

The Quaker Meaning of Light (and James Turrell's work)

by Helen Meads

Abstract

Helen's presentation is prompted both by her experience in James Turrell's work and his teasing remark: "This idea of going inside to gain outlook is of course this idea that there is in meditation. And certainly the Quakers were involved in that. And for them it was going inside to greet the Light. That's what my grandmother would always say to me, and I'm still sort of finding out what that really means."

She will explain what Quakers mean by 'Light' and explore the links between that Quaker meaning (of Light) and James Turrell's work (with light). She will describe the basis of Quaker worship and the nature of Quaker experience and, with particular reference to Kjaer (2008) and Adcock (1990), highlight Quaker inferences in his sculptures. Helen will also discuss the experience of being in Turrell's pieces, concluding how they both evoke Quaker practice and invoke Quaker experience.

Introduction

This afternoon I'm going to talk a little about Quaker origins in the seventeenth century in order to explain why 'Light' is still such a central concept to Quakers. This is what James Turrell says in the Yorkshire Quaker Arts Projects film (*Go Inside to Greet the Light* 2007):

This idea of going inside to gain outlook is of course this idea that there is in meditation. And certainly the Quakers were involved in that. And for them it was going inside to greet the Light. That's what my grandmother would always say to me, and I'm still sort of finding out what that really means.

By the end of my talk I hope that you'll understand a little more about how Turrell's early Quaker experience, and the Quaker ways to which he was exposed, influenced his understanding and informed his work with physical light.

I'll also draw on my doctoral research to explore a little what religious experience is for Quakers and touch on how Turrell's work both evokes Quaker practice and may invoke Quaker experience.

I know we have a lot of Quakers here today, but in case any of you are unfamiliar with Quaker practice, I'll very briefly outline it. Traditionally and at least in Britain still, Quakers do not have priests or pastors, but at Meeting for Worship (which is

fundamentally different from a church service) Friends (the name Quakers use for each other) sit in a circular arrangement in stillness and silence. Friends mostly sit with their eyes closed and, as any Friend is moved to speak, she or he will stand (if able) and speak as moved - this is known as 'ministry'. Friends often describe giving ministry as outside their control (there may be a physical prompt that one must stand and speak, which cannot be easily resisted).¹ And they may not know when they stand exactly what they are going to say. Similarly they may not know for whom amongst those present they are saying it.

Meeting for Worship usually lasts for an hour at any agreed time and place (often in a Meeting House on a Sunday), although some Meetings are experimenting with longer; at other times shorter Meetings for Worship may be held, for example at the home of a Friend who is too ill or incapacitated to come to the Meeting House. Another but more unusual example is when Yorkshire Quaker Arts Projects organised a couple of Meetings for Worship in the Deer Shelter Skyspace, which were for one of the times James Turrell recommends as best to experience it: 20 minutes before sunset and 45 after.

Turrell may have implied in that quote from the film that Quakers meditate, but I think that was his way of giving an indication to an audience which in all probability has no clue about Quaker ways, nor of the nature of Quaker practice. I don't believe that it was a misunderstanding on his part. Quaker Meeting for Worship is not individual meditation, but a collective waiting on God (whatever one understands by that term).

The Quaker Meaning of Light (in its historical context)

Friends in the Truth or the *Children of Light* (later to be called 'Quakers' in derision (Nickalls 1975: 58; Moore 2000: 11&246[EN26]) and self-named 'The Religious Society of Friends') were a radical seventeenth century Puritan religious group, initially in England (and later Wales, Scotland, Ireland, America, and -in later centuries- other European countries, Africa and Australasia). In the seventeenth century, a belief in God went more or less without question and Christian language was fundamental, in both a religious and a more general context. The bible had not long been

¹ See, for example, Elisabeth Salisbury's 1968 description (*QFP* 1995: 2.57).

liberated by the English translation from the control of the established church's interpretation. People could read it for themselves and it was available in most households. Indeed, there were also pocket editions:² here's a photo taken last year of one of my friends holding George Fox's travelling bible. (Fox was one of the earliest Quakers.)



In the seventeenth century, most people believed that the world was ordered with God as the supreme power and the King, who claimed a Divine right to rule, exercising that right over the realm. It is hard for us to imagine how big a shock Charles I's execution in 1649 was at the end of seven years' Civil Wars. England had been thrown into turmoil.

The Civil Wars saw the army travelling all over the country and (when previously most people travelled no more than 20 (and often no more than 10) miles from their own village (Reay 1985: 66-67)) ideas began to spread (Moore 2000: 3). Different religious groups sprang up and the government of the Commonwealth, which followed the King's execution was very nervous of potential challenges to its authority, when many anyway saw that authority as illegitimate (Hutton 1990: 26).

The Quaker discovery and the message they promulgated was that every person had direct access to God, that the spirit of God within each person could properly understand the scriptures. The idea that everyone could communicate directly with God was very radical and extremely threatening to Cromwell's rule. Not surprisingly, then, Quakers were persecuted by the authorities.

Blasphemy was a capital offence: on the third conviction, the blasphemer would be executed. Quakers therefore had to be very careful about their language. 'Light', of course, is a very common metaphor in many religions, including Christianity, and is frequent particularly in John's Gospel. All the seventeenth century Quakers would have been very familiar with the contents of the bible and it seems from

² Bibles were not expensive compared to other book prices in the seventeenth century (Hill 1972: 93).

seventeenth century sources that many of them knew it, chapter and verse, off by heart.

Rosemary Moore, who is the foremost British authority on early Quaker writings, suggests that Quakers used the term 'Light' (usually 'Light of Christ, but also 'Light of God') for the operation of the spirit of Christ or God within; 'the Light' was not Christ, nor God, nor the Holy Spirit, but was something that came from Christ or God (Moore 2000: 109). She suggests that 'the Light' developed into the characteristic Quaker phrase because it was a safe alternative to 'Christ' and could be used with less risk of blasphemy charges (Moore 2000: 81), that is, Quakers' use of 'Light' avoided the charge that they were claiming to **be** Christ. Moore cites Fox's favourite 'Light' phrases in pamphlets 1652-1654: 'the Light in your conscience', 'the Light that Christ Jesus hath enlightened you withal', 'the Light of Christ with you' and frequently 'in the light', 'receive the light', 'turn to the light' and very often simply 'the light' (never just 'light'); and, from the context, 'the light' was an overwhelming invasive force, not a vague mental illumination (Moore 2000: 81).³

The word 'Light' has over the centuries remained in Quaker parlance, with the connotation of a transcendent power (as a euphemism for Christ or God) or with the connotation of immanent intentionality (which others might understand as prayer). In Quaker forums and on Quaker pages on facebook, for example, as well as in conversation and in Quaker ministry, Friends often say something like 'I'm holding you in the Light'. It's a phrase I've used recently myself in keeping in touch by text with a young woman who comes to the Meeting I attend and who is currently in a great deal of personal, social and family distress.

You could say that, even though it no longer carries the explicit connection with Christ or God, Quakers use 'Light' as a metaphor for the Divine. Early Friends used the terms 'Light within' or less frequently 'inward light', never 'inner light' (Moore 2000: 81); in the twentieth century 'inner light' and 'that of God in everyone' imply (very solipsistically) the Divine part of the individual, which is not what I (nor, I believe, Turrell) mean.

³ Also used by Richard Farnworth 1653 (Moore 2000: 81, 263).

In my doctoral research I concluded that what brings Quakers together is experience, not belief. My informants understood the Divine in various belief frameworks (Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, non-theist). In Britain, Australasia and some US Meetings, it is more usual for Quakers to have a 'Universalist' approach.

Some of James Turrell's Quaker experience

As you may know, Turrell grew up as a Quaker in Pasadena, California (Adcock 1990: 2). He attended Meeting for Worship at Villa Street Meeting as a boy with his devout conservative Quaker grandmother, Mary Frances Hodges, who wore Quaker plain dress and even made the young James wear the hat (Kjaer 2008: 42). In the 1960s⁴ he moved to the Hicksite (more liberal and politically active) Meeting at Orange Grove (Kjaer 2008: 54).

As part of his Quaker service as a young man, he was active in encouraging resistance to the draft for the Vietnam War⁵ and was imprisoned for two years as a result. Lise Kjaer suggests that his solitary confinement had a profound effect on his work (Kjaer 2008: 77, 90-92).

In particular *Meeting*, one of Turrell's *Projection Pieces*, begun in 1967 (Turrell 2004: 57), also seen in exhibitions as the aquatint *Meeting* (1989-1990), could be seen as the light falling into a Quaker Meeting House. The projection was later realised as a skyspace at the Museum of Modern Art in New York as *Meeting* (1986).

Turrell was ambivalent about any Quaker influence on his work (Adcock 1990: 211) until he realised that in *Meeting* (1986) and *Second Meeting* (1989) he had responded to his Quaker heritage (Adcock 1990: 211).⁶ After exploring Buddhist practice, Turrell came back to Quakers as a Universalist in the 1990s when he

⁴ Turrell was born in 1943 (Adcock 1990: 2) and his grandmother died in 1958 (Kjaer 2008: 54), so by the 1960s he was both a young adult and free of his grandmother's direction.

⁵ 1954-1975 (Kjaer 2008: 79).

⁶ The ambivalence is referenced to Adcock's 1986 conversation with Turrell (Adcock 1990: 249[EN10]) and the acknowledgement to one in January 1989 (Adcock 1990: 249[EN13]). Kjaer is unreliable here (Kjaer 2008: 58). She also says that Turrell had a shift in perception the day his father died (Kjaer 2008: 64), citing *Air Mass* (Holborn 1993: 12), but that page does not refer to the day his father died. It is of course possible that Turrell told her the story when she interviewed him in 2007, but if so the referencing is incorrect. Turrell himself is not above mischief or misremembering: in *Air Mass* (the interviews for which were conducted January 1993 (Holborn 1993: 120)), he claims to have been conceived the night of the Los Angeles Air Raid (Holborn 1993: 9), but he was born on 6 May 1943 (*James Turrell Biography*) and the raid was on 24/25 February 1942 (*The Battle of Los Angeles*).

wanted spiritual influence for his children (Kim 2013: 40),⁷ at that point referring to himself as an 'un-lapsed Quaker' (Kjaer 2008: 20). He now publicly acknowledges his Quaker upbringing, but is always careful to explain his work in general terms which a wide audience might readily understand.

Evoking Quaker practice in James Turrell's work

One of the phenomena I observed in James Turrell's work is that people settle into stillness and quietness (if not silence) in quite a short time. I also observed that children seemed to 'get' some of the pieces faster than adults (particularly *Ganzfeld: Tight End* (2005)), sitting still and appreciating them.

The *Skyspaces* (1975a; 1986; 2006) reflect the architecture of Quaker Meeting Houses. They are plain, the seating is arranged so that people face each other in a square (or circle) - from the very first, Quakers met so that they could see each other's faces.

Also, in immersive pieces like *Gray Day* (1997), *Ganzfelds* (1967; 2005; 2009) and *Wedgeworks* (1969b; 1974; 1975b),⁸ the experience of having eyes closed, as Quakers often do in Meeting for Worship, is approached.

From what Turrell has said, this seems to have been his intention all along (Rose 2013: 9:11):

With the eyes closed there's full vision. You think of the lucid dream. There's full vision without eyes ... So where does this light in the dream come from? And how do we have this full vision that we access, seven, eight hours a night with the eyes closed? And what is the light, where does the light come from in the dream? Those are very interesting thoughts and ideas.

And so I wanted to actually deal with the light. It seemed to be a light that we knew, but didn't often see with the eyes open, because we often see light this way, but not that often with the eyes open. ... I would like to achieve in my work that you know this light, but it's not familiar with the eyes open.

⁷ His astronomer collaborator at Roden Crater (Turrell's *magnum opus*, still under construction), Dick Walker, was Clerk of Flagstaff Meeting (Kim 2013: 40).

⁸ *Wedgework II* was never exhibited, although a drawing exists (Turrell 1969a; Adcock 1990: 100, 103).

Although Turrell doesn't mention Quaker Meeting for Worship in this context, his boyhood experience of sitting in Meeting for Worship with his eyes closed will have been formative.

From my own experience, I feel it's not unreasonable to say that in a Quaker Meeting for Worship we can enter an altered state of being. Not a dream, but a dream is also an altered state of being. And this light (which is unfamiliar with the eyes open) is present in both, whether consciously acknowledged or not.

I should also add that Turrell has taken his work back into the Quaker context by giving Skyspace to Quaker Meetings: at Live Oak Friends Meeting House in Houston (2001) and Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting House in Philadelphia (2013). In those contexts Quaker practice is not just evoked, but actually conducted in the context of his work, as indeed it has been as well when we held Meeting for Worship in the Deer Shelter Skyspace here in August 2006 and August 2007.

The nature of Quaker (religious) experience

I'm going to draw here on my doctoral research into a Quaker practice called, appropriately enough 'Experiment with Light'. Experiment with Light is a relatively new Quaker practice [1996], additional to Meeting for Worship and is practised by a minority of Quakers. (There are approximately 70 Light groups in mainland Britain (there are 478 Local Meetings in Britain) and a minority of Friends in each Meeting will be in the Light group.) It is based on the process which seventeenth century Quakers are thought to have gone through, but the Experiment compresses the process into a much shorter timeframe. It is based on four core steps (Ambler 2002):

- mind the Light
- open your heart to the Truth
- wait in the Light
- submit to what is shown in the Light

The Experiment takes the form of sitting in stillness listening to spoken prompts (with long silences in between) which relate to those steps.

It is fair to say that not every Quaker will have had experiences similar to those of my research informants, but several of the experiences described to me were based around light or sight. My guess was that these informants were drawn to this additional Quaker practice because of their earlier experiences.

Here's one (Meads 2011: 179):

It's simply an enormously bathed sense of encompassing light, even with the eyes closed. It's very often ... It's very hard to describe it, except it's being in light ... It's a much more sort of ambient and softer ... but being absolutely enfolded.

I concluded from my research that those who practise the Experiment go through a process very similar to that of seventeenth century Friends, albeit less dramatically. They move through stages of understanding, particularly about their relationships and how their own behaviour contributes to whether those relationships work well or not, into acceptance. Changing their own behaviour led to transformation - not only transforming themselves, but also their relationships. Where change was not possible (for example in a work environment), they accepted that impossibility or removed themselves from the situation (some changed their jobs). Where they practised in Light groups, they drew into a community of love.

How James Turrell's work may invoke Quaker experience

So, I've talked about how there's Quaker influence on Turrell and consequently in his work, how he seeks to evoke an experience of physical light which he links to an altered state of being and I've mentioned the nature of Quaker (religious) experience.

I'd like to go a little further now and talk about my own experience in his work. I would acknowledge that my experience was informed by my practice. In my thesis (Meads 2011) and elsewhere (Meads 2007) I have written about how my research intensified my experience in my practice and the experience I'm about to describe occurred in 2006 during the period I was doing my research.

I came here (YSP) to the Underground Gallery pieces a lot in 2006, sometimes with friends, but also on my own. I recall in particular an occasion in *Gray Day* (1997). If you visited it, you'll recall that to enter it you walked into blackness and either had to feel your way along the wall or, latterly, you might have been shown in by someone with a torch. It was very dark and on the facing wall was a large envelope-like aperture lit from behind. On this particular occasion I spent a long time in the piece and so I recall it as very light, not dark at all, because my eyes had adjusted. As I sat there, I had a sudden understanding about the relationship between my co-directors in a business venture I was financing and how I could better deal with and relate to both of them. What was interesting was that I had not been thinking about either of them, but a sudden understanding came, in a very similar way and with very similar physical signals to that in my *Experiment with Light* practice, but without the steps being consciously prompted.

Transcendent Light

So, I would say that James Turrell's work with light is prompted and informed by his Quaker experience. He has offered it back to the Quaker community in the Skyspaces in Quaker Meeting Houses. As a result of its origins, his work both evokes Quaker practice and can invoke the Quaker experience which prompted it in the first place.

I had always thought that, as physicists often say, the only constant in the universe is the speed of light, but in a recent interview James Turrell said:

I was surprised that we were able to stop it, that we found a medium where we could slow down light to the point it didn't move through it; that was very recently that that happened, through a lot of experimentation

(Rose 2013: 7:22).

In the same interview, he said:

We now are suspecting that light knows when we're looking at it. It has different behaviour through a diffraction grating when we're looking than when we're not. That's quite interesting. That almost imbues it with consciousness.

(Rose 2013: 7:51).⁹

⁹ Zajonc cites the experiments he performed at the Max Planck Institute for Quantum Optics in the 1980s as one source for Turrell's interest in the felt experience of light extending to the possibility of attributing consciousness to

So we're back to the concept of intentionality and maybe physical light is more than a metaphor for the Divine.

Helen Meads has been a Quaker since 1998 and has followed James Turrell's work since January 2006, when friends took her to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) Underground Gallery pieces: *Gray Day* (1997); *Ganzfeld Tight End* (2005) and *Wedgework V* (1974). She has been a partner in Yorkshire Quaker Arts Projects (YQAP) since its inception and was co-producer of *Go Inside to Greet the Light* (2007), YQAP's short film about the YSP Turrell *Deershelter Skyspace* (2006). She has travelled to London, Kijkduin and Wolfsburg to appreciate other Turrell pieces.

In 2011 she graduated PhD from the University of Birmingham Department of Theology and Religion in Quaker Studies with her thesis '*Experiment with Light*' in Britain: the heterotopian nature of a contemporary Quaker spiritual practice.

For her day job she does something completely different.

light (he does not reference the other sources); Zajonc also describes the experiments (2013: 56) and says that Turrell's scientist friends told him of the experiments. Based on his 10 February 2013 conversation with Turrell, Zajonc links Turrell's interest in the consciousness of light with his Quaker background (Zajonc 2013: 56).

References

- Adcock, Craig. 1990. *James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space*. Oxford, University of California Press.
- Ambler, Rex. 2002. *Light to Live by: An Exploration in Quaker Spirituality*. London, Quaker Books.
- The Battle of Los Angeles*. The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, [accessed 1 March 2014]. Available from <http://www.sfmuseum.net/hist9/aaf2.html>.
- Go Inside to Greet the Light: Short Films inspired by James Turrell's Deer Shelter Skyspace at Yorkshire Sculpture Park*. 2007. Huddersfield, Yorkshire Quaker Arts Projects. DVD.
- Hill, Christopher. 1972. *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*. London, Penguin Books.
- Holborn, Mark, ed. 1993. *James Turrell: Air Mass*. London, The South Bank Centre.
- Hutton, Ronald. 1990. *The British Republic 1649-1660*. London, The Macmillan Press.
- James Turrell Biography*. [accessed 1 March 2014]. Available from <http://jamesturrell.com/about/biography/>.
- Kim, Christine Y. 2013. 'James Turrell: A Life in Art.' In *James Turrell: A Retrospective*, edited by Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Jennifer MacNair Stitt and Phil Graziadei. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Kjaer, Lise. 2008. 'Awakening the Spiritual: James Turrell and Quaker Practice.' Unpublished PhD Thesis, City University of New York.
- Meads, Helen. 2007. 'Insider Research into "Experiment with Light": Uncomfortable Reflexivity in a Different Field.' *Quaker Studies* 11 (2), 282-298.
- . 2011. 'Experiment With Light' in Britain: the heterotopian nature of a contemporary Quaker spiritual practice.' Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham. Available from <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/3076/>.
- Moore, Rosemary. 2000. *The Light in their Conscience: Early Quakers in Britain 1646 - 1666*. Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania University Press.
- Nickalls, John L., ed. 1975. *Journal of George Fox*. London, Religious Society of Friends.
- Quaker Faith and Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*. 1995. London, The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.
- Reay, Barry. 1985. *The Quakers and the English Revolution*. London, Maurice Temple Smith.
- Rose, Charlie. 2013. *James Turrell - Looking at Light 2/2*. kunstspektrum, [accessed 10 February 2014]. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-gmHA7KbcU>.
- Turrell, James. 1967. *City of Arhirit* (Ganzfeld). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- . 1969a. *Wedgework II* (Drawing).
- . 1969b. *Wedgework III* (Wedgework).
- . 1974. *Wedgework IV* (Wedgework).
- . 1975a. *Skyspace I* (Skyspace). Villa Panza, Varese, Italy.
- . 1975b. *Wedgework V* (Wedgework).
- . 1986. *Meeting* (Skyspace). P.S.1, MOMA, New York.
- . 1989. *Second Meeting* (Skyspace). Brentwood, California.
- . 1989-1990. *First Light: Meeting* (acquatint print).
- . 1997. *Gray Day* (Dark Space).
- . 2001. *Live Oak* (Skyspace). Live Oak Friends Meeting, Houston.
- . 2004. *Projection Works 1966-69*. London, Albion.
- . 2005. *Tight End* (Ganzfeld). Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield.
- . 2006. *Deer Shelter* (Skyspace). Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield.
- . 2009. *Bridget's Bardo* (Ganzfeld). Kunstmuseum, Wolfsburg.
- . 2013. *Sky Query* (Skyspace). Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.
- Zajonc, Arthur. 2013. 'Liberating Light: A Contemplative and Scientific Endeavour.' In *James Turrell*, edited by Carmen Gimenez and Nat Trotman. New York, Guggenheim Museum Publications.