

Where do Nontheist Friends Stand in Relation to the Quaker Christian Tradition?

At the 2014 nontheist Friends annual conference two Friends challenged the assembly to state where they stood in relation to the Christian tradition. Michael Langton reminded the group that the Society is still officially constituted as a Christian Society. Jan Arriens perceived the elements of a two stage break with tradition. He noted that nontheists in the first stage have abandoned the doctrinal structure of Christianity. As to the second stage, Jan asked whether nontheists were also giving up the sense of a connection with a mystical dimension of existence that grounds a sense of God. Jan feared that were nontheists to abandon, also, this mystical basis of religion then they would truly have severed all connection with the Quaker tradition.

Nontheist Friends ought to be able to give a reassuring response to these questions which cause anxiety for many Friends. My response to Jan is that profession of doctrine and mystical experience are two inappropriate tests of Quaker faith.

Quakers are the original abandoners of doctrine. Fox recognised the gulf that can exist between doctrines and Christian spirit. He tested Truth from the outset by a person's kind actions, not by words. For the past hundred years, since that body's inception, Friends have been responding to the World Council of Churches attempts at a unifying definition of the Christian Church. They have consistently refused that Christianity can be stated in a doctrinal formula, and have voiced profound disagreement with the clericalism of the definitions presented.¹ Friends put forward instead their vision of 'Unity in the Spirit'² and a 'Spirit-led Church'.³

The idea that Quaker faith is based on mystical experience is a theological conjuring trick that Rufus Jones played on the Society at the turn of the nineteenth century. I reject it on two counts. It is outrageously superior and un-Quakerly to claim that Friends have specially direct experience of God, if that is to be taken to mean that this

¹ *To Lima With Love*, Quaker Home Service, 1987.

² *Unity in the Spirit: Quakers and the Ecumenical Pilgrimage*, LYM 1979.

³ *A Spirit-led Church*, Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations 2016.

differentiates them from other Christians, who all have direct experience of God, in, for instance, the daily companionship of Jesus.

I reject the claim too because it mistakes the real uniqueness of Quaker faith. Jones was thrashing around for a lifebelt to save the liberals of his time from the evangelical pressures to re-instate doctrines. He wanted a defence against the Richmond Declaration of Faith of 1887, which threatened to change the nature of previous Quaker practice when it came up for ratification at the Manchester Conference of 1895. Mysticism, with its complete discount of doctrines, was the very useful lifebelt that Jones grasped hold of.

But, if Quakers are to re-gain an understanding of the place of their faith within the Christian family, it is necessary to clear Jones out of the stable. His conjuring trick takes some unravelling, in more detail than I can present here. But I have stated the case at length in an article in *Quaker Studies* titled, *Rufus Jones never did establish that Quakerism is a Mystical Faith*. In summary, Jones rejected everything that had up till then constituted the mystical *via negativa*, the 'negative not-saying' tradition of mysticism. He thought it perfectly vacuous. Jones recorded in detail his disdain for the Platonist, mystical tradition of negative not-saying in his two books that began the Quaker History Series.⁴ With breath-taking audacity he sought to draw to a close that two thousand year spiritual practice. In its place Jones substituted his own re-invented brand of rational mysticism.

The Christian mystics have returned the compliment by ignoring Jones entirely. Not a mention of him is to be found in today's major surveys of the mystical tradition, nor, for that matter, any mention of Quakers as mystics. Jones may have fooled his Quaker audience, but no one outside the Society of Friends has been taken in by him.

Furthermore, and rather incongruously, Jones hereby separated Quakers, who are the original liberals before the name was even thought of, from the main stream of liberal Christian theology which, during the twentieth century saw a surge of interest in the mystical *via negativa* which has been something of a suppressed tradition within the main stream of Christianity. To sum up, direct experience of God, in Quaker faith,

⁴ Rufus Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion*, Macmillan & Co. 1909, *Spiritual Reformers of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Macmillan & Co, 1928.

really states 'not mediated by priests'. Mystical experience, as a basis for the religion, is an unfortunate exaggeration.

My conclusion from this is that, although some nontheist Friends may be blessed with mystical experiences, they are not excluded from the Christian tradition of the Society if they do not experience them.

My response to Michael is that it is falsely exclusive to ask whether nontheist Friends are Christian or not. There are many varieties of Christian Faith, and Friends were, from the outset, accused of not being Christian in relation to the pervasive Calvinism of the time. There is some irony in Friends accusing each other of not being Christians because Quakerism *began life as a movement considered to be an abandonment of Christianity*. William Penn denied the trinity and disputed the credibility of atonement.⁵ For this he was thrown into the Tower of London. John Luffe, who travelled to Rome to convince the pope of Quaker faith, was hanged. What better reception could have been expected for a heresy more vile even than that of the Protestants? A faith which dispensed with the sacraments, denied the apostolic, succession, denied the priesthood and actually put into practice the priesthood of all believers to which the Protestants at least only paid lip service?

Fox's work *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*, recorded 130 books and pamphlets written against the Quakers by the priests. The accusations centre around half a dozen Calvinist doctrines on which Quakers were judged not to be Christians. Fox patiently answered each one. Here is a sample of the vituperation visited on Fox by his fellow Christians, 'The Priests' Curse'.

Cursed be all they that say that grace is free, and let all the people say amen. Cursed be all they that say every man hath a light sufficient to lead him to Christ, and that within. Cursed be all they that say faith is without sin. Cursed be all they that say the scripture is not the word of God.⁶

⁵ See Stephen Angell's discussion of William Penn's *The Sandy Foundation* in Stephen Angell, *The Foundations of Liberal Quakerism*, Southeastern Yearly Meeting, 2008.

⁶ George Fox, *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*, The Works of George Fox, Volume III, Philadelphia, Marcus Gould Publisher 1831 [1659], pages 524-526.

Fox referred to the Calvinist doctrines as 'the dark teaching',⁷ 'false Christianity'⁸ and 'the lying doctrine of the Devil'.⁹ Fox instinctively sided with that other branch of Christianity which knows God's justice to be a travesty if it is visited upon people with no moral capacity. The true glory of God is that he gave to his children the ability to grow in spiritual strength. For this the Quakers were declared not to be Christian.

Quakers have ever since been a group suspected of tenuous allegiance to Christianity. It is because of this marginalisation, still persisting today, that not a trace of Quaker belief can be found in the writings of Anglican dominated liberal theology over the past fifty years.

In asking how nontheist Friends connect with Christianity it is necessary to ask, firstly, what kind of Christians have Quakers *never been*? Then to ask what branch of Christianity Quakers represent? Then to ask how might nontheist Friends be related to this type of Christianity?

My answer to the second question is that Quaker faith originated as an outbreak of the repressed tradition of Christian Universalism. In this tradition God gave to *every single person*, whether they had heard the name of Jesus or not, whether they had encountered the scriptures, or not, the light which is the means to their salvation. That is the basis on which Quaker responses to the World Council of Churches have consistently refused exclusive ecclesiastical definitions of the Church. Meeting for Sufferings, for instance, emphasised instead the invisible Church of God's workings that we should seek to recognise, and the potentially universal membership of all human beings in that Church.¹⁰

Christian Universalism has some magnificently inclusive features which account for the pluralist condition of the Society today. It accounts for the fact that people of any faiths, including nontheists and atheists, may be welcomed into the society today, in complete accord with the original Christian spirit of the society. It is inconceivable to

⁷ *The Journal of George Fox*, John Nickalls, Ed., Cambridge University Press, 1952, page 317.

⁸ Journal page 128.

⁹ Ref *The great Mystery of the Great Whore*.

¹⁰ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Meeting for Sufferings, 2009, section 2.5.

Universalists that a loving God could be discriminatory in providing the means to salvation, so the logic of Christian Universalism, making some allowance for changed times, is that God gave the light even to nontheists and atheists. Furthermore, Christian Universalism is a wonderfully self-deprecating, confidently self-dissolving reading of the Christian message. It is not necessary to profess Christianity to be part of God's family. Christian Universalism, and this is how I read Quakers today, looks with equanimity on all faiths, so long as they inspire peace and love.

It is because of this self-effacement of Christian Universalism that the Society today may be judged 'post-Christian' without severing any connection to its original Christian spirit. Nontheist Friends may no longer talk in terms of salvation, or God's gift of grace or light, but the comprehensively inclusive spirit of the Society, which nontheists seek to maintain, derives from the Universalist origins.

It is a pity that Jones did not seem to know of the Christian Universalist tradition because that is by far the best explanation of the condition of the Society today and the fundamental continuity that underlies what appears to some Friends to be a fractured connection to the Society's origins.

I hope this short response goes some way to answering Jan and Michael's fears of departure from Quaker Christian tradition.

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