

An encomium of Quaker worship

The church of my childhood was hardly a pretentious building. Locally it was known as the 'Tin Tabernacle', as it was largely constructed from corrugated iron sheets and no more than 50 years old.

It was the daughter church of the ancient Cheshire parish church several miles away. During heavy rainstorms, the service had to be suspended, as the noise of rain falling on the iron roof blotted out all other sound.

This unpretentious building boasted a single bell which was rung each week by a deaf and dumb ringer, incongruously named Johnny Dumbell.

I can still remember the aroma of pitch pine and polish coupled with the pungent smell of musty hymn books that filled the building.

Sunday after Sunday, I donned cassock and surplice and joined the six or seven others who formed the choir. I doubt that we were very musical but we made a joyful noise and enjoyed ourselves.

What I did not realise at the time was that I was being educated. The memory of visiting preachers droning on and on about incomprehensible aspects of Christian doctrine are with me to this day - even though I don't recollect a word they said. It wasn't the sermons that stayed with me. It was the language of the Prayer Book.

From time to time, I also began to share in my local Quaker meeting.

Forty or more years later, the Tin Tabernacle was but a distant memory. My choir companions had gone - in fact, all companionship had disappeared. For week after week, as a



hostage, I sat alone in a cold prison cell in Beirut.

My possessions were few: a small stub of candle provided light and I was allowed a bottle of water with a plastic beaker.

To be totally alone for a long period of time can be depressing. My skin grew white because there was no natural light. I lost muscle tone as I was limited to exercise that I could do while chained to the wall. My beard was long and grey, and I remember thinking that I was growing old before my time.

As I saw my body beginning to deteriorate rather more quickly than I hoped, I wondered if the same decline would take place within. Would I fall apart mentally and spiritually? I soon recognised that if I was to remain reasonably healthy, then I had to learn to live from within.

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I began to write in my head in order to keep my imagination alive. I did not have pencil and paper, so I wrote my first book, *Taken On Trust* - the account of my captivity - completely in my mind.

I also discovered that at times of stress the mind has its own protective mechanism.

My short term memory seemed to evaporate. So, for example, I could not remember the precise details of my capture, but I could remember happier events from early childhood. By giving me access to these more pleasant memories, I was being protected from some of the harsher realities of the moment.

I always leave the meeting feeling a sense of inner calm.

I remembered All Saint's Church - as the Tin Tabernacle was properly named - and the language that had been communicated to me as a child came flooding back.

The old prayers took on a new significance: 'Lighten our darkness we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all the perils and dangers of the night.'

How many times had I repeated that prayer as a choirboy? Now, however, it took on a special meaning as I was literally sitting day after day in the dark surrounded by unknown perils.

I realised afresh that there was a harmony and rhythm of language in the old prayers and they enabled me to maintain a greater degree of inner balance.

Each evening I would save a small piece of bread from my simple supper and early the following morning would pour water into my plastic cup and say the Communion Service. 'Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you.'

I had no need of a prayer book, for quite unconsciously, years before, the language had been fastened in my memory. As a child I had been given a love of the words it contained through regular repetition.

The faith which had been communicated to me did not depend on an over-emphasis on feeling or emotion. It was a part and parcel of the totality of my life. Spring, summer, autumn and winter settled together comfortably with the Church's year.

Easier in particular marked the end of the long winter months, and the religious message of resurrection and hope blended naturally with the changing of the seasons. There was a harmony and rhythm to life and I felt a part of that process as together we all moved from birth through to death and the hope of resurrection.

Today, we live in very different times. The Tin Tabernacle was replaced years ago by a modern building which in turn has closed and is now a private home.

The concept of Englishness has largely gone, and many who call themselves 'English' have real difficulty in defining Englishness. And, of course, one problem for the Church of England is that its identity was intimately related to Englishness.

At the Reformation, a National Church was created, based on ancient Catholic traditions but with a distinctive identity of its own. Church and State enjoyed a unique partnership which continues to this day.

As significant changes began to take place within England, the Church sought a wider identity in fellowship with the world-wide Anglican Communion. The Archbishop of Canterbury was recognised as *primus inter pares*; first among equals of the other Archbishops of that global fellowship.

Now, given the social changes that are taking place on a global scale, that union

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of Anglicans is fragmenting, particularly over the issue of homosexuality. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion does not have the necessary structural supports to enable it to hold together, and thus break-up is virtually inevitable.

In England today, Sunday is very little different from the other six days of the week. Evensong, which was conducted in almost every parish church throughout the land, is now a rare occurrence. In most churches, the old Prayer Book has disappeared and, along with it, the regular use of good language.

I am no Luddite, for, along with many Anglicans, I felt that the 1662 Prayer Book needed some revision, but I don't believe that I am alone when I suggest that the clear-out might have been a little too rigorous.

Back then, there was a time when I could attend a communion service and participate in a contemplative way. By that, I mean that I did not have to stand up every few moments; greet my neighbour with either a handshake, hug or kiss and sing along to the strains of a guitar.

As this type of service increasingly became adopted by more and more churches anxious to attract younger members, I found myself drawn in two directions. First, to the Orthodox Church. Often when I was in London on a Sunday morning, I would make my way to the Russian Orthodox Cathedral to share in their morning liturgy.

To take part in such a service is, in fact, to be a participant in a great dramatic performance. The order of service is highly formal and full of elaborate ritual. Standing in the main body of the Church, one can be caught up with one's fellow worshippers in what might be seen as a magnificent show with choral music that encourages an attitude of reverence.

At the same time, while the service progresses in the language of Old Slavonic (translations are always available), one can slip away to a quiet corner and retreat into contemplation as the liturgy continues.

Here, I found a balance between participating with others and withdrawing into inner silence. Such a balance I could not find within the 'busyness' of the new Anglican services.

From time to time, I also began to share in my local Quaker meeting. At first sight, this might seem miles away from the Orthodox - after all, the elaborate ritual and drama is totally missing.

I find spiritual strength from participating with others in the silence.

One takes one's place in a simple meeting room and silence reigns until someone or other feels that they have something to share with the group. There is no compulsion on any individual to speak and if one does, then one is listened to in respectful silence. At the end of an hour, we break for notices and a general chat.

Each week, about 30 or 40 people attend the meeting - and admittedly there are not too many young people among that number. I always leave the meeting feeling a sense of inner calm and at the same time challenged by a comment someone might have made during the hour.

For me, both the Orthodox and the Quaker meetings provide what I feel is lacking in many Anglican Services today and that is contemplative space. I value the sense of the divine created within Orthodoxy where I can reflect on, and participate in, the great mystery of life.

For their part, the Quakers enable one to face and be nourished by the profound silence that lies at the heart of the universe. A silence that may be experienced within.

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I do appreciate the difficulties faced by the clergy of the Church of England who today are experiencing a situation vastly different from when I was brought up in the Church.

What, in my day would have been considered elementary religious knowledge would today be largely unknown by the majority of the population. Although I didn't attend a Church School, as a very young child I learned the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer by heart.

Clergy can no longer take for granted that these will be known by the present generation. Another problem is that the uncertainties of our age seem to be increasingly producing some form of reactionary fundamentalist Christianity that proclaims absolute certainty.

Traditionally, the Church of England was always able to embrace those who could not embrace such certainties but increasingly today they might well feel excluded. The 'happy clappy', showbiz style of worship does not appeal to all.

More significantly perhaps, the Church seems to lack men of eloquence and intellect who can at least relate to some of the arguments put forward by atheists such as Richard Dawkins and others. There seems to be a lack of good scholarship within the Church.

So, where do I stand in relation to the Church today? Whenever I attend Evensong at such places as Magdalen College, Oxford, or one of our great cathedrals, I realise that not all the family silver has been sold off.

Without a doubt, the Church of England has some of the best Church music there is and one can worship in such places without being forced to leap to one's feet and demonstrate participation.

In company with an increasing number from my own Church, I also - as I have mentioned - continue to attend Quaker meetings from time to time. Not only do I find spiritual strength from participating with others in the silence, but I am also happy to share with those who have a straightforward and yet un-dogmatic approach to life.

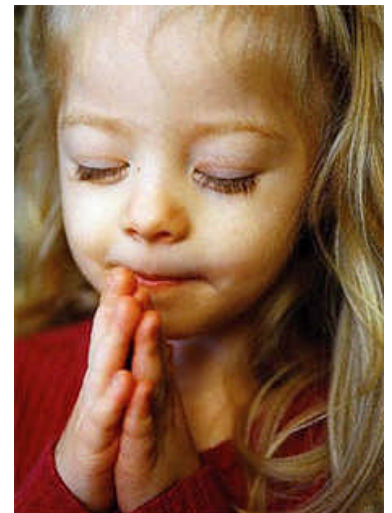
I remain an Anglican, but the Church of England, as those of my generation have known it, has gone for ever.

However, men and women from every age will continue in their spiritual quest and there will always be those who, like the Quakers, attempt to apply the teaching of Christ to this world in a determined and quiet manner.

I do fear for the future however. The heritage reflected in our lovely parish churches is in real danger of being lost. Who will pay for their upkeep in a country where Christianity is slipping?

As for regular use of good language, well, there are fragments contained within modern services but improvised language seems to be increasingly popular.

And what of the Church of England that formed and shaped me? I fear it has gone for ever. I have enough faith to believe that the message of Christ will continue - but I think members of my generation will understand my sadness and regrets.



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