

## The Future of the Religious Society of Friends

The ruins of contemplative orders lie all around the area I live. At the very time when a third of England's wealth lay in the hands of the church and Cardinals advised Kings, these immense monasteries trembled on the edge of destruction. The greatest religious movements have limited lifespans. Like us, they are mortal.

When I started coming to Friends, there were seven adults in the local meeting, most of them in their late 60s. It had only recently been an "allowed meeting" and we met in the back room of a dilapidated building. The front room was stacked with old pews, which dated back to the time this had been a Monthly Meeting serving a great region of northern moorland. I could not help be reminded of Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going", where the agnostic librarian finds himself drawn to decayed old country churches:

Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly.

As I became a regular attender, I began to ask myself how long our meeting could possibly survive. My guess was 25 years. By then the old Quakers would have faded away, our financial reserves would have been exhausted and the building would have aged beyond repair. If this were so, worship would be a matter of living in the present. The idea that one might be part of a declining movement that owed no allegiance to the future had its attractions. Quakers might be the light of the world, set "on a darkling plain". After all, just before the Second World War, there had only been 20 000 Quakers, and yet, working with the Jewish Board of Deputies, this tiny group had liberated ten thousand kindertransport refugees from the Nazis. One of them, Karlheinz Liebenau, was my wife's Uncle Charlie. We should not take thought for the life of our meeting. We should practise contentment and consider the lilies of the field.

In fact, over the last 25 years, our little microcosm has waxed and waned. When tensions arose over the future of our building, there were only eight of us at our Sunday Meetings. Friends from the Area joined us. One year, five members died or left - but five new attenders came. The numbers in our gathering have fluctuated, but on most Sunday mornings for the last twenty years, there have been between 15 to 20 present. Despite all the differences of opinion, our building was refurbished two years ago. The letting of our old caretaker's cottage has given us a new funding stream. The renewed sense of unity created a virtuous circle, where the enquirers, who never stopped visiting, stayed on. Quaker Quest brought in three faithful attenders and three more have joined us since. Two of our long-standing attenders became members, and for the first time in many years, we now have more than enough to fill all the offices.

So has our little meeting secured its future? In the early years, when there was a children's meeting every Sunday, we attracted a lot of young parents.

Cruise missiles and Greenham Common drew in a few more concerned about world peace. We have tried consciously and deliberately to plan one main project every year and have another in the pipeline, designed to involve the existing group and interest new enquirers. We have always monitored our finances carefully. But the fate of many of the country churches hereabouts suggests that our survival can never be guaranteed.

We have had to accept that in an increasingly secular age, expansion of any spiritual group entails running up a downward escalator. This is particularly true for those practising contemplative worship. In the West, few such groups have ever become mainstream. However, I would argue that the Religious Society of Friends is better placed than others to take advantage of what Philip Larkin took to be:

A hunger in himself to be more serious.

As a young man, I read and absorbed the work of the Analytical Psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung. He grew up in the Manse and one of the spurs to his own spiritual journey was the shadow of his father's loss of faith. In his autobiography, he creates a wonderful image of the desolation in the Roman World when the conviction grew that "Great Pan is dead". But he would argue the courage to confront death, both at an individual and institutional level, is at the heart of the religious experience. For him – and for me - the possibility of renewal comes not from messiahs or individual spiritual leaders, but through the collective imagination. Towards the end of his life, Jung prophesied that once the West had secured itself from want, our major preoccupation would be individuation. Freed from ritual, hierarchy and the intellectual restrictions of a creed, Quakerism ought to appeal to increasing numbers of people, as they put more of their energies into the cultivation of the human spirit.

So I continue to feel that, in the long term, there are grounds for optimism. However, change comes slowly and uncertainly. Jung had not reckoned with the possibility that as the West got richer, it would become even more materialistic and less non-conformist. More people feel that more money will make them happier, even though the research suggests that it makes little difference. While more of us go to University, carry out original research and sign up for PhDs, the companies that employ us expect greater conformism in the workplace. Our education system is becoming increasingly exam driven and secular. While more children are better educated, they learn less either about the spiritual life or the Christian tradition. Unless they go an aided school, there will be fewer and fewer opportunities to read the Bible or any other sacred texts. Fewer and fewer teenagers are given the tools to construct their spiritual journeys and I would agree with John Stephenson Rowntree that the key to the long term propagation of the Society of Friends lies in the foundation of more Quaker schools.

It was Stephen Allott who suggested that our journey to modern Quakerism began with Rowntree's Inquiry into the Causes of its Decline. As Friends of the Truth, we had to come to terms with overarching social and historical trends, however negative. In Dover Beach, Matthew Arnold had just

compared the certainties of Medieval Europe with the decline of organised religion in Victorian times:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

Darwin was just about to demolish the idea that a purposeful God had created the species in seven days. And the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach was delighting European radicals with the paradox that while there was no separate Creator, humanity would continue to wrestle with God's hold over the imagination. Lionised by the 1848 revolutionaries and translated by George Eliot, Feuerbach saw the nature of God as a projection of all that is best in humanity, something that is capable of being understood not through ritual, logic or theology, but only as a form of first hand experience. He thought that Christianity would long since have vanished from the life of the world, had it not been animated by this divine principle. He argued that organised religion is simply a form of alienation, and when it is recognised as such, individuals and small groups would be freed to seek their own redemption, much like the agnostic and despairing weaver in Eliot's *Silas Marner*.

What kind of inspiration can Quakers look forward to in our virtual, faithless age? Our *Advices* urge us to "enter imaginatively into the life and witness of other communities of faith". I would argue that Friends will also need to learn from those who act in what one might call a Christian fashion, even if they profess no faith at all. As she was cutting my hair last week, my barber told me about her apprentice. His mother had abandoned him, just after he had done his GCSEs. Her lover lived at the other end of the country and one day, while he was at work, she stripped the house of all her belongings and left. Noticing how upset her apprentice was, the barber asked him what was wrong. Her own children had all just left home and she told him she was happy to offer him a home. Then she took him to the police station to make sure she was breaking no law. They contacted Social Services, who duly found the mother, who agreed to let him live with the barber and offered to make weekly payments towards his upkeep. None has appeared so far, even though the barber has re-clothed him. As Eliot, Feuerbach and those nineteenth century Quaker Seekers would have recognised, there are moments of reprieve. People will continue to love their neighbours.

