

Prayer beyond belief

This appears to me to be a rather special time to be a Quaker. **The Whoosh! Epistle**, July 2012 – written by a self-selected group of Friends, and signed by Paul Parker our Recording Clerk, and Helen Rowlands, Head of Education at Woodbrooke, reads: *“We discern a growing confidence within the Religious Society of Friends that our experience-based religion is increasingly what many people are looking for.*

Growing numbers of people have rejected all claims to absolute truth, but are hungry for a path of personal and social transformation. This could be a ‘transition moment’ for British Quakers, as we discover a new radicalism in response to turbulent times.

*Do we have the **courage to speak with passion and conviction about our spiritual lives? Can we acquire the confidence to find our own words to express the ways in which we understand the divine? Can we encourage others as they reach for the language that is right for them?”** (www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012) > *Vibrancy in Meetings Initiative**

Quite a task

We Quakers are committed to the notion that there is “that of God in everyone” – that every human being is to be respected and valued as we are - unique and precious – with the potential to shine as lights in a sometimes very dark world. How each of us interprets what or who God is, and how we indentify God in other people, is for each of us to discern for ourselves. We focus on an attitudinal faith, rather than a propositional one: committed to a course of action, and a venture of the spirit, rather than a creedal formula.

As **Ben Pink Dandelion** – who will be our Swarthmoor Lecturer in 2014 - explains, Liberal Quakerism *“is not defined in terms of doctrine but in terms of the form of Quakerism.... its worship and business method, its testimony and values. Belief is plural but also marginal.”* The Quakers – A Very Short Introduction: (Oxford 2008)

This is not new. **John Macmurray** said nearly 50 years ago in his Swarthmore Lecture in 1965 *“The central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends is that Christianity cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs; that what makes us Christians is an attitude of mind and a way of life; and these are compatible with wide variations, and with changes of beliefs and opinions...”*

“Faith no longer means the acceptance of an established creed or the assent to an authoritative system of doctrine. It recovers the original meaning of trust and fearless confidence; and this spirit of faith is expressed in a way of living which cares for one another and for the needs of all.”

Search for Reality in Religion

(Swarthmore Lecture 1965).

Lloyd Geering – a New Zealand Presbyterian theologian has written: *“Religious claims and theological statements, however valuable and inspiring, can never be more than human attempts to say something of ultimate importance. Therefore they should never be identified with the ultimate truth, but must always remain open to question and review. Theology (or God-talk) is highly symbolic. It bears greater resemblance to poetry than to definitive or descriptive statements.*

“Christianity is today in a more fluid state than it has been since the time of Christian origins. Nothing from its past is any more to be regarded as final and absolute. Everything is open to review and to change. We are free to explore whether or not the traditional idea of God is any longer essential to Christianity. “

Lloyd Geering – *“Christianity without God”* paperback 2003 edition. pages 15-16.

This is the base from which I speak today. It is further illumined by the writings of Greta Vosper, a Minister of the United Church of Canada, founder & Chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.

Greta Vosper has written what the American Bishop Jack Spong describes as a *“powerful book, a provocative book, a book that needs to be read and debated”*.

He himself is a noted and controversial writer and theologian. He states that Gretta has pushed the insights of several modern Christian writers *“into dimensions of truth and experience beyond anything I had yet embraced. She made me realise just how much real work still needed to be done to bring about a reformation in Christianity that would ensure its vibrancy well into the 21st century. I was absolutely stunned by her brilliance and by the comprehensiveness of her far-reaching intellect.”*

The noted English philosopher and writer on religion and science - Alfred North Whitehead wrote in *“Science and the Modern World”* in 1925

Religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science. Its principles may be eternal, but the expression of those principles requires continual development.

His words express very well the principal themes of Gretta Vosper’s writings. The essential message underlying all her work is that our whole way of thinking in the Christian tradition needs to be drastically overhauled, changed, and reformulated.

Why? Because in every other field of knowledge and experience – new knowledge and new experiences which add to or challenge our previous knowledge and experience, requires us to revise our mind-set, - our paradigm - as well as our practice.

It does so in science, technology, commerce, communications, sociology, and many other fields. The whole picture – or paradigm – changes in each of these fields of knowledge with new material. Very little of the science of 1813 is still relevant to us this year. Doctors were then still bleeding people as treatment for infection. In the last two centuries there has been what Whitehead describes as “unprecedented intellectual progress”.

Christianity, on the other hand, is stuck with a paradigm that made sense with the knowledge available 1500 or 2000 years ago. Christian leaders have tended to be defensive against each development of knowledge or practice, until obliged to accept it. This you can see in the tortuous process by which they came to accept Darwin’s theory of evolution; and in our own day are coming to rethink their views of homosexuality.

Christianity still defines itself with creeds formulated in the fourth century. Like many other Christians today, I cannot any longer say them with integrity.

Five key elements

The five key elements that I will briefly review in this new paradigm are:

The Bible God Jesus Doctrine Prayer

The Bible

Traditionally – the Bible has been regarded as the revealed Word of God, authoritative for all time.

New knowledge and research, not only from Christian scholars with their analysis of the earliest versions of the scriptures, but from Jewish ones too, have challenged many long-held ideas. Geza Vermes, the former Catholic priest who reverted to his Jewish roots, became the first Professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University, the author of the standard translation into English of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and one of the most important voices in contemporary Jesus research, gives us a markedly different view of who Jesus was, what he did and what he taught. He looks at Jesus from a Jewish perspective, not through the prism of Catholic doctrine.

Furthermore, the fruits of archaeology only possible since Israel occupied the West Bank area in 1967 give us new perspectives on the Old Testament. Other disciplines such as Roman history, anthropology, social history, linguistics, cultural studies, and the finds of ancient manuscripts in caves beside the Dead Sea, and at Nag Hammadi in Egypt, in the 1940s have transformed our understanding of the books of the Bible, their origin, authorship and meaning.

We now have a good deal more clarity and understanding of the process by which Jesus – the remarkable Jewish mystical exorcist, healer and teacher, whose message was for Jews only, became transformed over 300 years into the exalted figure of Christ, the second member of the Holy Trinity.

I do not think we can, with integrity, regard the Bible in the same way as it has been regarded by Christians in the past, and continues to be regarded by very conservative believers.

There is much in the Bible that is inspiring, motivating, compelling, visionary. There is much too that is myth, that is sadistic, and has accounts of events written to meet a given agenda – today we recognise the work of spin doctors – and they were at work throughout the drafting and editing of the books of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We can treat it as a source book for inspiration and draw from it new light – as poetry, story, prayer, moral guidance – but I cannot with any intellectual integrity, treat it as the authoritative word of God. It is inspired, and the fruit of spiritual experiences, but it is not infallible.

God – I am glad that Quakers do not find ourselves committed to subscribe to any particular understanding of God, for that has undergone vast changes over the time that people have put their trust in God. Writings like those of Robert Bellah *“Religion in Human Evolution”*, and Karen Armstrong’s books such as *“A History of God”*, *“The Battle for God”* and *“The Great Transformation”* explore these developments.

There is no agreement in history about who God is, and what is God’s nature. There are widely different perspectives among Jews, Christians, Moslems, among the Hindus of India, the Buddhists of Tibet, the Shinto of Japan, the Druids or Wicca of Britain, and the American First Nations. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, and the Incas of South America had many gods – and I do not know of anyone nowadays who trusts or worships them.

Among Christians there are wide variations in people’s concept of who or what God is. Christians are unusual in their focus on philosophical speculation about the nature of God – in which doctrinal belief is more important than loving and compassionate behaviour. Jews and Muslims for example are obedient to the discipline, the practices of their religion. It was only when the young Christian church separated from its Jewish roots that it began to develop such speculation that led to the concept of the Trinity, in the 4th century. The concept is mind-bogglingly complicated in the language for example in the creed of St. Athanasius. It is a long way from the simple concept of a loving Father which many people have.

In the lifetime of the Religious Society of Friends – just over 360 years – scholars of different Christian traditions have tried to reshape their

understanding of God in the light of modern knowledge. We have had Theism, Deism, Pantheism, and Panentheism.

There is a tradition in Christian theology, called, the **Apophatic Tradition**, which goes back to the end of the second century with Clement of Alexandria. This says that as anything we try to say about God is so very inadequate – contemplation of the divine is beyond language - we can only say what God is not: not male or female, in human form, beyond the clouds, or many other things God is not. What it doesn't say is – how can we know God is? **All religious ideas were created by humans to explain something of the mysterious parts of our life and experiences.** These ideas have changed a great deal over the last three thousand years. There is no way of proving any of them - they are a mixture of hopes, fears, desires, and invention.

God is a powerful force in the lives of many millions of people. This is a concept built on experience and interpretation, assumption, hope, belief – but all are intangible and speculative. I was taught it, and based my life on it. I prayed and sought a relationship with God – but gradually God no longer seemed credible.

I found it took me a while to adjust mentally and emotionally to life without God. At first I felt a bit lost - even bereaved, but I didn't want to pretend to a belief or trust I no longer had. Now I am very clear, confident and relaxed in accepting that while there are many wonderful and mysterious aspects of life, I don't need an idea of God to understand life. For me, life just is. I don't expect anything beyond the death of my body. I am content. Just as many years ago I grew to be independent of my natural parents, I grew to be independent of a divine parent. After a difficult part of my spiritual journey, I now find my experience of prayer has been enriched: I have been liberated

However – I am not seeking to persuade others to share my point of view. Each person has their own spiritual journey, their own experience and ideas. Each of us has been heavily influenced by our parents, and the environment in which we grew up. It is important that we each find a way to speak honestly of our experience, to describe how we understand our

experience, and to develop our lives accordingly.

Gretta Vosper writes: *I know no proof of God beyond personal experience, and I cannot acknowledge that proof as substantial...I prefer to acknowledge my ignorance in regard to matters of which I can have no reproducible evidence...I know there exists a world beyond me – the “other” – but whether that other includes another kind of being, I simply don’t know....What I need to understand is how I may continue to develop myself spiritually, open myself to learning, and stay committed to living with integrity.”*

*I’m suggesting that we ... write our own sacred wisdom **again**, this time gleaning from scripture all that is life-enhancing – **but none that is not.** In other words – construct a new paradigm.*

She goes on to say is that *“there are values I believe we must choose and on to which we must fervently hold. I propose that these values could be the foundation for the future assessment of our beliefs and practices, affirming those things that ennoble the human spirit and sifting out those things that diminish it.*

It seems she is affirming our Quaker approach in emphasising our testimonies, and leaving speculative theological questions on one side as no longer relevant or important.

Jesus

Many people today honour Jesus of Nazareth, not as the divine saviour whose death on the cross opened for us the gate of heaven, but as a Jewish mystic healer, exorcist and teacher, with some charismatic gifts, and what Vosper describes as *“a great posthumous marketing team.”*

Doctrine

Pope Francis seems to think that the world-wide Catholic church has become rather too pre-occupied with the minutiae of doctrine and

sexual behaviour in a legalistic way, and lost sight of the importance of love, of an open welcome to people who are poor, oppressed, and seeking hope.

Quakers on the whole don't give much attention to Christian doctrine – instead our attention is focused on our testimonies. Are others coming round to the need to do the same? All religions have personal and corporate transformation at the heart of their teaching. That is where the new paradigm needs to focus. – See *The Charter for Compassion*

Prayer

My theme today is not to explore any of those topics - The Bible, God, Jesus, or doctrine - in detail. Those are the foundations from which new approaches to the Christian way are springing, but we are not tied to the old formulations. Now is a time for a new paradigm.

So when belief has changed, what can prayer mean now?

Prayer beyond belief

ACTS – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication

Praising – worship, adoration, expressions of love and loyalty

Thanking – thankfulness – for blessings in various forms

Asking – making requests – to provide, to protect, to guide,

Confessing – apologising, groveling, remorse, desire to change

These become transformed into

**AWE CONCERNS THANKFULNESS SELF-
RELFECTION**

Other elements include

Working out

Guidance seeking – discernment in difficult decisions

Railing – expressing anger, grief, blame, criticism, pain

Reflecting & loving

Meditation – reflection on themes

Contemplation – the prayer of silent waiting, wondering,
open to the Spirit alone – or with others

AWE *Anne Lamott – American novelist & political writer –
author of *The Three Essential Prayers* – **Help, Thanks, Wow**
“You can either practice being right, or practice being kind”*

Awe – awe, awareness, wonder, awakening.

At the sky – a landscape – a newborn baby.

At the intricacy of a flower, or the human eye,

Beautiful craftsmanship -

Selfless service –

Looking at the world in depth – noticing details – for example on a walk

I find myself amazed and sometimes intrigued by the wonder of all that is -
the structure of a flower - how an eye works,
the astonishing size of the universe, or the beauty of a natural landscape.

the creative skill and inventiveness of a great musician or artist, an
engineer, a nurse, a gifted teacher or designer, the confidence with figures
of an accountant, or the gift someone has in training an animal – personal
service and self-sacrifice to benefit others.

I cherish **Advices and Queries** number 7 even though the words “spirit of
God” mean something different to me than to some other people.

*“Be aware of the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and
experiences of your daily life. Spiritual learning continues throughout life,
and often in unexpected ways. There is inspiration to be found all around us,
in the natural world, in the sciences and arts, in our work and friendships, in
our sorrows as well as our joys...”*

Take time to practice AWE - the pocket reminder

THANKFULNESS

Thankfulness, There are so many things in life that I am blessed in –

my wife, children and their spouses,

grandchildren,

other family and relationships, friends and Friends,

home, warmth, food, clothing, a standard of living and comfort which I know is not shared by the vast majority of the people of the world. All this I can too easily take for granted. When I reflect with thankfulness I begin to appreciate many of these things in new ways.

Expressing gratitude to another is courteous.

I find simply recognising with thankfulness so many aspect of life, the joys and benefits of being alive, simple pleasures, ways of being enriched in tastes, smells, opportunities, knowledge, entertainment, books, my recliner chair, my computer and mobile phone, my spectacles without which my life would be very trying, a daily shower, clean clothes, fresh air, a welcoming greeting, a smile, a hug. There are so many rich experiences of life for which I am thankful. All these seem to me a natural part of a life of prayer, though I do not address my awe, gratitude or concerns to any divine being.

Make time to appreciate all that we too easily take for granted.

A discipline of spiritual practice – it can be done in many different places,
at many different times – whatever the opportunity of time is there

A different pocket reminder

CONCERN

Concern – concern, compassion, caring, – For Quakers, having a concern, has a particular meaning. It refers to a matter which one of us thinks important enough to want to bring for consideration to fellow Quakers in a Local Meeting.

If others agree this matter can be referred to the area meeting and beyond to national Quaker meetings for consideration.

In this context, I use the word concern to refer to matters which I am concerned about enough to want to reflect on them, and perhaps talk or act with others to contribute to some positive action. This may be in **contributing money** to a cause which addresses this concern, or **sign petitions** or **write to a newspaper or a member of parliament**, or to draw me to find out more about a particular situation.

It may lead me to take specific action to help an individual or group.

Many people pray to God for such concerns. I no longer feel drawn to ask God to take the action I think is necessary. I find prayers to God are often telling God things such a God would already know, and if God is the Ultimate Compassionate One, will already be taking action on.

I like the story of the soldier who entering a bombed church, found a statue of Jesus whose hands had been blown off. He hung a notice round the neck of the statue which stated: “No hands but ours”. If the world is to be made a better place, Jesus certainly provides a classic example of encouragement, motivation, and idealism to us – but it is up to us to do something about it.

Advices & Queries 20 – *Do you give sufficient time to sharing with others in the meeting, both newcomers and long-time members, your understanding of worship, of service, and of commitment to the Society’s witness? Do you give a right proportion of your money to support Quaker work?*

WORSHIP – Worth – ship – worth, dignity, deserving esteem, honour or repute. I have no difficulty with continuing to use the words:

Meeting for Worship.

SELF-REFLECTION

Self-reflection – The Greek philosopher Socrates is credited with saying: “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

I was trained in the high church Anglican tradition – confession

for the most part I hated it, and came to avoid it. Only very occasionally did I find it healing and helpful – for the rest it was largely an artificial process of thinking up things to confess.

I came also to dislike the fact that most church services start with everyone saying together a “confession”. These are ritualised words which I found myself saying without any real sincerity.

I find I need to take time to reflect on my relationships with other people. I need to consider what I have said to a particular individual, or how I have treated another, the things I have done which I have felt have been positive, and those which I regret and think were mistakes, errors, or a loss of self-control.

I need to reflect whether my words, thoughts or actions were appropriate – were well considered, and whether there are things I can learn from reflecting upon them. How would I consider doing things differently another time? Some of the things I reflect on concern only myself – my choice of what I spend my money on, what I eat or drink, what exercise or reading I do, whether I am side-tracked from what I should treat as a priority when I am attracted to get involved with something that seems at the time much more interesting.

I find the words in ***Advices and Queries*** number 11 helpful: *“Be honest with yourself. What unpalatable truths might you be evading? When you recognise your shortcomings, do not let that discourage you. In worship together we can find the assurance of God’s love and the strength to go on with renewed courage.”*

For me - *“the assurance of God’s love”* is a re-affirmation of myself as a person. I do not look for any other assurance, though I would were I to feel I was not acceptable within my family, my circle of friends, or within the Religious Society of Friends.

GUIDANCE SEEKING

I have deeply valued Meetings for Discernment – Meetings for Clearness.

That too is an important part of our spiritual life as Quakers.

The collective reflection of Friends whose wisdom and experience you value, shared in an open way, to lead to new light, and well-thought through decisions.

Advices & Queries 15 Do you take part as often as you can in meetings for church affairs? Are you familiar enough with our church government to contribute to its disciplined processes?

Do you consider difficult questions with an informed mind as well as a generous and loving spirit? Are you prepared to let your insights and personal wishes take their place alongside those of others or be set aside as the meeting seeks the right way forward?

RAILING

Read the Psalms and you will see how good it is to get off your chest

Anger

Grief

Blame

Criticism

Pain

MEDITATION

The prayer of silent, open waiting, in deep stillness

I commend to you: ***God Just Is*** – by Curt Gardner

Meditation – is a positive activity, with physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual benefits for the meditator.

The practice of mindful awareness is beginning to be more and more taught to people with stress and with mental health problems – to enable them to deal more resourcefully with their difficulties.

The practice of meditation – internal focus of attention in mindfulness – activates and changes the way our brains function.

There is a “left-shift” to the frontal cavity of the brain – this enhances our resilience, and boosts our immune system. Our body’s ability to fight infection is improved.

The person who meditates feels clearer in their mind, and more emotionally stable.

It is now being used more and more with people who have obsessive compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder, and drug addiction, and in preventing depression.

It is thought likely it will help people to stop ruminative thoughts, repetitive destructive emotions, and impulsive and addictive behaviours.

Experiments with medical students suggest it improved their empathy, and has the potential to reduce stress burnout, and improved sensitivity and good “bedside manner” towards their patients.

The spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Roman Catholic religious order the Society of Jesus, provide me with a helpful structure for a late evening prayer exercise, that I have chosen to adapt to my own viewpoint.

1. To settle into a stillness and silence
2. Review the events of the day with gratitude
3. Pay attention to my emotions – and to particular events that engaged my emotions
4. Choose one event or feature of the day to reflect on further

Anticipate tomorrow with hope

Handout One

Godless prayer – impossible?

Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it. When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you. Avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language. Do not allow the strength of your convictions to betray you into making statements or allegations that are unfair or untrue. Think it possible that you may be mistaken.

Advices & Queries 17.

Listen – be open to the Spirit – seek to know an inward stillness reflecting and loving in meditation or contemplation

ACTS of prayer A C T S

Awe - Awareness

Concerns

Thankfulness

Self- examination – *being honest with ourselves* A&Q 11

Seeking Guidance & Self - expression

Whether we address our prayer to God, or we do these spiritual exercises without a concept of God – it is important that as Friends we respect each other's experiences, cherish each other, and live together in peace and harmony.

“Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way.” A&Q 2

Handout Two

Meeting for Worship -
implausible for a nontheist?

“Worship is our response to an awareness of God.”

Worship means – worth-ship – worth, dignity, deserving esteem, honour or repute.

Without an awareness of God – can we share similar experiences
– but account for them differently?

Listening to the Spirit?

Heeding *the promptings of love and truth in your hearts?*

Being led to a discernment?

Are these natural or super-natural phenomena?

Whether we seek to listen, to or be led by, God, or we share the same experiences but do not attribute them God – it is important that as Friends we respect each other’s experiences, cherish each other, and live together in peace and harmony.

“Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way.” A&Q 2

Handout Three

Reading list

Books referred to during the day

The Whoosh! Epistle www.quaker.org.uk/whoosh-epistle-july-2012

The Quakers - a Very Short Introduction, by Ben Pink Dandelion . Oxford 2008

Search for Reality in Religion – by John Macmurray – Swarthmore Lecture 1965

Christianity without God – Lloyd Geering, 2003. Polebridge Press, California.

With or Without God – Gretta Vosper. 2008. Harper

Amen – what prayer can mean in a world beyond belief – Gretta Vosper. Harper. 2012

Science and the Modern World – Alfred North Whitehead. 1925

Religion in Human Evolution – Robert Bellah. 2011 Harvard University Press

A History of God – Karen Armstrong. 1993 Random House

The Battle for God – Karen Armstrong. 2000. Harper

The Great Transformation - Karen Armstrong. 2006. Atlantic Books

The Case for God – Karen Armstrong. 2009. Bodley Head

Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life – Karen Armstrong. 2011. Bodley Head

God Just Is – by Curt Gardner. Quaker Books. 2012

Jesus the Jew – Geza Vermes. 1973. S.C.M. Press

The Authentic Gospel of Jesus – Geza Vermes. 2003. Penguin Books

A simple framework for a spiritual discipline

Handout Four

Prayer beyond belief

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