

A Moral Argument for Immortality

David Britton

I would like to begin by quoting at some length from the Russian philosopher Berdyaev, who died some 50 years ago. This is the opening of the chapter called 'Immortality' from his book 'The Divine and the Human'.

"The problem of immortality is fundamental, it is the chief problem of human life, and man only forgets it through superficiality and light-mindedness. Sometimes indeed he likes to persuade himself that he has forgotten it; he does not allow himself to think about the subject which is more important than anything else. The prayer that we may be granted the remembrance of death is a profound prayer, and the seriousness of life itself is conditioned by the remembrance of death, not one's own death but still more that of other people. All religions... have taken shape in relation to death. Man is a being who is faced by death throughout his whole life, and not only at his last hour. Man wages a double warfare; for life and for immortality. Death is something which is within life and not beyond it; it is the most stupendous of facts, one which borders upon the transcendent.

Great suffering always raises the problem of death and immortality; but every experience which deepens life always raises the same question...."

I hope you enjoy, as I do, the forthrightness of that passage. Berdyaev is medicine for the Society of Friends, if only it would read him. He combines enormous learning and depth with the most courageous simplicity. He never tries to hide himself behind his learning, or to protect himself thereby from the possible scorn of his professional colleagues.

In the spirit of Berdyaev, my emphasis today will not be on the evidence for another world and life - (though I believe such evidence exists) - but on the moral requirement that there be one. Part of my reason for taking this approach is the hope that fellow Quakers will be moved in their tenderest part, their moral consciences. If this begins to happen, prejudices about the whole question of the Soul and Immortality may begin to lose some of their force. And after that has occurred, Friends may begin to look, in an open-minded way, at the very interesting evidence.

One problem is that there are now many Quakers who no longer believe in God. For them my moral argument is of no use or relevance. If we don't believe in a God who has brought us into being in some way, and who cares for us, then we don't have to believe that the system of things is just, or will one day become just - though most Friends who reject both God and Immortality continue to hope for justice on earth. At the same time, and quite illogically, such Friends feel freed of a great burden in not having to think about the whole question of Immortality. It appears to simplify things considerably not to have to do so. Quite so, and it would simplify things even more to give up hoping for justice on earth, or peace, social harmony, and many other things that most Friends care for! Most of us see immediately the terrible price that would have to be paid for such a drastic simplification. But what most current Friends don't see is the terrible price we are paying already for the drastic elimination of the Soul and Immortality from our concern and our spiritual life.

For in the religious or Christian, and specifically the Quaker position, as traditionally understood, there most certainly is a moral requirement for another world, for the fulfilment of creation, because our sense of God's justice and love requires it. The question now is - Do we actually mean anything by what we say? To say, as many Quakers still do say - 'God is Love' - while at the same time strenuously denying another world, in which broken lives can heal, and begin to grow again, is a bit too much like saying - 'God is Love if you are lucky on earth.' It really is a bit too close to saying - 'God is Love if you are English and middle-class, and have lived somewhere in the Home Counties in the second half of the 20th Century.'

Many Friends will reject this angrily. They may admit the social classification, while denying that this has spared them suffering. And they will be right, where this is true. But their arguments against the need for Immortality will nevertheless be strained and artificial, as I have found, and will continue to reflect this specific background and its gradually learnt assumptions. This is especially true when they argue that they don't ask for another life, that they are not interested in 'rewards and punishments', that they don't require

‘the consolation’ of another world, and so on. It is true even when they make the moral argument that a concern with another world morally distracts us from a proper concern with social and other conditions in this world. And my criticism is true especially when they maintain that God’s Love for us isn’t to be measured by any benefits conferred on us, and that the deep spiritual life is a mystery beyond any such practical or crude equations.

All this puts them on the moral high ground, as it is meant to do, and makes the rest of us seem rather grubby and calculating. The good Quaker, it is implied, must transcend the clamorous needs of the ego, and practise gratitude towards God for his or her life on earth, whatever it may be. But it is a simple fact, open to anyone’s observation, that there are many lives in which the love of God has had no chance whatever to take root. Too many of us now, in our social concern for ‘the wretched of the earth’, brush aside a concern for the Soul and its fulfilment. Yet a social concern for a situation which is not quickly remediable, is not a remedy at all, and if there is no remedy for misery, we had better stop talking about knowing the Love of God. Berdyaev wrote in his autobiography ‘Dream and Reality:

“Nothing is more pitiful than consolation derived from the idea of the progress of humanity, and the happiness of future generations. The consolation of eventual world-harmony as frequently offered to personality, always revolted me... Nothing ‘general’ can comfort the ‘individual’ man in his unhappy fate. Progress itself is acceptable only if it is effected, not alone for future generations, but for me, as well.”

Some people never seem to doubt the value and importance of what they will call ‘the spiritual life in the Here and Now’. And yet, if there is no remedy for wasted and broken lives, and if it is not considered important to find one through another world, then it is surely frivolous to affirm the importance of the Here and Now, and the importance of ‘spirituality.’ Why is such a life important at all, and what makes such people so sure that God is listening? God will be listening to the broken and the lost, to the yearnings to which our Society has stopped listening. The ‘spiritual life’ of those who shut out those yearnings will be a merely self-referential circuit, composed of the illusion of reaching out and response. It is a game.

All that I’ve been saying might make it seem that the moral argument for Immortality is for some kind of compensation for unjust pain suffered on earth. But that is not my argument. The argument is that a creative loving God longs for the development, the flourishing and the return of all creation, for that is what the enterprise is about. The overarching spiritual idea is that whatever is created must fulfil its nature, and will not be thwarted. Essential to this idea is the understanding that nothing and no one reaches a full unfolding of itself in the limited conditions of this world. And the moral argument is therefore subordinate to a larger argument by which we are all unfinished beings, all needing other worlds and sets of conditions and experiences to complete and fulfil us.

Now of course the trouble may simply be that many people just can’t believe in another world. Hostile Friends may drop their defensiveness and their pride about not needing another world, they may come to admit that a spirituality without another world is inadequate. ‘There ought to be another world, but I just can’t believe that there is.’

Here the role of evidence becomes crucial. Yet the moral concern remains relevant, for it becomes a question of how sincere we are in our desire to believe - that is, how much we are prepared to care. It consequently becomes a question of how much we are prepared to suffer inwardly for what we would like to see - of whether we are prepared to be turned inside out for it, as nothing less than that will bring us to any sort of conviction.

It also becomes a question of who we will decide to venerate and follow within our Society. There is no disgrace whatever in being unable to believe in Immortality. If anything I have said has seemed to imply that there is, then I take it back with all my heart. What is truly shocking and disgraceful, however, is to see the few quiet people in our Society who do have such a serene conviction, marginalised and dishonoured. Their voice is silenced, and the really vociferous people in the Society are those who make it a point of pride not to believe in another world. They regard themselves as possessing thereby a ‘superior’ spirituality, and are determined to be leaders. These not only ignore the truly spiritual serene believers in another world, and try to lead where they should be following, but many will also crush and bully, so that the other people in our Meetings who want to talk about the Soul and Immortality are too

terrified to do so. And these bullies in our Society regard their standpoint as 'reality', and 'seriousness', whereas they are precisely the people who are not fundamentally serious.

At this point I would like to go into a little theological history. The Christian Churches were always serious about the next world, but not always serious about God being Love. Both Protestants and Catholics believed, for much of their history, in the doctrine that God had predestined a few for Heaven and the rest for eternal Hell. Eastern Orthodoxy, to its great credit, never believed this, and the great theologian Origen, in the 3rd Century, specifically taught universal salvation. But much of Origen was condemned by later Church Councils, and certainly in the Western Churches his universalist doctrine was buried and forgotten.

You may be surprised to know (for it is now never talked about in the Society) that the Society of Friends holds a very special place in the revival of Origen's attitude and in the overthrow of the Calvinist predestination doctrine in which all mid-17th Century Quakers without exception were brought up. Poor Isaac Pennington was nearly driven out of his mind by it, as you can discover by reading the short account he gives of his life. The main contribution of the Quaker inspiration in the 17th Century was precisely the re-discovery of the possibility of universal salvation, involving, it goes without saying, another world. And yet this is precisely the thing that is never talked about by modern Quakers. We have become the greatest betrayers of the very thing that our Society came into existence to proclaim. Among our modern Quaker scholars dealing with Quaker origins, it gets no mention whatever, apart from the work of the very fine H.G. Wood, who was an inspiring Warden of Woodbrooke for so many years. (Woodbrooke is now as though H.G. Wood had never been.)

To talk of universal salvation in the context of another world is to re-discover the phrase 'God is Love' in a truly meaningful sense. But in Quakerism today we have the melancholy situation of a universalism (in the sense of Truth from many sources and religions) without the salvation. That is to say, without the next world, or worlds, by which alone Universalism can make good sense. It is also ridiculous to claim to be 'open' to truths from all the other religions, and therefore to be universalist, while totally ignoring the concerns with another world which pretty well all the other religions talk about. It is an Orwellian case of 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.'

It is very strange. A deep inner life, which is what Quakerism still claims for itself, should make us aware both of the God within, and of the greatness of our own Souls, without which the reality of God cannot after all be grasped. In becoming aware of the greatness of the Soul, in apprehending God, one would expect the quiet conviction of its Immortality to follow naturally. Yet this is not happening in modern Quakerism. We could even be said to be in denial - and we need someone or something to shake us. Someone once said that the virtue of great preaching was that it wounded us with a sense of our own possible greatness. Perhaps we instead practise a spirituality of low self-esteem, and that we understand true humility to be the denial of our Soul and its Immortality.

Friends in the 17th Century were turned inside out by their inner conflict from the Calvinism in which they were brought up. They could not rest until they had come to an inspired understanding of many things, of which universal salvation was the most important. It was a revolution. Quakers were persecuted for a generation, but predestination doctrines gradually died out. In the 18th Century John Wesley thanked the Quakers for that.

It seems to me that nothing less than being turned inside out all over again is going to do for our Society if it is to grasp the importance of the issue being put forward here. And this is why I offer the moral argument to the tender conscience of our Society. It seems that only there, in a moral turmoil and struggle, are we so capable of wrestling with ourselves that we are in real danger of finding out the truth. We need first to look unflinchingly at the real tragedy of the world. Without for a moment taking our eyes off that, we need to ask ourselves if our current solutions are really solutions, and if we can really credit a spirituality that tries to manage without another world. The second step is to admit to the bankruptcy of previous approaches, whether frankly secular, or spuriously spiritual. We may then find ourselves for a long time in a painful limbo, having lost our previous certainties without having gained any true and life-giving certainty of the other world. Out of this pain, vision will begin to come, and when this begins to happen, actual evidence will become a useful supplement.

It may seem a miserable thing to focus on the world's tragedy. Yet if we never do, or do so without clear looking, without inner honesty, we will only succeed in being subliminally troubled by it, and in producing inauthentic and manic spiritualities. None of these give us any real hope, or give the wretched of the earth any hope. The thing to pray for is that by looking honestly we will break through the misery and be granted the blessing of the real vision that our Society is really hungering and thirsting for, but is too proud to admit to - the vision of those heavens in which all creation will be gathered up.

There is in American Indian spirituality the notion of 'Crying for a Vision'. People are granted a vision by sighing and crying for it, and yet there is the frank recognition that some are granted the vision, while others are not. Those who are not will venerate those who have received it, while meanwhile their state of sighing and longing goes on. We just cannot say how long we might remain in the limbo of uncertainty about the existence of the other world, or worlds. But it doesn't matter if we are there for the rest of our lives. We might cure it by a resort to Spiritualism, (which should always be available as a part of our religious life), in which we receive a clear message. On the other hand, we may not receive a message at all, or it may be so blurred that it cannot help us. This does not mean that we should cease to sigh and groan for the other world, for such sighs and groans open our spirit and help the spirits of others in ways it is impossible to specify, but which are very real. This is a real stage in a real spiritual life, unlike much current spirituality which is based on the absolute and dogmatic certainty that there is no other world, and that we must base our orientation towards God on practices and attitudes that do not entail it. And going with that, there is a determination to suppress the voices of those who feel and think differently on this most important of all issues.

The person who is sighing and groaning for some glimpse of the other world is facing in the right direction, and if a whole Meeting were allowed to face this way what a difference there would be. Isn't it time we began to try this? I hope that all that I have said in this talk will encourage those who want such a change in our Meetings to find the courage to ask for it.

I would like to end by quoting one of A.E. Housman's most memorable poems

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

Into the tidiness, the no-nonsense down-to-earthness of so much current Quakerism, the surest medicine would be the unbearable nostalgia of this poem. It is a subtle poetic trick of Housman always to suggest that the question is closed, while a powerful but seemingly useless longing is all that remains. But the longing is not useless, it is a most potent weapon for keeping the question eternally open.

David Britton April 2002. Adapted from a talk given to the Quaker After-Life Studies Group.