

The Quaker Universalist Group

The Quaker Universalist Group is based on our understanding that spiritual awareness is accessible to everyone of any religion or none and that no one can claim to have a final revelation or monopoly of truth.

We acknowledge that such awareness may be expressed in many different ways. We delight in this diversity and warmly welcome both Quakers and non-Quakers to join us.

About this pamphlet

Seeking a firm faith to live by is a continuing quest for many people in our times, but we are not the first to find it so. In this paper for Quakers and other Seekers, Clive Sutton has tried to tune in to how people felt in the past when they were needing a way forward on their spiritual journeys, and he began by collecting quotations which give a sense of their dilemmas.

In Part 1 he presents the words of Victorian poets who were experiencing a crisis of belief but who also showed a marked yearning for faith even in their moments of greatest doubt. The American Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier is amongst the most illuminating because of his open acknowledgement of uncertainty.

In Part 2 Clive follows the theme of yearning into the twentieth century, with its hopes and fears about human betterment.

In Part 3 he considers our plight today when some people seem to have too much assurance and too strong a faith, while others have none at all. Perhaps Quakers have something special to offer in this new century. Do they?

Quaker Universalist Group

HUMAN BEINGS YEARNING FOR A FAITH

Clive Sutton



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About the Author

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Each Quaker Universalist Pamphlet expresses the views of its author, which are not necessarily representative of the Q.U.G. as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not easy for human beings today to place themselves as characters in a story which gives meaning and purpose to their lives, and offers guidance on how to live. Yet we all need some such story if our sense of who we are and what we are doing is to be strong. That's what constitutes a **faith** - some sense of purpose to our lives, some **trust** that what we do is right in relation to that purpose, and some **hope** for the future.

There are of course people who profess certainty on such matters. They think they know who they are and how they fit into the general scheme of things within the framework of an established religion. More typical of our times, as I see it, are the thousands of people who are confused over what life is all about, and what it means to live it well.

It's not that we have to be deeply philosophical. For much of the time the *de facto* purpose of our lives is to look after our nearest and dearest and to grapple with the tasks we set for ourselves in the world of work. 'Who am I?' and 'What am I doing in this world?' can have very simple answers, but it helps if we can also see the ways we do those things in some larger perspective - even if it is only that we are 'working for a better world' or whatever. At that level it is political or religious feeling which begins to animate us and provide us with a faith to live by.

We can find examples of great certainty amongst evangelical Christians, ultra-orthodox Jews, Moslems obedient to Qu'ranic law, and also amongst the confident materialist-atheists who believe that science 'proves' the world to be completely without purpose. I am continually surprised at how readily each of these take up their particular certainty, but the self-dedication with which they do so is something we need to understand as an outcome of a very important human yearning.

The uncertain people on the other hand inherit the results of decades of careful doubting in both science and religion: How certain is our knowledge in science? How sure can we be of any of the impulses which animate religious feeling? Do traditional accounts of the origin and destiny of mankind stand up to reason? Do the modern accounts do so? Questions like that can make us into 'displaced persons' who are out of touch with what our grandparents knew, unable to take it for granted what our role in life should be. Displacement from past beliefs and taken-for-granted social practices can be sudden, as for some Asians migrating to Europe in recent times and facing a sharp crisis of identity. Amongst

those with a Christian heritage, however, it has happened more slowly over several generations, so I shall start with some of those in Christian countries who expressed their struggle to find a coherent faith in the nineteenth century. They were questioning the scriptural accounts of the origin and destiny of mankind, but they also grieved for the security of earlier beliefs.

The place of mankind?

To some of the early Victorians it may have seemed that their forebears had had a simpler sense of who they were and how the world worked ... comforted perhaps by some of the words from Psalm 8:

*... What is man, that thou art mindful of him? ...
... thou hast made him a little lower than the angels
and hast crowned him with glory and honour ...
... Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy
hands,
thou hast put all things under his feet. ...
O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!*

Unfortunately, that notion of our place in the scheme of things was losing its power in Victorian times, and by our own time many of us are in real doubt about just how we do fit into this world.

PART 1: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The crisis of belief in Victorian times arose partly from closer examination of the authorship and content of the Bible, and partly from developments in geology which gave a totally new sense of the vastness of time and the corresponding smallness of our own lives. No longer could human beings be seen as central characters in an historical process that was unfolding over just a few thousand years from Adam to Jesus to ourselves. Yet people still wanted a faith, and several poets were able to express their personal predicament in the face of the new knowledge. Two of the most well known are Matthew Arnold who wrote *Dover Beach* in 1851 and Tennyson who worked on *In Memoriam* between 1833 and 1850. The Quaker awareness of the crisis is very well represented by J.G. Whittier in America who wrote a long poem in 1852 which he called *Questions of Life*.

We can start with Arnold's sound picture of the withdrawing waves as, conscious of his own doubts, he listened to the ebb tide and spoke sadly to his wife:

*Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.*

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, ...*

*But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Perhaps the recession of the tide always provokes some of the sadness which

afflicted Matthew Arnold, but for myself I wonder whether it should not also inspire hope because tides ebb away only to come back with new power. Is there any chance that today we might experience a flood tide of faith resurgent? Living organisms also die away only to re-emerge with new vigour, as for example when snowdrops push up from frozen ground in what we can read as a new assertion of life. Faith and Trust and Hope have their ebbs and flows too, their times of waning and their times of resurgence - even after the biggest knocks - as we shall see later.

Tennyson's musings that make up *In Memoriam* belong to the same early-to-mid Victorian period. They were composed over many years as he struggled to come to terms with personal grief over the death of his young friend Arthur Hallam and with a more existential grief about the impermanence of everything and the savagery of nature 'red in tooth and claw'. He knew that a timescale of millions of years made mankind seem much more insignificant, and that 'all things shall perish' applies to every aspect of the natural world. He had internalised that understanding long before Darwin systematised it in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Tennyson felt the awfulness of the geological-biological story, but he wanted to have faith. He wanted, like his Ulysses, 'to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield', but in part 54 of *In Memoriam* we see the state of his struggle to be positive:

*Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final end of ill, ...*

*That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete;*

*That not a worm is cloven in vain;
That not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,
Or but subserves another's gain.*

*Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last - far off - at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.*

*So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
And with no language but a cry.*

Yes, what am I? An infant crying in the night? I guess that *In Memoriam* found its way to America and it might have influenced John Greenleaf Whittier. His long poem entitled *Questions of Life* is not nearly so well known, but it echoes Tennyson's theme. Whittier states in a preamble that he does not want to disturb the assurance felt by people who have a firm traditional faith and who have not experienced the shafts of doubt, but for himself, he has only a fierce Quaker honesty in facing doubts:

*I am: how little more I know!
Whence came I? Whither do I go?
A centred self, which feels and is
A cry between the silences;
A shadow-birth of clouds at strife
With sunshine on the hills of life;*

*A shaft from Nature's quiver cast
Into the Future from the Past
Between the cradle and the shroud,
A meteor's flight from cloud to cloud.*

If that sounds rather too mournful, I should add that Whittier does not end on a negative note, for he is not really in doubt about how to live his own life. In the rest of the poem he looks for guidance in the heavens, the living world, and the writings of people in various world religions, all of which are found wanting. Then he returns to the simplicity of his Quaker faith, in silence attending

To the still witness in my heart With reverence waiting.

He accepts uncertainty - a point that I shall return to in Part 3.

Members of the scientific community were also amongst those who felt the effects of new discoveries on long-held assumptions. James Clerk Maxwell was

reflecting on the hugely increased timescale of life on earth, when he wrote rather sadly in 1874:

*We honour our fathers and mothers,
Grandfathers and grandmothers too,
But how shall we honour the vistas of ancestors now in our view?*

From a lecture given in Belfast that year by his fellow physicist John Tyndall, Maxwell sensed that purely materialistic explanations of life and the world were becoming very powerful. Not only had palaeontology revealed mammoths and dinosaurs, but the first speculations had begun about a molecular evolution at still earlier times. All things seemed subject to change and perhaps only the atoms are permanent, so his poem continues, laconically

*So then let us worship the atom, so lively, so wise and so small;
The atomists next let us praise - Epicurus, Lucretius and all;
Let us damn with faint praise Bishop Butler, in whom many
atoms combined
To form that remarkable structure which it pleased him to call - his
mind.*

(Bishop Butler died in 1752 and should not be confused with Bishop Ussher who in Cromwell's time had suggested 4004 BCE as the date for the start of Genesis. Butler was known for his interest in moral philosophy rather than natural philosophy and actual history. Maxwell's reference to what 'it pleased him to call his mind' suggests to me some impatience with purely materialist accounts.)

Twenty five years later the nineteenth century was drawing to a close and Thomas Hardy seems to have had difficulty in retaining a positive outlook on life. His poem about the *Darkling Thrush* was, he said, composed on 31st December 1900. He viewed the dead winter landscape as representing the corpse of the passing century, and he seemed anxious and ambivalent about the future. The poem, still one of nation's favourites, describes a bleak scene in which a solitary missel thrush sings with apparent defiance. It concludes with Hardy wondering wistfully whether there was after all

*Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.*

Could Hardy respond at all to the thrush's song as a genuine message of hope? It sounds as if he really did think that the poor bird was deluded - and he was writing long before our scientific interpretation that birdsong is 'nothing but' a

territorial signal! On the other hand he did appreciate it as music. For myself I can take reassurance from the 'uppity-ness' of such a song. To me the thrush epitomises the eternal cussedness of living things with their constant resurgence in the most adverse circumstances. As with the snowdrops thrusting through the snow the message I get is that 'life goes on and will go on'.

Arnold and Tennyson and several others wanted to have a positive religious faith but they also wanted to take new knowledge very seriously, however disconcerting it might be. The tension they felt is captured in a well-known quotation from John Ruskin, who wrote to a friend in 1851 about the weakness of his own Christian faith:

*If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do
very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them
at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.*

Some churchmen took on the new knowledge not as disillusionment, but (they hoped) as further witness to the greatness of God, who (they felt) must be working through the natural processes of evolution over these vast ages. Liberal Anglicans like Charles Kingsley and the Rev. Professor Baden Powell adopted this position even in the eighteen fifties, and Bishop Colenso of Natal used a strong liberal voice of that kind in his commentaries on parts of the Bible. In Quaker terms they were all determined to be 'open to new light from whatever source it may come'. Their newly acquired awareness of a very long earth history joined with their understanding of biblical scholarship to bring them away from the literal reading of the biblical accounts which their evangelical colleagues were demanding, and towards an appreciation of the scriptures in the same terms they applied to other writings. It made them attend to the varied authorship and function of these writings and to the symbolic meanings of the stories in them. Those meanings could clearly be still valid - even the vigorous singing of Psalm 8.

A 'reasonable faith' amongst Quakers

Not all the Victorians took that liberal path. Some, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, found their faith in Rome. Others, including quite a lot of Quakers, took up an evangelical position that was based on literal readings of the biblical texts. Amongst English Quakers there were however publications like *A Reasonable Faith* (Francis Frith, William Pollard and William Turner 1884) which contributed to the debate ¹. Eventually at the Manchester conference of 1895, a refusal to reject new knowledge chimed in very well with the long-standing Quaker distrust of written creeds and they chose to regard themselves as holders of 'a reasonable faith', not tied to falsifiable doctrinal statements.

Faith in human progress?

Reconciling new knowledge with traditional views of what made humans special was made easier for some by an idea of progress in which human effort would somehow be in tune with evolution. Biological evolution was seen as 'leading to' humankind at its pinnacle. It is not interpreted that way today, and humans cannot now regard themselves as its finest product. They seem to be only one amongst many marvellous products - insects and birds for example. But for some people in the late nineteenth century, and others like Julian Huxley in the twentieth, the image of an ascending ladder, with the possibility of rungs to yet higher things, was strongly held and it was a source of inspiration. Occasionally it was mixed up with a colonialist missionary zeal and even nationalistic and racist aspirations. Here is a 'hymn' which captures this mood of optimism about the perfectibility of mankind, written by John Addington Symonds towards the end of Victoria's reign:

*These things shall be - a loftier race
Than ere the world hath known shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls,
And light of science in their eyes.*

*They shall be gentle, brave, and strong
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth and fire, and sea, and air. ...*

Oh! Disillusionment came all too soon, in the massive spilling of blood of 1914 to 1918.

PART 2: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The idea of progress had been a growing component of western human identity in Victorian times and it remained so right through most of the twentieth century because new discoveries and inventions repeatedly transformed people's lives. So for most of this time the human-centred story of social and material progress was gaining credibility while the God-centred stories from the scriptures were losing it. Hopes which had been expressed in the eighteenth century Enlightenment seemed to be working out well and many individuals were animated by a sense of their place in forwarding progress, either by working for political change or by contributing to the advance of science, medicine or public health. Sometimes their actions were linked with a Christian sense of duty, and sometimes completely independent of it. Social reformers, public health campaigners, hospital builders, Christian Socialists, suffragettes and many others were able to find their sense of purpose in working for improved human society (or the Kingdom of God on Earth, or whatever).

The biggest early blow to confidence in our powers of self improvement was the Great War of 1914-18, about which Hardy wrote bitterly:

*"Peace upon earth!" was said. We sing it,
And pay a million priests to bring it.
After two thousand years of mass
We've got as far as poisoned gas.*

The idea that such a war could 'never again' happen had a very short life, and in the Second World War we experienced not just more industrialised warfare but also industrialised murder in the man-designed gas chambers.

Resurgent faith with hopes for human betterment, and then doubts

Despite the war horrors, there was actually a new hopefulness in 1945, with a buoyant growth in the human-centred faith. Social planning for a Welfare State was strong in Britain, and internationally we set up bodies like the World Health Organisation and prepared statements like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There was eager investment in science because although the war had generated atom bombs it had also produced penicillin and radar. Science had proved its power, and surely it could now be applied for good, in medicine, agriculture and engineering. Phrases like 'atoms for peace' and 'the white heat of technology' came easily to people's lips to inspire and give meaning to their efforts. And science did soon yield successes, particularly with medicines and in agriculture. Fertilisers and plant breeding for the 'green revolution' seemed wholly beneficial, but before long there also came the first awareness of a 'shadow of

progress' - when the unanticipated environmental damage caused by DDT was recognised. Faith in unalloyed technical progress then faded further, as more unexpected outcomes emerged, e.g. in the surprising and alarming effects of thalidomide.

Awareness of the consequences of using insecticides came out most dramatically when a biologist, Rachel Carson, published *Silent Spring* in 1962. It was an emotive picture she drew, but so well backed up by careful data that she effectively launched the environmental defence movement. Here are some words from her opening 'Fable for Tomorrow'.

*There was a strange stillness ... The birds, for example -
where had they gone? ... No witchcraft, no enemy action,
had done this. The people had done it themselves*

'The people had done it themselves' struck home, and her book came to be seen as more than just a highly competent technical analysis. It was also a challenge to the human hubris which had generated the rush to use of the new chemical inventions, driven by the assumption of easy dominion over unwanted pests. Clearly, the spirit of Psalm 8, putting 'all things under our feet' could be misused, and in new organisations like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace it was recognised that our actions would in future need an ethical and even a religious dimension - human respect for complex ecosystems.

This marked a very important stage in the story of faith and loss of faith which I am trying to trace. Automatic confidence in science was broken, and suspicion of ourselves as a danger to the planet was engendered. The resulting 'Green Consciousness' has been characterised as 'quasi-religion' by Brian Appleyard (not very kindly). People who embraced it had recovered a sense of sin, together with a new moral imperative towards personal actions that might help to save the planet. Also recovered was a sense of deference to something much bigger than oneself. Who was it that most readily embraced that new 'green' philosophy? Probably it was not those who made their living from Texas oil. I suppose there were more people from the political left, together with feminists and anti-colonialists. They recognised in the industrial chemist the trampling figure of the masculine colonial pioneer who they wanted to disown.

Not long after this denting of faith in science and technology there came also a loss of confidence in political and social improvement. The concentration camps had been revealed at the end of WWII and many people thought that such a thing could never happen again, but before the end of the twentieth century there were new genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda . . .

Taking both these aspects together, today it seems unlikely that our future as human beings can be a direct line to any kind of Utopia. We are too painfully aware of the great ill we can do to each other and to the planet we live on.

One book which may have contributed to the growing feeling about our potential for ill, had been written before the steep rise in awareness of environmental damage. It was William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954). He explored the hopes, fears and behaviour of a group of boys marooned on an island and offered a less than rosy picture of human potential. It was not all that far from the picture given in Thomas Hobbes' essay of 1651 (*Leviathan*) in which human life had been portrayed as 'nasty, brutish and short' unless there was a strong state and system of law. Golding was more subtle however, and through his characters - Ralph, Jack, Piggy, Simon and others - he prepared a generation of readers to think about human potential for harm. The idea of 'original sin' and its contrasting idea of 'original virtue' may have been ready for replacement by an understanding of the capacity for both in all of us. Many books about chimpanzees and gorillas and our primate ancestors have been read eagerly for clues about this puzzle.

The balance between optimism and pessimism about human capacities nevertheless tends to veer towards optimism - perhaps because we cannot live at all unless we repeatedly conjure hope. One of those who came down on the positive side was Jacob Bronowski in his television series of 1974 where he tried to trace the cultural evolution of humanity, emphasising creativity in science and technology. He was able to call his programmes *The Ascent of Man* even though he did not fail to mention descent into the horrors of the holocaust, nor the doubts of some of the physicists who had 'fathered' the atomic bomb. He did warn of the dangers of regarding the findings of science as certainties, but his general tone was very positive and the whole series was a celebration of human creativity and imagination. The most distinctive quality of humans, as he discerned it, was our ability to modify our environment:

Man is a singular creature. He has a set of gifts which make him unique among the animals so that, unlike them, he is not a figure in the landscape, but a shaper of the landscape. In body and mind he is the explorer of nature, the ubiquitous animal who did not find but made his home in every continent. (My italics)

He seems not to have felt that our actions on the environment and our rising population would pose a threat on a global scale. Three decades later, however,

a greater awareness of the environmental damage we cause has put that optimistic view of ourselves into competition with a much more despairing image of mankind as a species with altogether too much power and a built-in arrogance.

Doubt about human beings as a species has gone on growing but is not really new. I have already mentioned Hobbes' view of life (1651) as nasty brutish and short unless there is strong governance. In 1733 Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* wrote of Mankind as suspended 'in doubt to call himself a God or beast'. Meanwhile the mainline Christian churches have always avoided too rosy a picture of humans by emphasising the human capacity for sin.

Institutional science, however, has remained buoyant right up to the present time, and the development of new technologies related to economic growth continues to surge ahead. We, who are beneficiaries of the new knowledge and so many new inventions, can hardly fail to marvel at the results achieved since the nineteen-fifties - transistors, lasers, computers which now affect all parts of our lives, new medicines, space exploration and new understandings in molecular biology which have led to the development of genetic engineering. It is therefore no surprise that technocratic optimism should continue to flourish in some quarters, or that it should be expressed with vehemence against the critics. The most dynamic scientists and entrepreneurs maintain their confidence in the 'technical fix' and argue that only by means of more science will we be able to detect unexpected and unwanted outcomes like the ozone holes, and only with new technologies will we be able to put them right. Some even accuse the environmentalists of themselves being a danger to the planet because they undermine public confidence in the efforts of the innovators!² The innovators do have a powerful faith which inspires their effort, but it is a faith, not a certainty!

Trapped in an unstoppable system?

The critics of technocratic optimism are not actually blaming the scientists and technologists directly, but focus on what they identify as an unfortunate alliance of big business, science and industry that forms a self-perpetuating system no longer under human control. It contains self-reinforcing positive feedback loops in which one successful development leads to another, with few negative feedbacks to make the system self-limiting. What will happen when all the forests are felled, the mineral sources are depleted and the seas fished out? Perhaps none of the stake holders - scientists, bankers, farmers, industrialists, governments, voters etc - would be able to slow the accelerating engine of change, even if they wanted to.

That view has developed from ideas which were explored in the 1972 report *Limits to Growth*, prepared by a group of scientists and economists who called themselves The Club of Rome. They examined the exponential curves of population growth and resource depletion and challenged directly the idea of endless economic growth.

Key points were captured by Dr Seuss (real name Theodor Seuss Geisel) at about the same time when he wrote a parable for children called *The Lorax*. It was a playful fantasy in verse, about the growth of the 'thneed' industry using 'truffula trees' as a raw material. The fate of the forest and of the 'barbaloots' who lived there were described with a sympathetic understanding of the developer's 'good intentions', but also with a devastating clarity about their unintended effects. I shall come back to the important status of stories like this later, but for those who know Seuss's poem there are many telling passages, like the one which ends:

*For business is business, and business must grow,
Regardless of crummies in tummies, you know ...*

The most constructive response to *Limits to Growth* came with the invention of the idea of 'sustainable' activity and recycling of waste. Could we use only wood which can be re-grown in a reasonable time, or fuel from annual crops, etc? Considerable effort has gone into studying the replenishment of forests and fisheries for example, but the overall hope that humans will live in equilibrium with their environment seems difficult to achieve while governments continue to devote themselves to economic growth and are in hock to a self-driving system of globalised trade and investment. Faith in growth and faith in a sustainable equilibrium don't fit together at all easily.

Taking stock

Around the end of the twentieth century there were attempts to take stock. Where was humanity going? Did we have a believable story about ourselves that could guide us on our way?

Brian Appleyard tried one such appraisal in his book *Understanding the Present* (1992). He was fearful for us in our state of being dominated by scientific accounts of our world, and he bemoaned the pervasive influence of science on every aspect of our culture. I think he correctly diagnosed that we are in the grip of an idolatry of factual knowledge. Materialist accounts of 'what is the case' are taken much more seriously than anything else that can be said about the human condition. This in turn supports materialist objectives in life. We think we now know how the world works - even from the 'Big Bang'! By applying some of this

knowledge we believe we can make a happy life for everyone, and more science and technology will help us if things go wrong. That faith could be very wrong; but more importantly, does it inspire with enough things worth working for, beyond a better hip replacement in one's old age?

Appleyard recognised a new faith growing up amongst environmentalists (the 'Greens') which centred on their desire to care for the planet, but he wrote about it without much enthusiasm because he saw it as mainly a practical survival strategy, lacking any transcendental features and aspirations. Perhaps he was not giving its adherents enough credit for their sense of **reverence** for the natural world and things beyond themselves? Or their increased **humility** in the face of it? He argued that science would have to be humbled in some way which wasn't clear to me on first reading. I tried to understand the depth of his disgust with our oh-so-flexible open society that continually adjusts to change for the convenience of this or that lobby group, and in which he felt it almost impossible to take a strong value-based stance. Perhaps his personal anguish is captured in sentences like this one from his chapter about 'the assault on the self':

Science, like religion, provides a meaning that connects all it touches but it is a more limited meaning that offers a form of truth without significance.

He wanted to restore respect for the individual's sense of significance, and it was left to others in the new century to show how that might be done, as I shall describe in Part 3. What is to be said about us, other than what is in the remorseless scientific accounts of material reality?

More generally, Appleyard dared to question the Enlightenment values of rational humanity and progress. Could those high-minded hopes be misguided, along with our faith in new factual knowledge? Dare we even ask such questions without falling into some potty extreme which would deny the truth of what has been established scientifically? Not easily! Yet by the end of 2005 historian Simon Schama³ was writing sadly about two centuries in which

... men of good faith and powerful minds had ... believed that once humanity was liberated from credulousness and governed by reason then cruelty, tyranny, superstition, ignorance, destitution and injustice would vanish from the face of the earth. . . .

He was then able to suggest that the years 2000 to 2005 may be seen as a time when

this long-burning flame of secular faith guttered and sputtered and came dangerously close to extinction.

Dangerously close maybe, but of course it has not really gone out. Even if technocratic optimists hold it too glibly, this faith in improvement remains part of the *de facto* basis of our western culture at present.

PART 3: THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Worlds of meaning

The way to restore human significance and to loosen the grip of one dominant way of thinking was well expressed by David Boulton in his book *The Trouble with God* (2002). He understood the relevance of the twentieth century studies of perception and language which have demonstrated how completely human beings get 'suspended' in 'worlds of meaning' that are language-based. Each of these is a coherent system - a way of talking that shapes our imagination. We make it and then it makes us. Scientific materialism is one of those worlds, but not the only one, and it need not erode respect for others. Alex Wildwood had come to the same conclusion in his 1999 Swarthmore lecture for Quakers, entitled *A faith to call our own*:

*... our ideas and beliefs determine the reality
we take for granted as obvious or 'natural!'*

That includes our scientific ideas and beliefs, for they are 'stories' too, albeit well supported by a vast range of evidence which gives them the prestige of being called 'discoveries' rather than 'inventions'.

For writers like Boulton or Wildwood 'stories' are no longer in simple opposition to 'truths', and acceptance of the scientific story does not require other stories to be consigned to the category of 'error'. It is in re-valuing a variety of stories that a new perspective on the human condition can arise, together with a new humility about our powers of making sense of ourselves and our world.

Stories which matter

So are we ready to think again about our currently dominant stories? What are we telling ourselves about ourselves? What do we now think we are doing? Where do we think we are going? Who do we think we are? If the biblical destiny story doesn't work any longer and the human progress story is suspect, we will need new stories which **do** work and **are** a source of inspiration. What will they be? Green-consciousness might be part of the inspiration - especially if we get really frightened about climate change and loss of bio-diversity. To cast ourselves as just a part of the world we live in and not something separate is surely a better story than some which have gone before. However it is still only one way of making sense of things, one system of meaning, very important, but not the only thing that can be said about us.

Four decades ago, when God-centred accounts of the world had lost a lot of their power there was much talk about 'the death of God', but now people are also

beginning to talk about 'the death of atheism'. In a review of David Boulton's book, Tony Benn remarked that it would appeal to 'lapsed atheists'. What is this trend about? Rumours of these deaths are perhaps 'exaggerated' in the sense used by Mark Twain when his death was prematurely announced, but they seem to me to be connected with the 'one story' problem and the feeling that if some new insight is correct it has killed off former ones. Recent atheism, for example has been quite strongly associated with the idea that the scientific materialist account is now the only one that matters. Can we abandon that culturally lop-sided thought?

Part of our cultural problem has been that we have had too sharp a distinction between what we invent or construct in our heads and what we discover in the world 'out there'. The latter has seemed always to over-ride the former, but now it is hitting home that even scientific concepts are human constructs, despite our confidence that they really do correspond to the world 'out there'! Truth in a scientific sense is important, but other expressions also carry 'truth' which need not be devalued. The story of *The Lorax* is not 'true' in the simple factual sense, but it does help us to explore 'truths' that could be of personal significance. The future lies in re-valuing 'useful stories' 'inspiring myths' and 'human truths' as an essential part of our humanity, not something to 'grow out of'.

Philip Pullman is a present-day story-teller with a strong moral sense, who describes himself as an atheist, but seems in no doubt that the 'God shaped hole' exists in modern consciousness:

*We need a story, a myth that does what the traditional religious
stories did: it must explain. It must satisfy our hunger for a why ...*

For one such story he played with the idea of the 'republic of heaven' rather than the 'kingdom of heaven', a thought which had also appealed to David Boulton. Most important however, is Pullman's assertion of the need. I agree that we need a story - no, I mean a lot of stories - which show us much and touch our sense of what we can be.

From the currently dominant part of our culture we get the scientifically 'true' story of the Big Bang and the development of stars and planets, and then the evolution of living organisms. It may be better known today than the story of the Garden of Eden or that of Noah's Ark, and we need a policy about whether both should be taught, and if so how. Some people find the Big Bang awe-inspiring, but others, including me, find it very bleak for an understanding of ourselves and what we can do. Noah's Ark however, is a story well worth engaging with, without our having to pretend that it is literally true⁴.

Probably more children hear about dinosaurs nowadays than hear about Abraham. Does that matter? Some of those who heard the Abraham story in the past found themselves with a guide to faithful living... Or do I mean a misguide, because I don't like his kind of automatic obedience? At least if I know the story I will be able to think about it. That's why David Boulton asserts that we should not throw out earlier expressions of faith. Great stories from within the religious traditions should be used, and the responsibility for deciding what 'spin' to put on them is ours. Psalm 8 can be read as an invitation to dominate, but it can also be read as an invitation to careful stewardship. There is no single literal reading that can be taken as definite instruction. In Quaker terms we are not absolved from the responsibility of seeking today's light upon it.

My reading of Pullman and Boulton is that we should now be teaching ourselves and our children that human beings are story tellers, and stories matter for how we understand and how we try to live our lives. We should listen carefully to such tales, especially some of the oldest and some of the most recent, and think about them! The old question 'Is it true?' will have to be replaced by 'In what ways is it true?'. If we are committed to seeking 'that of God in every person' we should apply it to stories as well. Stories of dinosaurs are 'true' in one of the most important senses we have, but a story like *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs⁵ is true in other ways that are not less important for living a good life; and that surely goes for *The Good Samaritan*.

At one time the Bible was the handiest source of stories in Christian countries, so everyone knew about Cain and Abel and about Noah in his ark, Joseph in Egypt, Moses in the wilderness and Jesus on the Cross. Greek myths (which are not true, but are not 'lies' either) were also important for some of our ancestors. Then, a few centuries ago, came the excitement of travellers' tales from across the seas (voyages of 'discovery'). The interpretive influence of the teller was not well understood at first and that may have contributed to our cultural over-confidence in the reporting of supposedly simple 'facts' when even more exciting stories emerged from using telescopes, microscopes and rock-splitting hammers. Human beings had begun the new kind of 'voyage' which we now call 'scientific discovery' and in their reports they consciously tried to 'write themselves out' of the story so as to produce the plainest possible accounts of factual truth.

As a result of all this, there are now vast riches of 'factual' and 'fictional' tales to which we might attend. How are we to make a judicious choice? ... And in a global society, shouldn't we include more of stories from other cultures too - the *Ramayana* from India, for example, or the dream time stories from Australia?

That does seem indicated by today's light, but there is a problem because human solidarity is easier when people share a few of the same inspirational stories. Personally I always feel most comfortable with people who appreciate Ratty and Mole from *The Wind in the Willows*.

I hesitate to suggest an approved list of stories which everyone should hear in their religious education, because it would be huge. Could the United Nations set out a list, with the aim of fostering cultural unity in the global village? That does not sound a very feasible idea. Yet it is already suggested that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* from 1945 needs to be supplemented by a *Universal Declaration of Human Duties*. Perhaps that could be followed by a starter pack of *Key Stories for Humans*, but there must be a doubt about whether a widely inclusive collection could animate people with a sense of their membership of the human race, rather than membership of their own little group.

Actually, the stock of valuable stories could never be fully specified if only because new ones will be generated all the time. For moral education, Pullman has written about the value of more than one story:

*We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence.
Thou shalt not is soon forgotten, but Once upon a time lasts forever.*

Problems with 'big' stories and the desire for certainty

Little stories like *The Snowman* and *The Lorax* and *The Good Samaritan* are abundant. Emotional literacy and a deep faith could come from exposure to these and many other tales which explore human life in all its heroic and tragic aspects. However, we can't ignore the bigger stories which people tell about our identity and destiny, and which seem to their tellers to be 'fundamental'. They are sometimes called 'Grand Narratives' and are 'fundamentalist' in their scope - that is they are held to be so basic as to be the only important truth that matters. They satisfy a particular kind of yearning - the yearning for certainty. Here are three which I would like to consider in more detail:

Grand Narrative 1: Plain Materialism - *a story of the material realities we encounter*

Grand Narrative 2: 'Plain' Christianity - *a story not of material realities, but of 'redemption' and 'salvation'*

Grand Narrative 3: Rational Humanism - *a story about better and better societies*

Plain Materialism Today we can hardly escape the purely materialist story of ourselves as some strange accident in the dance of the atoms in an inexplicable universe, and of our destiny as no more than ultimate extinction. It has become more compelling with each advance of science, and it seems to be scientifically 'true', if deeply unsatisfying. In one of his laconic comments on life, the Danish physicist Piet Hein put it this way:

*Nature, it seems, is the popular name
for milliards and milliards and milliards
of particles playing their infinite game
of billiards and billiards and billiards.*

Richard Dawkins has an evangelical enthusiasm for the materialist-atheist cause, and when he was constructing his own sub-story about DNA and Us⁶, he was very glad to quote Hein with approval, missing the wistfulness in the word 'seems'. Confident himself that we do live in a universe with 'no purpose, no design, no good and no evil' Dawkins was also delighted to quote A.E. Houseman's cry:

*... nature, heartless, witless Nature
Will neither know nor care.*

... and to cap it with his own once-and-for-all 'truth' to the effect that 'DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, and we dance to its music'. All other stories could apparently be rubbished as superstitions of the past.

Tennyson might have found himself having to acknowledge the 'truth' of the billiards story and the DNA story as far as we can understand the natural world, but he would have said, and we should definitely now say: Is it the one and only truth?

The key realisation underpinning post-modern thought is that one single narrative cannot ever suffice to say all there is to say about ourselves. There are many stories which can and should be told and which carry 'truth' in different ways. The 'truth' of one story does not deny the 'truth' of another.

To put this another way, the 'privileging' of scientific accounts has gone too far recently, and has generated the kind of 'scientism' which Dawkins expresses. It is a scientific 'fundamentalism' and like all fundamentalisms it claims its one truth to be the whole truth, and permanent⁷.

We don't have to contradict Dawkins (except to object to his dogmatic tone), for parts of the conclusions he takes as so definite may stand, or fall, or be modified in the process of further exploration. For us today, the more important thing is to re-value and upgrade the status of other stories which are not in direct competition with the materialist one. We have been accustomed to 'either-or' thinking rather than 'both-and' thinking and for several centuries we have lived on the assumption that if one account is shown to be accurate then others are necessarily 'untrue'. Perhaps the strength of that habit explains why some people today equate post-modernism with something awful called 'total relativism' and are disquieted by it. They fear that the acknowledgement of more than one truth implies that any story is as good as any other and that in conduct 'anything goes'. Not so, I think, for all stories are subject to critique.

The materialist story will remain privileged as a physical story, but if it tends to generate only materialist life-ambitions, it will have to allow other stories that are 'true' in not quite the same sense but considerably more important to humanity.

What, for example, is missing from the following impression of humanity which Richard Fortey offers in his book *The Earth - an intimate history* (2004)? Writing about the dramatic rises and falls in sea level that occurred in the past as tectonic plate movements altered the climate, he makes this rather bleak comment (p 192):

*Mankind is no more than a parasitic tick gorging himself on
temporary plenty while the seas are low and the climate
comparatively clement. But the present arrange- ment of land
and sea will change, and with it our brief supremacy.*

I think he was intending to invoke in the reader a decent humility, rather than despair, but to avoid the implication that science offers the one and only worthwhile understanding, he could have written:

*From a geological point of view it seems that mankind is no
more than ...*

There certainly are things that can be said about mankind from other points of view, and they matter!

'Plain' Christianity. To me the Judaeo-Christian heritage is not at all plain; nor is it simple. Its scriptures contain many wise things that have been said about our lives, as well as many unwise ones, and these old and well-worked documents should not be neglected as a resource for helping us explore who we are. They remain relevant today in the same way as other literature, and many parts will 'speak to our condition'. We might even still sing Psalm 8 as long as we can do so with a twinkle in the eye.

But like Ruskin I cannot read them as a single literal account of historical progression, with our destiny worked out and maintained over a few thousand years by an interventionist God; that is not credible for us as it was for some of our forebears. Any positive faith that builds on the scriptural tradition will have to re-assess those older forms of thought that make them look like a single story (e.g. the New Testament theme that something happens 'in order to fulfil' a certain prophecy). But in the West we are rooted in Christianity and Judaism whether we like it or not and we cannot just abandon the tradition. The question is, how can we use it well in relation to modern and post-modern 'new light'? David Boulton has interesting comments on how to sing some of the traditional Christian hymns without feeling dishonest or foolish. He writes about the process of 'entering in' to a story, without pretending it is the only story.

The most 'evangelical' of Christians, however, retain their understanding of a single literal account and derive the strength of their faith by 'entering' very fully into those parts which carry news of personal salvation. That's what speaks to their condition, and in their concern for the security of a definite belief they feel it as the one outstanding truth. The 'Redemption' and their own salvation by Jesus become the most meaningful thing in their lives, but when they say 'This is **the Truth**', I hear it as 'This is the best story for me'. I notice however that it generates a high degree of personal dedication:

*Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless
praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

etc etc
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.*

Frances Havergal (1874)

Now there's a thrush at least as eloquent as Hardy's! - a human being entering

whole-heartedly into a story and ready to commit himself or herself totally. Perhaps we need more of such dedication? . . . or do we need less because the inclusiveness towards the 'saved' is accompanied by too big a sense of difference from others? A firm faith mobilises hearts as well as heads, and the liberation of a person's emotional life is of great value to that individual. Yet some of the charismatic preachers carrying this message have exploited their hearers and raised passions to a level that is hardly short of mob hysteria and can even be turned into crusade or *jihad* against other groups of humans. Passion is a needed component of faith, but it can be dangerous.

That applies to all 'fundamentalist' stories, but particularly to the Christian and the Islamic examples, where the enthusiasm has been known to turn against other human beings. When Moslem youngsters in search of identity and purpose become suicide bombers, they are not the first examples of misplaced passion. They are, however, another illustration of how powerful is the yearning to have a faith and how readily one can be taken up, however tragic its consequences.

Some religious rituals in Christianity, in Islam and in Judaism channel quieter forms of passion, which usually involve some form of repentance and self-abasement, but we cannot ignore the dangers that do from time to time accompany passionate conviction about the over-riding truth of one's own 'big story'. Many Christian Zionists and Jewish Zionists seem to be trapped by that kind of passion, just as much as the Islamicists who are currently gaining much attention. Ill-chosen 'big stories', held to be the one and only truth, have been the inspiration for ill-chosen actions up to and including genocide.

Rational Humanism (focussed on 'progress'). I have already discussed the influence of this 'big story' in Part 2. While the idea of working for human progress remains a strong faith to live by, it needs to be recognised for its 'mythical' power rather than its unquestionable 'truth'. There are many heroic tales of what we have achieved, and they will go on inspiring us, but to regard ourselves as omni-competent and completely in charge of our own destiny seems highly arrogant, taking too little account of the harm of which we are capable. It verges on idolatry of human beings. Perhaps an element of **humility** needs to be restored in any future faith. Whittier long ago expressed this in lines which still appeal to many people today:

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, Forgive our foolish ways

Two new 'big' stories

Although there are dangers in all big stories, because they come to be regarded as literal truth which should take precedence over everything else, people do go on yearning for this kind of general understanding. Today there are some which are coming to greater prominence which have not yet been taken as dogma or literal truth:

Grand Narrative 4: Green consciousness - *a story about the place of humans on a finite planet*

Grand Narrative 5: 'Universalism' - *a story about the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people*

Green consciousness. I discussed its emergence in Part 2 and it casts us as a part of nature rather than the masters of nature. The green movement has a component of **humility**, and - I think - another important one as well - **reverence**. In the imagination of some people it is as if Hiawatha, accompanied by Rachel Carson, looks at the splendour of the forest and the river, and understands that we are a part of something greater than ourselves.

Universalism. Globalisation has forced on us the awareness that Westerners are only a part of humanity. So can we think of ourselves as part of a brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind, or even as part of a companionship of all creatures?

Unfortunately, western religions tend not to be based around membership of humanity as a whole. They have often used the idea of a chosen people or a saved group possessing 'the truth'. That is an idea which strengthens each person's sense of belonging at the local level, but it very easily becomes associated with the will to war against others. Can future faith include respect for all other humans, as well as respect for the natural world? Anti-colonialist writers suggest that in some cultures such as those of the native North Americans and the Australian aboriginals the people might have had a better relationship with the natural world that sustains them than we do. 'Haply we might learn' from these other traditions, as John Woolman tried to do that in his encounters with strangers in eighteenth century America.

In this vein Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote a book in 2002 called *The Dignity of Difference*, urging respect for other faiths. Yet Judaism is amongst those faiths which have encouraged the local or tribal sense of membership. It matters a great deal to most Jews, and correspondingly to many other peoples. A - smallish group or tribe of one's own seems so important to human beings, but

how can we overcome the strength of the 'us and not-us' emotion which has done such harm in the past, and continues to do such harm?

Idealistic feelings about belonging to the human race as a whole do emerge however in popular song. John Lennon sang yearningly in 1971: 'Imagine ... all the people, sharing all the world', and many record buyers were able to respond to that image, even if it was somewhat pie-eyed. In July 2005 an alliance of pop singers tried to push forward a similar message to influence world leaders over third world debt. The vision was also carried in Joan Baez' song *We shall overcome*, when first sung during the civil rights campaign in the southern states of the USA in the sixties. The key words were:

Deep in my heart, I do believe .. that we shall overcome .. some day.

Overcome? - not overcoming 'the other group of humans', I think, but overcoming the bad habits of inter-communal relationships which had prevented human solidarity. The song was a positive affirmation of hope for that wider solidarity, and it managed not to be just pie-eyed idealism, because the defiant assertion of hope by large numbers of people did turn towards reality. Later, *We shall overcome* was also sung in campaigns against armaments, and today it is used in the 'Make poverty history' campaign, where the 'evil' to be overcome is debt and unfair trade.

The sense of a 'companionship of all humanity' - and indeed of all creatures - brings universalism and green consciousness together. The words 'ecumenical' and 'ecology' both use a root in the Greek word for a household - *oikos* - to suggest that there is one 'household' and we are all in it together. Quaker Universalists, with their insistence that no group can have a monopoly of truth, are amongst those who can bring a strong spiritual dimension, and not just a political one, to the companionship.

Neither of these newer 'big stories' have yet become dogma or text to be followed literally. They are still alive and meaningful in spirit rather than in letter. I recall T.H.Huxley's comment that 'It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and end as superstitions'. These new big stories may still seem like heresy to some, but they certainly have not yet decayed into mechanically-followed superstitions.

Living with uncertainty

All the ambitious 'big' stories I have described are likely to remain in circulation, but I think that the pretensions of any of them to be the whole and over-riding truth should be rejected. Can we be more content with uncertainty, and humbler in acknowledging that there are limits to human knowledge? Of course we struggle to understand how the world works. Stories, scientific and otherwise, are our best attempts; they are 'essays' towards understanding, and there are many of them, 'true' in different ways. We can't really claim that the particular mental 'map' of the world which we construct at this moment is anything more than 'a map', a way of orientating ourselves⁸.

In her book *Man on Earth* (1954) Jacquetta Hawkes put it this way:

... we can but look our ignorance in the face, for it is one of our few certainties. No religion, no philosophical or scientific system claiming any absolute or exclusive knowledge of truth is proper to our condition as inmates of one speck in a universe the vastness and wonder of which even our trifling minds are beginning faintly to apprehend.

Facing ignorance about who we are does of course carry its own anguish, and Rowan Sutton has shown me the following words, written by Stephen Batchelor in his book *Buddhism without beliefs* (1997):

I am confused ... I am confused by the irrationality, ambiguity, and abundance of things coming into being at all. I am confused by being born into a world from which I will be ejected by death.. I am confused as to who or why I am. I am confused by the labyrinth of choices I face. I don't know what to do.

But Batchelor says that Buddhism teaches him to accept this as his starting point. What a contrast with the certainties that people have taken from credal faiths! Yet his words echo what Whittier wrote in 1852 - 'I am, what little more I know'. His Quaker return to an 'inner light' as a check on too much certainty and a source of interim guidance comes out very strongly in his 'Questions of Life' poem. Not knowing also figures in Edward Fitzgerald's rendering (1859) of an Omar Khayyam quatrain:

*Into this Universe, and Why not knowing,
Nor Whence, like water willy nilly flowing;
And out of it as wind along the waste
I know not Whither, willy nilly blowing . . .*

Omar Khayyam's response as interpreted by Fitzgerald was rather hedonistic ('Come fill the cup') but the confusion does not have that effect for everyone. For Batchelor, acknowledging his bewilderment has become a key part of his faith. For him there is 'no truly authentic response to human life that does not acknowledge its inherent existential uncertainty' ... and he is ready to suffer that uncertainty.

Perhaps the toleration of uncertainty is also a component of what David Boulton and Don Cupitt have called 'radical religious humanism' to distinguish it from other forms of human-centred thinking. They want a faith that respects the religious impulses of previous generations as well as our current insights, and the perennial uncertainty is an insight which has recurred many times to our ancestors. In 2003 Colin Tudge wrote a book called *So shall we reap* which started as an almost technical analysis of trends in global agriculture but took him towards a consideration of ethical choices and of how human beings regard themselves and the world. Warning of dangers inherent in current trends in farming, he wrote in an almost prophetic style, stressing the limits of our ability to understand, let alone control, Nature. Then he looked back to what he thought prophets throughout the ages had in common, and drawing on the writings of the Hindu reformer, Ramakrishna, he made this short list:

- Personal humility
- Respect towards fellow sentient creatures
- A sense of reverence towards the universe as a whole

Notice that it does not include certainty about a particular set of beliefs which can be regarded as 'fundamental'. The stance that he describes is one of acknowledging human existence within a great mystery.

Part of that mystery is that there are also inescapable contradictions in what is sometimes called 'the moral maze'. Far from there being one truth which is 'the whole truth', we experience many tensions in which opposites can be true simultaneously:

- Is the development of medicines to save lives a good thing? - Yes.
- May it also be contributing to a population problem? - Yes.
- Has Christianity helped humanity? - Yes.
- Has it damaged humanity? - Yes.
- Are human lives the product of biological evolution? - Yes.
- Are they also the product of personal effort and will? - Yes.
- Does suffering sometimes bring happiness? - Yes.

Our habit has been to ask for 'the truth' in either/or terms. Either this is true or that is true. Only slowly do we get used to both/and thinking, which is necessary if our faith is not to be simply tied to a limited 'truth'. More widely perhaps it may be as Alec Davison wrote in song:

'Through the gates of contradiction lie the ways of truth'
(Quaker Song Book, 2005, no.179)

Faith expressed in action

I can read Colin Tudge's list of three core religious attitudes (above) as three 'advices' in the Quaker sense, and from all of them I think there is a requirement for action. The permanent state of 'not-knowing' is no excuse for 'not-doing' something, or 'not-trying' with the best light available and it is in what we do as much as in what we say that 'faithful living' should have its expression.

I am thinking not only of action in campaigns about armaments or social justice, which are well known to Quakers, but action within the structure of our social systems. Many of the stories that influence our lives don't come from written or spoken sources; they are inferred from how people treat us, especially in childhood. The loving parent and the steadfast friend tell us the important story that other people can be trusted. That seems a really useful story to learn, but it needs stability in the social structure and surely there is an obligation on us to try to ensure that such stories, learned from life, are well told. Unfortunately, fragmentation of society is now providing youngsters with many different and confusing stories about what can be expected of other people and who can be trusted. (I don't wish to imply that the story of trust is the only one, but I do judge that it is an important one early in life. We should of course be aware - all in good time - that there are circumstances in which people do become untrustworthy).

Other stories 'read' from the lives of those we encounter provide unspoken answers to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What should I do?' by providing role models. It becomes possible to think 'I am my mother's daughter and I am doing my best to live as she lived' or 'I am the third generation in our family business' and so on. A stable social system at family level and beyond can provide people with a taken-for-granted understanding of roles, a sense of identity and a tacit knowledge of what to do with their own lives. Our society today offers great freedom to individuals but perhaps too many options over how to live. There are many different versions of what constitutes a good life, and it is quite understandable that youngsters with no clear prospects and confusing role models should doubt their own identity and then plump for a simplistic story that will give them a sense of purpose and direction.

Perhaps a meaningful life can't be lived without role models and a 'place' for oneself - a feeling that one has prospects in a society that is fair and just and reliable. If those things are experienced the individual can become a faithful actor in the various life stories - parent, citizen, etc - and get a sense of belonging to the stories and to the community of people around whom they revolve.

To put that another way, if people are to be trustful they need a stable social system, and today that is not just a local challenge, to make our little local communities stable and just. How can the same idea of a just society which looks after all its members be spread globally, with the necessary sense of empathy for all? Campaigns which carry titles like 'No Peace Without Justice' and 'Make Poverty History' are certainly intended to stimulate that empathy.

At a more mundane level, can a lively faith today recognise and encourage conventional 'religious practice'? Many people yearn, not just for an inner assurance about what they are doing, but also for some outward and collective expression of that in a church or mosque or other meeting place. Why do they go to church or synagogue, or those other gatherings like Quaker meetings which express something of inner importance? Why do some of them want to *sing* about their common aspirations on such occasions? Why has church music been so important?

I am inclined to think that a meaningful life can't be lived without rituals. These range from the simplicity of ordinary family meals through the more self-aware fasting and shared breaking-of-fast in Moslem households during Ramadan, up to much more elaborate public ceremonies. I can think of two important kinds:

- those which mark the stages of life - birth, growing up, marriage, death
- those which are repeated on a regular basis for reminder: e.g. the various versions of the Christian communion service which have given many people a regular reminder of their sense of who they are.

Probably we all yearn for a sense of belonging which confirms how life is to be lived. A ritual can become a 'sacrament' when it is meaningful in that way; it joins the individual to his or her community and to whatever can be called transcendental or holy.

Ceremonies with a sacramental quality are not nearly as easy to 'enter into' as they once were, or still are for those whose faith is one of certainty and purely local solidarity. However, I think that some such may be necessary to sustain the kind of faith which I see as possible in this century. It not a set of certified beliefs or doctrines, but more like a stance - the stance of accepting one's place and one's

responsibilities in the community and the wider environment. It involves duties as well as rights. It involves uncertainty but trustful action. To work it has to be more than an individual's choice. I think it has to be manifested in the day to day practices of small communities, aware of their part in larger wholes.

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ENDPOINT

So what am I saying about human yearning for a faith?

1. **It is resurgent.** Even when older faith has ebbed away, the yearning persists. That's how we are; we need a faith to live by, and we can be 'grabbed' by some very odd faiths indeed if we are not careful.
2. **Meaningful stories are the key to an active faith** and to our understanding of who we are. There are many different sorts - 'scientific accounts', 'moral tales', 'inspiring myths', 'warning myths', 'guiding myths', tragedies, comedies. Those we know well become stories we live by.
3. **But no single story (either religious or scientific) will suffice.** Much as we may wish for certainty, faith needs to be a commitment and trust in the face of uncertainty.
4. **Some previous 'certainties' are losing their power.** Notably (i) the materialistic 'narrative' which dominates our culture at present is seen to have drawn attention away from other things that can be said about humanity. It expresses truth, but not 'the whole truth', and it does not provide personal guidance on how to live; (ii) myths of unending human betterment by our own rational efforts are less compelling than they were, despite the technocratic optimists, while newer accounts of the place of humanity *within* nature are gaining importance; (iii) older influential and widely-held fundamentalist stories can now be seen more clearly as dangerous because they pick out an 'us' as being different from 'them'.
5. **An effective faith requires attention to the social framework.** If society does not provide a framework in which individuals can act out a meaningful role in trust, and with hope, they will all too readily plump for some identity, even if it is negative and destructive. Can we safeguard a social system which values humility, reverence and some sense of the sacred, enough to make 'respect for other people' a felt reality?
6. **All faith-inspiring stories need to be kept open to 'new light'**
For Quakers that open-ness would centre upon the discipline of silent stillness, with confidence in the guidance of 'the teacher that is within you'.
7. **A big problem remains** in how to relate well with members of those faith groups in which the yearning is for a once and for all certainty. They make highly definite claims to 'the whole truth'. How to respect their sincerity and admire their sense of purpose, while fearing for the effects of their quasi-tribalism which divides them from the rest of humanity?

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Notes about sources

Most of the quotations I used in Part I can be found by putting the key lines into a Google search, and I have learned a lot about the writers by using that system. It is so easy to use that I have not given all the references in the traditional way. I leave readers to follow up any particular item for themselves. That goes also for the publishers of books to which I refer simply by author and title.

The first stimulus which set me gathering quotations was Brian Appleyard's book *Understanding the Present* (1992) in which he discussed the defence of faith in a culture that seemed to him almost overwhelmed by the successes of science and technology. Later I was provoked into teasing out connections amongst the Victorian writers by John Cartwright of Chester College who has work-in-progress about *Poems of Science*, while Mary Midgely's book *Science and Poetry* (2001) seems to me to be the nearest thing I have found to an adequate response to Appleyard's complaints.

A further stimulus came from David Boulton's book *The Trouble with God* (2002). He was writing after years of involvement in the 'Sea of Faith' network, whose questing is explained at www.sofn.org.uk. They take their name from Matthew Arnold's image of a well loved 'sea of faith' that was receding. After that, I enjoyed Colin Tudge's book *So Shall we Reap* (2003) because he manages to connect the moral and spiritual dimensions of living with the practicalities of understanding a world of globalised trade and technology. Other sources are mentioned within the text, but where that would interrupt the flow they are numbered and explained here:

1. The ferment for Quakers over 'a reasonable faith' is described in the first part of Thomas C. Kennedy's book (2001) *British Quakerism 1860 – 1920*.
2. This sentiment about environmentalists becoming a hindrance to technical solutions was expressed by Sir Alec Broers in his Reith lectures (2005) entitled *The triumph of technology*.
3. Simon Schama's wistful comments about Enlightenment hopes appeared in *The Guardian G2* on 30 December 2005.
4. Do we 'believe' in Noah's ark? David Boulton emphasises the importance of make-believe in our personal and emotional growth, and an excellent example of playful make-believe can be found in Michael Flanders' and Joseph Horowitz's songs about *Captain Noah and his floating zoo*. We don't ask 'Is it true?' but we might ask 'In what ways is it true?'

5. Raymond Briggs, *The Snowman* (Film version 1978). See: www.thesnowman.co.uk

6. Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (1995).

7. For a fuller discussion of scientific fundamentalism see *Science in Faith and Hope* by George Ellis, Quaker Books, 2004 and *Science and Poetry* by Mary Midgely, Routledge, 2001.

8. The 'many maps' idea is explored by Mary Midgely in *Science and Poetry*.

9. Clive Sutton would welcome discussion on his pamphlet. His e-mail address is clive.sutton@btinternet.com