

## **This world and the next: the psychic and the sceptical in the Society of Friends**

**Presentation by Jan Arriens, QFAS Conference, April 2007**

### *Past Quaker experience*

Over the past year or so I have been writing Quaker stories for children. Some of these have dealt with early Quakers. In reading about them, I have been struck by the extent to which psychic phenomena and what we now term extrasensory perception were interwoven into their lives and faith. Like people in the Bible, they heard voices and had visions that changed their lives. They took dreams seriously and acted upon them. Quakerism would not have come about without the "great openings" described by George Fox. Acting on leadings, Robert Fowler crossed the Atlantic with 11 friends on board in his coastal vessel the *Woodhouse*; John Woolman felt impelled to visit chief Papunahung at a dangerous time; Stephen Grellet had a vision on Long Island that changed his life, ultimately affecting Elizabeth Fry and prison reform. Later Quakers too, such as Rufus Jones upon the death of his son, and Caroline Stephen had profound mystical openings.

### *A spectrum of response*

Now, that awareness of an unseen dimension guiding our lives has faded. Whereas once all Quakers were responsive to the psychic dimension, now we have a whole spectrum of response. At one end, there is outright rejection, if not scorn. Alongside that is a less passionate rejection of any thing to do with the "paranormal" or "supernatural". Further along the spectrum we come to indifference and neutrality. A bit further along again we come across people who have an open mind and who may have had certain psychic experiences themselves but attach no particular importance to them. Finally, at the other extreme of the spectrum, are those who do attach importance - often great importance - to such phenomena, many of whom will have had various experiences themselves. Somewhere at that end of the spectrum we come across the good ship QFAS.

So, many Friends are, I would submit, sceptical, uninterested or embarrassed by the subject of the psychic. It rarely comes up in ministry or in our writings - even though it runs like a common thread through Quaker Faith & Practice (and even more so in the blue book).

### *A rational, scientific age*

There are, to my mind, two main reasons for this. The first of these is that we live in a rational, scientific age. The world looks radically different from what it did in George Fox's time. It is, I think, very difficult for us to project ourselves back into the kind of mentality that people must have had in the 17th century. Man had been created by God in fully-fashioned form; the pre-Darwinian way of thinking is all but beyond our comprehension. In the 18th century came the Enlightenment and, more recently, our own modern age with its vast advances in such fields as subatomic physics, astronomy, and biology. Our cosmology is now entirely

different. Many of us here were born before the idea of the Big Bang made its entrance. We have extraordinarily powerful computers and have put people on the moon. We have looked back at the Earth from far out into space.

Above all, we understand that the extraordinarily complex phenomenon of human beings has evolved out of the first primitive forms of life that emerged from the primeval soup – which in turn came from the dust of collapsed stars. Even if climate change or an asteroid doesn't get us, we know that at some point in the future the sun will burn itself up and our solar system will come to an end.

All that being so, it makes no sense to talk of an eternal soul. At what point in evolution would this have arrived? Does this mean that animals have smaller souls, and insects or or an apple a smaller one again?

We are all children of our scientific age and I for one certainly feel that it weighs heavily on me. I need only throw a small switch in my mind and I can comfortably read books that firmly reject the idea of God or any higher form of collective consciousness. My world-view and such awareness of modern scientific knowledge as I have almost all point in that direction. Such thinking is, pretty clearly, behind much of the scepticism or indifference towards psychic phenomena that we find in the Society of Friends today.

#### *Friends and the afterlife*

The second reason is that very much to their credit, Friends have never set much store by the afterlife. Although, as David Britton noted last year, millenarianism was alive and well in the early days of Quakerism, even then the concern was much more with the here and now than with storing up any reward in heaven. Quakers have never been particularly concerned about the resurrection or the doctrines of redemption and atonement. Instead, the emphasis has been on direct revelation, individual discernment, collective discernment, and collective worship.

#### *What are we left with?*

My concern now is that we are at risk of operating on only two of these four great cylinders. Friends rarely admit to any kind of revelation of a personal kind. Discernment, particularly of the collective kind, has also become much less common. What we are left with is collective worship – our meeting for worship. The fact that we are, largely, operating on only one cylinder is because we have lost touch with the unseen dimension of our lives. Discuss.

In doing so, we are of course in line with society in general. Even though the United States forms a curious exception, there has been a general secularisation throughout western society. This reflects many things, but at its heart, surely, has been the different way we look at the world intellectually.

#### *The evidence*

But science is based on two things: reason and observation. Sometimes observation comes first and we build a theory around those observations, and sometimes we come up with a theory and see whether the facts fit. What we have now, however, is a very odd situation, in that orthodox science is, by and large, turning its back on a whole range of evidence that the world is not quite as it seems. Because these phenomena are inexplicable in terms of our present scientific way of looking at the world, they are rejected, ignored or derided. Anything that cannot be measured or reproduced in the laboratory is treated as being unworthy of serious consideration.

The evidence, however, is very strong. Even though science and rational thought impels me in the opposite direction, I am unable to deny the evidence. Our own booklet, *A Not Unfamiliar Country*, provides some beautiful and thought-provoking cases. The point comes at which one can no longer dismiss all these experiences as being due to fabrication, coincidence, distortion, or wishful thinking. The experiences that people report have a striking consistency.

First of all, we may identify a whole range or ladder of psychic activity and phenomena. To start at the bottom, why do we have such an extraordinary, instinctive affinity with some people and not with others? Fairly near the bottom, although it can soar much higher, is the gathered Quaker meeting. Up another rung or so is telepathy, with beyond that precognition and retrocognition. Higher up again we might put near death experiences and some of the extraordinary phenomena with which QFAS is concerned and, finally, peak mystical experiences when the veil momentarily parts.

#### *Particular problem areas for the sceptic*

There are, I think, three particular areas or types of experience which it is difficult for the sceptic to deal with. The first of these concern physically impossible instances of perception, or what are known as out-of-body experiences. Familiar examples are surgery patients who, under anaesthetic, float to the ceiling of the operating theatre where they are able to observe details and overhear conversation in a way that should be impossible. There may not be anything very deep or spiritual about these experiences, but they do challenge our understanding of the physical world.

Secondly, there are experiences that stand our understanding of time on its head. These include premonitions, precognition and clairvoyance. Let me give one particularly graphic example. I have a friend in London, Emma-Sue, whose mother was an accomplished artist. Hanging on the wall of her home she has a painting by her mother that was made in Oklahoma, where they were living at the time. It is a night-time painting, showing a typical tall clapboard American house on the right, the roadway in the middle leading towards the viewer and, in the bottom left, the stricken face of Emma-Sue, then aged 11.

In the middle of the picture is a body lying in the middle of the road. If one looks closely, it is possible to see that hovering above the motionless body is painted an apparition clad in flowing, diaphanous white clothes. One could see it as the soul leaving the body or as an angel watching over the dead person with deep tenderness. Quite apart from anything else, the depiction of this figure is quite exquisite.

Now the painting was made six months before Emma-Sue's mother's death. It is accurate in every circumstantial detail; this was precisely how her death took place, when she was visiting a friend and knocked down by a drink-driver. Her mother was not suicidal. We can, of course, put this down to coincidence but I think that that would be to diminish the richness and wonder of our human existence. Instead, we must ask how the world is ordered as to make such an artistic foreshadowing possible? What channels are operating here, where that most intimate and sensitive of realms - the artist's creativity - is used to prefigure her own death, presumably in such a subtle way that she did not herself interpret the painting as a warning?

The most recent version of *An Undiscovered Country* contains an account of mine concerning precognition which again challenges our conventional understanding of time.

Thirdly, there are the extraordinary experiences in and around death with which QFAS is mainly concerned. These too may involve challenges to our understanding of time and space, but they often also have a spiritual dimension as well and suggest that the universe is essentially benign and full of a love going far beyond what we would normally understand by the word.

I am sure that most of you will be able to quote examples of such phenomena, either from personal experience or from reading. I should like to share one example which I came across just three weeks ago. It is drawn from the book *The Hidden Place* by Corrie ten Boom, which no doubt some of you will know. It recounts the experience of a non-Jewish Dutch family in the Second World War who used to hide Jews in an upstairs room.

Eventually, the author and her sister Betsie find themselves in Ravensbruck concentration camp, where Betsie dies. Betsie is an extraordinary, deeply religious woman whose gentleness and spirituality are able to affect the others in the concentration camp. As she loses her strength, Betsy optimistically shares with her sister a vision of their life after the war ends. She sees them living in a large house looking after people traumatised by experiences just such as their own. The house has large gardens, parquet floors, bas-relief statues set in recesses in the walls and a large staircase surrounded by gallery.

In part, Corrie sees this as a fantasy world her sister has concocted in order to transcend their terrible circumstances, but there is also something very

compelling about the vision. After the war Corrie gives talks in Haarlem, in the hope that she might somehow be able to make the vision come true. And indeed a wealthy woman comes up to her after such a talk saying that as she listened to Corrie it came to her that if her fifth and missing son in the Resistance returned from Germany she should then give up her house for Corrie's work.

The son returns soon after and Corrie goes to see what turned out to be a 56-room mansion. The gardens are run down but huge. Staring up at the house Corrie asks the owner, Mrs. de Haan, whether it has inlaid floors, a broad gallery around a central hall and bas-relief statues. "You've been here before!" exclaims Mrs de Haan.

No, she says, I heard it from... but how can she explain? "From someone who's been here," Mrs. de Haan finishes her sentence simply. "Yes," says Corrie, "from someone who's been here."

### *Near-death experiences*

This leads us to the phenomenon of near death experiences, and why, if these are just a psychological mechanism to help pave the way to death, the mind should want to comfort itself in this way. Why, if there is no survival of consciousness beyond death, would the mind come up with such a convoluted explanation?

We now know from Dr Melvin Morse's study in Seattle that even very young children can have near death experiences, i.e. well before the age at which any notions of survival beyond death may have occurred to them. It is also particularly interesting that children could see wizards, etc, i.e. information has to be imparted to them in terms they will understand, in the same way that different figures will appear to people from different faiths. It is also notable that no children who had lost consciousness but not been near death reported NDEs.

There is another curious fact. People who have had NDEs sometimes report seeing someone among the "welcoming committee" whom they had thought to be still alive. I am not, however, aware of any instance of the reverse, i.e. of a person being greeted by someone whom they thought to be dead but who was in fact still alive. While the latter combination must be a good deal more rare, it is perfectly conceivable and noteworthy that mistakes of this kind do not appear to be made.

### *Explanations*

Let us look for a moment at how these experiences could be explained. The most remarkable and pregnant with meaning are to my mind those dealing with death. These are particularly striking because they go right beyond our normal frame of reference. But even things such as telepathy or precognition are intensely difficult to explain – to the point that science often simply doesn't bother. Alternatively, the sceptics will say that what we regard as "supernatural" or "paranormal" are

simply phenomena that we will one day be able to explain with the normal laws of science.

That may well be so but, if it happens, it will require what is known as a paradigm shift, that is, a radically different scientific theory or approach. David Bohm writes: "How are we to think coherently of a single, unbroken, flowing actuality of existence as a whole, containing both thought (consciousness) and external reality as we experience it?" (from *Wholeness and The Implicate Order*, 1980, pp. ix-xv). Rupert Sheldrake refers to a "morphogenetic field", although it may be argued that this is no more than a conceptual label that acknowledges rather than explains the unseen connectivity between us.

Arthur Oram, who was for many years honorary secretary of the Society for Psychical Research, posits a single multidimensional system, including the 4D world and the higher-dimensional world. A mind attached to a body is fairly remote from independent minds in the HD world. PSI phenomena are an interaction between the HD and 4D worlds. Communication between the two worlds is in prelinguistic or thought form. He sees the HD as having some power to intervene.

According to modern quantum physics, reality is made up of tiny nuclear particles, so tiny that it is unclear if they are actually matter or simply patterns of energy. All of the fundamental particles in this universe have at least two counterparts which have been documented as being "real". These particles last for only a fraction of a second in this reality, and yet they comprise the elemental building blocks of reality. In theory, there is one possible universe (the Omega Point) in which there is no time or space, and all possible universes coexist.

Melvin Morse argues that the study of NDEs provides a starting point for understanding the mysterious link between our brains and the universe. Though sound scientific studies have already identified the existence of "the God Spot" - the right temporal lobe of the brain - Morse takes this concept several steps further. Building on the controversial theory that memory may actually be stored outside the brain, he suggests that the right temporal lobe acts not as a "computer" for our individual minds, but as a transmitter and receiver of the universal mind - and that we can actually learn to stimulate this part of our brains in a number of ways besides near-death or active dying. The challenge, he says, is to learn how to integrate the rational (left) and spiritual (right) sides of our brains.

### *Scepticism among Friends*

Within the Society of Friends, the most pronounced scepticism comes from the humanist quarter. The humanists set particular store by the human spirit and such values as mercy, pity, love and peace. These values are seen as not being in any way transcendent but as "human". They stem, it is argued, from the human spirit.

The problem with this is that the human spirit *is itself transcendent*. We are apt to think of ourselves as little entities sealed off from the rest of creation, but in fact we are utterly interconnected. We are dependent on the outside world, in terms of the air we breathe and the food and drink we ingest, to the point at which it is impossible to say where we begin and the outside world leaves off.

Similarly, we are subtly connected up with or, to use an ugly word, interpenetrate with other people. This is where the phenomena we have just looked at are so important.

Some of these can be explained away by coincidence and physiological states. Others cannot without unduly stretching credulity. In these circumstances, one finds the more extreme humanists saying that these are only to be regarded as paranormal phenomena because we do not yet understand the relevant physical processes, for example in relation to telepathy. But if we posit some kind of as yet unknown scientific explanation, we find ourselves going in a circle and ending up back in a religious position. As is happening in the field of quantum physics, there are serious suggestions of some kind of highly subtle force field connecting all matter in the universe at an energy level. This allows particles to communicate with one another, even over great distances, and means that the observer and the observed are no longer separable.

I would therefore say that if we are to move from the paranormal to the normal in explaining what the human spirit is capable of, we can only do so in terms of the very kind of interconnectedness and interpenetration (the “unity of all things”) that is at the heart of conventional religious belief.

This, I would suggest, is the realm of what we traditionally call “God”. Friends, in my experience, are good at using the word “God” in a Quaker minute but we rapidly become less comfortable if pinned down as to precisely what we mean by the term. It is not a precise concept. It is about the mystical and the mystery, about that which is beyond words and which we find in the silence, both individually in meditation, and shared in meeting for worship. I find this lack of certainty - which is by no means confined to Quakers - honest and refreshing. In that sense, the humanists reflect the rational spirit of our age and are making us think more deeply, which we can only welcome. Our old-fashioned notion of God may be an easy target but, in demolishing it, are the humanists throwing the baby out with the bathwater in claiming that everything derives from the human spirit?

Being unable to say anything very meaningful about God does not mean that there is no such thing as the transcendent. And once we accept that the human spirit is itself transcendent, the differences with the humanists melt away and we can join together honestly in worship and seek to live out the values of mercy, pity, love and peace.

### *Non-theist Friends*

Surveys suggest that about a quarter of Friends do not believe in God or are “not sure”. In my own experience, I would have put the figure considerably higher. In so far as nontheism may in fact be representative of far more of us within the Society of Friends, it may also be that with the loss of God language many Friends now have difficulty in finding the right language for – and even admitting anything suggestive of – the divine or otherworldly, as reflected by the drift towards the secular.

At the same time, it is notable that those who do describe themselves as non-theists do not necessarily reject some unifying form of truth and reality transcending the self. This is a particularly striking feature of the statements provided by 27 Quaker non-theists in *Godless for God's Sake* edited by David Boulton (2006). Take Robin Alpern, who writes: “The basis of my understanding is that there is one life, one source, one being, one energy, which manifests physically as the universe we identify as planets, people, animals, rocks, water, air, etc. this means I heard when you heard; I am uplifted when you are. It means I can hold someone in the Light, by focusing my attention on our innate connection, at a time when they may be feeling separate.” Or James Riemermann: “In an instant it dawned on me that I am not just myself. On the contrary, the energy of the universe flows through me... there is nothing magical or supernatural about it, nor is it something more out there with which I can occasionally commune. Rather it is the essential, undeniable, little, constant reality of being human in the real world. We are a part of everything, and it is all linked together.”

When it comes to dealing with scepticism, statements like this provide support from the least expected quarter! This suggests to me that our differences may well be more apparent than real. But when we make the paradigm shift to a more extended view of our physical reality we end up in much the same place. Both of us are, in fact, starting from evidence and experience.

As these statements show, this is not just outward but also inward evidence and experience. There is also an inner knowing or recognition, so that when we read or hear of other peoples' experiences it resonates with us at a very deep level. The experiences confirm what we knew innately. Not all people will agree with this, but certainly that was my experience before I encountered a number of psychic phenomena in my own life. It was akin to the feeling one can get reading Shakespeare or the great poets, when what they say points to some greater truths beyond even their powers of expression, and which we recognise in ourselves. This gives us an extraordinary sense of kinship with the writer - or, for that matter, the composer. We have an inner sense that we know what it is that they are seeking to convey is beyond the realm beyond words – so much so that we can have the feeling that we alone know precisely what it is they mean.

So it is as though we carry within us a blueprint of experience that provides a basis of recognition or validation for psychic experiences in general.

### QFAS

Finally - where does this leave QFAS? What I like about our organisation is that it starts from the evidence and has its feet firmly on the ground. It is my impression that many Quakers are, in fact, in sympathy with us but either don't know about us or are too caught up in the mood of scepticism and embarrassment to link up. That means that we have a responsibility to present this information carefully. In line with Quaker theology in general, I think it behoves us to avoid any claims to certainty and to be hesitant about any theory building. It is, for example, very easy to move from the evidence of survival of consciousness beyond death to theories of reincarnation. I think we should be very cautious about doing so. The truth may well be much more subtle.

Paradoxically, there is little real concern about the afterlife for its own sake within QFAS. We are interested in these phenomena in an experiential sense and for the way in which they can inform our lives.

The important thing to come out of all these wonderful experiences is that they suggest an interconnectedness that goes to the heart of what religious faith is all about. Regrettably, this great realm of mystery and wonder has become increasingly tucked away in the basement of the Society of Friends. Our religious experience could be so much more rounded and profound if we were more comfortable with sharing the intimations we receive when the veil parts. That is where QFAS has such a contribution to make.

Here I would conclude by making two points. The first is that I think we would benefit by broadening out from just "afterlife studies". We might for example call ourselves the Quaker Fellowship for Afterlife and Psychic Studies. I know, however, that this has been considered before, so I will probably not be popular for putting this forward again. I do however think that it would make us seem less of a fringe or way-out organisation.

The second point flows from that. We need to avoid flights of fancy. I think it is essential for us to come across as solid and mainstream. We need to start from the evidence, as we have done in our excellent booklet, and to draw conclusions concerning the wider spiritual significance and implications for the way we lead our lives in terms of openness to the force-field around us.

For I do think that we have a great deal to offer to the Society of Friends. The supernatural or paranormal are only labelled as such because of our limited frame of reference. As time goes by we will probably understand some phenomena that are now regarded as unfathomable, while other occurrences will require a whole new scientific approach or paradigm. Our task is to help make that possible within the Society. It means making the "supernatural" a much more

everyday part of our lives, as it was for early Friends. Scepticism about God should not be confused with scepticism about the connecting energy and mystery that bring us to Meeting for Worship and that give life its essential meaning.