

8

FOR LHM ON EDWARDS

MAX EVANS

I

THE FUTURE OF THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I hope to explore the way Quakers were, are and will be. I hope to throw light on past actions of the Society, whether they be good, bad or indifferent to the Society as a whole. Friends have always tried to make the world a better place, shedding light onto events that held mankind under the chain of darkness! They wish to enlighten those who Fox said were "shrouded and lost in dark". Unlike him, we cannot hope that our words will be spoken with the same reverence and impact, with an angel telling him that Jesus could speak to his condition. But, hopefully, we can show the world that co-operation is better than conflict and that violence is the first (and, in many cases, only!) resort of the incompetent. The Society has never been huge in numbers, lacking the ritual and ministers that are the mainstay of so many larger religions. I recall a story told to me by an elderly convinced Friend, named Eric Swift, back in the 1970s, saying that it's easier to touch the spirit of God in people's hearts when the membership is high in your Meeting (60+ in his, usual turnout 25-30+) It is a whole different game if, to quote his words, "your usual turnout is a caretaker, a deaf mute, a Newfoundland dog and a visitor who has mistaken you for the Woodcraft Folk!" Many Meetings kept going with only child attenders when their parents were imprisoned. These days, many are in such dire straits that not only are they bereft of children, but those they regard as Meetings' 'youngsters' are old enough to have sired teenagers legally!

I hope, in the course of this essay, to find what past Friends regarded as the core of Quakerism, why these beliefs were such a bedrock to them, which have changed over the years and why. The Society had no experience of global conflict until 300 years after Fox's death. Did this change things and now, nearly 400 years after the same event, what can the Society learn? There is an old saying (I believe American) stating that one's destiny lies at the cradle's foot. What are we leaving at the cradle's foot for the next generation? Should the Society encourage the young and fertile to spread (legally!) their wild oats to people the future with Quakers? Should this be tempered with a concern for S.T.D.s? It was Gerald Priestland, in one of his talks in Priestland's Progress, who said that, "sex is wonderful but does not put food into the mouths of the consequences." On a happier note, syphilis was as big a slayer (if not more) than AIDS but a cure for the former was found, so there is always hope. I hope that the foregoing will encourage you to read on - I feel I have something to say. I have split my essay into five sections: this introduction, the past, what was right and wrong then, its impact today and the future.

THE PAST

Since the days of John Wilhelm Rowntree, Friends of a young age have seen improvements to their outlook. Many boarding schools were mixed and some of the first not to beat pupils. Friends attempted to find non-violent ways of dealing with misbehaviour. For the first time, women in the Society had an education, which took many to University. Happily, many Quaker schools still thrive (nearly all of them co-ed), showing that they moved with the times. This was a Victorian phenomenon, but the next major upheaval, effecting 'young people' more than others, was in the late 1950s. A group of worthy Friends, including a prison governor and a sexologist (to use the euphemism of the time!) got together

①

and produced a booklet entitled 'Towards a Quaker View of Sex'. It made a laudable attempt to confront the fact that the young in the Society were not only promiscuous but even gay! (although this euphemism wasn't in use at the time). It included a glossary of medical terms for those unfamiliar with them. (Presumably attendance at Quaker schools meant they only knew the impolite ones).

The next indication that Young Friends were not following parental examples (like most young people in those days) was their response to the dropping of the age of consent and the legalisation of homosexuality in the late 1960s. I believe that 'Towards a Quaker View...' contributed toward this. ~~It~~ ^{was} also the Pill; YF gatherings no longer segregated the sexes when they slept. There were, and still are, worries about young people and drugs and drink. This ^{was} a grudging acceptance that all are prey to their hormones. *show*

The first real recognition that the young were a vital part of the Society came in 1978, when Yearly Meeting planners organised an outdoor event with street theatre involving a huge dragon. At the next Residential YM in 1982, when one in seven involved were under 18 the Teenage Programme took off and the group took part, with the Leavers, in their Late-Night show. (As a Leaver at the time, some of them who had acted at Lancaster said they preferred to be indoors!). This was the start of something big. There were other things that, in my opinion, blighted the past. The first, which ended at the beginning of the 20th Century, was the disowning of Friends for marrying out. It's odd to think that non-Quaker spouses would be thought harmful to the Society. Happily, this and other anachronisms (such as separate Meetings for the two genders, a throwback to the Shakers, so I'm told) are now part of the past. Fox challenged a minister, once, for not allowing a woman to ask questions of the priest. The other past bugbear was being forced to attend Meeting every week, whether or not you felt like it! Meeting is never spiritually uplifting or worthwhile if you're dragooned into it. Young people didn't wish to be inculcated into the fear and nurture of the Lord, they wished to find Him in their own way.

WHAT WAS RIGHT OR WRONG WITH IT?

In the past, Friends felt that their views of Young People and their behaviour were not only right, but to suggest otherwise was tantamount to heresy, even slander! Even the most tolerant hoped that their children's drinking, promiscuity and/or homosexuality would be something they'd grow out of. In the 1920s and '30s, society put their daughters into lunatic asylums if they became pregnant out of wedlock and the father had absconded. Even Members of the Society were acquiescing because of 'convenience'. Friends didn't like facing the fact that their children enjoyed breeding as much as other mammals! On the good side was their witness against war as a solution of the world's problems. Many, however, could not answer the oft-asked question "If you're anti-meat and anti-war, what are you for? You're nothing but a crank."

Many young people from Quaker families now feel that there are insufficient role models. Their parents and elder Friends may cite what they regard as wondrous paragons from Quaker history (conscientious objectors in World War I, Mary Dyer who was publicly hanged etc.) but usually forget the old story about the child who, when praying was heard to say "Please, God, make all bad people good and all good people nice!". It may seem peculiar to some, but a sense of humour and wit sugars

② the funny side of anything. Unfortunately they seem to live by the mantra, "Go and see what those nice young people are doing, and tell them not to!" Friends do try to communicate with young people, but feel that they are either in 'loco parentis' or are trying so hard to remain 'pals' that they feel it difficult to say anything, even when they suspect that something bad is afoot.

If you wonder how Fox dealt with young people in his day, it is sobering to remember that he and his followers were the young people of their day. His role model may have been his father, Christopher, (known as Righteous Christer, a churchwarden and a weaver, said by George Fox to be, "pious and strict"). Friends in the past always attempted to keep their offspring from what Fox called, "the spots of the world". But, for the last half-century at least, the 'spots of the world' have actively hunted the virtuous. I will return to the effects on present day Quakerism in the next part of my essay, but I only wish to mention the debits and credits of the past in this part.

④ The main cause for concern, I believe, is the question, "Where do we go from here?" Even thirty five years ago, Geoffrey Hubbard agonised over what twenty thousand God-centred pacifists could do to make the world a better place. We have our own organisations with aims much the same as national bodies, but still wish to remain discrete. Our theology is amateurish, but is argued over at a trivial level. Teas and shared lunches are more a cause of joy and fellowship than our sense of humour. Certainly, this has changed in thirty years, thanks to the likes of Ormerod Greenwood, Alec Davison and his Quaker Youth Theatre acolytes. Friends in the past did have a sense of humour, but disliked those they regarded as frivolous. I have met convinced Friends who feel the same today – one said he thought that past Friends would not recognise the Society today. I knew what he meant but felt that the Society's experience of two world wars had changed it for the better. He told me, in so many words, that the Society had lost its way by the time of my birth (1950s). I told him that if all Quakers had felt like him, the Society would have ditched the Peace Testimony as a seventeenth century pacifist anachronism and embraced the idea of the Just War. He said it might be a good idea. I told him that that was exactly what it would lead to – JUST WAR! Not having a reply, he tried to take offence. I knew how Fox felt when he had a theology argument and accidentally trod on a man's flowerbed. (Read the journal)

So there are many Friends who have hopes for the next generation but have their own views about what the Society has done in the past; some ~~is~~ laudable and some less successful. → *conf* However well intended, I feel that we can learn from the past to see what was good and what is relevant today. Finally, we may have been more in unity with matters in the past, and Friends were more certain of how to proceed; now this is not the case. We need to formulate a corporate view that we all feel happy about. This is compounded by the fact that our views are less certain than before. We need to stop getting overwrought because we cannot please everyone. There has always been some disunity and always will be.

HOW DOES IT IMPACT TODAY?


⑤ The main impact of the past on the present is that there are fewer Quakers now than there were fifty years ago. There are many reasons for this including less parental pressure to stay in the Society; Quaker schools being less Quaker-oriented than in the

The main impact of the past on the present is that there are fewer Quakers now than there were fifty years ago. There are many reasons for this including less parental pressure to stay in the Society; Quaker schools being less Quaker-oriented than in the past; the end of the assisted places scheme, and even better contraception. I have heard some say, that in order to boost falling membership Friends are now letting anyone in and these Friends do not stay long. For small meetings, the visit by two Friends to quiz an attender wishing to join their Meeting, becomes a formality rather than anything valid. Unfortunately Friends look at their Meeting and see it becoming a Darby and Joan Club due to the lack of young people. If they wish to alter this they should attempt to make it more user friendly to those who hold the Society's future in their hands, specifically, to those under thirty. It is alright to quote Friends from the past but to remember that young people are growing up in the 21st century. If your Meeting resembles what satirist Tom Lehrer once called "ivy-covered professors in ivy-covered halls" then Young Friends may have misgivings about joining your Meeting. They may also feel unhappy if any suggestion they make to modernise the Meeting is dismissed with a kindly smile. However well meant, it amounts in their eyes to propping up an anachronism! Another thing, which annoyed a lot of my generation, and I suspect the present one, is when they visit an elderly Meeting, and someone says "It's nice to see so many young people here!" It would be better to say "...so many visitors": it is certainly more inclusive. Most of the present generation are not bad people; they may have weaknesses but then, don't we all? Most of the present generation of Young Friends are well educated and want their Meeting to acknowledge their worth.

I believe that we could, through the efforts of the present generation, sustain the Society, but we must ensure that they have a clear vision of how to proceed. I mentioned the lack of numbers earlier on; we also have a lack of money. The Society is now less affluent than in the 1950s because there are more members who are inclined to contribute privately to good causes rather than publicly, than in the past. There is also a feeling that moral and party politics are synonymous and spend their money accordingly. In the past, Friends with such sympathies could separate the two. I feel that this is a grave mistake, however you vote. Quakers have a moral duty to succour the needy. Moral blackmail is used to support any lame duck that has an eloquent sponsor. Above all, it is not easy to accept any group who regard constructive criticism as personal abuse – they seem at a loss and usually take umbrage. Sadly, they do their cause no good by airing a whinging litany of third-rate grievances. Both sides then regard it as a confrontation between themselves and the idiot generation and admitting that they are wrong is seen to be pandering to the paranoid.

We need to trust one another, not to be thin skinned and learn to respect one another's privacy. I remember a non Quaker speaker back in the 1980s who worked with the Samaritans, saying that, when talking to most suicidal people aged under sixteen, they told him that the thing that depressed them the most was adults who refused to allow them to have secrets. These were usually regarded by the same adults as salacious, seditious or possibly criminal. This, to him, (and myself) was every bit as much an abuse as the behaviour the adults warned them about. There is also the problem that ethically founded firms, such as Cadburys, Rowntrees, Lloyds etc. are now bereft of Quakers on their board and have, ~~in the past, invested in oppressive regimes, or may have engaged in~~ dubious employment practices, etc.

THE FUTURE




Quakers of the future must, like past Friends, face the fact that the world is changing, whether for the better or worse is a matter of opinion, but there are some things as problematic as ever. The future of society as a whole (and let's face it, the Society) rests with those who are still children. We must encourage them to face thankless responsibility and learn how to cope with it. (After all, when older, the buck will stop with them.) As Geoffrey Hubbard said in the 1970s, it is incumbent upon Friends to tackle Life's ocean of darkness. This is all right as a starting point but Act I is not as good as the lot. They must encourage the world, Christian, Moslem etc. not to descend into animosity over differences of view. While most young Friends in the past have tried to take a more worldly view than their parents, there is a growing feeling that the Society must get a grip and decide what to do next. I feel that the Society of Friends, as well as society at large, must start to question the growing paranoia about immigrants and paedophiles.


On the former, they must help people settle in, learn the language (another source of misunderstanding) welcome them positively into our Meetings. On the latter point, the best way to protect our children is to have a Meeting where we know each other so well that abusive behaviour will be impossible. Many of our Meetings have children's classes, and, hopefully, many more will have them in the future. It is difficult enough to find those willing to serve when looking after children; what is making it worse is knowing that the Meeting must check on anyone kind enough to volunteer. Meetings should arrange for training for those who are willing to serve and should know from past experience who the best candidates are. Above all, trust people when strong evidence is not forthcoming. Most Friends are good enough people; there is nothing naïve about seeing others as innocent until proven guilty. Children are most in danger if looked after by inept adults – there are far more of them than there are ~~of~~ paedophiles. Encourage a more tolerant and realistic view from the Government. We should campaign for this with the same vigour with which they used to support the Peace Tax diversion and same sex marriages.

Friends of the future must also be aware that the places we worship, like ourselves, are not getting any younger and we will need Friends with the will and the wherewithal to deal with this. Friends in the past had the courage to do this. For example: they demolished Devonshire House and replaced it with Friends House back in the 1920s. They should grasp the nettle and say what some regard as unsayable: "Do we really need to meet in a crumbling, listed building when it makes greater financial sense to purchase something more modern and sell the building to the National Trust? As I said earlier, people who would oppose this are using moral and emotional blackmail to prop up an anachronism. This must be recognised and confronted if things are not to worsen. I personally look forward to attending the one hundredth anniversary of the opening of Friends House when I am 69. Equally, I won't be feeling upset if the Society's H.Q. is located somewhere else and we rent Friends House out for income. This brings me to another future problem – accommodation. The present fire regulations and obsession the authorities currently have for our buildings to look authentically old, venerable and still be safely inhabitable, mean future generations will need to spend more money upon them. I have no problem in worshipping in buildings constructed after my birth, as long as

Friends do not put functionality before taste! Older buildings are good to rent out to others and I feel that, in the future, Quaker buildings should be more dedicated to the Society and of a size suited to membership and less to history. This is the only way I feel to address the future.



We need to address modern issues in a constructive way, not to allow concerns for our doctrines to deteriorate into sinecures and obsessions. We should respect that of God in all. The next generation should be encouraged, but not dragooned, into participation in the Society. There is nothing so soul-destroying, in my opinion, than a Meeting where Friends endeavour to 'tolerate' one another, but put on a show of unity to give the impression that nothing is wrong. In fact the cracks are not only beginning to show, but are widening. If the Society is to continue we must, at all costs, get our problems out in the open and not just feel that it is a concern for wiser Friends than ourselves. If you leave a problem on the back burner, it will, eventually, boil over! When (not if) it does, it will do far more harm than if it were brought to Meeting's attention at an early stage and discussed. You cannot solve a crisis by smiling at it and hoping it will go away, as I mentioned earlier on. This is reminiscent of the smug complacency that Geoffrey Hubbard mentioned in Quaker by Convincement. We would all like life to be one long ego-trip, but, as Sartre once said, "Hell is other people". Sadly, this includes Friends. The Society, past, present and certainly in the future, will have their own list of things which will improve the Society in the future, and which they feel are lacking in the present day. As proof of how wonderful these ideas are, they quote from the fact that Friends did them in the past. This begs the question, "If this is such a good idea, why did the Society abandon it?" Possibly it wasn't such a good idea after all. Some may retort that it would not have been abandoned if not swayed by the eloquent but ignorant. It is easy to be wise in hindsight. When asked, many Friends reply - "Please don't get me started".



Finally, if Friends are to survive they must encourage those with good, reasonable practical ideas, to see how their visions can be fulfilled altruistically. Anything which encourages a lack of tolerance of those less capable or moral than yourself is counterproductive. We are all valuable in some way if we allow trivial personality clashes to ruin our meetings, we shoot ourselves not only in the foot but through the heart. Have the courage to confront one another and enjoy picking a few bones, don't just go off, sulk and get back at them by subtle blackballing. The most effective way to solve a difficult issue is to confront it in a positive way. Ironing out misunderstandings and coming to terms with one another above all, finally, be sensitive. If you are one of those lucky Friends with happily married parents, who still kill the fatted calf when you visit them, not to mention siblings and cousins you know and get on with (most of the time) then you are fortunate. If you then complain that you cannot manage a foreign holiday this year, a week in your ~~post~~ holiday cottage in Cornwall will have to do, your gripes will sound trivial and annoying to a Friend brought up in poverty, without the money or health to holiday far away in this country and to whom foreign holidays are as inaccessible as the Moon. Don't be surprised if they get annoyed with you. Many people in this world suffer from depression, this includes many Friends; it is what the Retreat was built for. Those who hide hurtful issues behind a smile need our support rather than good being done to them. If the Society has a future, these people must be helped; we must light a candle in their benighted lives. Thus, the way to the Ocean of Light will be

PDSH

ERRATA

Thank you for telling me about the website for the essays-here are my corrections:

- 1) The penultimate sentence of paragraph circle 1 should be '...a group of worthy..',not '..og..'.
of worthy..',not '..og..'.
2) In the paragraph circle 2,the words '..were aquiescing..' should be '..aquiesced..'.
3) To the paragraph circle 3 should be added '..the pill.But some Friends seem unable to see the funny side of anything and seem to live..!.This is also a partial correction to the next page.
4) Paragraph circle 4.The words '..I knew how Fox..' should be '..I knew, then,how Fox..'.
5) Paragraph circle 5.The words '..As Geoffrey Hubbard said in the 1970s,it..' should be replaced by '..It..'.
6) Paragraph circle 6.The words '..one another,but put on..' should be '..one another and put on..'.Also,the bracketed words '(not if)..' should be underlined.
7) Paragraph circle 7.The sentence '..Ironing out misunderstandings and coming to terms with one another,above all,finally,be sensitive..' should be '..Iron out misunderstandings.Above all,finally,be sensitive.'
8) On the back of this errata,delete the sentence '..This may be alright for a start,but Act I is not as good as the whole play.'

O how ~~amely~~ amely corrections are made in
~~new~~ from.

MAR EVENS