

Liberal Quakerism and 12 step spirituality: realised universalism?

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The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) website records 156 AA meetings being held each week at Quaker Meeting Houses in Britain. In his introduction to *Beyond My Control*, Alex Wildwood notes that:

More than one author [in this anthology] draws the analogy between Quaker Meeting for Worship and the 12 Step group, and between ‘the group conscience’ of the AA 12 Traditions and our business meetings. (Meetings and Quaker wardens might take note that hosting 12 Step groups is clearly an effective form of outreach).¹

Robert Levering has observed that “increasing numbers of new Friends are attracted to the Society because of the compatibility of Quakerism with the spirituality of the recovery movement”. It is therefore relevant and interesting to compare and contrast liberal British Quakerism and 12 Step spirituality as originated by AA and adopted and adapted by many other “Anonymous” fellowships.² By their inclusive nature both societies demonstrate forms of realised universalism. The Steps and Traditions are explained in the AA book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.³

AA was founded in America in 1935 when failed New York stock analyst and drunkard Bill Wilson sobered up in the inter-denominational Oxford Group and carried the message of recovery to Ohio surgeon Robert Smith. The two men are regarded as AA’s co-founders and they steered the infant fellowship after it severed ties with the Oxford Group. The story has been told many times, for example by AA itself⁴ and others, notably Ernest Kurtz.⁵ In March 1947 American AA member Grace O., visiting London with her husband, the writer Fulton Oursler, convened a meeting for eight people in her room at the Dorchester hotel in London, the first recorded AA meeting in Britain.

¹ Skidmore, Chris and Gil (editors), *Beyond My Control: Quakers talk about their personal experience of addiction* Sowle Press, 2002

² Levering, Robert, *Friends and Alcohol: recovering a forgotten testimony* Pendle Hill Pamphlet 313, 1994.

³ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (www.aa.org).

⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, AA World Services Inc, 1957

⁵ Kurtz, Ernest. *Not-God: a history of Alcoholics Anonymous* Hazelden Information and Educational Services, 1991

British Friends were involved in helping AA become established from the earliest days. In December 1948 the first five AA members in Manchester realised they would need a telephone contact for enquirers.

They approached the Friends Meeting House at Mount Street. The Friends agreed to allow their telephone number to be used as a contact, and meetings of the first Manchester AA group were begun at Mount Street. The caretaker's telephone was in a cupboard under the stairs and callers were told the time and venue of the next (AA) meeting and it was hoped they would turn up. The system remained in place until 1956.⁶

AA meetings are still held at Mount Street Meeting House. In 1960 The Retreat in York, a specialist mental health care provider based on the Quaker belief that there is 'that of God in everyone', regardless of mental or emotional disturbance, knew about AA and laid on transport to get its patients to meetings.

In 1965 AA members Dartmoor Bill and Vincent S. tried a long list of possible churches and halls to find a venue to start the first AA group in London's East End. Bill recalled:

The last port of call was Toynbee Hall in Aldgate East. The Governor, Walter Birmingham, was a well-known reformer. He had been a missionary in Africa, (was) a true liberal and Quaker. He was a really *good* man. They're rare, but goodness shone out of Walter. He and his wife ran the Toynbee Hall complex and they already knew about AA. 'I'll be pleased to let you have the hall for all your meetings,' he said. He showed us a room and asked, 'Will this do?' We were overwhelmed, 'Yes please, it's perfect.' Walter replied, 'Good. It's quite historical. Marconi first displayed his wireless apparatus here. I hope your meeting is an historic first, and that your message spreads as far as Marconi's has'.⁷

AA still meets at Toynbee Hall.

In March 1950 AA member Robert C. wrote to Bill Wilson:

Dear Bill, I've been a member of AA for three years and doing a fairly good job. In the meantime I've become interested in the Society of Friends (Quakers) and I seem to see a great kinship between the two movements. The Way of Life of both movements seem to fit so well into each other that I have become greatly interested in knowing how much Quakerism effected not only the foundation of AA, but also what part if any, it has played to date.

Wilson replied:

Dear Robert C., the really amazing fact about Alcoholics Anonymous, and something I've never been quite able to comprehend, is that all religions see in our program a resemblance to themselves. For example, Catholic theologians

⁶*The First Fifty Years* AA GSB (Britain), 1997

⁷ Linskey, Eunice, *Anonymously Yours: beating the booze* Pisces Press, 2000

declare our Twelve Points (*Steps*) to be in exact accord with their Ignatian Exercises for Retreat and though our book (*Alcoholics Anonymous* - the so-called Big Book - AA's basic text) reeks of sin, sickness and death, the Christian Science Monitor has praised us editorially. Now, looking through Quaker eyes, you too see us favorably. What happy circumstances these! Though the structure of our AA Society was designed only by experience and what grace God may have given us, I must confess that in this aspect we do bear a strong resemblance to the Quakers. We have no paid preachers and once the early members erected the basic principles, the authority seems to flow up through the mass instead of down through the top. When I wrote the Traditions, I can assure you that I did not create this state of affairs, I merely reflected what had already appeared out of the groups.⁸

Contemporary British Friends have drawn similar parallels. An article in *The Friend* in November 2009 reported that:

The AA group that I began attending met at a Quaker Meeting House. There was a poster in the notice board that said, 'A silent Quaker Meeting for Worship can be a quiet process of healing and a journey of discovery'. That spoke to my condition so I plucked up courage one Sunday and went to my first Meeting for Worship. I was not told what to believe but welcomed for who I was. I was attracted by the similarities between Quakerism and AA. Both are practical, non-hierarchical and non-creedal – the AA programme makes useful suggestions about recovery (and) Quakers have our *Advices and Queries*. Both say the spiritual life is not a theory – we have to live it ...

Another AA member wrote

I was made to feel welcome and wanted by my local PM. I had at last found a place where my spirituality could flourish. I didn't have to believe, or pretend to believe, the impossible. There was no creed, no doctrine, only expectant waiting. After a few years I applied for membership and was accepted.⁹

Four years before AA was founded, T. Edmund Harvey is quoted in *Quaker Faith & Practice*(20.39):

The world is a dark enough place still for too many. It can ill spare even the poorest rushlight candle of cheerfulness or the smallest fire of fellowship. We must not put out the glimmer of light, which shines for so many today through the tavern windows, unless we can put a better in its place. We need the light of a brighter cheerfulness, and the glow of a warmer fellowship.

Countless problem drinkers have found that "warmer fellowship" in AA. The Preamble read at the start of AA meetings makes explicit that Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. Others have found fellowship among Friends. One woman wrote:

⁸ Correspondence in the archives at AA's General Service Office in New York

⁹ *Beyond My Control* op cit

Sometimes in Meeting for Worship I would hear a voice calmly telling me to stop drinking, but I either ignored it or convinced myself such a transformation was impossible...I did not pursue the (AA) avenue ... I was (also) put off by the fact that most of the literature I read about alcohol addiction was very male-centred ... It took time for me to be comfortable in 'coming out' to Quakers ... I came to believe that as Friends we can sometimes seem very self-confident and 'together' from the outside and the sharing of vulnerability is a necessary way of opening up to one another..."¹⁰

William Penn compared the virtue of temperance with the vice of drunkenness:

Rarely drink but when thou art dry; nor then between meals, if it can be avoided. The smaller the drink, the clearer the head, and cooler the blood; which are great benefits in temper and business. Strong liquors are good at some times and in small proportions ... All excess is ill; but drunkenness is of the worst sort. It spoils health, dismounts the mind, and unmans men. It reveals secrets, is quarrelsome, lascivious, impudent, dangerous and mad ... he that is drunk is not a man: because he is so long void of reason that distinguishes a man from a beast. ¹¹

Not everyone who gets drunk is an alcoholic, *i.e.* addicted to alcohol. But George Fox, and AA's first members, realised that - for some - more than will power was required to overcome addiction.

Friends, whatever ye are addicted to, the tempter will come in that thing; and when he can trouble you, then he gets advantage over you, and then you are gone. Stand still in that which is pure, after ye see yourselves; and then mercy comes in. After thou seest thy thoughts, and the temptations, do not think, but submit; and then power comes. Stand still in that which shows and discovers; and then doth strength immediately come. And stand still in the Light, and submit to it, and the other will be hushed and gone; and then content comes. ¹²

Such rock-bottom *kenosis*, or self-emptying (what AA calls 'ego deflation at depth'), finds echoes in the *12 Steps*.

- 1 We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2 Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,
- 3 Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

However, Friends - and AA members – who travel this path know that their release and awakening must be sustained as a way of life, as both *Advices & Queries* and AA's text make clear, respectively. "Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way"; "The spiritual life is not a theory – we have to live it." After the *metanoia* of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Penn, William. *Some Fruits of Solitude* Archibald Constable and Co., 1903

¹² *Quaker Faith & Practice* 20.42

conversion, and having “cleared away the wreckage of the past”, as AA says, in Steps Four to Ten, recovery must be underpinned by continuing growth. The 11th and 12th Steps urge members to seek through prayer and meditation to improve their God consciousness ‘praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out’; and having had a spiritual awakening as the result of the steps, to carry the message of recovery to other alcoholics ‘and practise these principles in all our affairs’. *Quaker Faith & Practice* says, “A true spiritual experience must be accompanied by the visible transformation of the outward life...a commitment which must be continually renewed”, (27:40) and, “They were changed men themselves before they went about to change others “” (19:48)

One reason why Quakerism adapted and survived, unlike other 17th century millenarian movements like the Muggletonians, Fifth Monarchists and so on, is because George Fox saw the need to protect the movement’s future after the pioneers had left the scene; so with Margaret Fell and others he spent the last years of his life organising the expanding Society. Their legacy is our modified system of church government: Local, Area, regional and Yearly Meetings. Bill Wilson, another charismatic leader, was also concerned to ensure the pentecostal fire of recovery did not flicker out when the founders left the stage, and for that the message’s transmission had to be routinised. Against considerable resistance from the fellowship itself, he formulated a system of non-binding principles and administration in the 12 Traditions and AA’s service structure: groups, intergroups, regional gatherings and the annual general service conference.

One obvious difference between the Religious Society of Friends and AA is the qualification for membership. Friends say:

Membership is (also) a way of saying to the meeting, and to the world, that you accept at least the fundamental elements of being a Quaker: the understanding of divine guidance, the manner of corporate worship and the ordering of the meeting’s business, the practical expression of inward convictions and the equality of all before God. In asking to be admitted into the community of the meeting you are affirming what the meeting stands for and declaring your willingness to contribute to its life.¹³

AA makes no demands on its members, other than a desire to stop drinking alcohol.

Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought AA membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.¹⁴

Among its responsibilities, Quaker Communications Central Committee works to improve and monitor income from meetings, Friends, other individuals and grant giving bodies, in the form of contributions, legacies and grants. In contrast, AA has taken a vow of corporate poverty. It owns no property and, beyond a ‘prudent

¹³ *Quaker Faith & Practice* 11.01

¹⁴ Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions op cit

reserve', does not accumulate funds. Indeed, in 1986 AA was forced to ask Parliament to change charity law to enable it to refuse gifts from non-members after being left a legacy in a will.

In the first of his 1901 Gifford Lectures, William James observed:

The Quaker religion which he [Fox] founded is something which it is impossible to over-praise. In a day of sham, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England. So far as our Christian sects today are evolving into liberality, they are simply reverting in essence to the position Fox and the early Quakers so long ago assumed.¹⁵

Ben Pink Dandelion notes that:

As early as 1930 (Rufus) Jones was asked whether it was necessary to be a Christian to be a Quaker. Belief came to be personal rather than prescribed. Through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s Liberal Quaker belief diversified. In 1966 draft membership regulations were rejected by Yearly Meeting as being too prescriptively Christian... In the early 1990s, there were Hindu Quakers, Buddhist Quakers, Muslim Quakers and even a Moonie Quaker within British Quakerism.¹⁶

Some Friends nowadays describe themselves as agnostics, or humanists, or non-theists and describe their experience in ways to avoid the use of the word God entirely. *Grapevine*, AA's American magazine, reported responses from sober Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Shintoists, native Americans, pagans and atheists. And *Share and Share Alike*, a book published in 2007 to celebrate 60 years of AA in Britain, included contributions from a Muslim, an atheist, a Quaker, various members of Christian denominations and non-believers. Quakers with our near creedal belief of 'that of God in everyone', and AA, who 'must always be inclusive, never exclusive' (Bill W.), both in their own distinctive ways exemplify prophetic spiritual universalism.

[2532 words]

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¹⁵ James, William *The Varieties of Religious Experience* Longmans, Green and Co, 1928

¹⁶ Dandelion, Ben Pink *The Liturgies of Quakerism* Ashgate 2005