Quaker Universalist Group Conference 2021

Life, Time, and Eternity from a Christian perspective by Philip Young

What do we mean by life? What is the nature of time? Can we get outside of time? How do different religions look at life after death? What comes after death if anything?

How exciting to be part of this Quaker Universalist Group Conference 2021 and to hear different views on these fascinating subjects. We look at them from different perspectives. An Anthropologist, a Christian, a Muslim, a Zen Buddhist, a Scientist, and a Hindu. By sharing our different perspectives, we are hoping to be able to bring it all together at the end. Perhaps we can look forward to a time when we are all united in one universal family, where hunger, injustice, and war are no more, and where prejudice, ignorance, and hatred have no place at the universal table of our one beautiful and precious world.

And so, it has fallen to me, Philip Young, a Quaker, an Anglican Christian, and a member of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis to speak about the Christian perspective. This will be a very personal view, but one very much influenced by a liberal belief in Christianity, which is also, hopefully, very open to other faiths and also to non-religious perspectives. Taking good Quaker advice, it is well to remember that ‘Christianity is not a notion but a way’ (Advices and Queries Number 2).

I believe the way of Christianity is above all a love story. I believe the most important of all human tasks is to let love rule in our hearts and in our actions. I have good scriptural backing for this. The Bible in the First letter of John Chapter 4 verse 16 says, ‘God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them’ (- for further words about the challenge of love read through to verse 23).

Jesus, on the night before he died, taught his disciples a new commandment, ‘to love one another as I have loved you’, and he dramatized this by washing his disciples’ feet. A radical demonstration, to show a new way of love and service (John's Gospel Chapter 13 verses 1 to 17). I believe our supreme calling, from God, as human beings, is to learn how to love one another. Jesus came that we have might have life in all its fullness. The ability of human beings to move from hate to love, from war to peace, is the love story of God’s dealings with man. God loves us, and in the Christian story, acted out in history, God shows us this love through sending his Son Jesus to teach us the way of love both by his actions and by his words. In John chapter 3 verse 16 this love story is summed up in these words, ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

I have written 16 poems called ‘A letter from Love’ and here is the first of them called ‘Love speaks’

Hello you.

This is love speaking.

You were conceived by me in love.

I was at your beginning and I will be at your end.

I was with you before your earthly beginning and I shall be with you when you depart.

You may know me by another name for Love is God and God is Love

Or you may know me without knowing my name.

I have existed for all time and I exist beyond and outside of time, which people call eternity

I created you with love and now you are being called by me.

I am calling you so that you can return to your true nature, which is Love.

Come to me and all shall be well

Come to me and I shall make you whole.

Perhaps now is the time to offer on an apology on behalf of Christians. How come, so often and for so long, we have got this teaching about love, so wrong? Jesus wanted his disciples to be known for their love for one another. We know only too well that many Christians have not loved one another. Instead, they have picked huge fights, creating divisions amongst themselves, and splitting the Christian Church into many factions. And many Christians have narrow, prejudiced beliefs and are, to be honest, not very kind people. You only have to look at the way that some Christians have been, and still are, racist, homophobic and intolerant in so many other ways, to know that love has not been anywhere near the centre of their faith.

Then, when you look at the wars down the ages, you can see that religion has spelt disaster, and Christianity has often been at the centre of many conflicts, from the Crusades, to the troubles in Northern Ireland. A huge part of the problem is when some Christians arrogantly think they are God’s chosen people, and, all others, who do not believe in the same way as them, are excluded even to the point where they are believed to be going to eternal damnation in hell. This is when I feel embarrassed to be called a Christian. I do not want, in any way, to defend this kind of prejudice and hatred.

Thank God there are others who are more loving and kinder. I declare that I am a Universalist believer. I cannot believe that God’s love is not for everyone. A God who condemns people to everlasting rejection, is in my mind a hateful God. I do not think of God as God of just the Christians, but as God of all people, whether of faith or no faith. This then leads me to believe that all people are of one family, and that we are all brothers and sisters. I respect peoples’ right not to believe in God, but my faith leads me to believe that we are still part of one world family, consisting of all human beings, past, present and future. Also, as a Franciscan, I would want to include our many brothers and sisters in the natural world.

I am hoping that I am getting nearer to answering the question, ‘What do we mean by life?’ I would like to expand this now. My belief is that to become fully human and fully alive is to learn how to love and care for each other and how to love and care for the planet. This is, I believe, what Jesus came to teach, that we might have life in all its fullness. Without love we are just a ‘noisy gong or clanging cymbal’ as Saint Paul puts it in his hymn about love in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13.

To put it another way, we are ignorant and unskilful as human beings, until we learn how to move away from self-centred, clumsy, damaging behaviour, to a healing behaviour, that contributes to the whole community of being a member of the human family, which also means belonging to the wider ecological community of the living Earth. Then perhaps we can be a part of the healing of ourselves and our living planet and play a harmonious tune as part of the living whole. How we might achieve this move from unskilful living to a more centred peaceful loving life, I will return to later.

Now it is about time I talked about time! As human beings we all experience the passing of time. We call it Chronological time or Clock time. It consists of years, months, weeks, days, minutes, and seconds and we can measure it very exactly, with atomic clocks, I am told. This time appears to us to be linear, and we are always at a moment called ‘now’. Before the present moment, there was past time, and after the present moment, there will be future time. To understand the past, we tell stories and create histories, and to try to understand what might happen in the future, we make forecasts and predictions, based on our past and present knowledge and experience.

At some point, in the past, on this timeline we are born, and at some time, in the future, we shall die. At some point in the past, the Universe seems to have begun, and, possibly, at some point in the future, it will end, or, maybe, it will go on forever. May be too, some sort of Universe has always existed. This is where it gets interesting for our human brains, as we only have a limited understanding. For when we think about infinity, we are stumped! It doesn’t make any sense. If there was a beginning, what came before it? If time goes on for ever, then, the more we think about it, the more we get in a muddle. Modern Physics points to the theory that Space and Time exist as a joint package, so that you can’t have one without the other. There is something mysterious here, and, beyond our human understanding.

The Christian story seems to recognise the linear nature of chronological time. The Genesis story recognises a beginning. ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void’ (Genesis chapter 1 verse 1). So, the Christian answer to what came before the beginning, was that God was at the beginning, presumably, already in existence. It was God who created everything out of nothing or, at the very least, out of a formless void, whatever that might mean! The Christian story is that Jesus was at the beginning too. John’s Gospel states, ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God’ (John’s Gospel chapter 1 verse 1). And in Jesus, ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’ (verse 14).

Christians also believe there will be an end to this present world, and that Jesus, the Son of God, will sit on the throne of God as the Lamb of God. In this ‘new heaven and a new earth’ ‘there will be no more night, they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever’. (See the Book of Revelation Chapters 21 and 22 for the full story). So, the Christian view of time is that, in its present form, there will be an end to the world as we know it, and it will be replaced by a new heaven and a new earth, where God is on the throne and will reign forever and ever.

For Christians God is Lord of time. God is in control of time. He was there at the beginning, and will be there at the end, and he is present within history, and at all times in between. In Revelation Chapter 22 verse 13 it states, ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’. The books of the Bible tell the story of God’s interaction with men and women, first through the people of Israel, and then through Jesus's incarnation and ministry, his cross and resurrection, by the sending of his Holy Spirit, and by the founding of the church, and the spreading of his Kingdom throughout the world.

Some Christians believe that Jesus came only for a chosen few, and that many will be cast into outer darkness. As a universalist Christian, I believe that Jesus came as the light of the world, and that, love is inclusive, and that, all men and women will come to be in the light. As a Quaker I believe ‘there is that which is of God in everyone’, as George Fox believed, and that the godly part will live on forever, for God’s love never ends.

Just how much chronological time has passed in our present universe is one of the great discoveries of modern science. If we believe the Bible literally, then the story goes that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. There are still those who believe this is literally what happened. If the rest of the Bible is taken literally, then an Irish 17th century Bishop, called James Usher, famously worked out that the world was created on the 23rd of October 4004BC. This date, apparently, was printed in the King James Bible. The approximate date of 4,000BC continues to be believed by some non-evolutionary minded Christians even now!

I love the science. Most scientists now agree that the Big Bang was about 13.7 billion years ago. That's a lot of chronological time. But I believe that time is on our side, so to speak. These huge amounts of time give the universe time to evolve, from simple beginnings, to the complex world we find ourselves in today. First of all, from simple particles, the elements of hydrogen and helium have time to evolve. From these building blocks evolve the complex elements of the Periodic Table. Simple life emerges and has time to evolve into the more and more complex life forms, until, finally, Homo sapiens evolves right at the end of this long process. Were the 13.7 billion years displayed to us in the pictorial form of a 24-hour clock then at 20 seconds to midnight, signifying about 300,000 years ago, Homo sapiens emerges. A tenth of a second before midnight, signifying 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

All these huge amounts of time, means that Homo sapiens has time to develop tools, language, society, history and above all awareness and consciousness, culminating in an awareness of the spiritual, and of God. Faith has time to evolve. First of all, many gods are believed in, particular to objects and particular to the tribes that believe in them. There slowly emerges the idea that there is one God; the God of Israel becomes the God of all the world. It is fascinating to trace this evolution through studying the Old Testament books of the Bible.

I believe this process is still going on, as we move from tribalism to universalism. As we move away from racist beliefs, to embrace a worldview, where all men and women are our brothers and sisters. As we move away from the idea that God loves only one group of people, to the idea that God embraces us all in a wonderful rainbow of diversity. When I lived in Norwich, I used to love joining in with the Pride march and the celebrations of diversity. And here, at this conference, we hopefully listen to each other’s faith stories and learn from each other. We are part of this evolutionary process as, hopefully, our faith is living and active, and never static. There is still, perhaps, plenty of time for love and peace between human beings to emerge into all its fullness.

Time for another Love Poem from my collection of 16. This one is called ‘I love your silence’

I am love

I love it when you are silent

For then I am able to be with you.

I am with you all the time

But oftentimes you are too busy and noisy to notice me.

Go quietly into the silence of your heart.

Breathe slowly and deeply and take your time.

Sit quietly and make yourself comfortable

Seek out others who love to do the same.

Learn to do this every day

And I will come to you.

I will come to you in love.

Now I want to return to considering how to move away from our self-centred, clumsy, damaging behaviour, to a more healing, loving, and centred behaviour. I believe the practice of mindfulness is the key to it all.

By mindfulness I would include Quaker Meeting for Worship, other forms of reflective worship, prayer, meditation, contemplation, and the ordinary ways and methods of relaxing that we might use to quieten our busy lives, and especially our busy minds, into more stillness. I would include mindful walking and spending time in nature. Mindfulness has the ability to transform us radically, as we find that more and more of our daily life and tasks can be carried out in a mindful and peaceful way.

I want to argue that something amazing is happening to time when we go quietly into the silence of our hearts and breathe slowly and deeply. I believe we are experiencing the Eternal Now. People often remark that time seems to stand still or even stop. Another remarkable experience is that there can be a profound feeling of connection with all things. We experience ourselves as being part of everything that exists, and all divisions have melted away. We are one with God and with all that is. If we are able get outside of time, then perhaps this is a glimpse of it? If God is Lord of time, and somehow exists both, in time and, outside of time, then perhaps mindfulness is experiencing God’s presence and our best way of finding the eternity that is ever present. I find this all very exciting! Perhaps the God who revealed himself to Moses as ‘I am who I am’ is also revealing himself to us when we practice mindfulness?

Another way of trying to understand what is happening in the practise of mindfulness is to realise that the ‘ego’ has to die. What is so often in control is the non-stop chattering mind, sometimes called the monkey mind, which we find so difficult to quieten down. We find that our minds are trained to be dualistic and confrontational. We often behave in very reactive ways to other people. We find ourselves taking the same reactive mind into our contemplative practices. This mind, which is constantly at war with others, and itself, has to die, in order for a more unitive, healing, and quieter mind to evolve.

This is interesting for a Christian as it reflects the process of death and resurrection which is so central to the Christian faith. in John’s Gospel Jesus is reported as saying, ‘Truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.’ (John Chapter 12 verse 24) in this saying Jesus is foreshadowing his own death and resurrection, as well as identifying the process of dying to self in order that a more integrated person may be born. Dying to self in order that we might live for others. Dying to our self-centredness and rising up to be other orientated and God centred.

I have talked a lot about chronological time, but in the New Testament books of the Bible, as well as the Greek word for time, ‘chronos’, there is another word used, which is, ‘kairos’. ‘Kairos’ is used to indicate a time of opportunity or fulfilment. It recognises that some times are more significant than other times, in history, and, in our own life journeys.

I want to explain what might be meant by a ‘kairos’ moment. An example from history, might be sitting on a hillside and listening to Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount. An example from your own experience, might be your heart thumping in Meeting for Worship just before you stand up to give Ministry. An example from human interaction, might be when you meet someone, and your heart leaps for joy, as you discover they are right on your wavelength. Given these examples I am sure you can add many more of your own. These special moments can be life enhancing and life transforming. I believe they could be indicative of the eternal presence entering the present moment. I am reminded of Advices and Queries number one, which says, ‘Take heed, dear friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life’.

A ‘kairos’ moment of great significance for our discussion is the Sunday morning of the empty tomb when Jesus rose from the dead three days after his cruel crucifixion. We don’t know the exact chronological date, but it was probably around about 33AD, just after the Jews had celebrated their yearly Passover festival.

These words from the Easter Anthems are used by some Christians in worship in the fifty days after Easter each year: -

1    Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us:  ♦

so let us celebrate the feast,

2    not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness:  ♦

but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 Corinthians 5.7b, 8

3    Christ once raised from the dead dies no more:  ♦

death has no more dominion over him.

4    In dying he died to sin once for all:  ♦

in living he lives to God.

5    See yourselves therefore as dead to sin:  ♦

and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 6.9–11

6    Christ has been raised from the dead:  ♦

the first fruits of those who sleep.

7    For as by man came death:  ♦

by man has come also the resurrection of the dead;

8    for as in Adam all die:  ♦

even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15.20–22

Christians believe in life after death, and, if we are to say what is the Christian perspective, it seems right to put resurrection at the centre. There is no time to have a long discussion about what kind of body Jesus had when he was raised from the tomb or what kind of body we shall have after our own deaths. It is safe to say that Christians believe in some sort of bodily resurrection, alongside a spiritual resurrection.

Christians believe that death is not the end, but that after death comes resurrection. Jesus rising from the dead is a sign that death is but the entry into a new life. I believe this resurrection is not just for Jesus but for all human beings. ‘As in Adam all die; Even so in Christ shall all be made alive’. Here Adam represents the humanity of human beings who inevitably are bound by chronological time and by their mortality. Christ, often called the second Adam, represents the divinity and a new humanity, which is also found in all men and women. I believe, this divinity and new humanity is eternal and everlasting.

As a universalist Christian, I believe in this cosmic Christ, who comes to give us life in all its fullness. I believe this life begins right here and now. The divine eternal breaks into the present moment. The divine eternal is love itself.

Eternal life begins right now as we realise that love is and always will be, for God is love.

I want to finish with the International Prayer for Peace

Lead me from death to life,

from falsehood to truth

Lead me from despair to hope,

from fear to trust

Lead me from hate to love,

from war to peace

Let peace fill our heart,

our world, our Universe.

Philip Young 8th May 2021

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