

Divine Abiding and the Holy Life: a guide to stewardship

“For everything that lives is Holy.”

William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Song of Liberty*.

There are many ways in which we are urged to live our lives – the good life, the healthy life, a life dedicated to family and work. But such are our times that we are not very often urged to live “a holy life”.

Nevertheless, somewhat to my surprise but certainly to my delight, a recent Quaker text on the matter of “sustainability and the environment” proposed just this, suggesting that holy living might, in some way, be a key to learning how to live sustainably.¹

This Quaker advice suggests that our testimony for living sustainably “should spring from a place of love rather than from fear”² and that, although we may struggle to describe it, it might well be characterised by words such as:

...care, respect, love, symbiosis, honouring, valuing, hospitality, stewardship, nurture, humility, adaptation and accommodation, peaceable living, interconnectedness, awe, wonder, relationship, harmony, consecration, sacramental or holy living.³

Although I suspect that many of us would say “Amen” to that, I also suspect that most of us would find it difficult to describe how the sacramental or holy life might be lived.

Oddly enough, and given that we seem so often to be confused about what it is that we must do, the teachings of the New Testament are clear. According to the gospels, the over-riding commandment is that we should “love one another”,⁴ that we should be peacemakers, meek, merciful and pure in heart and that we should “turn the other cheek” and “go the extra mile”.⁵

Today, of course, such a self-less way of life would be derided as being entirely “unrealistic”. And yet whose realism are we talking about, for I

¹ *Engaging with the Quaker Testimonies: a toolkit*, Quaker Peace and Social Witness Testimonies Committee, Quaker Books, 2007, 55.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John 13.34.

⁵ Matthew 5, The Sermon on the Mount

have found that much of my life has been surrounded by people who live their lives by cooperation and compromise, by neighbourliness and a care for each other, by small – and sometimes not so small – acts of kindness and thoughtfulness. Furthermore, the most successful businesses that I have worked with have been characterised more by generosity and loyalty than by selfishness and aggression. I have found that colleagues respond best to encouragement rather than fear and continuously “go the extra mile”. It is just that such behaviour, such holy behaviour, is seldom spoken of and, for reasons that I have never quite understood, that we commonly proclaim a false myth about how our lives in general and business in particular proceed, portraying the “jungle” in which we are all supposed to live as “red in tooth and claw” when, in truth, if it is a jungle it is one that is made up of a delicate set of reciprocal relationships – the survival of the fitting.

This is not, of course, to deny that the socio-economic model of the Western world has been profligate and damaging to the Earth. It has. But it is to suggest that this has been caused as much by a profound misapprehension as by a deliberate selfishness. Indeed, this is almost certainly so since the priests of our economy – and we as their flock – have had faith in what now looks very much like a false god. And, at root, the common and fatal systemic flaw of present dilemmas such as “climate change” and the “credit crunch” may not be an inherent human weakness but rather a particular form of human ignorance.

Interestingly enough, the Buddhist teaching of reality, of how things come to be as they are – the teaching known as *paticca-samuppāda* or dependent origination⁶ – tells us that our circle of suffering arises from three roots: greed, hatred and ignorance. And, counter-wise, that the circle of the end of suffering arises from generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. Wherever you start from, one thing will certainly follow on from another. So, in this sense, we might at least be prepared to agree that it is the unholy life that will, in the end, be the one that leads to failure, since, as we can see, greed and hatred appear to have their own inevitable consequences in the degradation of Nature and of our lives.

Certainly greed and ignorance must underlie both “climate change” and the “credit crunch” – our rapacious appetite for consumption and financial gain and our inability to see the consequences of our actions. Indeed, nothing could surely be more emblematic of our present time than

⁶ See, for example, the Preface to *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, translated by Maurice Walshe, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, 34 et seq or Walpole Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Grove Press, New York, 1974, 53 et seq.

the failure of the banking system. On the one hand it purports to represent stability and responsibility and be the measure of the best of life; on the other, and “in reality”, it would seem to represent instability, foolishness and recklessness.

Another of the Buddha’s seminal teachings, and one that may help us in the search for holy living, is the teaching of “divine abiding” – the teaching of the four sublime states or *brahma-vihāra*. These four states are: loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy in others (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).⁷ Again, as with the teachings of Jesus, these are qualities that, although they are often present in our lives, are commonly said to be unworldly or unrealistic. But both the teaching of Jesus and of the Buddha challenge this supposition. Indeed, the teaching of the Buddha is that seeing things as they really are can only be done by this divine abiding, that without it we will never be able to see this world for what it is. And then, in the parable of the vine, Jesus says something that is very much akin to this:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.⁸ (my emphasis)

In both cases, the teaching would seem to be that “the holy life” or “divine abiding” are not some separate practice reserved for monks and nuns but the necessary grounding for all our lives; and not for some part of our lives but for our lives as a whole, including “the good life, the healthy life, a life dedicated to family and work”. Indeed, as I have said, we should also note that such a life is not in any way alien to us. On the contrary, according to the teachings it is, in the deepest sense, familiar to us, for when we live it we are most our truly ourselves.

If it seems certain that we cannot expect to find solutions to our present problems by following the path that has led us to them, might it then be that it is these supposedly “unrealistic” teachings that must be our guide as we try and extract ourselves from an old and outmoded culture and from an old and outmoded economy based upon a set of deeply embedded but flawed propositions? Is it possible that the qualities and principles inherent in these timeless teachings of Jesus and the Buddha are the very qualities that we now need to enable us to find our way out of climatic and economic disruption? I believe so.

⁷ See for example, *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, Translated by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1995, 5 and Suttas 7 and 40.

⁸ John 15.4.

But how might this be expressed in practice?

Let us start with the matter of banking and investment. What we have seen in recent months – but what has been brewing for some years – is a reification of that unholy quality, greed, expressed in financial mechanisms that have insisted upon an ever-growing separation of investment from the raw assets upon which, in reality, its returns depend. Thus we have seen an ever-burgeoning array of financial derivatives, often coupled with significant gearing or borrowing, that appear to offer both liquidity and outstanding returns – for ever! This intoxicating froth, which seemed for a while to offer us ambrosia, was, in truth, a fantasy, disconnected from and quite unrelated to true worth.

By contrast, as we have seen, the teachings of the holy life are rooted in the notion of connection and relationship. So, when we come to markets, one of the matters to which they would ask us to give attention is the quality of the relationships that these markets describe, the extent to which prices and financial values are well-grounded and, yes, sustainable. For sustainability has as much to do with economy as it has to do with environment

By way of example, let us take the case of the humble mortgage. There was a time when a mortgage company would attract funds from savers and use these savings as the foundation for lending money to house-buyers on the collateral of their houses – using, as governing principles, a set of sustainable relationships such as sound liquidity ratios and never lending more than 75% of value or more than two and a half to three times a person's working income. Recognising this reciprocal relationship, these companies were called “mutuals” and principles of “affordability” were deemed important as a test of repayments and thence of the rate of interest payable to savers – a set of dynamic but clearly understood relationships that sought a fair balance, a mutuality, between the needs of both savers and borrowers.

But for some, this was not enough and many such companies were urged to let go of their mutual status and “go public”, serving shareholders rather than either savers or borrowers. This required what is called “performance” – and “improved performance” each and every year. At the same time, by changing a house from a place in which to live into an asset in which to invest, the nature of the relationship between the house owner and the house was changed, and this was further degraded as the value of the house then came to be seen as the collateral for personal

expenditure – a fundamental blurring of the distinction between capital and income, with the former falsely being used as a surrogate for the latter.

Such pressures and such changes, based upon what the Buddha would have called greed, were according to his doctrine bound to fail. And they have – not by accident but by consequence, as a consequence of the inevitable relationship between what we hold to be true and what we then do, between belief, action and outcomes.

If we were to follow the principles of the holy life, we would have to come back to those qualities set out in the Quaker text to which I referred at the beginning:

...care, respect, love, symbiosis, honouring, valuing, hospitality, stewardship, nurture, humility, adaptation and accommodation, peaceable living, interconnectedness, awe, wonder, relationship, harmony, consecration, sacramental or holy living.⁹

If such a set of wholesome or holy principles governed our investment management and behaviour, they would surely have acted as a check to the flagrant greed and opportunism of the now sorrowful banks and building societies. For they forgot that which they used to know and thereby became un-whole-some, which is to say, un-holy. By following wholesome or holy principles, by being stewards of the basic relationship between savers and borrowers, it would, surely, have been possible to continue to provide funds for people to buy houses and, as it happens, to do so in a manner that would probably have dampened the rise in house prices, thereby making buying a house – a house to live in rather than a house as an investment – more rather than less affordable.

Perhaps, by default, we are about to return to such ways. It is certainly noticeable that savers are now transferring their funds away from the profligate banks and towards the old mutuals, favouring their more humble aspirations. If this is so, perhaps it might give us time to rethink what the true purpose of our banks and building societies is and how they might be governed and managed in accordance with those principles of connectedness and stewardship that are described by the holy life.

⁹ Op cit Quaker Peace and Social Witness Testimonies Committee, 2007

Finally, the unholy economic profligacy, selfishness and myopia that has led to global warming and climate change has similar characteristics. It, too, has been an expression of a fatal disconnectedness or unrelatedness in economic behaviour. A form of what the Buddha would no doubt have called ignorance.

However, just as the Quaker text on “sustainability and the environment” to which I have referred has suggested, we are now beginning to understand that our lives and our ways of being are deeply interconnected. A part of this is to understand, or at least be aware of, the dynamic relationships between the economy, society and the environment. In this, and amidst all the evidence of possible catastrophe (which I do not in the least discount), there are grounds for hope as we, as individuals, families, communities, businesses and, belatedly, as nations, appear to accept the need for a significant shift of perception – a move from an old world and an old economy to a new world and a new economy, a move towards a more “whole-some” and, I would say, holy, way of living.

For example, I have, in my own work, seen a quite extraordinary shift in the expectations and aspirations of young people coming into work and requiring that their employer demonstrate what is sometimes called “responsibility” but might be called stewardship. I have seen an investment community develop policies of responsible investment and invest considerable sums of money to become informed of the changes that they will have to make in their investment policy to adapt to and mitigate climate change. I have seen individuals, businesses and communities tackle not only the daily good practice of such things as energy-efficiency and re-cycling but also the more fundamental changes in perception, policy and action that they now accept as a necessary calling-in of the debt of their own profligacy.

Behind all of this, I discern a structural shift towards a set of timeless principles of whole-some-ness, stewardship and interconnectedness that, as we have seen, might be said to represent holy living or a divine abiding. That which is holy unites whilst that which is unholy separates and divides. To bear fruit, the branch must abide in the vine. Divine abiding requires that we care for others with loving-kindness, compassion and joy in their happiness. It also requires that we practice discernment and equanimity. And, as Quakers, this is perhaps where we come to. In a world of frenetic activity, perhaps we of all people should be able to understand and profess the importance of reflection as the root of true action. That a holy life needs must be sustained by daily prayer and

blessed silence. That living sustainably “should spring from a place of love rather than from fear”¹⁰.

¹⁰ Ibid.