

Reflections on living with the EPs

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1 Background

I first met the EPs through Margaret and Richard's daughter Catherine, whom I knew because we were both in the same mathematics cohort at Cambridge (class of 1960) and because we were both attending meetings of the Cambridge Quakers. In my third year I became interested in the philosophy of religion, and was becoming uneasily aware that the Quakers in their rejection of formality might somehow have thrown a baby out with the bathwater, an issue which I discussed with Margaret (to whom Catherine had introduced me).

After graduation I did not have a job to go to. But because of my interest in the questions that were concerning the EPs and in language, and because I was able to write computer programs (a skill I picked up in what would now be called a gap year between school and university, when I was employed as a programmer by a computer manufacturer), Margaret offered me a job at CLRU to put some of her ideas onto a computer, and also offered me a room at 11 Millington Road in which to live, provided I did so as part of the communal living. I accepted these offers.

Communal living involved attendance at the daily morning Chapter of Faults and weekly attendance at Holy Communion at the local parish church, having dinner at Millington Road except when occasion prevented, offering to serve at Mass at the Sisters establishment in Huntingdon Road once a week or so, and going to the quarterly EP meetings at Burnham Overy Staithe Mill.

This regime lasted somewhat over 3 years until I left to get married in 1967, when I also left Cambridge to follow my professional and personal life elsewhere. I retired from my then post of Professor of Information Management at Newcastle University in 2001.

2 Daily Life at Millington Road

(i) Chapter of Faults: I came to understand in time that this was on the whole a healthy process designed to prevent personality clashes and hurtful personal interactions turning sour and harming the communal life. The religious language was there simply to provide a suitable healing framework in which it very easy to say 'sorry', partly because everybody else is doing so too. It could be a bit artificial at times, but you can't go to such a meeting and say "I don't think I did anything hurtful or personally unskilful yesterday". It helps self-understanding to reflect on why you do such things.

(ii) Holy Communion: it was easy to see that if you wanted to change (too strong a word: 'help improve', perhaps) the protestant understanding of the mystical side of Christianity, this was better done from within the church rather than from outside it.

(iii) Dinner: Discussions over dinner were sometimes challenging and sometimes of no interest to me (e.g. Cambridge University politics). Sometimes also, they could be aggressive to some visitors in a way I found discourteous and distressing.

(iv) Serving at Mass: Although I could not accept some of the Sisters' belief system, I did understand their importance to the EPs and so it seemed important also to participate in the ritual which was such an essential part of their daily life.

(v) Mill Retreats: I could understand that as well as acting as an opportunity for community and reflection and discussion on matters of concern, it was –like everything else I've mentioned– a form of living our values.

(vi) I was living in Millington Road during the time of gestation of 'Theoria to Theory. A lot of tensions arose from the fact that it was unclear what sort of periodical it was intended to be, particularly between Dorothy (more scholarly) and Margaret (more speculative).

(vii) It took me a long time to understand how Ted fitted in. I could understand his contributions to the discussions, and I understood his stance on various aspects of theoretical physics –perhaps I was the only one at Millington Road who did– but it seemed to me that on a 16PF chart he would appear as very much an outlier (this is, of course, not a value judgement). I came to realise that it didn't matter.

(viii) I don't think people who didn't live there fully appreciated the contribution to simple housekeeping (e.g. cooking, washing up) made by Margaret's sister Dorothy, who had some sort of mental impairment which was not (to my knowledge) properly understood medically. Understanding of such conditions in those days was quite primitive anyway. I think it fair to say that we all treated her as charitably as we knew how.

3 Retrospective

3 things I have dropped

- (i) the psychology of religion. The debate has moved on since then but I've lost interest in it.
- (ii) the science/religion dimension is no longer one of my personal constructs (in the sense of George Kelly). I no longer find it a useful polarity. My eyes glaze over when I read these two words in the same sentence.
- (iii) Likewise the 'one world' / 'two worlds' views. I no longer mull over whether the world is indeed as it seems to be or whether we live in some kind of Platonic cave. Both are useful in their own way: it depends on the context of use.

3 things that have stayed with me

- (i) some understanding of the relationship between language/religious belief/acceptance.
- (ii) the importance of ritual in maintaining the life of a community.
- (iii) the belief that science is the only road to truth that we have (though I'll come back to this at the end).

3 things I miss

- (i) living in a community that lives its values.
- (ii) a forum in which to discuss all the above in a meaningful way.
- (iii) Let me tell you a parable I used to give to an adult discussion group in philosophy that once I led. It was intended to raise discussion, and indeed often did.

"Imagine" (I said) "that we are visited by a race of superintelligent alien beings. (Being superintelligent, they can converse with us in English.)

They ask, how do we know things? How do we find out about the way the universe works and our place within it and understand ourselves?

We (or I anyway) answer, By using science and mathematics.

Ah yes, they reply, Science and mathematics. We tried that. It gets you a long way, but it only tells you part of the story. To get a more complete understanding you also need ..."

"And now," I said to the group, "how would you complete that sentence?"

I think that is the question that interested the EPs. I too miss having an answer to the question.

