

KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF AND FAITH

Bob Booth

*Bob suggests that our increase in knowledge leads to a more universal faith and that this should affect revision of *Advices & Queries* and *Quaker Faith & Practice**

Faith follows belief - but has it kept up with knowledge and awareness?

Knowledge moves one way - it's like a ratchet. It cannot become unknown but it can be ignored, forgotten or given less priority. What we select from new knowledge is always subconsciously influenced by our cultures and individual emotions, although usually pure reason may be claimed. Ever increasing knowledge with our diversity of feelings makes it so important that we have the Quaker business method to test our concerns and listen to others.

Those outside us (but who can need us) may see only a Religious Society who worship God. The implication being that we know what that is. It could be said that we are a gathering of seekers, of Friends, who rarely reach certainties about the nature of the spirit that motivates us. We do say in a published expression of our faith 'Quakers share a way of life, not a set of beliefs' and 'Quakers seek to experience God' (*Quaker News*). The majority around us who are not into God worship might be confused – or even dismissive. It is not generally appreciated that we are a unique religion.

The past is better for learning from – not for leaning on. We have to work from where we are and not seek justification from where we think we were. Quakerism in Britain, where it began, is hopefully still open and free enough to approach vital thoughts on faith. A diversity of belief is hidden in our silence with its lack of rituals and pre-planning. This diversity is a strength as well as a weakness. Wider, freer and more liberal thinking started in the 19th

century and then the Quaker Universalist Group started over 30 years ago and more recently the Kindlers and Non-theist Friends Network.

Our use of the word 'God' shows faith in an 'other' beyond our consciousness. Quaker diversity covers belief in that 'other' as both in or as a human-type awareness outside us, and Quakerism provides a community for those sharing that uncertain, seeking but credible faith.

The dictionary (*C.Ox.D*) says faith is "reliance or trust in" and "belief founded on authority". These are different meanings; Friends are likely find the former more acceptable. Quakers express more direct self, rather than corporate, discipline. In other religions the discipline derives from a scriptural authority. At the start Quakers were not frightened of rejection, dissent or enquiry – all necessary for new knowledge and revelation. Yet enquiry can be suppressed by the certainty of traditional myth and belief in scriptural text.

In the former meaning of 'faith' we can trust, assume and expect the human spirit to be found anywhere in the world regardless of religion (that is the good parts of human behaviour - not the bad). It is an absolute necessity in our social/communal living and everyone has it to different degrees in different ways. In the latter meaning, faith in the Holy Spirit comes with scriptural authority. Religions do provide a vehicle for this more universal human spirit. Nevertheless it is mystical and unpredictable and underpins all moral and ethical thoughts. It is essential for living and being with others.

Does it come from evolutionary genes and social memes or does it come from a divine source? In the UK a majority rarely go to a place of God worship – do they lack this universal spirit?

Early in the evolution of our brains we acquired the knowledge of how to flake flint and use it for cutting. From this understanding of cause and effect we created new effects with new knowledge and tools. For the two and a half million years or so there was only a slow increase in that knowledge – then there was a sudden

exponential increase. Quakerism came with that exciting increase and we were a notable part of it with scientist Friends like Dalton, Lonsdale, Eddington and Burnell finding observable and measurable facts – the truth of reality. Before that many things were seen as beyond human cause so we had to find a cause outside ourselves so humankind created god(s). Three hundred and fifty years ago, when Quakerism started, there was little understanding of evolution and the why and how of science as we know it now. Night and day, seasons, earthquakes, weather, disease and all life were believed to be caused by a divine creator.

Although Isaac Newton's ideas were part of new knowledge, he still wanted to fit them into the Christian worshipping culture of the time. At this time Friends of the Truth (Quakers) were also within that same culture, but in a very different way. Quakers thought that direct contact with God could be made from the individual mind. Friends use phrases like inner light and concern making little reference in ministry to a divine being outside us.

A monotheistic God became a central part of many cultures across the world. Other religions worship God in consecrated places with rituals and creeds. In most, enquiry about basic belief is discouraged because it threatens the certainty of that belief. 'Living adventurously' may not be seeking the safety and comfort of unquestioning alliance with older traditional faiths. However we are not alone in seeing that revelation is better current than historic. Groups like Sea of Faith and Progressive Christianity Network, like us, see scripture often falsely blending historical fact with religious faith.

It is significant that Friends do not have any dogma or creed put into their minds - nor is it assumed to be there. We choose to explore our own minds in silence. We try to find thoughts that are deep down and often hear the thoughts of others. We want to be with those doing the same and having a similar faith. The universal human spirit is found across the world regardless of religion, beyond self-interest, with compassion, awareness, care and empathy – a loving kindness – all needed for peace.

Quakerism has changed significantly since it started. It has survived the painful clash between scientific knowledge and religious faith. A fear is that we just fade away with our declining and aging membership. Friends, because of their lack of a divine certainty, are better able than others to change for survival. Because of our unique character this change need not affect any of our practical activities and concerns. However it would affect some of our more formal published references like QF&P and Advices & Queries which might then be read more outside our Society. For example, none of the human spirit need be lost in rewording A&Q where its value is in the essentially spiritual and need not specify 'God' or 'Christianity' so often.

Everyone needs a faith. For some their faith can come from recognising a universal human spirit rather than a Holy Spirit. Faith is hope which we all need. This is helped by a community of that same faith. Distancing ourselves from God worshipping is not easy as it has become such an established part of our cultural paradigm with its inbuilt inertia. There is often a fear of change even when we know that survival for the future needs it. However cultures do change and all change starts somewhere.

There is both reality and humility in accepting that the ultimate responsibility, morally and humanly, is ours - not God's. In our Society the positioning of God in or outside our mind may be of little matter, but to those outside us, it does matter.

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