

### About the author

David Boulton is a journalist, author and broadcaster who has written on a wide range of topics. His first major book, *Objection Overruled*, published in 1965, told the story of First World War conscientious objectors and was the basis of the Ken Loach BBC TV series *Days of Hope*. Other books include studies of Loyalist private armies in Ulster, the Lockheed aircraft bribery scandal, and British jazz. As a broadcaster, he edited the investigative current affairs TV series *World in Action* and became Granada TV's Head of News, Current Affairs, Arts and Religious Programmes. Since 1990 he has directed television projects designed to assist the democratic transformation of Eastern European countries and the Russian federation. In 1996 he was appointed a member of the Broadcasting Standards Commission.

Born into a Plymouth Brethren family, David first encountered Quakers in active peace work with CND. Since 1980 he has been a committed attender at Brigflatts Meeting, Cumbria. He has written extensively for the Society of Friends, including *Early Friends in Dent* (1986), and contributions to *New Light on George Fox* (1993) and *Sounding the Depths* (1996). He is a member of the Woodbrooke Quaker Theology Seminar and Friends Historical Society. He is editor of *Sea of Faith*, the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network. His book *In Fox's Footsteps*, written with his wife Anthea, is to be published by Sessions in 1997.

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## THE FAITH OF A QUAKER HUMANIST

David Boulton

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A Quaker humanist? Some mistake, surely? Is not Quakerism essentially *religious*, and is not humanism a denial of religion and "things of the spirit"? Can oil and water mix without creating an unholy mess?

I want to explore in this pamphlet the area of belief, attitude and moral commitment where Quakerism and humanism seem to me to meet and overlap. I shall suggest that, while it is clearly possible to be a Quaker without having any attachment whatever to organised humanism, and while it is patently possible to be a humanist without being any kind of Quaker, a position which draws on the two traditions can be both logically coherent and imaginatively responsive to some of the pressing concerns of the late twentieth century and the oncoming ones of the twentyfirst.

I write as a long-term, committed attender at my local Friends meeting - Brigflatts, Cumbria, where George Fox's visionary imagination conjured up "a great people to be gathered" - and a member of the Quaker Universalist Group, active in a variety of Quaker affairs. I am also a member of the humanist movement in its diverse forms - the British Humanist Association, South Place Ethical Society, and the Sea of Faith Network. It should be clear, however, that while there is good reason to believe that the views expressed here are shared by other Friends and humanists, they are my own responsibility, and should not be attributed to any organisation. (I should add that there is no Quaker Humanist organisation, nor is this pamphlet an attempt to create one!).

There are three key words in my title, *Faith*, *Quaker* and *Humanist*, and I would like to unpack them one by one. On the way, there will be some subsidiary unpacking (or repackaging) to be done with other terms like *mysticism* and *spirituality*. I shall look first at

### ***Faith***

Quakers will have no problem with the word "faith". Theirs is a religious tradition, and in religious traditions faith invariably occupies a central place. Friends have their own (regularly revised) book of "faith and practice". Humanists, on the other hand, generally avoid the word, precisely because of its religious connotations. This is a fairly recent preference. Nineteenth and early twentieth century humanists were often happy to write of their "faith", even of their "religion". As late as 1960 Julian Huxley gave one of his broadcasts the title *The Faith of a Humanist*. But today humanists usually

prefer to see themselves as representing a "world view" rather than a "faith tradition".

I have no quarrel with that. I am not going to challenge the convention that, when we talk of faith traditions, world faiths, inter-faith dialogue, we generally mean religious traditions, world religions and religious dialogue. We do not normally regard, say, socialism or existentialism or humanism as faiths in this sense. But few would deny that there is a strong element of faith in all these secular isms. Some of us would say it takes a lot of faith to remain a socialist these days! And perhaps in the light of the cumulative inhumanities of the twentieth century, it takes a lot of faith to be any kind of humanist.

So I am using "faith" not in its acquired sense as a body of religious beliefs but in its more basic sense of a kind of combination of trust and hope. Faith in this basic sense is not about belonging to a religious group, still less about believing dogma simply because that is required of us by some outside authority and tradition. Faith is the voluntary acceptance of certain uncertainties, and the willingness to trust and hope despite those uncertainties.

I fall in love. I trust and hope that my beloved loves me as I love her. I cannot furnish myself with irrefutable, logical, scientific proof that she loves me and that our mutual love will last till death doth us part. Indeed, common experience offers plentiful evidence which might presuppose me to assume the contrary! My acceptance of her love, and my giving of my love to her, has to be an act of faith. I promise to be *faithful*. Our lives together are based on this trust and confidence - *con-fidence*, "with faith". And that faith has to be constantly renewed. From time to time it may fade, or be broken. But such faith has its own imperatives for survival and growth.

On a more mundane level, I fall ill. I call the doctor. There is no certainty that her medicine will cure me. I know only too well that medical science is inexact, imperfectly understood even by doctors. But I place my confidence in her. I have faith in her proposed remedies, albeit a rather sceptical kind of faith which is contingent on their working at least some of the time.

I live in a consumer society where the free market is god, where greed is exalted, where property rights take precedence over human rights, where there is said to be no such thing as society. I have lived through a massive dismantling of collective and cooperative enterprise and a triumphalist demolition of social values. If I remain a socialist, a communist or a liberal social democrat, I exemplify the triumph of faith over experience. Faith, to borrow Byron's image, is flying the flag of freedom (or whatever banner we may be carrying) *against* the wind.

My point is that it takes faith to be a humanist or a Quaker. There is no certainty, no logic of history, no immutable grand design which guarantees that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well; that love will prevail

over hatred, "that of God in everyone" over that of the devil, the "ocean of light" over "the ocean of darkness and death". If, before we try to live by them, we demand rational demonstration or proof that human values of love, compassion, sympathy and fellowship will prevail, we shall never get started. If we choose to try to live by these values, to build a society in which these values are exemplified, we had better recognise that we are unfurling our banners against the wind. We are choosing to live by faith.

So I am not proclaiming a new faith-tradition, a belief-system called Quaker Humanism! I am saying what is obvious: that we live by faith, whether we like it or not. And I am saying, which is perhaps less obvious, that there is much common ground between Quaker faith and humanist faith, which is what we are about to explore, first by unpacking the word. . .

### *Quaker*

Quakerism was the product of particular historical circumstances, as all religious and social movements must be. Its particular historical context was that of the seventeenth century English civil war and revolution. The civil war of the 1640s and the revolutionary republic of the 1650s were together the climax of a crisis of authority. Who was to rule in state and church when state and church were indivisible, joined at the hip? Where did visible authority lie? With God's anointed king and bishops, or with the people's own chosen representatives in Parliament and a reformed, accountable ministry?

That ultimate authority lay with "God" was unquestioned by either side. What was disputed was the visible agency by which this ultimate authority was exercised. The crisis had its origin in the Reformation a century earlier when the traditional claim of Pope and Church to infallible authority was rejected, in Britain and half of Europe. The vacuum thus created was filled by the scriptures. A bible which, hitherto, only the Pope and his priests had the right to interpret, was now available to all by the invention of printing and by vernacular translations. For Protestants at least, the book replaced the church as the ultimate repository of all truth.

In 1640 the two sides of the religious and political divide had this in common: both claimed to stand on the authority of the bible. Churchman and sectary, royalist and Roundhead, cited scripture to their own purposes. It was in this confusion that a new (or renewed) idea began to gain currency in radical circles, particularly among the unpropertied classes which had hitherto been excluded from political society, including those who would come to be called Quakers. The idea, seized upon in particular by plain country men and women and "rude mechanicals" in the towns and cities, was that neither church nor scripture had ultimate authority. Such authority, or the closest one could

approach to it, was an inward rather than an outward thing, a matter of inner conviction rather than outer compulsion: a matter of conscience.

Since this was the seventeenth and not the twentieth century, with a popular culture saturated in religious and biblical imagery and language, this subversive notion was expressed in religious terms which then had resonance for all but now resonates strongly only with those who think it worthwhile to make the effort to connect past with present ways of expression. Inner conviction was expressed by the metaphor of "inward Light". George Fox did not coin the term: it was used before him by Gerrard Winstanley, a few radical Baptists and some of those whom Quakers later called "Ranters" (though there never was such a sect - which is another story). But Fox's writings are permeated with it. Sometimes it is a light located within, but not identical with, conscience: "the light of God in your conscience", "the Light of Jesus Christ, that shines in every one of your consciences", "the Light is that which exercises the conscience towards God and towards man". But at other times Fox seems at pains to make the light a metaphor for conscience itself: "the light of conscience", "the Light is that which will let you see your transgressions", "the Light which lets man see sin and evil", and most explicitly, "Thou knowest theft is sin... Thou wilt say something in thy conscience tells thee so".

Both the emphasis on inwardness and the metaphor of light itself were new and strange in Fox's day. Inwardness seemed dangerous. If conscience was king, where did that leave a flesh-and-blood king and his bishops, or even a Lord Protector and his ministers? And light itself was a dazzlingly fresh metaphor. The image of Christ as "the light of the world" was familiar enough from John's Gospel, but the nature of light itself was coming under new scrutiny in the seventeenth century, among both artists and scientists. Rembrandt and Vermeer were experimenting with techniques for representing light and exploring its qualities in paint on canvas. Rembrandt used light to search out the darkness, and thus to penetrate mystery and heighten emotional awareness. Vermeer sometimes used a *camera obscura* projector to organise his light and shade, achieving a startling new realism in recording the eye's experience of natural light, usually through a window, on geometrical shapes, surfaces, and human faces.

At the very same time, modern science was emerging from its infancy, with Isaac Newton's investigations into the nature and properties of light. What was to become the Royal Society started in London in 1645 with meetings of "divers worthy persons, inquisitive into natural philosophy and other parts of human learning, and particularly of what hath been called the *New Philosophy* or *Experimental Philosophy*". Experimental as distinct from speculative science was all the rage in the 1650s. When Fox and his radical contemporaries made light their central metaphor for inward authority and

insisted, as they did, that what they knew they knew "experimentally" - by direct experience of what worked and what didn't, rather than by what the ancients or contemporary authorities said was true - they were speaking a new language of a new scientific understanding which was beginning to change their world into ours.

It is difficult for us today, when the primacy of conscience and experience is accepted as something of a truism (and when even Cardinal Hume concedes that where conscience and church authority conflict, as for some of the faithful they do over contraception, conscience takes precedence), to appreciate just how profoundly subversive was this rejection of traditional outward authority when its application was extended from the arts and sciences to private and social morality. It sanctioned rebellion against priest and magistrate, preacher and sacred text. Priest and magistrate warned that this inward light would lead to "levelling", democracy and an assault on the sacred rights of property - and they were right. It introduced a new principle of personal autonomy which would start a revolution of far greater consequence than Cromwell's "Good Old Cause".

Quakers, as a matter of simple historical fact, played a critical part in this revolution, first by helping formulate the idea in the language of the times, then by living the life required by their radical surrender to conscience and subsequent rejection of outward authority, despite persecution to the death.

Early Quakers quaked: they quivered with zeal. Some walked naked through the streets as a sign of humankind's nakedness before God. They rejected Puritan bibliolatry but embraced Puritan rejection of worldly pleasure, frowning on laughter, damning the arts as belonging to the devil, and fearing sensuality as a siren-call to hell. That was the negative part of their seventeenth century inheritance. But theirs was also a faith for the future. Their confidence in their inner light, their reliance on an enlightened conscience, led them to challenge the world in which they lived, and dedicate themselves to the task of transforming it.

So they *were* levellers, believers in a radical social and economic equality. Fox himself, who was by no means the most radical of the early leaders, campaigned for the abolition of the aristocracy and the clergy, demanding that the gentry's estates and church property alike be expropriated, taken into public ownership, and managed for the public good. (Would that the latter-day Society of Friends might adopt the same programme as part of its social testimony!). They elevated women to a status they had never had before (in religious and social life, if not yet in the home). They urged mass civil disobedience to unjust laws, and went to jail in their thousands for their own defiance. No punishment was too hard to bear, no suffering too harsh to endure, "*for conscience' sake*".

The imperative of conscience, rather than that of church, state or sacred

text, proved a deep and deadly subversion of the old order. Little by little, politicians and priests were forced to yield ground. First religious, then political dissent was grudgingly granted a degree of legal toleration. If Quakers failed to achieve the abolition of a professional priesthood, they won - for themselves and every other kind of dissenter - freedom to place themselves outside priestly jurisdiction. And their non-violent mass civil disobedience campaigns opened a way to the development of an institutional "loyal opposition", the foundation of a modern pluralist society.

I may be accused of exaggerating early Friends' political achievements at the expense of their religious and spiritual life (and I would concede that the "liberal" interpretation of history outlined in these few paragraphs is a huge simplification of far more complex processes: in particular, like most Quaker histories written to date, it under-emphasises the class conflict of which Quakerism was for a time a militant expression). But those pioneering Friends would not have separated the social and political from the religious and spiritual. It was all one to them.

Between the seventeenth century and the end of the twentieth, between the early-modern period and our own "postmodern" era, lie the immense upheavals and convulsions of Enlightenment rationalism, the industrial revolution, scientific discovery and evolutionary theory, the globalisation of culture, the "death of God" and his replacement by secular utopias such as communism and the irrational "spiritualities" of New Age notions. Quakers are not what Quakers were because the world is not what it was. But it was the conviction of the supremacy of conscience over king, court, bishop and bible that opened the doors of the modern and postmodern world. The "inward light" produced the Enlightenment, and the Enlightenment produced...

### **Humanism**

Jack Miles, in his book *God: a Biography*, shows how Yahweh, the god of ancient tribal Israel, begins life as the central character of the Old Testament myths, always in the action, smiting Israel's enemies and Israel itself, producing a plague of boils here and a talking ass there, demanding exclusive worship and obedience, promising, threatening, protecting, massacring as the mood took him. But as his story unfolds, his role changes. He begins to fade a little as the tribe itself takes up the foreground. By the end of the Old Testament he has been side-lined. The later prophets are careful to speak in his name, but he doesn't any longer do much speaking himself. Some of the last-to-be-written books don't mention him at all, not once. The vigorous master-god who once directed the affairs of a nation and manipulated history to his own supreme satisfaction eventually gets pensioned off as the Ancient of

Days, remote, inscrutable, granted only the occasional cameo appearance by the tribal story-tellers.

Something similiar happened in eighteenth century England. The God whose glory, power and authority had been claimed and proclaimed by virtually all the warring factions of the 1640s and '50s found himself written out of the Age of Reason's script. For some, the Deists, he became the distant Prime Mover who had lit the blue touchpaper and walked away from the explosion. For many he was at best one of life's optional extras. How had the almighty fallen!

God's recent biographers like Jack Miles and Karen Armstrong have made nonsense of the old view that God is "the same, yesterday, today and for ever". He patently is not so. Isaiah's suffering-servant God of all humanity is not the same as the older tribal deity who urged his followers to enslave their enemies and help themselves to their enemies' women-folk. The God of wrath and vengeance is not the same as the God of Jesus' beatitudes, and that God again is surely not the same as the one who killed Ananias and Sapphira for clinging to private property when the early church taught communism. God has changed again, incorporating the characteristics of other deities, by the time Christianity is the official religion of the Roman empire. Through the medieval period the God of eastern and western churches is significantly different, and Islam's Allah, nominally the same Being, is different again. Gods, including the god named God, are fashioned by human history and culture.

Early Friends made their own contribution to the never ending process of fashioning God anew. More than three hundred years later, the God of the first Quakers does not look very different from the God of mainstream puritanism, but contemporaries saw the difference and were scandalised by it. So unrecognisable to orthodox Christians was the Quakers' conception of God that Friends were accused of atheism, blasphemy and witchcraft. Why was this?

Quakerism emerged from a radical milieu which experimented with new ideas about God. God was Reason, wrote Gerrard Winstanley. Joseph Salmon thought that "God is that pure and perfect being in whom we all are, move and live; that secret blood, breath and life that silently courseth through the hidden veins and close arteries of the whole creation". Jacob Bauthumley believed that God was in everyone and every living thing, "man and beast, fish and fowl, and every green thing, from the highest cedar to the ivy on the wall". "He does not exist outside the creatures". He is in "this dog, this tobacco pipe, he is me and I am him". This sounds like one form of Quaker Universalism three centuries before the Quaker Universalist Group! Winstanley was associated with Friends, and was clearly an important if unacknowledged influence on George Fox, as was Bauthumley. Fox certainly did not go as far

as they did in denying a personal God, even in his most radical youthful period when he was clearly attracted by the notion that "all things come by nature", but his emphasis, and that of most Friends who collected around him, was on God's immanence rather than his transcendence. There was "that of God in everyone". Insofar as Fox located God, it was in the human conscience, much as Blake more than a century later would locate him "in the human breast". Early Quakers and the rest of the Reformation Left democratised the patriarchal God of traditional Christianity, liberating him from the clutches of churches and churchmen and refashioning him as a power incarnated in all humanity and manifested in the individual conscience. No wonder Quakers were first among the "atheistical monsters" denounced by the pious and scandalised Walter Charleton in 1652.

Later and more respectable generations of Friends pulled back from such radicalism. A much older Fox, in his occasional backpeddling mode, could write in terms not markedly different from the historic creeds of the hated steeplehouses. But early Friends and their radical allies had struck a note which was not to be silenced, even by their own emergent revisionist hierarchies. Liberal thinkers inside and outside the Society (but mostly outside) developed the idea of the inseparability of the human and the divine. William Blake expressed it in poetry of genius. God is the "virtues of delight ...mercy, pity, peace and love", but these are also wholly human: "the human form divine". The new disciplines of biblical criticism, pioneered by Fox's friend Samuel Fisher in the 1650s (a century ahead of the continental "pioneers") led to similar insights. Just as nineteenth century geology, biology, cosmology and physics began to make the old transcendent God something of an anomaly, the God immanent in humanity, the God *who is* mercy, pity, peace and love in mythological dress, re-emerged in the humanist interpretations of the German theologians Ludwig Feuerbach and D.F.Strauss and their English followers. Modern humanism was born, soon taking a wholly secular form.

There are instructive parallels between the receptions accorded to Quakers in the seventeenth and humanists in the nineteenth century. Both challenged prevailing orthodoxy and were made to pay for it with scorn, persecution and denial of civil rights. Both were the product of an intensely moral critique of institutional religion and society. Both had their martyrs and made their own mythologies. Both won a grudging respect for their fortitude and fidelity to conscience. I see the two traditions as different parts of that wider and most honourable tradition of religious, social and political dissent.

Humanists are rightly identified with the view that all religions, and therefore all gods, scriptures, mythologies, liturgies and institutions, are wholly human creations. The values they seek to promote are wholly human values. God is, at best, a mythological symbol of these values, a metaphor for them, a projection of them, an *image*-ined protagonist of the rich narratives human

communities have created to express and interpret these values. At worst, he is the tool by which the powerful have oppressed the powerless, a cynical fiction, an extinct species, or just a big mistake. But whether for good or ill, he and the religions which give him shape, from Zoroastrianism to Quakerism, are man- and woman-made, the products of human history, human culture and human language. There is no room in this scheme of things for "revelation", in the traditional sense of a divine being allowing humanity, or chosen representatives of humanity, occasional glimpses of himself and his wisdom.

Is this humanist view compatible with a Christian or Quaker perception? So long as Christianity and its Quaker variant insisted that the only sound and acceptable understanding of God was as an objective being, independent of humanity and human consciousness, a "real" power or force or spirit or influence capable of acting in a supernatural freedom of the laws of nature, the new humanism and the old religion were clearly irreconcilable. But recently a more profound, more liberating understanding of God has re-emerged in churches, synagogues and meeting-houses. I say re-emerged because its roots are deep: Aquinas insisted that God did not "exist" as an objective entity, and Eckhart taught that we discover God by taking leave of him. Blake knew that "all deities reside in the human breast". Twentieth century theologians like Don Cupitt in Britain, Thomas Altizer in America and Lloyd Geering in New Zealand have simply given this submerged tradition a contemporary post-modern expression.

Indeed, to call it a "submerged" tradition is hardly fair to eastern religions, some of which were thinking about these things a millenium or two before Christianity appeared on the scene, and are still thinking about them today. In *The Independent* on August 3 1996 the Reverend John Kennedy wrote about a Hindu friend who had in his sitting-room an image of the god Ganesh, the one with an elephant's trunk in place of a nose. Since this particular Hindu friend was an educated scientist, an industrial chemist, Kennedy asked him if he truly believed in this outlandish deity. "Yes", he replied, "I accord to Ganesh every divine attribute - except that of existence".

Of course some humanists deny that there can be any value whatever in any concept of God, whether traditionally "realist", or symbolic and "non-realist". For them, all religion is dead and any form of God-thought and God-language is obsolete and a brake on human progress. Paradoxically, such convictions are sometimes expressed with the same vehemence, the same emotional charge, the same dogmatic certainty which characterises so much religious discourse. Dogmatism and fundamentalism are not confined to the religious. Many humanists, however, do recognise the value of religious language and imagery in connecting us with the past and giving imaginative depth to the ways in which we interpret and express our life-experience. Above all, humanists and Friends alike place their emphasis on deeds rather



than creeds, on mercy, pity, peace and love, but also on justice, integrity, equality and community. With William Morris's John Ball they know that "Fellowship is heaven and lack of fellowship is hell, fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death" (and I am sure Morris and his hedge-priest included women among their "fellows"!). For the imaginative humanist as well as the Quaker, the language of religion, understood as metaphor and poetry, retains its ancient power to fire the imagination, to strengthen commitment to the values the language symbolises, and to inspire to action.

The humanist Albert Einstein wrote in 1934: "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. It was the experience of mystery - even if mixed with fear - that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man."

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**"But what about . . . ?"**

Some readers who have reached this far will by now have questions. Where, if at all, does Christ fit into all this? What does a Quaker humanist do in meeting for worship? Does a Quaker humanist pray? What does a Quaker humanist make of "following the leadings of the Spirit" and "seeking the will of God"? Is there a place in Quaker humanism for mysticism and spirituality? And some, including Quaker Universalists, will question the value of a perspective which looks to them narrowly human-centred, confining God or "the Spirit" to human consciousness instead of locating the divine in all living things, as Bauthumley did when Quakerism was first in the making. I will take these questions one by one and offer some provisional answers.

### **Jesus Christ**

What about Christ and Christianity? Quakerism began as a profound revolt against the Christian church, but the revolt took place within a culture which had been shaped, over the best part of one-and-a-half millenia, by an over-arching Christian tradition. Inevitably, then, the Quaker revolt itself was shaped by Christianity and articulated in a specifically Christian language. Early Quakers thought of themselves as reforming Christianity, returning to the purity of the primitive church. Modern secular humanism has also developed within a Christian culture, and has partaken of that culture more than many

humanists care to admit. This is why humanism has made little headway in wholly non-Christian cultures such as Islam and the eastern traditions.

One of the most persistent criticisms levelled at early Friends by orthodox churchmen was that they "denied Christ". A few pioneers actually did question the existence of an historical Jesus, but most Friends followed Fox in asserting that Jesus of Nazareth had indeed lived and died on the cross, but that *the experience of Christ within, here, today* was more important than dogma about the Jesus of sixteen hundred years earlier. "Christ" was thus appropriated as a living principle within, seemingly interchangeable with "the light": another metaphor for conscience and the ideal. It followed (though Friends were not always ready to acknowledge this) that non-Christian cultures might have different but, for them, no less valid metaphors.

Humanist theologians in the nineteenth century - Feuerbach and Strauss, for instance (both translated from German into English by George Eliot) - went a step further than early Friends and humanised Jesus. Albert Schweitzer undertook a quest for the historical Jesus and found him elusive and ultimately irrecoverable. We were, and are, left with only one Jesus: the Jesus of a literary tradition, the Jesus who is the hero of the Jesus stories, rather as Hamlet is the hero of *Hamlet* and Frodo Baggins the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*.

This is not to trivialise Jesus but to draw on the literature in order to reappropriate him for ourselves and our time. "For the Christian", writes Don Cupitt in *The Sea of Faith*, "[the] task of working out a vision of God takes the ... human and concrete form of framing a personal vision of Christ, who is our own ideal *alter ego*, our true Self that we are to become, our religious ideal actualised in human form". That seems to me the essence of a specifically Christian or Christ-centred Quakerism. But it is also profoundly humanist. Note how it is the humanists who have often succeeded where the church so often fails in refashioning a Christ for our own times: Denis Potter's *Son of Man*, Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*.

But in our modern multi-cultural, multi-faith communities the Christian Quaker and post-Christian humanist must never forget that Christ may be his "religious ideal actualised in human form", her symbol of the enlightened conscience, but the many other and no less valid religious and secular traditions which share our planet and perhaps our parish will have their own visionary projections of the "ideal *alter ego*", their own symbols of conscience and transcendence. To recognise this is to accept cultural pluralism. To understand that no tradition has a monopoly of truth or virtue is to embrace religious and cultural relativism. To acknowledge that Christian and non-

Christian faith systems alike are the products of human imagination shaped by human language is humanism.

### **Worship**

So what *does* a Quaker humanist do in meeting for worship? The simple answer is: worship. Worship does not necessarily require an outside object. As Harvey Gillman (whom, by quoting, I do not wish to tar with my humanist brush!) writes in *A Light that is Shining: An introduction to Quakers*, "the word [worship] derives from the word 'worth'. It is the time Quakers give to finding worth in their lives" - and as Harvey would be the first to add, not only Quakers but others who meet for worship as Christians, Hindus or whatever. Quaker meeting for worship is for me a valuable hour in the week when, in the company of Friends, I can focus on "finding worth", on "whatsoever things are true, honest, just and lovely" - and focus, too, on minding the gap between my aspirations and my failure to begin to live up to them in my personal, social and political life.

If it is insisted that I must worship *something*, I worship God, understanding God as the symbol and imagined personification of mercy, pity, peace and love - the values which, though they can hardly be anything other than wholly human in origin and expression, I choose to treat as if they were absolute and transcendent. And if we make the effort to penetrate beyond the specific language and ritual, do we not find that every culture which truly worships God (as distinct from co-opting his authority and power for human ends) is in its own way celebrating and reasserting what it has come to regard as ultimate values, those it acknowledges as the inescapable moral imperatives? Has not religious faith, in all its variety of forms, always been at best a way of creating working frameworks to give shape and coherence to human values?

To "seek the will of God", then, or "follow the leadings of the Spirit", is *not* to suppose there is a "real" God or Spirit out there with a will of his (her? its?) own which will be revealed to those (especially in a Quaker meeting?) who open their minds to it. Do we not all recognise, in our heart of hearts, that this is a figure of speech, a powerful and imaginative way of expressing a commitment to a common search for what is right and best for all? The Quaker humanist will aspire to seek the will of God in this sense not only in Friends' business meetings and the religious realm but in secular life too: in business, in politics, in social and domestic life, and in rest and recreation. Early Friends abolished the old distinction between sacred and secular, just as their more radical allies on the Reformation Left abolished the distinction

between the human and the divine. Unhappily, both distinctions have crept back by stealth into our discourse.

### **Prayer**

Does a Quaker humanist pray? Not in the crude, literal sense of imagining that there are divine ears out there, listening-in and running the universe as a non-stop request programme. Real prayer is real action. As the old Quaker poem put it, "Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer". Alternatively, prayer is an attitude of mind, an assumption of humility, an acknowledgment that we don't have all the answers, a recognition of our own essential inadequacies. This is the kind of prayer which changes things because it changes us.

### **Mysticism**

Humanism demythologises both mysticism and spirituality, discarding their supernatural or occult associations but seeking to penetrate to the essence of the human experience they describe. Thus mature and imaginative humanism does not deny the mysterious, the unknown, the sense of transcendence and the "peak experience" described in very different cultures as a sense of "unity with the creation", but it holds that the experience of these "visionary gleams", of finding oneself "surprised by joy", requires no real, objective God or supernatural power to validate it.

John Dewey famously pointed out (in *A Common Faith*, 1934) that "history exhibits many types of mystic experience, and each of these types is contemporaneously explained by the concepts that prevail in the culture and the circle in which the phenomena occur". American Indians induce mystic experiences by fasting, Hindus and Buddhists by meditation (and, one might add, an entire sub-culture today seeks something similar with the help of drugs). "There is the mysticism of intense aesthetic experience independent of any theological or metaphysical interpretation. There is the heretical mysticism of William Blake...". Dewey emphasised that "There is no reason for denying the existence of experiences that are called mystical. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that, in some degree of intensity, they occur so frequently that they may be regarded as normal manifestations... Yet the mystic experience yields ... various results in the way of belief to different persons, depending upon the surrounding culture of those who undergo it".

The experience itself is undeniable, but interpretation is variable. The devout Catholic or Quaker believer in a transcendent God may interpret her mystical experience as one of unity with the Creator. Others may interpret identical and no less intense experiences without reference to religion. Coleridge recognised the transcultural nature of such experiences and called them "vivid spectra", Wordsworth spoke of "visionary gleams", and today's



psychologists of "eidetic imagery" or "peak experiences". Mystical experience is "religious" only if we choose to use the vocabulary of religion to help make sense of it. It is human, aesthetic, psychological if we so describe it. Unhappily, there are those who proclaim their own mysticism as a way of asserting their higher level of openness and awareness: an unappealing form of spiritual elitism. Those who do not have the experience, they suggest, are less open, have hardened their hearts, are not in touch with their inner selves. Equally arrogant are those who dismiss all "peak experiences" as delusions or the after-effect of a bad meal. The Quaker humanist will respect the experience, but will not insist on any one interpretation of it.

The physicist Fritjof Capra describes his own mystical experience as "the core spirituality that comes from deep ecology... I have a real emotional connection to the earth... I feel very much at peace by the sea or by mountains. Those are moments when I feel most alive - this rush of feeling alive - most spiritual in the sense of the 'spirit' as the 'breath of life' ". For Capra, there is no essential distinction between the inner mind and outer matter, between the mystical and the mundane, between the flesh and the spirit. One newspaper reporting his work describes his message as follows:- "Take you, for example. You are irredeemably connected to the river and the earth. This is not a denial of your self's identity but an extension of it, not the ego's sorry isolation but its splendid relation to the river and the tidemark, the hurricane and the heather, the stinkhorn fungus and the lyre-tailed nightjar. This is Liberation Physics; an intellectual passport to new lands... [and] an unusual reassurance that science is not the enemy of nature but its ally, and not the reducer of mystery but an enhancer of awe". What is mystical experience if not "this rush of feeling alive", this experimental knowledge of the interconnectedness of all things? And you don't have to be a Quaker, a Christian, a fortune-teller or a believer in objective gods to delight in similar experiences.

### ***Spirituality***

"The spirit" and "spirituality" are terms often heard in Quaker meetings, and increasingly in the mainstream churches and New Age movements. Many Friends today feel more at ease speaking of God as "the Spirit", and many modern Christians prefer the less well-defined term "spirituality" to the more formal "religion". Spirituality seems personal and free-flowing, where religion carries an authoritarian and institutional smack; spirituality is relatively dogma-free, where religion and dogma seem locked in unholy embrace; spirituality is about attitude, where religion is about belief.

"Spirit", as noted in quoting Capra, derives from a Latin word meaning breath, and, by extension, life. (Interestingly, Greek and Sanskrit also use the same root word for spirit and breath.) The link with breath is preserved in words like *expire*, to breath one's last, and *inspire*, which literally means to

breathe new life into. To the ancients, breath must have seemed a magical, mysterious thing. It was invisible, but there was no doubt that it existed. It filled the lungs and blew out candles. To breathe was to live, and to stop breathing was to die. It is not difficult to see how, by extension, the world of the ancients came to be populated by these magical "breaths", invisible beings bearing the essence of life: spirits.

By an odd inversion, some of these "living breaths" were supposed to be walking dead. The breath of life had left the body, but was held to have acquired an immaterial existence of its own. Thus the essence of life became the essence of death. A spirit was a ghost - or, at least, a ghost was one kind of spirit.

A spirit world helped explain the otherwise inexplicable. Good things were linked to good spirits, bad things to bad. A complex mythology of spirits undergirds every major religious tradition.

William Blake, who called the spirits gods or geniuses, described how it all happened in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with gods or geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity;

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, and enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects - thus began priesthood;

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounc'd that the gods had order'd such things.

Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.

Blake summarises the history of religion in a single short and brilliant passage. The spirits, or gods, or geniuses are not real entities: they were created by the poetic imagination. (When asked where his visions came from, Blake tapped his forehead.) But priesthoods arose to "enslave the vulgar" by stealing the spirits from the poets and artists who made them, building contrived forms of worship around them, and pretending that the gods they had stolen and conscripted to their purpose had themselves "order'd such things". "Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast", the human creative imagination.

Over the last two or three hundred years, particularly in the western world, humankind has begun to see through the enslavement strategies of priesthoods and reclaim the spirits for the poetic imagination. Gradually we

have abandoned belief in the existence of good and bad fairies, angels and devils, evil spirits and the Devil himself. God (and, for some, ghosts and aliens) is the last survivor of this ancient belief system. But he too, says Blake, resides in the human breast.

So today, when we speak of a divine spirit or the human spirit, the Holy Spirit or the spirit of the age, we are using a powerful and ancient metaphor for the very essence of life. Humanists do not believe in spirits as the ancients came to believe in them, as living beings without material bodies: demons and devils, ghoullies and ghosties. But this does not mean that humanists deny any meaning to spirituality. We have material needs - food, drink, clothing, a roof over our heads - and we have spiritual needs: love, sex and companionship, the enrichment of mind and imagination, laughter, fulfilment, values to live by. These are the essence, the very breath of human life.

A British Humanist Association briefing on "spiritual development in education" put it this way: "The 'spiritual' dimension comes from our deepest humanity. It finds expression in aspirations, moral sensibility, creativity, love and friendship, response to natural and human beauty, scientific and artistic endeavour, appreciation and wonder at the natural world, intellectual achievement and physical activity, surmounting suffering and persecution, selfless love, the quest for meaning and for values by which to live". The same briefing quoted Julian Huxley, first president of the BHA: "The spiritual elements which are usually styled divine are part and parcel of human nature" - a point made most powerfully in the same document by the eminent psychologist Professor A.H.Maslow: "The spiritual life is part of our biological life. It is the 'highest' part of it, but yet part of it. The spiritual life is part of the human essence. It is a defining characteristic of human nature, without which human nature is not full human nature. It is part of the real self, of one's identity, of one's inner core, of one's specieshood, of full humanness". How well this chimes with the Quaker Universalist Group's recently revised testimony that "spiritual awareness is accessible to everyone of any religion or none"!

Of course there are some humanists, particularly those who prefer to call themselves rationalists or secularists, who shy away from the word "spiritual" because of what they see as its religious connotations, just as there are religious people, including some Quakers, who insist that the spiritual and mystical lies essentially outside and beyond human consciousness, culture and language, and must necessarily relate to a real God. These very different views are to be respected. But it seems to me that both are unnecessarily narrow and therefore unsatisfying.

Before leaving the question of spirituality, I must acknowledge the position of those who would criticise my emphasis on *human* spirituality as itself too narrowly human-centred. Those who press this criticism prefer to

emphasise the spirit as flowing through all living creatures, through the rocks and the waters, the earth itself, the sun, moon, stars and the whole of creation. They can summon to their support the radical precursors of Quakerism I have cited - Salmon and Bauthumley - and a glorious company of poets, panentheists and creation spirituality theologians, as well as "liberation physicists" like Fritjof Capra. The spirit, they insist with Wordsworth, rolls through all things.

I agree. But this - even with the physicist Capra - is the language of the imagination, not the language of science: the imagery of the poet, not the factual description of a police notebook. When Blake breaks into one of his finest songs of joy and, refusing to describe the sun as merely "a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea", insists it is nothing less than "an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty", he is speaking (or singing) as a visionary, not as a tabulator of empirical facts. So too is Wordsworth in seeing a new-born infant coming into the world "trailing clouds of glory", or sensing the spirit that "rolls ... through all things". Blake and Wordsworth saw the world *as if* it were infused with the glory of God, the holy spirit, and their poetic vision helped them express the reverence for life and the natural world which resonates again so strongly today after two centuries of blind neglect and destruction. But to suppose that the hills and trees, fleas and flatworms, mountains and molehills literally partake of a "real" quality called spirituality is a naive and sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of visionary, poetic language and the power of metaphor. To suppose that Planet Earth really *is* a living thing, a self-healing, self-sustaining spirit, rather than choosing to live *as if* it were so, is as ploddingly literalist as to believe with the bible fundamentalist that God really did create the world in seven days in the order proposed by the Genesis myth, or that Mary really conceived Jesus without a little loving assistance from Joseph.

To those who say we should be God-centred or eco-centred rather than narrowly focused on our own species, I reply with the assertion radical Quakerism has always made, that the human and the divine are indivisible, just as the body and the stream it drinks from, the flesh and the earth it rots into, the mind and the ecosystem it comprehends, are indivisible. There is no meaningful conflict between the human-centred and the God-centred. If God is no more (but, gloriously, no less) than a projection of our highest and deepest values, and if these must be human values (because no other form of life has created and articulated them), God-centredness just becomes one way, a religious way, of talking about being human.

Much of the aversion sometimes expressed to an avowedly human-centred approach is based on a common misapprehension. It is emphatically *not* the case that humanists generally, and Quaker humanists in particular,

assert the superiority and self-sufficiency of the human species. On the contrary, it is the older biblical tradition which gives man dominance over the rest of creation, setting him apart as uniquely created in God's own image. Quaker humanists reject that view, as they also reject those versions of evolutionary theory which see humanity as the pinnacle of some purposeful and conscious process, the finished product of nature's hidden mind and hand. We are humbly aware, as our predecessors were not always aware, that we are *one* product of evolution, *one* species, *one* part of a vast eco-system that functioned before we evolved and would probably continue to function if we succeeded in destroying ourselves, unless in our folly we took the whole lot with us. The important fact that ours is the one form of life which has developed the ability, through the awesome complexity of language symbols, to be conscious of itself, conscious of its own consciousness, reflective and analytical, even mindful of its own unique responsibilities, must not blind us to our essential interconnectedness with and interdependency on the whole chain of life.

In acknowledging our human-centredness we simply acknowledge our human limitations. Our viewpoint *has* to be human because we *are* human. It cannot be other because *we* cannot be other. We cannot think ourselves out of our humanity to some universal viewpoint. If from time to time our poets and visionaries seem to succeed in doing so, they manage it only by the exercise of their human imagination, so that even what seems an extra-human perspective turns out to be wholly human. Transcendence itself is a human concept, as is the biblical Creator-God, Fox's notion of "that of God in everyone", Bauthumley's idea that "God does not exist outside the creatures", Wordsworth's rolling spirit, and modern concerns for Earth-Quakerism, deep ecology and the integrity of the universe. Eco-centrism, creation spirituality and occult mysticism are no less human concepts, formulated by human minds from human experience, than the avowedly human-centred outlook I have been describing.

### ***Quaker humanism***

I hope to have demonstrated that it is possible to be true to both the Quaker and the humanist tradition, because although each tradition is distinct, their paths cross and overlap. My own Quakerism is hugely enriched by humanism, and my humanism is given a depth and a connectedness with the past by its alliance with radical Quakerism. But the Society of Friends and the Quaker Universalist Group both encompass a richly diverse range of views, or ways of interpreting our human experience, and I recognise that not all Friends will find that what I have called Quaker humanism speaks to their condition. I ask of them only that they recognise that it does speak to some of us, and that we too may have a part to play in fashioning a new Quakerism and a new

humanism for the twentyfirst century. The new radical Quakerism and visionary humanism will value the rational over the irrational and the imagination over the literal. It will employ both head and heart. It will be suspicious of a lazy reliance on an unreflective intuition and will recognise that the mind must be exercised if we would understand ourselves and our world. Its preoccupation will be the demands of our own century, in the language of our own times, not the demands and thought-forms of the seventeenth or first centuries. Its adventure will be the creation and re-creation of human value, the application of mercy, pity, peace and love to the complexities of social and personal life, and thus to William Penn's project of "mending" the world and George Fox's vision of "a New Earth as well as a New Heaven".

Nor is the kind of "religious" humanism I have tried to articulate confined to Quakers, in or out of the Quaker Universalist Group. The Sea of Faith Network brings together Friends, members of all the mainstream churches and wider faith traditions, and committed humanists with no religious allegiance to explore and promote a reasonable faith for rational humanity. There is work to be done - but we are not alone.

Quaker humanists will need fellow travellers and co-workers in this project, just as Fox needed allies on the radical left and in Cromwell's army. Such allies may be found among the broader spectrum of religious humanists in all the mainstream churches, currently networking in the Sea of Faith movement; in the Jewish humanist movement which has started to make its presence felt in the United States; in the liberal, universalist wings of the world's great faiths; among those secular humanists who are more concerned with human values than endlessly tilting at the cosmic Father Christmas; among nonrealist philosophers and "liberation physicists"; and, I suspect, among the activists, anarchists and subversive free spirits in Young Friends General Meeting, provided they do not pay too much attention to their elders.

Words will not build a New Earth: neither speeches nor pamphlets. Pamphleteer Gerrard Winstanley was clear about that in 1649. "My mind was not at rest," he wrote, "because nothing was acted, and thoughts ran in me that words and writings were all nothing and must die. For action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing".

## Further reading

This is not an academic thesis so I have not spattered the text with footnotes. Nevertheless, some readers may wish to follow up some of my references, or pursue their reading in the subject further.

On early Quakerism and seventeenth century radicalism, two good starting points are works by non-Quaker historians: Christopher Hill's classic *The World Turned Upside Down* (Temple Smith, 1972), and Barry Reay's *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (Temple Smith, 1985). For a modern, scholarly, revisionist biography of George Fox try H.Larry Ingle's *First Among Equals* (OUP, 1994). See also my own paper "Public Policy and Politics in Fox's Thought: The Un-militant Tendency in Early Quakerism", in *New Light on George Fox*, edited by Michael Mullett (Sessions, York, 1993); my article "The Quaker-Military Alliance" in a forthcoming (1997) issue of *Friends' Quarterly*; and *In Fox's Footsteps*, by David and Anthea Boulton, which explores the relevance of Fox's theology of radical immanence to our own times, to be published by Sessions and Dales Historical Monographs in 1997.

For a valuable discussion, with sources, of Fox's references linking "light" to "conscience" see Rex Ambler's paper "The Discipline of Light", to be published in the 1996 Proceedings of the Woodbrooke Quaker Theology Seminar. For more on Bauthumley, Salmon and Winstanley see Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*, but on Winstanley in particular, David W. Petegorsky's classic *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, written in the 1930s for the Left Book Club but republished in 1995 by Alan Sutton. Petegorsky was writing before more recent historians uncovered direct evidence linking Winstanley to early Friends.

Religious humanist classics include, from the nineteenth century, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and D.F.Strauss's *The Life of Christ Critically Examined*, both of which could do with modern reissues. I am not sure whether the "Christian atheist" writings of the American theologian and Blake-enthusiast Thomas Altizer are available in Britain, but Don Cupitt's extensive range of books are well worth reading, particularly *Taking Leave of God*, *The Future of the Church* and *The Sea of Faith*. Anthony Freeman's *God in Us* offers an "Anglican-humanist" perspective. *Tomorrow's God*, by the New Zealand Presbyterian theologian Lloyd Geering, is available in Britain from the Sea of Faith Network, as is my *A Reasonable Faith*. I have also written more about Quaker humanism in "Friends and the Next Millenium: The Continuing Quest for a Reasonable Faith", in *Friends' Quarterly*, April 1996, and in my "Open Letter to Harvey Gillman" in *Friends' Quarterly*, October 1996, as well as in *In Fox's Footsteps*, cited above.

Albert Einstein on religious humanism and John Dewey on mysticism are both quoted from Margaret Knight's excellent *Humanist Anthology*, newly

reissued. Fritjof Capra is quoted in an interview with *The Guardian* (November 6 1996) about his latest book *The Web of Life* (Harper Collins). Blake is quoted from his *Collected Works*, but Peter Ackroyd's biography *Blake* and the late E.P.Thompson's *Witness Against the Beast* both offer marvellous (but very different) interpretations of his visionary (but very rational, though he would have disowned the word) ideas. Finally, the Quaker Universalist Group's magazine *Universalist* includes Quaker-humanist articles within its universalist range, while the Sea of Faith Network's quarterly *Sea of Faith* explores and promotes religious faith as a human creation.

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