

An integrative approach to faith

Reflecting on annual retreat

Society of Mary & Martha, Sheldon May 2018

'Faith is how we can conceive, express and relate to the fullness of reality in various religious ways.'

That's how I would put it. It's a statement that might, first, be explored in terms of visible, organised religion. Generally speaking, anyone younger than forty tends to be blind to the differences between what we used to call

denominations. Now there are just churches of different styles, and we are free to choose wherever we feel most comfortable. Institutionally churches may keep in their own silos, but isn't it our gut feeling that such differences really count for little?



I must next own the statement in personal terms. All my adult life I have been a member of the Church of England, and a priest for forty years. But becoming a Quaker has been evolving to feel most fully at home with that open-minded and inclusive approach to faith, valuing the worship of simply waiting together in silence on that which is of God, and with a this-worldly spirituality. I feel called to it, as a vocation, just like the vocation to ordained ministry. It does make me re-interpret what that ministry is, seeing it now more as being a visible sign of the ministry we all have rather than being set apart to do 'for' lay people. But if the risen Christ greets us in the Mass, then he does also in the deep silent communion of the Meeting for Worship. I feel that my vocation as a priest in the Church of England, which has always meant of the whole Church of God, is now integrating into the life of the Society of Friends where it's not that we don't have priests, but that we are all priests. What I'm beginning to sense is that I might be one of those whose particular calling bridges Anglicans and Quakers, catholic to radical, and may become part of a new bigger picture for committed spiritual living in the years ahead, exploring how that might be. So, for me, hoping prayerfully to conclude my last two years at St Nicolas', day by day integrating silence in the Divine Office, letting the words come out of the waiting, liturgy integrated in an holistic mindfulness.

In the realm of ideas with a 21st century scientific perspective we are becoming unsurprised to find that things were never so simple as we might have thought they were. Quantum physics now tells us that on a very small scale matter and energy behave very differently to what we had learnt from classical physics. So, for example, small particles such as photons and electrons can behave either like a wave or like a particle under different circumstances (?). Particles can be subject to interference and diffraction like light waves. But the act of observing a particle causes it to be detected as a particle in a specific location and not a wave(!). Then chaos theory in mathematics shows that there are all sorts of complicated patterns within apparently random systems. For example, the famous butterfly effect describes how a small change in one state can result in large differences in a later state, like the butterfly flapping its wings in China causing a hurricane in Texas. So who would be surprised to discover that various forms of religion are just alternative ways of getting the human head around the most wonder-ful of realities?

Then, in terms of how our society is moving, well, clearly we are entering uncharted waters when we try to envisage the future for organised religion. Sometimes it seems there is a whole lot more resilience than we had felt in our gloomier prognostications. But the demographics and the projections for Church of England churches like ours don't really seem to help us. Perhaps all we can say is that the future for church as we have known it is totally unpredictable. But perhaps that's exactly how we ought to see it? Or perhaps we just need to remember what Einstein famously warned: "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

But certainly each of these ways of looking at it does make me feel that faith truly *is*: 'how we can conceive, express and relate to the fullness of reality in various religious ways', so that each form of belief and way of worship can be seen as an integrated completeness together. But it also leaves me sensing that it is *we* really who are being integrated by our spiritual cultures. Participating in the religious life where we feel most at one we can be nurtured and nourished, renewed and reformed, and enabled to grow into the fullness of the mystery of what this life is.

Yet beyond all these ways to explore the statement I've been mulling over it is most importantly a reaching out for the mystery of God. During my retreat this year I have really enjoyed a collection of reflections written by one of the great spiritual teachers of our time, Father Tomáš Halik, a Czech Jesuit priest, academic and monk, psychotherapist and advisor to both students and the Pope (awareness of whom I am very grateful to our Parish Administrator, Jana, for). I return from this most refreshing retreat with his words whispering in my ears:

My concern is that our too big, too noisy, and too human certainties are in danger of obscuring what is truly great: the Mystery, which likes to *speak though its silence and reveal itself through its hiddenness*, and which conceals its greatness in the small and scarcely noticeable.

Night of the Confessor, 2012