

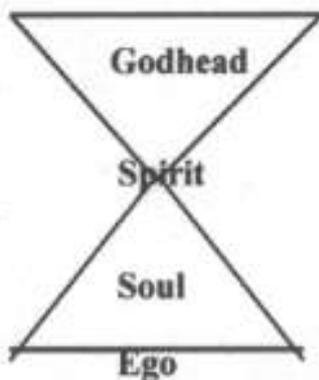
From Ego to Soul to Spirit: Walk on Both Legs

David Britton

Though I've called my talk 'From Ego to Soul to Spirit', I'm going to begin by talking about the last term, and later on about the progression as I see it. The reasons should become clear as I go on. I am using the term 'Spirit' here as it is used in the Christian tradition and Christian mysticism, not as it is used in Spiritualism. Meister Eckhart, one of the greatest of these mystics, sees Spirit as standing, as it were, at the apex of our being, and at the apex of the Soul. He sometimes calls it 'the Soul-spark', and also a divine spark in us. In one great passage he calls it an eye - which doesn't sound much, until one hears his epigram -

'The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.'

And here indeed we have the essence of mysticism, a conjunction or meeting-place of God and humanity, a place where we share the same being, where humans exercise their capacity for the infinite. It is also a place of supreme restfulness - at least initially. The meeting could be represented thus -



An individual aspires towards God, God responds to that aspiration, and a meeting can take place, at the mid-point.

Now one can try to practise a religious spirituality of this mystical kind, or something close to it - this aspiration towards the Godhead alone - without being, for a long time, concerned with the next world, in the sense of our survival, our Soul's survival of physical death, and its immediate condition and experience in another world

Why is this so? And to what extent is it valid and sound as a method and as a life?

It is so simply because this is the way that some people are religiously awakened in their adult existence. There is an extraordinary spontaneous and often completely 'unearned' experience in which some people transcend, for the moment, all the more familiar aspects of their being, and are drawn powerfully into this mystical 'formless' place - the place of the Godhead, which also feels like one's long-lost home. One is going home, or rather a strong magnetic force (not to be understood as any kind of material force), is pulling one home - and who that ever experiences this will want to look such a gift-horse in the mouth?

To what extent it is valid, (and certainly some would want to question it), depends on a number of things. I will not be dealing with all of these, but only with those that are relevant

to our overall theme of 'walking on both legs', and its connection with our concern for the next world.

It depends both on what has preceded this mystical experience, and on what will follow it. This is just another way of indicating Context, of which the main part is the tradition in which a person is operating. One can read the Catholic mystics of the Middle Ages or the Eastern Orthodox mystics, or the Hindu Upanishads or the great pagan Plotinus, (in what is admittedly a new kind of Context, that of modern global eclecticism!), without coming across a concern with our survival in another world. It is all about, or appears to be about, our here and now experience of the reality of God.

There is nothing at all wrong with such an emphasis, because in all these great traditions it is simply taken for granted that there is a next world in which we will live after our physical death. Some of us here may not agree in detail about what some of these traditions say about the next world, but we will surely agree that it is good that they take for granted that such a world exists. By doing so, these traditions in fact give a great freedom to mystical-spiritual and other types of religious path. We can undertake our spiritual journeys in this world without losing our hope for a greater fulfilment hereafter. The great traditions have already conceded the reality of one of our walking legs, and are saying to us 'Now go and walk on the other'.

On the face of it, of course, the mystical and spiritual writings seem to be saying that *we* don't need another world in which to find God, we can find God in this world, and it is God that matters, not the next world. Eternity is here and now. But in all the Christian writings of a mystical kind that I have ever read I have found the important qualification - 'So far as this world allows'. This is absolutely crucial. By saying they can find God, or God can find us, here and now, but 'only so far as this world allows', they are admitting that a next world exists and is necessary, and that we will find God more comprehensively and truly when we are translated there, not while we are here. The mystical writings are simply confirming what the corresponding theology has stated, and this is important, because there are certain modern tendencies of thought, and this includes much of modern Quakerism, that would like to drive a wedge between mysticism and theology, while they applaud enthusiastically the former and roundly condemn the latter. This invariably leads to a denial of the next world. Mysticism, so-called, is used as a stick with which to beat the next world!

A sound tradition will always take for granted a next world even though, as I have said, most of its spirituality will not focus on it. An unsound tradition such as modern Quakerism has largely become, does not take it for granted, because it has lost its basic prosy bread-and-butter theology, its solid underpinning girders and structures. We have become besotted with the 'poetry' of spirituality and the spiritual life, or a kind of scented prose afflicts us and a special voice in which we talk about these things. We regard ourselves as much too sensitive and refined to handle gross things like basic structures of the world, and basic needs like our need for immortality. Yet early Quakers had a good prosy theology, and it is set out in that great unread Quaker classic, Barclay's 'Apology', and immortality and the next world are solidly there.

Let me talk for a while from my own experience. I came very gladly to Quakerism from my time as a conscripted soldier. I discovered Quaker pacifism and mysticism at the same time, and began to attend Quaker Meeting as a University student. 3 years is a long time when you are 20 years old, and for 3 long years I was deeply happy with the mystical and the here and now emphasis of that spirituality. The clamour of what I am calling the Soul, *for* a life beyond death in another world, seemed to be very remote, and in this state of being the Quaker

tradition upheld me, and approved me, and even opened doors for my ambition, had I wanted to walk through them.

I am not persuaded even now that I was mistaken in my emphasis at those times. But I tried to keep it going for too long, when in fact a needy lower Soul was knocking at my door, and being ignored, I was emotionally very immature, and somehow felt that the 'pure spirit' could do all the work for me. The result was a swift and total collapse of my spiritual assurance in 1961, my last year as a student, and a strange human void as the residue. I could no longer practice spiritually, or read or understand mystical works, while I still kept the clamorous Soul at a distance.

Eventually I allowed room for the Soul's passionate desire for immortality. And I insist it was the Soul and not a mere selfish Ego, in that the prime motion behind my desire was for a communal hereafter, something which gave meaning to self and others, and was not mainly a simple fear of personal extinction. But as I began to try to talk to others, especially to Quakers, I realised my isolation and loneliness. This period was also that of so-called 'radical theology', when many Anglicans and Methodists as well as Quakers, gave up on so many traditional things. My conversations with members of these Churches were just as isolating for me. (I would now call those times 'The Dark Ages', not only on account of my own personal affliction, but on account of the negativity and destruction wrought by a number of highly influential theologians).

Sometimes I would quote Blake at them - when I knew that they were Blake enthusiasts - I quoted Blake's 'eternal worlds', of which 'this vegetable world is but a shadow'. But they had no problem with this - Blake's higher worlds were all just this world differently perceived. It was merely the childhood of religion, I was told, to suppose that there were actually worlds beyond death. And if I ever dared to mention evidence, and Spiritualism, they just hooted and made spooky wailing noises, or simply switched off, giving me what is called, I believe, 'an old fashioned look'.

It often takes a life-shock to deliver a person from spiritual complacency. Of course no one can -prescribe, either for himself or herself or for others, how long a purely spiritual approach of the kind I have described should last, without a concern for the next world. Some would not begin with a purely spiritual approach anyway, and in that Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and also Anglicans and other Churches, are probably wiser than Quakerism. Perhaps our Meeting for Worship, though beautiful, is a little too pure - and no other occasion exists in which other modes and resources of prayer can be used. Various factors make it a particular danger that Friends will over-prolong a pure spirituality - or, worse still, take up an ideological position of total resistance to the idea of a next world, and do this on a spiritual basis. This is now so common in the Society that I would venture to call it the ruling tendency in modern Quakerism.

For myself, I went through about 7 years of great struggle. One so wants the Soul to be a reality, not just a theory or a need. And yet for years and years it can be just a clumsy ridiculous pathetic-looking need. It does not feel good to oneself, and others are far from impressed by it. It would be quite different, of course, if the tradition one was in recognised this particular struggle, and validated its goal, the arrival at some kind of conviction of the Soul's immortality. Then the awkwardness would not matter, and one would not keep so much to oneself. One could accept being an ugly bare fledgling, in the knowledge that one was being encouraged to fly.

The year 1969 was very important for me. In that year 3 things happened at once, when I was 32 years old. In the first place, through some strange spontaneous regression experiences, I

seemed to find myself in a world of the Soul, with all sorts of emotional resonances that had been repressed for years. I had recently been allowing myself folk tales and fairy tales and myths, often in children's versions. I will not pretend I was in a healthy integrated state, because I was not. I was in a regressed dissociated state for much of the time - but this seemed absolutely necessary for me. Also, I will not pretend that it was very deep or life-changing, but it was enough. I recognised in some of the prose-writings of the Irish poets Yeats and A.E descriptions of the strange states I had inhabited, and this encouraged me. I began to feel my wings for the first time.

At that same time I picked up Geraldine Cummins two books, purporting to come from W.H.Myers - *The Road to Immortality* and *Beyond Human Personality* - and found them exciting and real. And at the same time I began to understand the mystical again, after 7 years of blankness there. I picked up 'The Cloud of Unknowing' from a shelf where it had stared at me cruelly for all those years, and read it through with delight. I found no conflict between these realities from different levels. They were all needed.

And what was also much needed was the third thing, which was just as delightfully surprising. I began to grow up. I was a very slow developer in many ways. At the time I was teaching fulltime, and part of my job was teaching General English Literature to 6th Form girls. We read through D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, and in the process (though it was the third time in my life I had read those books), my own ego seemed to mature of itself. It was an experience of much necessary grounding. When all these things had happened I found my vocation as a poet in that same year, in September beside a grove of aspens, whose simultaneous and multitudinous flickerings and rattlings and whooshings as of the sea put me into a light trance, and gave me a pleasing suggestion of a higher kind of group-life, full of energy and delight. I have never forgotten that hour.

So now we have come to the 3 terms of my talk - Ego and Soul and Spirit - and in my own life I have come down and down, from a precocious and extremely precarious spiritual interest, through a later Soul-struggle, to the beginning of an Ego-maturing.

Let me now leave my own history and look at these terms, and how they relate to the theme 'Walk on Both Legs'. For many people ego-maturing comes first, and it is also more or less where they stop. There is nothing wrong with this. People's lives can be full of reward to themselves and to others, without even a setting out on a Soul-struggle, or on the spiritual path. In all these activities, in family and vocation, friends and interests, culture and the good things of the world, there is, or can be, a sort of analogue of Soul-life and even Spiritual-life, but I think that a time of struggle followed by an actual quest have to occur before we should call these things a path and a life. That is a matter for debate, but I will leave that for now.

What I think is certain is that life on the Ego-level only becomes harmful when it becomes pathologically selfish, or when it becomes hostile and defiant towards the spiritual and other worldly interests in other people's lives. Otherwise, there may be great wisdom and necessity in the Ego-life for the people concerned. Also there is the charmingly simple outlook of those like Sir Stephen King-Hall, who, on being interviewed at the age of 70, after a busy and very outward life in the Navy and in Politics, said that he was now becoming interested in God and the possibility of a next life. I scorned this attitude at the time, but now I am sure it was wise.

I have been talking here of secular-minded people, of good people who feel no need for a religion. But for those who are part of a religious community, it matters very much, not only that they should start with a search for God as a fundamental concern, but that they should credit a next world, or at least take it with that seriousness that will require of them, at some

point, a search for that conviction as well. Their denial, or just their indifference, will begin to have destructive effects within their community, creating a stifling atmosphere.

In the current Society of Friends, some will justify their denial by recourse to the totally secular and rather corny left-wing argument that any kind of emphasis on a next world will detract from our proper concern and responsibility for this one. I find it strange that such a starkly simplistic idea could weigh seriously even with learned Quaker theologians, but it does. There seems to be a pre-determination that we can walk on only one leg, that to attempt to walk on two would be too much for us. It reminds me of the joke about poor old President Ford - that he couldn't chew gum and walk at the same time!

In secular left-wing thought the argument has often been taken further. It is said that if we create a truly just and democratic society, in which citizens are actively empowered, and in which leisure and cultural pursuits are available for all, we will simply not need to think of another world. This has also been taken up into modern Quakerism, through John MacMurray and his disciples from one angle, and also from the Biblical side. The idea of a religious community is put forward as the fundamental truth, and Jesus' promise of 'abundant life' is interpreted within this, and within an entirely this-world framework. The 'last things' that religions speak of, the 'eschaton' and eschatology, death and immortality and resurrection, are all interpreted as being realities for this world only. A Quaker theologian said recently at a Quaker Theology session at Woodbrooke - 'The only true eschatology is a realised eschatology. All the rest are just playing games.'

What this means for us, Friends, is that as we sit here and concern ourselves about another world, we are simply 'playing games.' All our intimations of another realm of being should and can be translated into the terms of the good religious community on earth mediating the love of God, and enabling psychological and spiritual 'resurrections' and the like. In this idealised picture the kind of tragedies that shatter persons beyond repair apparently don't happen. Or no tragedy is allowed to be beyond repair through the means that this world will provide, if there is a religious community to mediate the unfailing love of God. This is a most pernicious illusion. We live in a rough old world, which will always have irreparable tragedies, no matter how well we improve it. We are here on earth, not in order to pretend it is Heaven, or will one day be Heaven, but to gather valuable experience that cannot be gained in any other set of conditions.

In order to gather experience in this world, a certain providential forgetting may even be necessary. In a stanza of the great Wordsworth Ode on the Intimations of Immortality in which he speaks of 'trailing clouds of glory' as we come into this world, the poet talks about the need to forget, a creative forgetting that allows the earth to do its work for us.

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,

The homely nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

So indeed there is 'a time for all things under the sun', and to that list of things we could well add, 'A time to remember and a time to forget.' It is not all about remembering, whether it's past lives, or anything else. We have to forget some terrible experiences, and we have to forget wrongs sometimes. And sometimes we have to forget, or to put to one side, a direct

concern with Soul, or with the next world, or even with a Spiritual concern with God in a direct way, and then we have to trust that the earth-experiences we have, on the Ego-level, the earth-choices we make (many of which are unconscious), will have eventual relevance to our Soul-life and the next world, and to our Spiritual life focussed on God. It is certainly important for our Egos to mature, for us to 'separate out' properly, to be autonomous individuals, for without that the rest will suffer distortion and unreality.

It is when we begin to remember again, usually later in our lives, that we will begin to see the relevance of some of the largely unconscious choices we have made about how we live in this world. We can also begin to see the value of some of the earth-experiences we have had. I am talking mainly here of experiences on the Ego-level. In that connection, before a remembering takes place, there is usually a difficult Soul-struggle, the struggle to find our wings, to find a reasonable conviction of a next world, to turn it from a hungry need to a beginning of enjoyment and satisfaction.

At a certain point in that struggle we may be helped by a spontaneous remembering of having come from that Soul-world. We may become conscious, however dimly, of certain beings in that world who can help us. It then becomes clearer, as I have said, why we are doing some of the things that we have chosen, or that have chosen us, on earth. (Or we may instead be shocked into doing something else, experiencing an awakening). We can become aware that we belong to a group of beings who need a certain thing or things from us, a certain earth-experience, or developed gift, which contributes to the Group-life. My own experience of this is not vivid enough yet for me to add much detail or roundness, but I trust it, and it led me to write this piece, with the image of a House and a coming Feast, in one of my Theological Papers for the Theology Group at Woodbrooke. It is about our relation, as we feel it on earth, to our Group-soul as we begin to sense it.

'My image is of a huge rambling house with many floors, odd-shaped rooms, irregular projections, hidden gardens. Many people work in this house, but each in his or her own room. They have never met face to face, but they know they have an affinity with all the others in the house. They communicate with each other by tapping on the walls. They know that this will not go on forever, but there is work to be done, and each must do some work before meeting at the great feast which is often spoken of. People live in their rooms, year in, year out, a lifetime. But one day they will meet at a feast. The feast will not take place until the work is done. Each one must bring something to the feast, and must come dressed for a feast.'

In summary, I'd like to risk a few generalisations about the patterning of Ego and Soul and Spirit. In our experience on this earth, the work of Ego and of Spirit can go curiously together, in that both can be about incarnation. It is obvious why this is true of Ego, but it is true also of the Spiritual life focussed on God, in that the more real this becomes the more it comes down into our daily lives. We like to feel the 'presence' here and now. Together, Ego and Spirit can be one leg that we walk on.

In a very real sense, the Soul in us is the dreamer, and in an unromantic age such as ours is therefore automatically suspect. For several generations now it has not been 'permitted' to name the Soul in the writing of poetry, for instance, or even to hint at its domain, even if one does not use the actual word 'Soul'. Our age distrusts dreams of that kind, 'escapism' and so forth. So in our current Quakerism, the spiritual life focussed on God is still approved of (though even that is now under threat), but the dreaming and longing Soul is not - that in us which dreams and longs for another world, and imagines a fellowship there so much more vivid than is possible here. Our age reserves its harshest scorn for all talk and feeling of this kind.

Of course, it could be objected, the 'dream' of our Spirit about God is surely greater than any dream of the Soul about human fellowship in another world. Or rather, the dream of the Spirit about God surely encompasses and includes the lesser dream, making the Soul redundant. In an ultimate sense that is true - but there is no point in determining to think always in an ultimate sense, where all is one, when in practice we are forced to live, both here and hereafter, for as far as we can see, in a non-ultimate sense, where all is decidedly not one! That is the reality, and fine words about being with God in unity, or experiencing a oneness in which personal identity is surrendered, or knowing 'eternity', or whatever term is used, 'butter no parsnips', as the saying goes.

And it is possible, as I have said much earlier on, to live a life Spiritually focussed on God for a long time without it producing any sense at all of a Heaven of human and other fellowship. That may be because the tradition already, as I've indicated, 'looks after' the Soul and its

Heaven, liberating the Spirit for its essential work, and that is essentially a good thing. However, there is such a thing, even in traditions that recognise the Soul and its Heaven, as an inhuman Spirituality which, in its self-supposed God-focus, allows itself to think that it has transcended forever the human reality and fellowship. If such a thing can happen even in traditions which recognise Heaven and the Soul, the danger is even greater in our Society of Friends, which seems for a long time to have ceased to give even the slightest attention or importance to that realm.

There is something profoundly wrong with a pure Spirituality that absolutely never allows itself a concern with the Soul and immortality. For in the natural course of things, the Ego and the Spirit, incarnating spiritual reality on earth, walking on that leg, will find themselves urged to allow the other leg, the other world, to take the next step. This can be through the discovery, in mature years, that the realities of this world, even when imbued with the Spirit of God, simply do not allow the expression of many things that the now actively dreaming Soul can imagine. Partly this is about fellowship, but it is about many other things as well, principally the sense of energies and faculties unused, because the particular set of conditions that constitute this earthly world do not allow their use. To deny the dreaming and longing of the Soul at this point, out of concern for the maintenance of a 'pure' Spirituality centred on God alone, is a profound mistake, a drastic denial of creative forces. A Spirituality that tries to maintain itself through denial, that is to say when it knows that other concerns and passions are knocking on its door, condemns itself to an eventual sterility. But a Spirituality that listens to the Soul knocking on its door, and lets it in, and allows it the expression of its creative dreaming energies, not only liberates the Soul, but renews itself. Let us ask our Society to learn to walk on both legs.