

My Encounter with Experiment with Light before it began

by Klaus Huber

Prologue

Inspired by reading Rex Ambler's "The End of Words" (in its German version "Wo Worte enden"), I wrote an article entitled "Gedanklicher Ausritt nach dem Austritt" that was published in the German Quaker magazine back in September 1996. Rex Ambler encouraged me to create an English version of it. With a delay of 18 years, this is what I have done below.

Introduction

After having been a member of the Religious Society of Friends for five years, I resigned my membership in September 1995, principally for three reasons:

1. During my time with Friends, I gradually developed from a more or less Christian Quaker into an increasingly radical 'Universalist' and eventually ended up atheist existentialist. I found that honesty required of me not to call myself a Quaker anymore and hence to terminate my membership of the Society.
2. My resignation was also a psychological trick. For quite some time, I had held certain perceptions of what it is to be a Quaker, what a Quaker does and does not do - and was trying to adapt myself to this image. I started to feel that this was limiting myself, and that I was putting pressure onto myself to fit my self-constructed image of a Quaker. By resigning from the Society, I liberated myself from this pressure.
3. However, the most important reason for my resignation was that, in September 1995, I somehow had the feeling that this would be the right decision for me. In fact, the two reasons above only emerged during the months afterwards and, if at all, existed only very vaguely at the time. It appears as if it could have been my "inner voice" that prompted me to resign.

My resignation was not a farewell from Friends. I have remained part of the community as an attender and have continued to frequently think about Quakerism. I still feel that I haven't really departed from the most fundamental ideas of Quakerism, but, rather the opposite, thought them through too radically and logically. Recently this feeling has become stronger in me.

Rex Ambler and the chaos theory

I don't think I'll ever forget 11 April 1996. The day started by camping at the Baltic Sea and listening how the rain falling onto my tent suddenly turned to snow; and it ended with a spontaneous visit of Quaker House in Bad Pyrmont where I stayed the following night.

Accident, destiny, chaos theory - whatever it was, fact is that my unexpected stay in Quaker House Pyrmont coincided with the Northwest German Regional Gathering with the topic "Quaker identity: anything goes?" [1] Originally I wasn't particularly keen on this, but as I had nothing better to do, I decided to delve into the recommended reading for the event, Rex Ambler's "*The End of Words*". After having read a few extracts, I was stunned, and I wrote into my journal: "If Quakerism is what he describes it as in his conclusion, I should still be a Quaker." - Was it maybe wrong of me to have

left the Society? Let's explore Rex's ideas a little more before trying to answer this question.

Recently Rex Ambler described the essence of Quaker identity as follows: [2] “Quakers are a group of people who are committed to the inner light which shows them the truth about themselves and the world they live in, and in so doing awakens life and love and unity with other human beings.” It's a sentence that has to be read several times before it can be properly understood, but it's well worth the effort. And it's well worth putting this sentence into context by looking at other passages of Rex's. For example he says, at one point, that it's irrelevant if we're theists or atheists. I was honestly surprised to hear this view from a Quaker (from one who's still inside the fold). For a long time I've had difficulties to place myself on this spectrum. Depending on definition, I am either a theist, an atheist, neither one nor the other or both at the same time. Ultimately I regard the question of belief in God as a minor issue - and it seems to me that Rex agrees with this. No wonder when we look at Rex's definition of God: “God is the *ultimate reality* that surrounds our picture when we see ourselves in reality, free of the false images and illusions by which we normally live.” [3] - Seeing ourselves as we are, free of false images and illusions - an existentialist could have written this. Maybe they would have chosen slightly different words, but the meaning would have been the same: the liberation from self-deception; seeing myself as I am, not as I imagine myself to be, hope to be, hope to become, but exactly as I am - without glossing over anything, but also without regarding myself as worse than I am; in short: without any deception whatsoever. Normally we keep living with such deceptions that cloud the reality about ourselves and keep us from seeing the full truth. We select those parts of reality that fit our 'false images and illusions' about ourselves and ignore the rest. I still remember my living with an extreme self-deception, at the age of about 16/17. I perceived myself as some kind of great genius, destined to become very famous and rich, and that the world around me had simply failed to recognise my true nature. Alas, how could they have possibly recognised it when all they saw was a timid, shy, lazy teenager who, apart from the occasional witty moment, was usually very naive and knew almost nothing about life in the real world? Naturally I didn't see it that way and reinterpreted reality until it fitted my 'false images and illusions'. To me it was simply the mediocrity of my surroundings that I held responsible for the gap between who I thought I was destined to be and who I had become so far. And so my megalomania kept flourishing for a while.

It's the liberation from such self-deception that Rex Ambler is talking about and that he considers vital. This inevitably requires me to see myself as I really am, including all my imperfections. This liberation may, at first, be a very uncomfortable experience, but it is an essential prerequisite to gain self-knowledge and from there self-realisation: to realise the life that I am meant to live and that corresponds best to my being, my situation, my skills, experiences and needs. In order to find out what way is best for me, I need to liberate myself from all self-deception and accept the full reality about myself, with all its positive and uncomfortable aspects. This process can, for instance, be promoted through meditation, through rational thought, or through a Quaker Meeting for Worship where, in the company of Friends, I clear myself of everyday sorrows, prejudices, rigid perceptions, and so on, and let the Inner Light do its work to (in an ideal scenario) make me aware of the full reality about myself and the world in which I live. In fact, this approach isn't that far apart from the existentialist prompting me to rid myself of all misperceptions of reality, in order to fulfil the role that is best suited for me, in complete freedom (and full responsibility).

There's another parallel between Rex Ambler's elaborations and existentialism: Rex writes that the identity of Quakerism is much better expressed through its practice than in words (let alone in a creed). The form of worship and the discernment process in business meetings could be cited as examples of what constitutes Quaker identity. This links in with the existentialist slogan: “Man is the sum of his actions.” [4] The essence or 'self' of a human being or a group can be derived from their respective actions, a logical conclusion of the concept of reality mentioned above.

Fear of Reality

Once again Rex Ambler's beautiful sentence about Quakers: "Quakers are a group of people who are committed to the inner light which shows them the truth about themselves and the world they live in, and in so doing awakens life and love and unity with other human beings." The first part has now become clear (at least I hope it has). However, why should "life and love and unity with other human beings" necessarily follow from this?

When Rex Ambler writes that Quakers are committed to the Inner Light, then this means that Quakers are committed to the power that makes them aware of reality, without any misperceptions or illusions. Hence Quakers (according to Rex) challenge truth to show itself, instead of living in fear of self-knowledge and being frightened of the reality of our world. Fear of self-knowledge is a very widespread disease. Self-deception is much more comfortable than knowing yourself, because once you truly know yourself, one consequence of this will be full responsibility for what you do. As long as I live with illusions about myself and the world around me, I can have a clear direction in my life, supported by a nice system that rarely ever gets disturbed by reality. Experiences or facts that don't fit this system will be reinterpreted - or, if this doesn't work, simply ignored. Tough luck on me that, at the age of 17, there was a point when a revelation about myself entered my consciousness so suddenly and with myself so unprepared that I had no time to reinterpret it - and it was so intense that it was impossible for me to ignore it. My false images and illusions collapsed like a house of cards, and I was left devastated. Once you've been through such an experience, you will easily understand why most people are frightened of seeing reality as it is.

What's it like to be free from this fear? A fearful person lives behind closed doors, is full of mistrust, cautious and always wants to be safe - and hence not only loses out on many potential life experiences, but also on unprejudiced encounters with other people. A person who is not fearful, in contrast, is open to all kinds of new experiences, to getting to know new people, without mistrusting them, and may not even be scared of dangerous situations or even death. A person without fear lives life to the full and can be much more open and welcoming to other people. This is why commitment to the Inner Light inevitably leads to "life and love and unity with other human beings."

Postscript

The same month this article was published, I went to Woodbrooke for a term - and returned to England for good (at least so far) a year later. Drifting first from existentialism to Buddhism, the emerging Experiment with Light played a significant role in bringing me back into the fold of Quakers. I rejoined in 1998.

Notes

[1] Rex Ambler refers to this gathering in *Light to live by*, London: Quaker Books, 2002, pp.35-36

[2] This refers to the article Rex mentions in note 32 of *Light to live by* that was published in German in July 1996 and that later formed the basis of his *Friends Quarterly* article 'Quaker identity: anything goes?' (Vol. 31, No. 8 [October 1997], pp.371-380; the quote is from p.379). The German article 'Quäkeridentität - eine religiöse Beliebtheit?' was reprinted in *Quäker*, 5/2001, in preparation of Rex's Cary Lecture at German Yearly Meeting 2001. Special thanks to Rex Ambler for having provided me with copies of both articles.

[3] 'Quaker identity: anything goes?', *Friends Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 8, p.376; Rex's emphasis

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre: *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946