

"In our world, the road to holiness leads inevitably through action" Dag Hammarskjöld 1  
True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it.....  
OUR FAITH IS WHERE WE LIVE William Penn

It is now thirteen years since Jonathan Dale's visionary 1996 Swarthmore Lecture "Beyond the Spirit of the Age". Thirteen years of waiting for a follow-through from the broad body of Friends. In these apocalyptic times, it is high time for us to resume our prophetic role as a religious group.

With terrorism widely accepted as the norm; rape, genocide and slavery ever more widespread; malnutrition and poverty rising worldwide; a solution of the Israel-Palestine problem ever-receding; sea rise, inundation, tornado and drought ever more common, Friends' peace and simple living testimonies are no longer sufficient. Being Good People is not enough: we need to set out to change the world.

It is no longer fashionable to proclaim moral absolutes: everything is just "a matter of opinion". But that is rather like re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Jeremiah did not fear being regarded as barking mad. Isaiah did not mince words or try to be merely polite. And, both by example and by clearly-expressed values, nor should we.

We need to dig back from the surface manifestations of poverty, climate-change and war, to their deepest roots in human nature and society, and let the Light shine on what can only properly be called sin. Poverty is caused by the maldistribution of the world's resources. Climate change is caused by their greedy consumption in pursuit of luxury and profit; war wells up when these effects become unbearable.

The clouding over of the basic Commandments needs to be dispersed, so that they can be recognised once again as basic conditions of human survival. Preaching - which Friends have become shy of doing - is very closely related both to advertising and education. It is a process of bringing people to realise the truth and arise from the comfortable fog they have lain in hitherto.

Rather than billions of pounds' worth of weapons, perhaps Afghanistan should be deluged in posters saying "God is Life. Who takes life is attacking God", to question the core of the suicide bomber's philosophy. "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind" challenges the spirit of revenge. And 113-year-old Henry Allingham's statement "War is stupid. Nobody wins. You might as well talk first: you have to talk last anyway" is the wreath that should be laid on the Cenotaph. But who will dare?

The truths that George Fox perceived as obvious need re-illuminating. He regarded "steeple houses" as monuments to a hierarchical structure of authority which oppressed souls, and did not hesitate to go in and challenge the priests in their comfortable livings and smug sermons. He refused to take his hat off to any authority but that of God. Authority reinforced by ritual, oaths and mumbo-jumbo was anathema to him.

It is this authority, which permeates English society and attitudes, from the monarchy down, which is nearer the heart of the matter. But we need to dig even deeper, down to our relationship with the soil. In the 15th century, two hundred years before George Fox, if you didn't own land, you didn't have a vote; and that has coloured our experience ever since.

Mankind was created as a social species, living in village-sized communities where men built homes and metalled roads, sowed and reaped; women spun and weaved, children gleaned and fed the chickens, and each individual's role and contribution was valued. Agriculture was on communally-held land, with each family having its right to a strip - which can still be seen in the ridges in some fields.

But the ownership of land gave some people power over the others. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the enclosure movement allowed landlords to corral land for themselves, driving the peasantry into the cities to become an urban proletariat. And with that demographic change, came a change in people's lives. Men began to leave home, and go into factories, or travel elsewhere to work, whence they came home usually in a bad temper, with a little money - usually not enough - while women and children stayed at home.

But the memory of living on the land remained, so that, as George Orwell put it, "Every Englishman wants to be a landed gentleman - even in a suburban semi or a flat in Bayswater with a window box". In 1815, Richard Arkwright, the inventor of the Spinning Jenny, spent a sum equal to half of Britain's entire capital formation for the year, on an estate in Herefordshire. And today, when large parts of the working class have become middle class, town dwellers still have the longing to have a place in the country.

This has produced dead villages all across Britain, which have been colonised by weekenders, holiday-home owners and people who don't need a village shop, don't need a bus service, don't need a primary school, don't need a pub, don't even need a church. In one village in east Gloucestershire, there is a tiny stone church still used for worship, and another, larger, Victorian/Edwardian building labelled "St Michael's Church. Private Property. No access to graveyard" It might as well add "No lost sheep today thank-you", because what we are witnessing is the destruction of society, of community, of any relationships of mutual care or support, and their replacement by possession.

This long social/historical discursion may seem a long way from an ethical enquiry into the future of the Society of Friends: but I believe how we relate to each other, and the kind of society we live in, is absolutely central to how we exercise our faith. Modern economy works by dividing people into ever smaller competing, consuming nuclear units, each with its own car, tv, washing machine, and an inherent suspicion and fear of its neighbours. Disputes over hedges and boundaries, ever-higher stone walls and fences, and the progressive division of Britain into a series of packets of private property, marks our era.

Pubs, shops, disused primary schools, disused churches and chapels, are all converted into show homes, while the economy is more and more based on property values rather than real trade or production. Britain's economy has for over a decade, been a bubble of shopping funded by debt secured on the constantly-inflating price of houses. The current economic slump and recession is what that has produced. The major part of our "wealth" has been generated by the activities of money-lenders. As a result of three successive property booms, many Friends are now involuntary millionaires.

Everyone who has "got onto the housing ladder" is, in effect, standing on the fingers of someone else who has not yet done so. At the top are the very rich, who do not care; in the middle are the 70 per cent who are loan slaves, and at the bottom are the benefits slaves. The introduction of Right to Buy, designed to produce more Conservative voters by pandering to people's greed, has decimated the supply of affordable social housing for

ordinary people, and what is left has become sink estates for the most disadvantaged: to the point where we are looking forward to some 5 million people effectively homeless in the next decade. The MPs' expenses scandal was a fanfare to the pursuit of personal gain which dominates the tenor of daily life.

John Woolman's question: "May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions" is entirely apposite. Like Woolman, I see it as the mission of the Society of Friends to foster a more co-operative, communalist, caring way of living. And it is only by forswearing or minimising private property that we can do it.

Indeed, such is the insane level to which house prices have been forced by money-lenders' pursuit of profit, that co-ownership or community housing are the only way that many people can hope to find homes. Interestingly, in Norway - now the richest country in Europe thanks to its careful management of its North Sea Oil - housing is cheaper than in Britain, and there is no housing shortage. This is because its government has for many decades whole-heartedly supported co-operatives, which have solved the housing problem for it. That is, it has encouraged people to work together, and share property responsibility. I am my brother's keeper, and together we keep a roof over our heads.

In Britain, the apparent wealth produced by home-ownership, orchestrated by property supplements in every newspaper, Location Location Location-type programmes on tv, buy-one-get-one-free offers, pay nothing-till-next-year zero-interest offers, have produced a consumerist fever that has infected the whole English-speaking world. A passion for individualism that says "You are on your own, without any collective rudder". Huge borrowings detach people from reality; and, as Oliver James writes in his terrifying book *Affluenza*, "once the collective consciousness is shattered along with shared values about what is acceptable, the goals expand indefinitely and infinitely in the absence of constraints. You can never be satisfied, no matter what you get: there's always something more."

The result is an environment that is more and more privatised: gated housing developments with further internal gates to protect neighbours from each other. In Rio de Janeiro, residents of gated compounds commute by helicopter to avoid the danger of streets and barrios. Gated compounds in the USA are increasingly turning themselves into corporations and opting out of paying tax to local government - which fatally weakens the structure of democracy. And this vision is taking over our cities too. The rapid transfer of the Pathfinder Clean and Safe policy from America to the UK is seeing large tracts of cities and towns sold to private corporations who now own the streets as well as the properties, bring in their own cleaners and security guards, install CCTV and a control regime designed to keep out anyone not likely to spend money in the commercial properties whose value they are constantly bidding up. Since the IRA bombing, the centre of Manchester has been turned over to an outfit called Cityco, and become the ASBO capital of Britain. Anfield now belongs to a company called Keepmoat.

"Business Improvement Districts", "Defensible Space Safe by Design" introduce cultural control and zero tolerance. In America under these policies, thousands of homeless people have been cleared out of cities - in San Diego, 7,000 to a vast tent - so that the improvement is actually social cleansing, the removal of a symptom, not a remedy for a social problem. "A richer social mix" is the declared aim; but "richer" is the operative

word. The policy is driven by prosperity - for landlords. Beside the London Olympic area in East Stratford, a huge shopping area is being constructed, which will be patrolled by unmanned aerial drones of the type being used in Afghanistan. The cloning of our cities with the same marble floors and chain stores is turning them into something more like airports, less like human spaces.

All this is a repetition of the Enclosure movement which drove the peasantry off the land and into city slums, and created vast privately-owned estates in Scotland where the crofters became virtual serfs. It is power and greed, extreme wealth and inequality, social division and control by a privileged minority - attractive to insurance companies, police and politicians - rearing their heads again and taking us back to the evils of two centuries ago.

The loss of Liverpool Quaker Meeting House to a huge 34-street shopping mall development owned by the Duke of Westminster brought this pernicious policy right home to the Society of Friends. A place that had been a haven of peace and friendliness for many citizens was sacrificed to commercial self-interest. "A retreat from collective and individual responsibility to self-interest and a culture of fear. We are no longer responsible for what goes on around us - we abdicate control and walk on by," says Oliver James.

This further expresses itself in the rise of the BNP with its culture of xenophobia, and the Daily Mail's hysteria against immigrants and asylum-seekers. Controlling, usually absent-at-work parents with performance-driven demands of their children - "the price of love is success, starting with school performance, and usually involving an equation between money and exam success, as in 'work hard to be able to get a good job and earn a good salary'", and often combined with the use of physical punishment, have been shown to be major promoters of the Fascist personality.

Interestingly, in Denmark, where there is no use of CCTV, and other European countries, it has been found that the maximum number of strangers present in public places strengthens mutual observation and natural social control mechanisms, and reduces fear. It is the abdication of such control that creates insecurity. People walk round not looking each other in the eye or smiling, but instead concentrating on some little electronic gadget held in their hands or plugged into their ears. Yasmin Alibhai Brown, the Independent's liberal Muslim columnist, has compared iPods and mobile phones to burquas, isolating people from each other.

The poison is systemic, and runs throughout the country and its government, both local and national. In many cities, stable, long-established communities are being destroyed by compulsory purchase, with houses then sold off to housing associations who keep them boarded up until the inhabitants either move away or die from despair. The housing associations then demolish and redevelop more intensively, making huge profits. Large grassed-over formerly inhabited areas in Liverpool and Newcastle are testimonies to this process, which has ground to a halt as the credit crunch has dried up the supply of buyers for newly built homes. This is the public face of an economy run purely on profit and greed, with no concern for community. And it cries out for a Quaker witness against it.

There is a story in the Quaker joke book, of a Friend who gave a pig to a lazy, drunken neighbour. Caring for the animal led him to work hard and abandon his drinking habit. "Sounds like social work" commented another Friend. "No," the giver replied, "it is religious faith." And so is concern about the broad traits of our national society. It is incumbent on

us, as Friends, to set up an example of living according to other values; and to oppose by our political and social stance, the degrading of social values and behaviour. I hope I will not frighten Friends by suggesting that this begins with a deep review of our relationship to personal property, including our homes.

Taking for oneself no more than we need involves reviewing the size of accommodation we occupy. When our children leave home, is it really necessary to retain a family-sized home? Could it be sold and the profit used to buy another, larger house that could be turned into a housing co-operative or a co-owned block of flats? Or could it be sub-divided and shared with others? Neighbours may be shocked by such a move, but in due course brought to think, and see that this is a way to making housing affordable for more people, and growing a greater sense of community and mutual caring. "Defending that which is mine" transformed into "building that which is ours".

Nor need this involve any sacrifice of security. A co-operative benefiting from the generosity of an original owner should be able to pay a dividend on the capital lent to it which can provide the donor's pension. Better that our life's savings provide affordable homes for several people in perpetuity, than be swallowed into some profit swamp in the City by an annuity-selling insurance company. A good accountant should be able to organise such a move in a way that avoids Inheritance Tax being payable on the death of the donor, which is a way of withholding our Quaker resources from spending on war and nuclear weapons.

And what does such a course do to our children? The instinct to conserve property to bequeath it to them is ancient and inbred, but the criminal escapades, drug abuse and sex videos of young people who have inherited millions hardly suggest unearned inheritance is a benefit. The instinct to provide for one's children is aggravated by the increasing difficulty of housing themselves, but the effect is simply to reinforce the debt economy. It has become a tradition that you take out one mortgage to buy your own home, and when you have paid that off, you take another mortgage to help your children get homes; and when that is paid off, you "release equity" by taking out a third mortgage to pay for your care in old age - and thus remain a faithful loan slave for your entire life.

Our moral enquiry needs to go ever deeper. It should be clearly evident to thoughtful Friends that passing on property to one's children is in fact setting privilege in concrete for our own families. The control of land and capital assets is the root of the economic inequality which has become wider and wider in the last two decades in Britain. Professor Richard Wilkinson's Salter Lecture at BYMG showed very clearly that the wider the gap between top and bottom wealth, the greater the difference in infant mortality, health, life expectancy, education and employment prospects. There is no need to be a Quaker Socialist to recognise this as a profoundly unChristian situation.

The essential problem, against which Friends should take a profoundly unfashionable stand, is the expectation of unearned gain from others' misfortune or disability. Gambling, winning something for nothing, exploiting economic movements, are not Quakerly. Islam forbids usury. Is it not a fit thing for the Society of Friends also to take a stand against the culture of debt and money-lending built on private property? Ebenezer Howard's invention of the Community Land Trust in Letchworth Garden City, Robert Owen's New Lanark, the Cadburys' Bournville, and Titus Salt's Saltaire, are all examples of wealth being creatively used to provide housing, education, sanitation, employment and

decent living conditions for the benefit of a whole community. Shall we be any less morally creative? Our nation is having its attention fixed on the top waters moved by wind and weather, and kept from noting the deep undercurrents which threaten to drag us under and drown us all. We should let the Light shine to prevent this suppression of understanding.