

## THE BEDROCK OF QUAKERISM?: CONTINUING REVELATION

How many times have you heard or read the phrase ‘What canst thou say’? Well-loved amongst Quakers, but how many of us have read the sentences quoted before and after these words in Margaret Fell’s account of George Fox’s stirring address that moved her so much [1]?

*“The Scriptures were the prophets’ words and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord.....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?”*



(Fox’s Pulpit, Firbank Fell)

As Elfrida Vipont explains, Fox, at his famous Firbank Fell gathering “*bade the people take heed of the spirit of God in their hearts and obey its guidance in their daily lives; he told them that the spirit that inspired the Scriptures was living and working still in the hearts of men and women, ready to reveal fresh truths*” [2].

Later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as Vipont points out, George Keith challenged this premise: “*He held that by stressing the importance of the Light Within they were neglecting the historic Christ; moreover, he denied the possibility of salvation for any, however enlightened, to whom Jesus Christ had not been made known*”. She also notes that “*Some of his suggestions....involved the adoption of a creed which, however exemplary, can never be acceptable to those who believe in a continuing revelation*”. George Keith was disowned by Pennsylvania Friends and “*set up an opposition group called the Christian Quakers*” [3]. After coming to England to express his views, he was also disowned by London Yearly Meeting of 1695!

George Fox’s contemporary, William Dewsbury in 1655, as quoted by Rex Ambler, echoed the original teaching, stating that “*he [the Lord] will no longer be worshipped in words, forms and observations, but in spirit and in truth, and in sincerity in the inward parts; therefore everyone be faithful in taking heed to the light in your consciences*” [4].

Ben Pink Dandelion explains that modern Quakers during Meeting for Worship, “*sit in a tradition of revolutionary discovery*” [5] and further points out that “*The book of discipline, reviewed in each generation, is testimony to the Quaker search for truth, the experience of continuing revelation*” [6]. Dandelion as quoted by Alex Wildwood describes the “*three tenets of ‘liberal Quakerism’ – that faith must be rooted in experience, that it must be ‘relevant’ to the age, and that it should be ‘open to new light’ – together combine to create a theology where revelation is seen as both continuous and progressive. An expectation was created that the tradition will change*” [7]. Alex Wildwood also speaks of our “*continuing evolution as a faith community*” [8]. Many Friends would agree with Jack H Wallis when he quotes the Christian Faith & Practice 1925 Revision Committee that “*The ideas of God and man which have been held in the past must be re-expressed in the light of our own experience and*

*further knowledge*" [9]. I personally found this quote from 1925 amazing, thinking that these ideas were modern

I was interested to find that the recent Kindlers publication by Frank Parkinson, although castigating "*so-called Quaker atheism*" as "*an oxymoron that threatens to drain the life out of the Society and destroy its value to the human family*" [10], admits "*our God evolves as our perceptions develop*" and "*there is a valid argument that we are in charge of the evolution of God too*" [11]! Perhaps Parkinson should have discussed these ideas with members of the Nontheist Friends Network (NFN), whose annual conference at Woodbrooke was at the beginning of March 2013. We in the NFN, would probably agree with his latter statements and would try to dispel his fears concerning the first, explaining that we are not trying to "*dismiss religion as a primitive and childish truth system because its truths are mythical*" [12] but embrace a mythical, metaphorical meaning of religion, which is one of the reasons we remain Quakers!

The modern interpretation of atheism, as being against all religion, is one of the reasons that Friends have called their Network 'nontheist', indicating that they have re-interpreted 'God' in a non-supernatural way. I suspect many other Quakers may also have a less than traditional description of 'God' but do not consider themselves to be nontheist, mistakenly believing that that expression means non-believer, rather than, for some, interpreter of 'God'. Nontheists are Friends who have responded to their personal 'continuing revelation' and may even agree with Parkinson that "*we have been awaiting the appearance of a new kind of theology which can integrate the Quaker conviction of "God within" or the "Inner Light" with the contemporary thought-world and with the similar insights of non-Christian religions. Such a theology is now emerging in what has been called the "new epiphany" of science, where the creation story is being retold in terms of the evolution of the universe, of our planet and of the human species. The new creation story enables the Quaker experience to be enriched with an awareness of God as cosmic consciousness*" [13].

Dear Friends, let us share our experiences, the 'promptings of love and truth in our hearts' in a non-judgemental way. Let us try to understand 'where we are all coming from' and acknowledge that we are all sincere in our inward journeys, even if we are taken to different places.

[1] Quaker Faith & Practice, Fourth Edition; published by The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), 2009; section 19.07

[2] Vipont, Elfrida; The Story of Quakerism 1652-1952; Bannisdale Press, 1954; p.30

[3] Ibid [2], p.131

[4] Ambler, Rex; 'The prophetic message of early Friends'; Quaker Identity and the heart of our faith; Quaker Life Study Materials; p.44

[5] Dandelion, Ben Pink; Celebrating the Quaker Way; Quaker Books, 2009; p.11

[6] Ibid [5], p.23

[7] Wildwood, Alex; 'The whole banana'; Quaker identity and the heart of our faith; Quaker Life Study Materials; p.7

[8] Ashworth, Timothy & Wildwood, Alex; Rooted in Christianity Open to New Light; Pronoun Press, 2009; p.110

[9] Wallis, Jack H; Jung and the Quaker Way; Quaker Home Service, 1999; p.42

[10] Parkinson, Frank; The Power we call God; published by The Kindlers, 2011; p.6

[11] Ibid [10]; p.34

[12] Ibid [10]; p.16

[13] Ibid [10]; p.10

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