

### Friends – What of the Future?

It could be said of the Society of Friends that although it observes no creedal statements its core belief centres around “that of God in everyone”. Such a conviction cannot be rationalised into clear definitions because it is rooted in the heart, not in the head. An analysis of the words “that” or “God” inevitably diminishes the drawing power of the sentence which, left as a whole without the interference of the cognitive mind, can have such positive motivation as a spur to living, even living adventurously. It is a statement of faith in those we meet, and stands in sharp contrast to the orthodox approach which conceives everyone as being a possible threat.

To chart the course of a vector in displaying the past movements of a body and its current position is often of help, but it is used with less certainty to indicate future direction. Any hedge fund manager will tell you that dealing in futures is a risky business. Recognition of the influences of the surrounding environment is always important. So, to consider the future of the Society of Friends in Britain, we might obtain some guidance by taking a number of views of its past, and of the past environmental changes in the surrounding culture, with the belief that the Society is always influenced by the wider world, from which it springs and receives its nourishment. This approach does not imply that the Society of Friends is usually conformist – far from it. A more appropriate analogy is that of an irritant which, as a result of prolonged friction, sometimes causes a pearl to form in the oyster. But before delving into past history, let us have the fun of allowing our imagination to play with possible futures.

Although any forecast is hedged with doubt there are some certainties in which we can have confidence. For example we know that at some time we will die and we prepare for that eventuality by writing a will or even recording instructions on the formalities of the end processes. One other happening that we can be assured of is that the Society of Friends as we know it today will change, and it is life-denying for us to try to cling to present customs and practices after their due time has elapsed.

If the Society of Friends in Britain has a future it will come about because it affords all people, including children, the opportunity of worship without statements of belief being imposed on them. It will provide a means for people to meet together in shared concern and to practice love in action. Its boundaries will have to be flexible and its religious practices will need to change. Its methods of Worship have not given, up till now, due weight to the use of story, myth, colour, music, art and it is time to recognise the value of the emotions in the creation of a worshipful atmosphere. It is difficult to think of any other religious group from Christian origins which is open enough to respond to the needs except the Unitarians (and the union of Unitarians and Friends should not be discounted). It may be that the need has to be met through Eastern practices or in secular groups such as green movements or community developments. There are growth denominations with a fundamentalist approach and their methods of attraction may have lessons for Friends, even though their doctrines can be abhorrent. Are Friends free enough from the chains of the past to explore new methods? Are British Friends who represent a minority of the World family of Friends, sufficiently enthused and united to lead the whole body forward? What a challenge faces us! Of course no one can answer the question raised by the title of this essay. It is a good subject to consider however and perhaps the mental effort to respond by all the writers and the readers may itself inspire creative thought and result in fresh activity and new light.

So let us paint a picture of just one of the scenarios which Friends could develop.

- The Meeting House springs into activity with shared breakfast and closes with shared lunch.
- People come and go as they wish and the major theme throughout the day is “sharing”
- A central core is a Meeting based on silence and on listening.
- There are a variety of interest groups for people to drop into e.g.
  - A crèche and provision for children and teenagers
  - Opportunity for meditation and counselling
  - Groups to discuss Quaker history, religion, philosophy, theology and eastern insights
  - Review of newsprint such as Quaker periodicals and the weekend quality papers
  - Prepared talks led by volunteers on matters of interest or book reviews
  - Activity spaces for the practice of Circle Dancing, Tai Chi, Yoga etc
  - Drama, art, music and singing groups

You are challenged to create your own picture of an organisation which is so attractive that it is self-supporting but is not burdened by bureaucracy and heavy administration. At present we are drowning ourselves in committee structures and over-involvement in the sheer running of our business affairs. These processes need simplification and hiving off to a few small executive bodies in order to afford Friends with more time on relationships and the important things in life.

The Society of Friends spans the world and so unavoidably displays variety in its beliefs and practices. This sometimes leads to discomfort in relationships from place to place and from time to time. This essay has a specific subject “Friends in Britain” and, in a broad generalisation, they can currently be characterised by having liberal views and holding unprogrammed Meetings for Worship. Looking at the worldwide picture in this they are in a minority. Friends in Africa can be very unhappy with views held here on such subjects as biblical authority, theology, attitudes towards sexual matters, paid leadership, etc. Reference hereafter in this essay to “Friends” will be used to imply “British Friends” in this limited sense. However, the present characterisation of Friends as “liberal” is a recent one and historically they have been seen as quite conservative and broadly in the Christian tradition even though they have often challenged orthodox beliefs.

For purposes of simplification the stages of development will be considered in sequential sections. These subjective markers are by no means clear cut and are chosen arbitrarily whereas, in fact, each period blends in with the preceding and the succeeding one. Each section will cursorily survey developments within the wider society, followed by developments within the Society of Friends. Whether the former affects the latter is a matter for investigation. If a pattern can be detected from the past, the study of current trends in the world might have some relevance in any forecast of the direction likely to be taken by Friends in the future.

Britain was in chaos in the seventeenth century. The reformation had resulted in numerous protestant groups forming and the preceding centuries of control by the Church, although it was still very powerful, had weakened sufficiently for a degree of new thought to be allowed on religious tradition. There were many groups seeking to break out of the restraints of politics and religion and the divine right of kings was challenged to the extent of the execution of the king. Parliamentary

democracy was a new concept in experimental stages and the scientific method of analysis was only just being exercised. So searchlights of reason were shining across a background of belief in the supernatural, magic and superstition.

To those living through such changes it seemed that the foundation structures of society were crumbling, with enormous dangers in train. Many people therefore felt impelled to oppose modernity. The power struggles swung this way and that. Similar to today the fear of terrorism led to extremes, in that case to the crushing of ideas on equality, communism and free-thinking.

The birth of Quakerism broadly coincided with the birth of the scientific method. Friends recognised the corruption in the church and the dead hand of orthodoxy. They reflected on the life of Jesus, and sought a revival of what they saw as primitive Christianity. The Society of Friends was evolving, denying claims of church and state, rejecting hierarchical control by the priesthood, and ceasing to observe creed, dogma or ritual. It was, therefore, objectionable to the establishment and represented a great threat to social order. In the opinion of those in power it must be crushed by whatever means possible.

The initial period of Quakerism was driven by enthusiasm and experimentation. There was great emotion and it had dedicated and charismatic leadership. At first it lacked cohesion and, for its own survival, it needed to develop a degree of control over the exuberance of some of its members. This seemingly fragile body was to face intense persecution and it was not without good reason that its main executive body was called "Meeting for Sufferings".

It was a time when many new groups were forming in the fields of science, politics and religion, and the government, driven by fear, set out to crush such innovations. Groups such as the Levellers, Diggers, and Muggletonians, in which belief in the immediate availability of God to give guidance and authority, did not survive. The Society of Friends had an administrative structure and cohesion, and in numbers it was significant as representing about one in one hundred of the population. It was known to be a peace-loving body, but the general fear of revolution meant it had to be silenced and made ineffective.

By about 1700 the teeth of the Society of Friends had been drawn. Its members had been excluded from the church, the law, the universities, the professions and from involvement in politics. For the next 150 years it was largely seen as a small and dying sect. However it was able to be active in certain fields such as industry, education, mental health, social services, prison reform and anti-slavery movements. Within the Society a ghetto mentality formed with Friends seeing themselves as a peculiar people, separate from and unspotted by the "world". There was great resistance to change, strict control over the activity of its members, even clothing must not change in step with the times, and there could be no marrying with non-members. Of course this resulted in numbers steadily reducing by as much as seventy-five percent. There developed some division of opinion within the Society between the quietist Friends, who almost revered the writings of the first Friends of Truth and those Friends who had moved to an evangelical outlook and mixed with people from other churches, sometimes as part of high society. After several generations of inbreeding it is possible that the diminution of the genetic base was having a serious deleterious effect on birthright Friends, but this is a subject requiring further research. Although the Society was, by its own rules, so removed from the general population it did not completely lose touch with reality. For instance its cooperation with some churches on anti-slavery, temperance, moral welfare, work for the poor

and sick, did keep some awareness alive on "the world". However, it was abysmally ignorant of developments in philosophy and theology.

By the mid to the end of the eighteenth century the impact of the scientific method was being felt on a wide front. There was a major redistribution of the population as Britain changed from a pastoral economy to an industrial one. Instead of a broad scattering of people over the whole countryside they congregated to a much greater extent in defined centres. Movement of people and goods was facilitated by the construction of canals and railways, and in these developments Friends were influential. Germany's philosophical developments, biblical criticism, analytical psychology, geology, the "origin of species", the "death of God", and the rise of communism were all having an effect on the world view. This presented a great problem for the now small sect of the Society of Friends which had been so determined to keep itself apart from the world that it had failed to keep aware of the enormous changes in thought taking place around it. It was a time to take stock,. Was it to face the self-imposed death or was it to "get real" and wake up to modernity? Was the Society to adopt a reasonable faith, or was it to cling to past glories?

At the start of the twentieth century the decision for "life" rather than "death" had been made. Although Friends had opposed creeds or statements of belief the effect of being surrounded by creedal churches had rubbed off and their outlook was largely in accordance with Christian doctrine. They were still active in Christian missions and their message in adult schools was Biblical and Christian even though questions on miracles, the atonement etc were seen as areas for exploration. The myth of Christ incarnate, the divinity of Jesus etc were unresolved and unclear issues in the Society's teaching and would remain so, to be left for individual decision. This freedom in fact runs true to the resistance of Friends to the imposition of dogma. However theological questions continued to be of great importance throughout the century and awareness of the fact of Britain as an interfaith community was slow to dawn.

On the wider scene the century opened with Britain convinced of its greatness as the world leader, with resulting displays of arrogance, superiority and hubris. Internationally it had exercised its power in imperialism and control of smaller nations. The church kept the populace under firm control and dictated what it must believe. Its creeds were exported worldwide in the exclusive belief that there was only one way to salvation and that was through the Christian tradition. But it was not long before this over-confidence was undermined and disillusionment set in. The capabilities of industry, so recently lauded in the Great Exhibition were turned to destruction. Clearly the Western World had lost its way. The great hope for human progress was dashed in the carnage and horror of the trenches. Where was the divine hand in such destruction! For many people it was time to drop the concept of a controlling or intervening God and to turn to mankind itself to find salvation in good government, with a world perspective. Others emphasised nationalism and self-protection, negotiation from strength.

Officially Friends held to their Peace Testimony although individual freedom led to many Friends joining the armed forces. In practice there can be no simple answers to the questions of war and peace. However the Society became known as a pacifist church and thereby gained in membership and the influx was largely from adult thinkers. So the constitution of the Society changed from an inbred close-knit group to being more representative of the thinking population. This was a move from conservative to more liberal Quakerism.

The century has held many changes, and each major change has affected the Society of Friends. The inter-war years caused Friends to be politically active. The horrors of the holocaust called for the provision of practical relief. No decade can be examined without seeing evidence of change. Above all in the increasing speed of communications leading to a smaller world, greater understanding between East and West, increased awareness of the background to problems between nations, between religions and between economies and with a greater understanding of the natural world.

In accordance with the theme of this essay on changes of environment and culture in the wider world and its consequential effects on the Society of Friends let us lay this writing aside for a period of reflection. How has life changed over the past one hundred years? Just a few factors are noted here. Dress style has become relaxed and informal, from the conservative fashions for male and female. There were no cars or aeroplanes so longer distances could only be taken by rail or boat. Communities were therefore much more local in their awareness and interest. Telephones and radio were not yet invented; interpersonal communication was slow and less spontaneous. The lack of photocopies made literary reproduction difficult. Knowledge of other cultures was limited and screened with a strong underlying prejudice that "Britain was best" and the world leader. For anyone forecasting the future in 1900 what inconceivable innovations actually took place in the fields of science, geology, genetics, transport, communications, astronomy, microbiology, and sadly in the ability of mankind to obliterate itself and terminate human life on earth.

No body of people can face such a dramatic change in outlook seamlessly and without internal struggle as was faced by Friends in Britain at the turn of the century – a change from strict conservative control by an inward-looking society to an openness of perspective on the wide world. This has resulted in confusion which has been worked through during the whole of the century and this progress bears study under many heads.

Early in the twentieth century the membership changed through the influx of people from other groups, and in this the pacifist stand was of particular importance. Gradually the majority of Friends became those new to the Society rather than birthright members. Even five decades later the old traditions were still held to in some Meetings such as the observance of plain dress, bonnets and gowns, no lapels, ministry in a high-pitched falsetto tremble, and kneeling in prayer. Today the veneration of the old times makes an interesting story on many a Quaker pilgrimage.

In matters of belief the Society was very Christian in outlook even though the understanding of Pauline doctrine was opposed to traditional orthodoxy. For example its understanding of the second-coming was that it had already happened; its view of scripture was as a history of mankind's development and not seen in any way as a literal or infallible record; in rejecting times and seasons it saw every meal as the opportunity for a love-feast and every day as a holy day; the resurrection was seen as a miraculous daily fact in our lives; the concept of "the Christ" was broader and more universal than the concept of Jesus as a particular manifestation at one period in history; the idea of sacrifice was seen as a willing service and not the appeasement of an affronted God. Such breadth of view turned orthodoxy upside down and much of the Society's teaching was concentrated upon conveying the understanding which was new to incomers from the Christian church tradition.

During the latter part of the century there was greatly increased understanding of Middle-Eastern and Far-Eastern philosophy, as well as a better appreciation of the use and limitations of language and the psychological needs of the human being. Special interest groups formed and give some

indication of what occupied Friends' thoughts. The Seekers Group was interested in the developments in psychology. Friends' Interfaith explored links with other religions and the Universalist Group was open to people of all religions and of no religion. Alongside those developments there were expressions of concern to emphasise the importance, maybe the exclusivity, of the Christian myth in the New Foundation Fellowship. But special interests were not limited to matters of belief and faith and included secular interests, camping, the Arts, community-living, singing, environmental issues etc. These movements give an indication of the ferment and confusion amongst Friends throughout the century.

We still live in confusion as can be seen by a glance at the columns of "The Friend". For example Friends like to cosy up to the Churches and even accept membership of their central body whilst knowing that membership is not granted to Churches which do not accept the doctrine of the trinity. Applications for membership from Hindus, Buddhists or atheists can cause perturbation and non-theists have to present their case strongly before they are heard. So even after the lapse of a century there is a long way to go. Friends have not sufficiently explored the conviction that personhood does not exist as a permanent self but is a process, and God (if that word still has meaning and is usable) is also a process. This introduces whole new concepts on death and dying, on the eternal, on love between persons, and on what we value.

However the big recent change is the wider recognition that we in the Western world have been foolish and short-sighted. Friends cannot return to their inbred extended families, they can no longer be a peculiar people. We have to recognise that the world is in crisis and it is up to us all to work to improve the environment and in this we must be motivated by the best policies as we understand them to be. The awareness of possible annihilation is not particularly a Friends vision but we are fully in support of the movements to reduce aggression between nations, to understand the causes of conflict and to improve the state of the natural world. Set against this background matters of doctrinal nicety diminish in importance.

Technological advances may well help to reduce the effect of global warming and avert some of the foreseeable disasters, but there is a deeper malaise within society which centres on loss of meaning and over-reliance on the scientific method in resolution of problems. For four centuries the Western world has underplayed the importance of the practice of spirituality in love and caring not only for our fellow humans, but also for the animal and the physical creation. Awareness of the spiritual requires the practice of meditation, humility, silence and sharing in community. Spirituality does not blossom through the over-activity of our monkey minds.

So why are Friends still meeting? Obviously the Society holds attractions for a diverse group of people, and they are happy to give it their commitment and to spend time and money in its support. The cohesion is not through uniformity of belief- in fact the lack of imposed uniformity offers a much-needed freedom, particularly to those people who have worked through and left behind what they see as immature concepts or inadequate myths. They find a joy in meeting thoughtful and spiritual people and in being able to share concerns, whether it be peace, conflict research, prison work, education, environmental issues, community experiments, love of children, new religious thinking, politics, family genealogies – this list can be extensive. They also can find a joy in the freedom to reject past impositions and to explore philosophies, faiths and beliefs which might have

been de-barred to them, to explore religion as a human creation, to reject the idea of a supernatural world.

In my dream I entered the cellar and the door slammed behind me. I was lost in pitch darkness. All I could do was to be still and silent and await the faintest sound of footstep or the glimmer of light through a crack in the door. I had built the walls well with stones hewn from the quarries of self-interest, capitalism and materialism spurred on by fear, but the source of saving light came from elsewhere. I needed to follow Ariadne's thread in trust and love.

But there is a matter of overriding importance, the valuing of silence, of listening to others, and also of listening to that inner voice or compulsion to which we have to be open if we are to be true to ourselves. Our Western world has become entrapped in reason and the scientific approach but has lost its way on direction, purpose and meaning. It needs to find a new balance in which the reasoning mind is valued but spirituality is seen as of greater importance. It is only through the spiritual that relationships can thrive in love, peace and caring. What is more important and life-giving than such qualities? So we return to the age-old blessing – may love, peace which passeth understanding and the fellowship of the human spirit be with us all today and in the future.

