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### **Signposts to the future?**

## **Creation-centred spirituality and the Sea of Faith**

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Quaker Universalist Group

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## Introduction

In this essay I am attempting to bring together those threads which make up the spiritual reality of my life today. Broadly speaking they are labelled as 'Quaker universalism' and 'creation-centred spirituality'. They are informed by the rapprochement between science and religion, humanistic psychologies, and an understanding of the value of those traditional stories and metaphors which carry the archetypal myths underlying our patterns of consciousness. Whilst creation-centred spirituality speaks most closely to my condition, I also value the insights gained through the Sea of Faith Network meetings and publications. In some ways creation-centred spirituality and the Sea of Faith path complement each other, but at the core they seem to be in a fundamental disagreement. This disagreement is to do with the 'mysticism' of creation-centred spirituality and the 'humanism' of the Sea of Faith. How real is this disagreement? Is it a misunderstanding of language, or of experience, or of false symbolism? This is what I seek to explore.

In the first Quaker Universalist Group pamphlet<sup>1</sup>, John Linton speaks of the search for Truth, and goes on "Whatever we choose, the Truth will still be above and beyond anything that we can now understand". In one way we choose to tread the spiritual path, but in another way it chooses us through the needs arising in our lives. We are drawn along it in search of wholeness or of compensation. In choosing to walk the path of creation spirituality, it is not clear to me how much it is a choice of the will, a spiritual leading, a psychological necessity, or a perceptive participation in the crises facing us in our times; the current face of evil.

It may be a truism to say that we live in a time of great change, but that doesn't make it any less valid a statement. In seventeenth century England, Quakerism arose from the ferment of the times: the 'world turned upside down'. In the centuries between then and now, there was a dominant definition of reality, that is, the world-view of the most powerful groups in society, supported by religious, scientific, educational, political and familial institutions<sup>2</sup>; a general agreement about the formats of the great church and state institutions: about how things should be run. At the end of the twentieth century, this consensus has crumbled with the advent of multi-ethnic societies, globalisation, the increasing dominance of supra-national media and information systems, scientific and technological advances, secularisation, and post-modernism. From this point of view, Don Cupitt states,

... religion increasingly looks like a troublesome survival from the past: a local and traditional way of symbolizing, enacting, and combatively asserting one's own distinctive ethnic identity, in the face of the threat of assimilation into the all-encompassing anonymity of the new global culture. Religion everywhere seems to be embattled, fighting a rearguard action that it must eventually lose."<sup>3a</sup>

In such a volatile situation, alternative realities are emerging from the flux of events.

I am starting from a position which accepts that the traditional Christian stories, as mediated by the traditional Christian church, no longer carry those meanings which are normative for our society, a society which has become secular and post-Christian. Within it, individuals follow different religious paths, either one of the great religious faiths such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism; or a mix from different traditions, some Christianity, Buddhism, paganism; or, become attached to a cultic group; follow a New Age activity; or, indeed, a purely materialistic, secular, path. Whilst accepting that the individual has the perfect right to select and follow any of these paths, I personally do not see them all as being of equal value. The two which seem to me to be the most promising are those being sought after in the Creation Spirituality movement and the Sea of Faith Network. I shall look at each in turn.

But first, what are the criteria by which such movements can be judged? Why do these two paths in particular seem to me to take our individual and collective spiritual journeys forward from a dying to a living vision? Four questions occur to me:

- What is the primary world-view?
- Does this accord with the experience of the individual **and** of the community?
- What ethics does it promote?
- What future does it point to?

For clarity, I am using '**religion**' to refer to the organised structures of the church which involve rituals, faith statements, scripture narratives and given meanings. '**Spirituality**' is more elusive. I like Ursula King's definition<sup>4</sup> that spirituality is used today "as a code word for the search [for] direction, purpose and meaning relating to the deepest dimension of human existence and to our self-understanding". 'Religion' has a tendency to become conservative, lacking the ability to change, but providing a stable environment in which it is possible for 'spirituality' to flourish. But 'spirituality' cannot be confined by religion; it is free-flowing, in process, open to change. Many

people are engaged in the spiritual search outside the borders of religion, which is seen to have become a drag on, or barrier to, the personal search for meaning and reality. This leads me to attempt a definition of another term which is bound up with the current attempt to build a new framework of reality: **postmodernism**.

These are called 'postmodern' times. This seems to mean that the accepted frameworks for understanding the meanings of life have lost their validity as they have been dependent upon the traditional stories which have lost their credibility with the advance of objective scientific knowledge. These former frameworks are therefore no longer normative in society, nor upon the individual. In the postmodern world everything is relative, contingent. Part of this process is called 'deconstruction'. In the religious area of our culture this entails the unpacking of the basic units of our God- and tradition- and Church-speak, and of their interlocking grid of meanings and traditions. But, as David Ray Griffin (quoted in 5a) says, postmodernism also entails *reconstruction*. Creation-centred spirituality deconstructs and also reconstructs in this way.

Creation spirituality offers an invitation to reconstruct religion itself by moving from an original sin ideology to an original blessing or original grace consciousness as a starting point for spirituality; by moving from anthropocentric attitudes to a cosmological and therefore ecological attitude; and by letting go of the three paths of spirituality that have dominated our naming of the journey (that of purgation, illumination and union) in favor of the four paths of the Via Positiva (awe and delight), the Via Negativa (darkness, letting go, and suffering), the Via Creativa (creativity), and the Via Transformativa (compassion, celebration and justice making). This rhythm of deconstructing and reconstructing could so invigorate religion itself that religion would regain its primal meaning, to *re-legere* - that is, to teach people to reread their lives and stories and nature itself, seeing them now as a home for the sacred.

Matthew Fox.<sup>5a</sup>

So postmodernism throws individuals on to their own personal spiritual path in which the search for direction, purpose and meaning cuts across traditional religious boundaries and opens the searcher to receive light from whichever quarter it comes, for example, mindfulness from Buddhism; the many faces of God from Hinduism; the value of women's ways of constructing the world from feminist theology; the interconnectedness of all matter from science; the amazing beauty and fecundity of nature; stories of creation from religions throughout the world; and multi-cultural art, music and symbols. All of these are to be explored and assimilated in their richness

and diversity, and not to be graded nor judged against some cultural or religious checklist of value, but accepted for what they are in their own right and for how they speak to our condition.

Cupitt<sup>3b</sup> proposes that we should embrace postmodernity as we can't escape it. He does this by redefining religion so that it would be "closer to the Kingdom than to the Church, closer to the Sermon on the Mount than to any sort of orthodox theology" and thus "short-termist in outlook". It would "aestheticize" religion "in the sense that it sees religious living in terms of artistic practice and symbolic expression"... religious life is an expressive, world-building activity through which we can get ourselves together and find a kind of posthumous, or retrospective, happiness".

A final term which needs some thought is 'mysticism'. The Sea of Faith outlook denies reality to the transcendent other and decries mysticism. If this became the general view where would it leave the Society of Friends? It is fundamental to Quaker belief that faith is based on personal experience. We believe that there is that of God in everyone, and that this inward Light connects us directly to the Spirit (or God or the transcendent other). This experience is universal and is available to anyone; not limited to Christian believers. Fox's famous challenge of 1652 still speaks directly to us:

Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light, and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?<sup>6</sup>

There are in use today several terms referring to personal experiences of a transcendental or numinous quality. The boundaries between them are blurred: what is the difference between 'peak experience' and 'mystical experience'? Is it of degree or of kind? My own thoughts are that 'peak experiences' refer to special moments where suddenly everything is intensified, the boundaries of the self weaken and we are drawn into an immediate relationship with an event; perhaps an amazing sunset, or music, or worship. We are the sunset, the music, the gathered Meeting. Martin Buber calls it the 'I-Thou' moment. It doesn't last long and we return to our usual senses and the world. We may, or may not, always remember such moments: a poem by Richard Allen<sup>7</sup> speaks of one such:

I walked in the dew-drop morning  
through Creation's meadow.

A lark rose in the silver silence.

I was in him and he in me:  
we were a lark-event together.

But when they asked me back indoors,  
Where had I been? Had I met anyone?  
I could not say.

But I want to make a different claim for 'mystical experiences'. Like the peak experience, there is a special intensified moment when the boundaries of the Self dissolve and the partaker comes into unity with 'something'. But that 'something' is experienced as transcendent, beyond, other ... Jack Mongar<sup>8</sup> describes mysticism as "immediate, intuitive knowledge of a God, or whatever is the equivalent in non-religious language" and says we "can realise the Divine Ground by direct intuition in which the knower is somehow united with the known". However, where I see the major difference in these experiences lies in their effects. The mystical experience carries such a dynamic charge that the partaker is changed permanently. The quality is transformative; the relationship with the world changes. The assurance received in that moment creates a confidence in, or a certainty of, a blessed unity.

There is a close relationship between mysticism and prophecy. William Hocking wrote, "The prophet is the mystic in action" (quoted in Matthew Fox, 5b). Matthew Fox continues,

If it is the prophet's task to *act*, what is it the mystic does? The mystic *sees*. The mystic beholds, holds being up for examination and wondering at. The mystic *listens* and beholds being in that way as well. The mystic awakens and is awakened. This is one reason why the mystic and the artist and the prophet are such integral allies in the spiritual journey of awakening *and* struggling.

Matthew Fox<sup>5b</sup>

The prophet *interferes* with prevailing attitudes and ideologies of the day, "wrestling ... with the demons of inertia and injustice, of closed minds and closed hearts ... [attempting] to live and speak a path of awakening and enlivening ..."<sup>5c</sup> It is my view that creation-centred spirituality is such a mystical and prophetic path.

Modernism, rooted in Western rationalist thinking, sidelined mysticism, and the advance of scientific knowledge and its widespread dissemination eroded humanity's links with the Spirit. Brian Swimme reflects that

Scientific understanding was too new and too different to fit into previously existing modes of human awareness; it needed to establish its own canons, procedures, and experiments without reference to anything outside itself. . . . The sciences were effective in their mechanistic formulations and thus became entrenched in mechanism.<sup>10e</sup>

However, in recent decades, there has been a change of understanding in some areas of science, particularly those of biology, physics, and cosmology. As Swimme (an American specialist in mathematical cosmology) says,

The great wonder is that this empirical, rational journey of science should have any contact at all with spiritual traditions. But in our century, the mechanistic period of science opened out to include a science of mystery: the encounter with the ultimacy of no-thing-ness that is simultaneously a realm of generative potentiality; the dawning recognition that the universe and Earth can be considered as living entities; the awareness that the human person, rather than a separate unit within the world, is the culminating presence of a billion-year process; and the realization that, rather than having a universe filled with things, we are enveloped by a universe that is a single energetic event, a whole, a unified, multiform, and glorious outpouring of being . . .<sup>10e</sup>

The scientific-technological period has enabled the dynamics of the universe to unfold into human consciousness.<sup>10f</sup>

This new creation story of the emerging universe which is in continuing creative process, and in which we finally understand that everything that exists is part of, or has evolved from, the original stuff of the stars, runs counter to previous creation stories of a god-made world. In toppling this 'real' God from 'heaven', the way has re-opened to the direct inward route to the transcendent experience.

### Creation-centred spirituality

As for many others, my first impulse towards creation spirituality came from an increasing awareness of environmental disasters and their present and likely future effects on people, flora, fauna, and the planet itself. The publication of Matthew Fox's *Original Blessing*<sup>9</sup> turned me towards the spiritual aspects of the situation.

In the West we have been used to thinking of human beings as superior to the rest of nature. This attitude is encapsulated in the Genesis creation story where 'man' is given dominion over fish, fowl and every living thing, and given plants and fruit for food (Gen.1:28-29). This licence to exploit the earth for our own benefit has been taken to destructive extremes in the twentieth century where, in the movement of people from the country to town and city, and from agriculture to industry and services, we have become so much more removed from close contact with nature. Water comes from the tap; milk from a carton; peas from the supermarket; petrol from the pump - our feet hardly touch the ground. Natural products have become commodities - to be paid for; we are living un-natural lives. We know now that it cannot last. There are limits to what can be done to the planet before its feedback mechanisms produce conditions inimical to the human species, and another variant of evolution returns to dust. For what seems **not** to be understood is that human beings are simply one product of planetary evolution amongst a trillion others. We are dependent upon the earth but Earth can easily do without us. As the words attributed to Chief Seattle<sup>11</sup> remind us:

This we know. The earth does not belong to us ... We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Much is made of human mental capacities. The ability to think and reason is seen to place us at the peak of the animal kingdom. But what are the criteria of value here? One of the highest human values articulated is that of love/compassion. Our record of love between humans is not good, but so often thinking seems to limit it to that sphere alone. Some extend compassion to animals - in the West there is a strong animal-rights movement - but in Christendom this understanding is only now beginning to be extended to the earth. We are starting to protest about the rape of the countryside for road-building, airport runways, mining, and so on. However, the motive for such protests is often 'not-in-my-back-yard'. If we judge the human enterprise by how it has treated other species and the planet, then our score is very low and sinking. For many people, love and compassion seem activated largely

by self-interest. My hope here is that love for our children will be the dynamic which will open eyes to the legacy of a polluted planet and all that that will mean for them. Hopefully, we shall then modify our actions. But, as we are humans, this change in attitude also needs to be validated in those stories which carry the meaning of our experience and help us to follow the 'right' path.

So, we have been taking the wrong story as holy writ and we need to let it go and find a new story which will help us in this present crisis. What is needed is a change in the general perception of humankind's relation to nature. This requires discarding the old story of human superiority (a superiority which is *only in our own minds* - it has no objective reality) and finding a new one in which nature is understood as a carrier of the sacred. As Thomas Berry<sup>12</sup> says, "Either the human race and the natural world go together into the future as a single sacred community, or we shall both perish in the desert".

Part of the process in achieving this change of consciousness is to unpack and reclaim the existing dogmas and understanding of traditional religion. In the Christian religion, Matthew Fox hit a chord with his book *Original Blessing*<sup>9</sup>. He puts forward his concept of 'original blessing' in contrast to the dogma of 'original sin'. In 'original sin', personal salvation of sinful humans lies beyond the world in heaven, the realm of a 'real' (existent) God who demands obedience above all else. The 'kingdom' is the church whose teachings on sinfulness emphasise feelings of guilt and the need for redemption. In contrast, 'original blessing' is panentheistic (the divine is in all creation): eternal life is here and now; the 'kingdom' is the cosmos and salvation lies in the healing of the people of God and the cosmos. Original blessing calls forth thanks and praise and emphasizes creativity: obedience is to the inward God. Original sin is dualistic - either/or; original blessing is dialectic - both/and.

This creation-centred, original blessing, theology is universalist. The creation story of the universe as told by science, and the cosmic panentheistic story cohere. Brian Swimme<sup>10a</sup> observes that "we reinvent human society by transforming our codings", and we are in the middle of such a transformation now. An encouraging feature is that with the new cosmic story,

For the first time in human history, we have in common an origin story of the universe that already captivates minds on every continent of our planet. No matter what racial, religious, cultural, or national background, humans now have a unifying language out of which we can begin to organize ourselves, for the first time, on the level of species<sup>10b</sup>.

For Swimme, the development of humans and their language stands on the shoulders of preceding ages of development in which life forms have emerged, evolved; some have disappeared, whilst others have been transformed to the present stage. In speaking of language (the key concept of Don Cupitt's philosophy of religion) he says,

Think of the sacrifices required of billions of creatures to make such language possible. Take a single sentence: "The fireball exploded twenty billion years ago at the beginning of time." That sentence requires nothing less than the full twenty billion years of cosmic development. It is not "my" sentence; nor does it "belong" to the theoretical scientists who first predicted the existence of the fireball, nor the experimental scientists who first detected its heat; it is a sentence of the whole Earth. Nothing less than that is required for its speaking forth. The sentence could not exist without the oceans, the rivers, the air, the life forms, and all the thousands of years of human cultural activities. Every sentence is spoken by the whole Earth. All language is spoken by the Earth as part of a biospiritual embryogenesis. . . . Language belongs to Earth as simply as the Cascade mountains belong to Earth.<sup>10c</sup>

Thus, for Brian Swimme "this planet is a rare and holy relic of every event of twenty billion years of cosmic development", and "our reverence for the holy must expand to include the whole numinous universe":

When we deepen our awareness of the simple truth that we are here through the creativity of the stars, we begin to feel fresh gratitude. When we reflect on the labour required for our life, reverence naturally wells up within us. Then, in the deepest regions of our hearts, we begin to embrace our own creativity. What we bestow on the world allows others to live in joy. Such a stupendous mystery ...! <sup>10d</sup>

In Britain, the Centre for Creation Spirituality has been set up at St. James's Church, Piccadilly, London. It runs events and produces literature. Its statement of purpose says:

Creation spirituality is asking ourselves deep questions about the human spirit and its true relationship with the planet. It is a way of searching for an authentic spirituality for our time, one which recognises an urgent need to revive the ancient wisdom of the whole created order as sacred, as worthy of infinite respect and love. Whilst drawing on insights from both the major religions and traditional cultures (especially the Celtic Christians) it also embraces the excitement of the new creation story revealed by science.

Combining the mystical with the intellectual, creation spirituality sees the creation process as ongoing in a dynamic universe. Encouraging creativity, it invites us to see ourselves as co-creators with the divine through our human powers of imagination, curiosity and playfulness. It invites us to approach our world with childlike wonder, awe and delight while at the same time befriending darkness and suffering, engaging with issues of poverty, pain and injustice as aspects of our global relationships with others. Celebrating the sacred unfolding of creation we can more easily address our own destructiveness and addictions - especially the all-pervasive materialism which captivates us all.<sup>13</sup>

### The Sea of Faith

An alternative version of reality and the future is found in the Sea of Faith movement. The Sea of Faith Network is a group of seekers, principally in Britain and New Zealand, which emerged in the 1980's in connection with the work of Don Cupitt, the Cambridge philosopher of religion, and in New Zealand following the work of Lloyd Geering, professor of religious studies at Wellington University. The title is from Matthew Arnold's poem, *On Dover Beach*.

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle fur'd.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.

This long retreat, of the Christian faith in particular, is traced in Don Cupitt's series of books. These track the religious odyssey of our times from out of the traditional beliefs, creeds and rituals of the Christian churches to the free-floating spiritual quests of people in these postmodern days, from a 'real' God-out-there to a 'non-real' concept of a 'God' which has no objective existence and where the use of the word is retained as a shorthand for such concepts as, 'the highest values to which human beings aspire'. The current stage is cogently outlined in Cupitt's *After God: the future of religion*<sup>3</sup>. The following outline is based on that work.

The primary worldview of the Sea of Faith movement is humanist. It views religion as a human creation. Humans create their own meanings through language. Language is formed and words and concepts "get their

meaning in the to-and-fro of our common and public life"<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the construction of 'reality' is a dialectic process. Throughout the evolution of the human species, reality has been shaped by the interplay of actions, views and events, co-operative or conflicting; by individuals, groups or societies, from which a consensus or a temporary accommodation has evolved. This has been and still is a continuous process. The construction of religious reality has been, and still is, a vital part of that evolution. Cupitt puts it that "*everything*, including all linguistic meanings, truths, values, and indeed reality itself, is a slowly evolving consensus product, the result of an interplay of forces in the human realm"<sup>3e</sup>.

The prime factor in developing our world is the development of language and the meanings conveyed by it which construct our worldview. The whole religious project is built in this way and great edifices of religious and philosophical thinking were produced as part of the on-going interplay of people and events. Cupitt puts forward a four-point linguistic theory of religious practice to explain *why* human beings trudged "through all those millennia of supernatural belief and mythical thinking before we could come to the simple and obvious truth"<sup>3f</sup>.

1. As both philosophy and religion have in the past taught, there is indeed an unseen intelligible world, or spirit world, about us and within us.
2. The invisible world is the world of words and other symbols.
3. The entire supernatural world of religion is a mythical representation of the world of language.
4. Through the practice of its religion, a society represents to itself, and confirms, the varied ways in which its language builds its world.<sup>3g</sup>

Through language humans account for their experience of the world, and these accounts are transmitted through the culture of a society and achieve an objective 'truth' into which members of society are socialised and which they accept as valid and normative for their social code. Stories of how things are and what they mean change with the changing experience and needs of society, and thus the 'truth' changes too - it has a relative quality about it. In our Western society, the religious aspects of truth have rested in the stories (myths) of Judaeo-Christianity, but this consensus of the meaning of our experience has broken down under the weight of science and technology, multi-ethnicity, and globalisation.

Lloyd Geering, who, like Don Cupitt, sees religion as a human construct and stresses the primacy of language in building the world of meanings, describes it:



Over the last two centuries the Christian story, on which the Christian world was built, has been falling apart, and for several reasons. The new cosmology and the evolutionary view of origins undermined the first part. The Bible fell from its pedestal as it came to be studied as a set of documents of human origin. As biblical scholarship began to distinguish between history on the one hand and legend and myth on the other, it undermined confidence in the second part of the story. Encounter with other cultures increased the awareness of cultural relativity and undermined the exclusive and absolute claims made for Jesus Christ.<sup>14c</sup>

Thus, Cupitt's theory says that we live in a world in which we now understand how we ourselves construct reality (and are responsible for it); where language shapes our worldview. This means that there is no supernatural authority which ordains meanings and sanctions those culturally-mediated rules and rituals of traditional religious practice. Indeed, the lack of authority and sanctions applies in all areas of human thought and society. Nothing is sacred any more. However, we have not experienced a sudden cut-off point where the clock strikes and suddenly we are translated into postmodernism. We are still juggling with the traditional balls in one hand and the postmodern bubbles in the other. Can we retain/reclaim existing stories and symbols for the new thought-world? Cupitt<sup>3h</sup> is firm on this:

Nevertheless, people do claim that it is possible to preserve something of our traditional faith and values in these strange new conditions. Religion, we are promised, can or does survive (1) as values; or (2) within the private or domestic realm; or (3) within individual subjectivity; or (4) in the last resort, as a counterculture.

But,

postmodernity as a cultural condition has been constituted precisely by the erasure of these very distinctions. The public realm, the sea of meanings, is outsideless and endless: nothing is fixed; everything moves and shifts together. It engulfs everything, including values, private life, selfhood and the counterculture.

He does, however, translate some Christian concepts to aid the transition:

- 'Soul' The principle of biological life, sentience and movement.
- 'Spirit' Not normally embodied - free-ranging supernatural power [presumably an archaic metaphor].
- 'Spirits' Signs of the forces, qualities, and kinds that most need to be recognized; for example, grace, wisdom.
- 'Gods' Signs of power and moral authority.

'God' The "master word that comprehends the whole scheme within which we live, personifying it in a way that we will often want to worship and sometimes to reproach". 'God' has "functioned as the mirror in which we look to become ourselves", communicating through meditation and contemplative prayer.

What then of the mystical union with 'God' or the 'transcendent other'? Cupitt posits instead a state of **void bliss**; more of a Buddhist-type concept, where all imagery, difference and form have disappeared, and the partaker, too, is emptied out:

In contemplative prayer God therefore is apprehended only as a naked, formless void infinite that may equally well be described as dazzling light, or as deep darkness, as the plenitude of being or as absolute nothingness, as fullness or as emptiness ... And the state of resting in God may equally well be described as a state of absolute knowledge or as a state of the purest unknowing.

In this state, participating in this state, emptied out into this state, the self finds itself undergoing just the same deconstruction as God; so that just as in contemplative prayer the theism/atheism distinction vanished, so also the self/not-self distinction vanishes. God is lost and I am lost in void bliss. Religious language becomes purely expressive and ecstatic ...<sup>3c</sup>

The dissolution of God, and our attainment of perfect union with God, are one and the same thing."<sup>3d</sup>

Lloyd Geering picks up on the impact of science and of globalisation on our condition. For him the emerging 'religious' story is based on a new story of the earth; for we are earthly creatures; but such a new story must also connect with the universalising dynamic of globalisation.

From science we have become aware of how our species has emerged from the evolutionary processes of life on our planet, and of how rooted and interconnected we are with that web of life. And further, of how living organisms are themselves an **integral part** of the planet, and not just **on** it. The planet, therefore, contained the potential for life from its formation, and evolution refers also to the way the planet itself has changed from within. Geering sees that

in view of the fact that all life, including humankind, has evolved out of the planet, it would be truer to say that it is the earth itself which is now becoming conscious of itself, and it is doing so chiefly through the

medium of human consciousness. The more we humans recover the sense of our own earthiness and of our complete oneness with the planet, the more we are able to say that the earth is a thinking organism and we humans constitute the chief organ through which it thinks.<sup>14a</sup>

Geering describes how the rise of monotheism led to 'God' being transferred from earth to sky with the subsequent desacralisation of nature and the development of a thought-world in which our true destiny was located in a heavenly realm. From this desacralisation of nature followed the negative value given to the natural aspects of human life and the exaltation of mind and reason. "From Plato to Descartes, the earth and all physical reality was judged to be inferior to the human soul or mind, in which rationality and/or the essential self was thought to reside".<sup>14d</sup>

The scientist has been the inheritor of this dislocated attitude. It is as though nature was studied from an outside, God-like, superior position. The story of the cosmos and of earth's history needs retelling "in such a way that can call us to wonder, to reverence for life, and to the vision of humanity living in community" with the living earth (Rosemary Radford Ruether, quoted in Geering<sup>14e</sup>). Optimistically, Geering thinks that the new story of the sacredness of the earth "is already coming to birth in the collective consciousness" of humans in the globalized world of today.<sup>14e</sup>

It is here that Matthew Fox and Lloyd Geering meet, although, it seems to me, they have arrived via different routes. I feel that this happy meeting marks the story of the resacralisation of the earth as the one which is the dynamic world-shaper for our immediate and future times.

### **Do these scenarios accord with experience?**

It is difficult to keep one's feet in times of transition. Matthew Fox, Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering all chronicle the fading away of the power of the traditional Judaeo-Christian myth. I agree with that. The Quaker Universalist Group itself has come into being as a result of these events with the acknowledgement that other routes taken on the spiritual journey are equally valid, and that we are enriched by the insights of other faiths. How far Quaker Universalist Group members would stretch this acknowledgement is not clear. In Quakerism we talk of seeking for the will of God in our gathered Meetings. I have, very occasionally, felt a deeper presence or feeling move amongst us in such a meeting, and from it has come inspirational ministry, or business decisions in right ordering. In Cupitt's scheme of things this is either

illusion or misunderstanding. I am not willing to concede that and find myself with Matthew Fox (as well as George Fox!) in accepting that something transcendent or beyond the self is encountered. For me, it is the quality of those very rare experiences of oneness which give the inspiration and colour to life, providing direction and meaning. It somehow opens my eyes in such a way that I can see the sacred (or value) in other people and in everything that is in and on this living planet. It is an ideal which I constantly fail to live up to but which is, nevertheless, clear to me. Seeing the sacred in the whole of nature, and feeling our interconnectedness with the web of life encourages us to accept responsibility for the world. Personally, I cannot reach that point from a reasoned, linguistic approach which, I find, puts me on the defensive - I am un-reasonable. Lloyd Geering, however, attaches the reasoning to the experiential/feeling part of me with his lucid analysis of what has happened in the past, why it is changing, and where the future should lie.

### **Future forecasts**

If the warnings of scientists on the increasing pace of the degradation of the planet are not heeded, hopes for the future of human beings and/or many other species must be limited. The earth doesn't owe us a living. It is against this sombre background that the urgency for a new creation story is felt. However, if the awareness of the scientific/economic/political opinion-formers and decision-makers is not raised in time, then the quest for a new story/myth for our times feels rather like fiddling while Rome burns.

But, optimistically, hoping for the required quickening transformation of consciousness, and sufficient time to slow and reverse the damage to our biosphere, what vision of the future do Matthew Fox, Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering see?

Don Cupitt does not address the above ecological scenario directly. His message is to the individual who, he suggests, should "maintain a small personal repertoire of different truths, paths, and goals, to be utilized ad lib". However, he does advance three themes relating to forms of religious existence, which we may be able to salvage from the wreck of the past. The first he calls **The Eye of God**. In the past we have understood God as a being out there who could overlook us, our words, thoughts and deeds, and judge us against certain moral and ethical criteria. Cupitt suggests that we could look meaningfully at ourselves and our world **as if** we were looking through the eye of such a God. This would be to judge from the universal and ideal

standpoint, and provide a certain "clarity of moral vision". What would God see and say?

The second theme Cupitt<sup>3i</sup> calls **The Blissful Void**. This concept has already been referred to in comparison with the traditional mystical experience. The Blissful Void is entered through meditation and contemplative prayer, and is a state where "all imagery, difference and form have disappeared". The self dissolves into the universal emptiness and nothingness. This experience would provide a background against which the flux of life, which no longer has "any assured and objective value, basis or foundation", pours onward in its contingent ephemerality. The Blissful Void would help the bewildered individual to set the flux in perspective and thus aid in the steering of a meaningful course.

The third theme Cupitt<sup>3k</sup> calls **Solar Living**. This is expounded in his book *Solar Ethics*<sup>15</sup>. Recognising that humans are "temporary aggregates of world-stuff", and an inherent part of the universe story, his vision is that we "should pour ourselves out as the sun does, identifying ourselves completely with the outpouring flux of all existence". We can continually shed our past selves, re-work ourselves, increasing the value and meaning of the on-going, present self. "That is solarity - to live by dying all the time, heedless, like the sun and in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. Solar ethics is a radically emotivist and expressionist reading of the ethics of Jesus".

Thus, Cupitt offers religion "as a toolkit", a set of attitudes and techniques through which, by practising, we can grow in self-knowledge (the Eye of God), learn to accept the transience and insubstantiality of ourselves and everything else (the Blissful Void), and learn to say a wholehearted yes to life (Solar Living). He suggests that during this current transitional period we may find it helpful to remain within our traditional religious milieu, but read it through the new lens of the 'non-real' framework, and offers the above three themes as aids. We should give ourselves permission to re-tell old stories in new ways, and to allow new stories to emerge. Cupitt recommends that we should see ourselves and our symbolic presentation of the world as our own work of art. We can paint our own self-portrait, as it were.

In considering the possibility of a future world religion, Cupitt sees that it would need to be a "unifying expressive activity through which we can simultaneously get ourselves together and build our common world". What such a world may be is obscure, but he does comment that "astoundingly, environmental ethics and postmodern spirituality turn out to coincide. Our spiritual life, our quest for redemption, and our world-building activity turn out

to be the same thing. There really is an intimate relationship between psychology and cosmology, our inwardness and our objectivity, microcosm and macrocosm"<sup>3m</sup>. It is this insight that Lloyd Geering has developed so well.

Lloyd Geering locates the future in his concept of the **New Global World** which is trans-national, secular, humanly-based, and subject to rapid change. The Global World has emerged as an organising entity through the increase in scientific objective knowledge. This knowledge is universal and universally available, scientific and secular; not the possession of any one group, religion or ideology; and is being continuously amassed and disseminated. This common store of knowledge, its critique of former explanations of how the world is, and the direct interaction of its thinking and physical consequences on people and planet, is building a common worldwide framework. The theory of evolution illustrates the ability of the cosmos to produce the planet and its life-forms, bringing creation down to earth. It is part of a process which has undercut and is sweeping away those religious traditions which legitimated meanings and values. It leads on, according to Geering, to the understanding that the "culture, values and beliefs by which people live are openly and consciously acknowledged to be of human origin"<sup>14f</sup>. (This may be so in academic and radical theology circles, but I personally have not seen much evidence of such an acknowledgement in the society in which I move.)

Such a body of objective knowledge is, however, value-free (as far as anything can be), so a world based on it cannot of itself provide answers "to the human quest for meaning. It can supply only the framework within which those answers are to be sought. The global world, insofar as it is based on scientific knowledge, is devoid of meaning"<sup>14b</sup>. So, certainly in this present transitional stage, we have to find our own meanings. Geering comments that so far we have been "living off the accumulated spiritual capital of the past", and that many people, in the face of such loss of meaning, "appear to be opting for a more pragmatic response to life"<sup>14g</sup>. For others, the loss of meaning is psychologically threatening, leading to existential despair.

In seeing the myth of biological evolution as a global creation story, Geering asks about the end of the story which would give symbolic significance to what has been created. The key to a story is often in its ending. Of course, science tells us that at some remote point in the future our sun will die and the planet with it, but this is too remote to be a current consideration in living our lives. Our problem is that if the present rate of destruction of the environment continues, the ending for the human species may be much

closer - possibly in the twenty-first century. In a telling sentence, Geering says that the signals we are receiving from the earth are "the equivalent in the global world of the prophetic warnings from an angry God" <sup>14h</sup>. How can humans stop their destructive behaviour? It is by seeing that the "ecosystem has become the God in whom we live and move and have our being. Indeed, the care of mother earth and all which that involves, is to a large extent replacing the former sense of obedience to the heavenly father" <sup>14i</sup>. There is a need to re-sanctify the earth, transferring to it all those values, hopes and actions presently linked to the heavenly realm. For Geering, this means that the dichotomy between body and spirit is healed at last, and that reality is now 'psycho-physical'. The mystical relationship is set in the attempt to visualise the whole of which we are a part "even though ... our mental picture of the whole is a world we have ourselves constructed".<sup>14k</sup> And, "the creativity within the collective human psyche is all of a piece with the creativity within the self-evolving universe. If we use the God-symbol to refer to this creativity, then, in a manner not unlike that of the mystics, we may say that the God within us and the God outside of us are one and the same God".<sup>14m</sup>

Paradoxically, whilst the trend to globalisation and the universalising tendencies of the dissemination of objective scientific and technical knowledge and the subsequent products are observable, Matthew Fox sees that society's infrastructures do not require 'big' solutions. He is in favour of decentralization, small technology and small businesses for the renewal of work and society. Small groupings allow creativity to emerge. He sees that rediscovery of the sense of the sacred releases creative energy which can be used to reinvent all kinds of relationships; work (and unemployment), politics, economics and religion. He terms the praxis of this 'deep ecumenism': the sharing across boundaries of the new creation story, both mystical and scientific. He is active in education through lecturing internationally, and in his work at ICCS (Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality) which includes both right- and left-brain work - dancing, singing, poetry, new science thinking, native traditions and practices, the mystics, art as meditation, "the greening of our souls". It is activity which starts with the individual and spreads out to the larger society. The future will emerge from such changes.

## Ethics

Ethics are not tied to any one religious source or ideology. They are humanity's distilled wisdom which enables people to coexist in society and with the planet. In the Western tradition they have been embodied in the Christian sacred texts. Justice, and care for the poor and needy, were proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets; 'love one another' is the great

commandment of Jesus. These are unchanging. Truth-telling and integrity are pillars of an ethical society. We are very concerned with social justice and the rights of the individual today, and this is all to the good. But Matthew Fox reminds us that social justice in the legal, structural sense, must go hand-in-hand with what he calls 'psychic justice', which means that each person must undergo deep transformation at a psychic level to re-connect themselves and awaken to 'right-brain' creative powers. For Fox this is the mystical activity. Justice is extended to the whole of the cosmos, and therefore any activity which exploits and degrades any part of it, animal, vegetable or mineral, is a form of injustice. Another form of injustice is the casting of millions on to the rubbish heap of the workless. This is a way of saying 'You are useless to society - a burden, and therefore of no value'. In Fox's mystical activity work itself needs to become re-spiritualized - we need "a cosmology wherein we learn to see our human work as part of the ongoing work of the universe and all the species in it". This criterion of the value of work removes it from materialistic, status-ridden assessments to which we tie value judgements of the worth of workers today, and says that all tasks for the community are of equal value. This is not a new idea, but we are still an elitist, class-ridden society, and some are definitely more equal than others. At the moment it is difficult to see how the driving energy of the global capitalist-industrial-military complex could be transformed but it certainly starts with the transformation of attitudes.

## Quaker Universalism

In preparing for this task, I have read through the previous Quaker Universalist Group publications. And very interesting they were too! In what I hope is a logical order, the following basic statements seem to me to state the Quaker Universalist position:

1. There is something transcendent to the individual human consciousness which traditionally we have referred to as 'God' or 'Christ' or the 'Spirit'.
2. Human beings, of any faith or none, can encounter the Spirit in a mystical experience.
3. It follows, therefore, that no one religion has a superior claim to being the only right way to God. Each religion, however, can provide a way to encounter God which can be the best path for an individual.

However, is this basis a sufficient one in the radically different world we encounter at the end of the twentieth century? Quakers are not immune to the development and controversies of religious discussion. In a recent Quaker

Universalist Group publication<sup>16</sup>, David Boulton discusses how the traditional Quaker statements, witness, beliefs, look from a humanist perspective. How do we respond to these alternative formulations of religious meaning? The first thing we must do is to take them seriously; raise our own consciousness and reflect on the meaning and validity for ourselves and our Society. Are we open to fresh light ...?

## Conclusion

Matthew Fox, Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt agree that the traditional stories and metaphysics of Christianity no longer function. Cupitt and Geering step outside the Christian framework altogether, but Matthew Fox reclaims the mystical tradition which has been largely hidden within the religion of the church. But also, he steps outside the Christian church to reclaim the value of native spirituality and earlier Christian traditions which reverence the earth.

Matthew Fox, Brian Swimme, and Lloyd Geering converge on the need for the re-sacralisation of nature.

Lloyd Geering and Don Cupitt speak of the power the human inward Self has to construct reality.

Don Cupitt and Matthew Fox see humans as needing to live life aesthetically, that is, as art: to paint one's own self-portrait; write one's autobiography.

But Cupitt and Geering remove the mystical, the mystery from our reality. For them our world of symbolic meanings is entirely produced by ourselves in an ongoing dialectic process. We can and do change our worldview as it suits us. The traditional Western worldview based on Judaeo-Christianity is collapsing due to the impact of objective scientific thought on the supernatural religious stories of our sacred texts. The incoming global universalism based on objective science and technology; ethnic diversity with its dissemination of different sacred stories; instant communication through the wonders of modern technology - post, fax, e-mail, telephones - has opened up the minds of individuals and societies.

For Matthew Fox, however, the mystical experience is still the heart of spirituality.

For me the following passage from *Quaker Faith and Practice*<sup>17</sup> puts the challenge to Quakers :

And now at this critical point in time, when our out-dated world view no longer satisfies, comes this breakthrough: science and mysticism speaking with one voice, the rediscovery of our own (Christian) creation

centred and mystical tradition, and the recognition of the spiritual wisdoms of the native traditions. All uniting, and all challenging in a profound way our narrowly drawn boundaries.

Are we willing to open ourselves to this wider vision, to cease our urge to control and dominate, to listen to our hearts, to recognise again the integrity and sacredness of this planet which we have so abused? This means entering into a new relationship with "Our Mother the Earth", it means seeing ourselves again in a cosmic context, a larger perspective, which includes fire-ball, galaxy, planet, and all other life forms.

If we can move from our "human sized" viewpoint and look instead from the cosmic viewpoint, there is a sudden and dramatic widening of the lens through which we look.

Redemption is seen to be for all creation, and our human story, far from being diminished, is incorporated in the whole drama of an emerging universe, and takes on an even greater significance when we perceive that the form of consciousness that we possess has taken 19 billion years to evolve.

To quote Brian Swimme, a physicist and the author of "The Universe is a Green Dragon", "The music held in the rock could not play or be heard until it had reformed itself into humans". True, but what a responsibility.

Creation spirituality is vast and wide-ranging, and as with Quakerism, it is a way of life, not a set of beliefs.

Grace Blindell

Whilst agreeing that creation spirituality is a path and not a possession, I don't quite agree that Quakerism does not have a set of beliefs. We do witness that there is that of God in everyone; that we stand in the spirit which takes away the occasion for all wars; that if we meet together in silence and listen in the gathered meeting, the word of God will come to us. It is such beliefs that speak to me, and keep me within the ambit of Quakerism.

So, finally, this pamphlet started as a response on my part to the challenge of David Boulton's writing<sup>13</sup>. It pushed me into considering where I stand in relation to the non-realist case. I have come to two conclusions. First, that Don Cupitt's argument cannot be *logically* countered. It is where reason takes us in the cold light of scientific analysis and objective understanding of the forces which shaped our past and brought us to this moment. However, there is more to being human than logic. I feel there is a spirit both within and beyond the individual. In my experience, when this spirit is met and trusted, then my feet are on the right path. The route to the spirit is an inward one,

maybe through meditation, contemplative prayer, or some other path; but the encounter is experienced as being with 'something other'. It is a mystery, a power-house to those who seek and find. Second, that we need to undergo that flip of understanding where we realise that the human species is an integral part of the web of life - a "temporary arrangement" (see Grace Blindell's poem at the end of the text) arising from and returning to the stuff of the cosmos. It is a raising of consciousness which enables us to see that in harming the planet we are harming ourselves. We need to re-read our sacred story, to re-tell what humans once knew, that the earth is sacred, and that we are of the earth and sacred too.

*This is the Original Blessing.*

### **Temporary Arrangements**

I kneel and plant the fallen conker,  
Still as death it lies  
    A stillness of unbeing  
In the coagulated winter soil.

Yet within that blackened shell,  
That dense and hardened flesh,  
Flickers an unease - a whisper of memory  
Stirs within its clenched and clodded self.

It is the dance, it is the rhythm,  
It is this magic alchemy  
Which stirs and calls forth struggle,  
The conker obeying its habitual path -  
Down and up, Root and shoot,  
A chestnut tree is born.

And yet . . .  
The chestnut tree and I are both  
Temporary arrangements.

Morphic resonance whispers memory of being,  
Whispers pattern but never permanence.  
Patterns arise, blend and fade,  
The dance shifts and changes,  
Intention co-exists with impermanence.

The chestnut tree and I  
Are both temporary arrangements,  
Yet every seven years or so  
I am remade with different stuff  
And what was me . . .  
Becomes (perhaps) the chestnut tree

Temporarily.

Grace Blindell

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## Errata.

In the References, Reference 16 should read:

16. David Boulton. *The faith of a Quaker Humanist*. QUG Pamphlet No.27. 1997.

Also, on p.23, bottom paragraph, line 2, the reference number should be 16.

#### Further contacts:

A helpful annotated booklist on **creation-centred spirituality** is available from Alan Shephard, 14 Beckford Close, Warminster, Wilts. BA12 9LW. The Centre for Creation Spirituality is at St. James's Church, 197 Piccadilly, London W1V 0LL. Information on the **Sea of Faith Network** and publications is available from SoF, 15 Burton Street, Loughborough LE11 2DT. Information on the **Quaker Universalist Group** is available from Maureen Cowie, 5 Malting Mead, Endymion Road, Hatfield, Herts. AL10 8AR.

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