Quaker Universalist Group believes that spiritual awareness is accessible to men and women of any religion or none, and that no one Faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of truth. The group is open to both Quakers and non-Quakers.