

## **'The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain'**

### **Preface – 'What canst thou say?'**

Knowing my own limitations I thought long and prayerfully about how best to express, in an essay, my firmly held views of the past, the present and the possible future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. The answer came to me as I considered George Fox's question recorded by his future wife, Margaret Fell. '*Christ saith this and the Apostles say that, but what canst thou say?*' He urged her to speak from her own experience and I knew that I must do the same.

I realized, somewhat to my surprise, that my present life span of eighty-eight years covers no less than a quarter of the total history of the Religious Society of Friends. And that my sixty-one years as a Quaker are one sixth of that total.

I therefore decided to relate my personal pilgrimage from the first childhood encounter with the Society, to the present day, and my hopes - and fears - for its future. With regard to the content I can only say that the facts related are as I remember them and the opinions expressed are entirely my own.

### **The Religious Society of Friends in Britain – Past, Present and Future**

We are continually being exhorted 'not to live in the past'. G.K. Chesterton though, points out in one of his essays that the future is unknown to us and the present, 'like an ever-rolling stream', slips away continuously as we speak. We really have no alternative *but* to live in the past. When we discuss 'the present' we are usually really talking about the immediate past. It is the past that creates the fleeting present, and the still unknown future. We travel forward in space but always backward in time, unable to view anything but the scene we have already passed.

However, a piece of folklore often quoted by my (late Victorian) mother, insists that 'coming events cast their shadows before them'. It may be that study of the immediate and rather more distant past may enable us to discern and interpret those shadows in order to gain an inkling of the way in which the ever-changing present will develop into the future.

The Religious Society of Friends has a past that extends over some 350 years. I have been a member for sixty-one of those years, not an inconsiderable proportion of that total! I became a member 'by conviction' at the age of twenty-seven, but I had learned of the Society's existence some seventeen years earlier.

I was about ten years old and had been with a friend and his mother in a large public park in my hometown. We came out to see '*Quaker Meeting House*' in big letters on a board in front of a large building on the opposite side of the road. '*What's Quakers?*' I asked. My friend's mother was a real East Anglian. '*Coo, they're a rum owd lot, boy*', she replied, '*and no mistake. They've all got pots 'a money, and they sit around in the dark, a'waiting for the spirit to move 'em*'. Apart from the '*pots 'a money*', which may have been true at one time, it wasn't really too inaccurate a description of a basic Quaker practice.

Coming across 'Quakers' in '*Uncle Tom's Cabin*', I asked my mother what she knew about them. She told me that they were all very good people, who wouldn't fight in wars. My father had been a regular soldier and, at the time, I thought that it sounded as though Quakers were just a bit too good to be true. This feeling was strengthened when I read '*John Halifax – Gentleman*' (I was a voracious reader with very catholic tastes). This left me with the impression that Quakers were people of absolute integrity and honesty, but with rigidly puritanical ideas and, in particular, a detestation of the theatre! This seemed less strange to a teenager in the '30s than it would today, when so many well-known Quakers have been, and are, even better known as actors.

A better impression was gained when my wife and I spent our honeymoon in a small hotel in Devon owned by a Quaker. Guests were politely invited to join in Sunday morning Meeting for Worship if they cared to do so. We, equally politely, declined. My wife was a Methodist. I was a lapsed Anglican and, at that time, considered myself to be an agnostic. We had planned for a fortnight's honeymoon but had to cut it down to a week when I was recalled to attend a government 'Further Education and Training Scheme' course for discharged ex-servicemen. We very much appreciated our Quaker host's waiving any charge for the second week that we had booked. Shortly after that we met and made friends with a likeable young man of about our age. He had been a conscientious objector during the war, was an attender at a local Quaker Meeting and had received the Meeting's support. Although (or perhaps because) I had just spent seven years in the army I was much more sympathetic to those who had refused to join up than I might once have been.

It was with this, very limited, background knowledge and experience that we decided one Sunday to attend the local Quaker Meeting for Worship. I had secured employment near my former hometown. We had attended services at the local Anglican and Methodist churches near our home and they had not 'spoken to our condition'. Our nearest Quaker Meeting House was, in fact, the one that I had noticed, and enquired about, as a ten year old!

We immediately felt at home. We were made welcome and the nature of a Quaker Meeting for Worship was explained to us before we took our seats. We didn't find the periods of silence difficult and we did find the ministry helpful. Early in the Meeting a passage from the New Testament was read by a member, whom we subsequently learnt was one of the Meeting's Elders. This, we discovered, was the invariable practice at this Meeting. We had no idea that it wasn't the custom elsewhere.

Afterwards in a friendly chat I explained that I was a disillusioned ex-serviceman (like, I was told, many of the very earliest Friends!) and had lost my Anglican faith. My wife was a Methodist. Several of their members had similar backgrounds. We were plied with Quaker literature and warmly invited to come again – which we did, week after week.

We were both avid readers, and immersed ourselves in the history and practice of Quakerism from its beginnings in the aftermath of the Civil War to the present day. We read all the pamphlets and several hardback books borrowed from the Meeting House Library, including of course, the three books that were then the equivalent of

today's 'Quaker Faith and Practice'; *Christian life, faith and thought, Christian practice and Church government*.

In 1959 these three were amalgamated into two books, 'Church Government', covering Quaker organisation and, for instance, the conduct of Quaker weddings and funerals, and '*Christian Faith and Practice in the experience of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)*'. The latter book, an anthology, was invaluable for use in Meetings for Worship and as a bedside book. It also had value as an instrument of outreach, making a welcome birthday or Christmas gift for friends and relations. We were introduced to '*Advices and Queries*' and after we had become regular attenders we were asked if one of us would read one or more of them on a particular Sunday, if we felt it right to do so.

Not long after we became regular attenders my wife became seriously ill and was destined to spend the next two years in hospital. Because of this we probably applied for membership rather sooner than we otherwise might have done. We were interviewed. I explained my agnosticism but assured the interviewers that I hoped that I was prepared to become '*a humble learner in the school of Christ*' and that I hoped that my face was '*set towards the light*'. We were accepted into membership, which we very much appreciated during my wife's two years in hospital, and the recovery months when, after major surgery, she was discharged home as 'cured'. During her hospitalisation she received visits from Friends, and also received visits from our local Anglican vicar. We were not members of his church and had never worshipped there, but we were resident in his rural parish and that had been enough to make him take a caring interest\*.

I continued my attendance at Meeting while my wife was away and after her return home, we attended together as soon as she was strong enough.

My experience has been of just two local Quaker Meetings, but during the seven years that we attended that first Meeting and for many of the years that we attended, and I still attend, my present Meeting, there was never any question that we were following anything other than a *Christian* tradition – that we were, in fact, part of the Universal Church of Christ bequeathed by Jesus to his apostles.

The Religious Society of Friends that we knew, and which I still know today, had its genesis when George Fox, in despair at the emptiness of the worship of both the established and the dissenting churches, heard an inward voice which proclaimed, '*There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition*'. And then, as he recorded in his journal, his heart '*did leap with joy*'.

Why did it do so? Because it meant that Jesus Christ (God's word made flesh in the Jesus of the four Gospels) was immediately available to 'speak to the condition' of every living human being, without intervention of prayer book, priest or minister,

\*The vicar's caring interest continued after my wife's discharge from hospital though we never did worship at his church. He gave us a little kitten, Josie, who became a well-loved member of the family. Josie's mother's name was Timoshenko – she was surely the only female vicarage cat ever to be named after a successful Soviet Cossack General!

without liturgy, music or ceremony of any kind. It was not a message exclusively for George Fox. He passed it on, over and over again. It was the message that brought thousands to the newly born religious society. The claim of the leaders of this new society was that, '*Christ has come again to teach his people*'.

The tenets of those early Quakers were positive, not negative ones. They had no creeds, not because they didn't accept the content of those creeds, but because constant repetition didn't either mean or bring belief. They didn't have separate sacraments (ceremonies that brought humans into contact with the divine) because they believed that the whole of life was sacramental; that when Jesus said '*This is my body... .. This is my blood. Do this as oft as ye shall take it in remembrance of me*', he meant that his body would be broken and his blood spilt for them in just the same way as he had broken the bread and poured out the wine. He was telling them that they should 'celebrate a eucharist' (give thanks for his life, teaching and example) at every meal, not just at an occasional symbolic one.

It was not that early Quakers had no priests or ministers, but that they believed that every man and woman who worshipped with them could act as a Minister of the Gospel – and should do so without payment. '*Freely have ye received, freely give*'.

They did not refrain from 'observing times and seasons' because they didn't believe in the reality and importance of Christ's incarnation, his crucifixion and resurrection but because they claimed to remember these things in their hearts every day of the year. They did not refuse to swear oaths because they didn't believe in a double standard of truth but because Jesus had said, '*Swear not at all, but let your aye be aye and your nay be nay*'.

Unlike modern Quakers they did not feel that they had to 'respect' practices of other traditions that they considered to be wrong. They publicly condemned the '*hireling priests in their steeple houses*' because they were not sufficiently Christocentric; instead of worshipping God as revealed in Jesus Christ, they were worshipping their own organisations, liturgies and ceremonies. I was reminded of this a few months ago when a reader's letter in '*The Friend*' suggested that some Friends came to Meeting every week to worship The Religious Society of Friends rather than God.

Tolerance was not a virtue highly prized by Friends, or I think by anyone else, in the seventeenth century. I have little doubt that then, as now, there were 'hireling priests' among both Anglicans and dissenters who were faithful shepherds of their flocks.

Absolutely central to Quaker faith and practice was the conviction that the 'inward light of Christ' was the inheritance of every man, woman and child in the world. This was not a conclusion arrived at experientially (how could it possibly be?) but on the authority of the New Testament. The first chapter of St John's Gospel proclaims that the Word of God (that was with God from the beginning, and was God, and without whom was not anything made that was made) was also the light of humankind. '*It was the true light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world and it cannot be overwhelmed by the darkness surrounding it. It was incarnate, made*

flesh, in Jesus Christ. *'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father – full of grace and truth'*.

The divine nature of that inward light, God's gift to all of humankind, and of its incarnation (personification if you prefer) in Jesus Christ, was the foundation stone of the faith and practice of early Friends. It is central to my Quaker faith today. Without it Quakerism would, for me, have neither credibility nor meaning. It is scarcely less important to Christians of other traditions, since it helps to clarify some of the more difficult passages of the New Testament.

Take, for instance, the occasion on which Jesus was mocked for suggesting that he was acquainted with Abraham who had been dead for centuries. His reply was, *'Before Abraham was, I am'*. Here he was clearly speaking not as Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth, but as the timeless 'true light', of which he was the incarnation, that had been in the world since its beginning.

I believe that he was also doing so when he said *'I am the way, the truth and the life'* and added that no-one *'came to the Father'* save through him. Could that possibly have meant that all those who were unacquainted with him (almost all his contemporaries for instance) were forever denied the love of God? I don't think so for a minute. He was surely speaking as that 'inward light'. Never mind what may be their religious tradition; those who faithfully follow the light of Christ (the principle that prompts them toward love, compassion and forgiveness) are being 'brought to the Father' through him.

The incarnation of that inward light in Jesus Christ also adds strength and emphasis to his claim that *'Whatsoever (good or bad) ye do to the very least of one of these my brethren, ye do unto me'*. This doesn't just mean, as it is often explained, that what you do is as good (or as bad) as it would be if you were doing it to Jesus. It means that because every single human being is endowed with the inward light of Christ you were, quite literally, doing it to him.

That same conviction underpins the Quaker peace testimony, Quaker social and political work, and Quaker concern with penal reform. How could you kill, or plan to kill, imprison unjustly or inhumanely, or allow to remain in squalor, poverty and ignorance, those who carry within themselves that True Light – however dimmed it may have become?

The faith that I learned in that Quaker Meeting over sixty years ago, was much the same as that proclaimed by early Friends. It had mellowed with the passage of time. Over the centuries Friends had come to value tolerance and courtesy. They no longer felt the need to separate themselves from 'the world' by dress or speech. Most, perhaps a little guiltily, celebrated Christmas in one way or another. However, the centrality of Jesus Christ (*'the Presence in the Midst'*) to Quaker worship and the importance and universality of the Inward Light of Christ remained intact. Over the years, in scores of quiet Quaker Meetings for Worship, I considered (as our Queries and Advices suggest we should) the possibility that my agnosticism might be mistaken – and decided that it was. The Quaker experience of the Christian Faith became my experience too, without reservation.

I was by that time an accustomed and, I hope, entertaining public speaker. I took every opportunity that arose to expound my Quaker faith to members of other religious and secular organisations in the area. With Preparative Meeting's approval I addressed Women's Institutes, Mother's Unions, Men's fellowships, retired people's associations and church groups of almost every denomination. I didn't make any converts. I hadn't expected to. But I think that I did leave my audiences with a better understanding of my kind of Quakerism – and possibly a better understanding of their own Christian faith.

When was it that I realized that the Quaker Faith that I had been enthusiastically expounding was no longer representative of mainstream Quakerism, and that the Religious Society of Friends and I had drifted apart? I have never been the most observant of people and I suspect that it was long after it had actually happened.

My first uneasiness had occurred many years earlier, shortly after I had rediscovered my Christian/Quaker Faith. I attended a public meeting, primarily intended for enquirers at which four 'weighty' Friends answered questions from the floor. One question that was asked was, '*Do Quakers believe in a life after death?*' One of the panel replied that Quakers were so busy trying to live *this* life properly that they rarely gave much thought to the next – not, I thought, an answer that would have brought much comfort to anyone terminally ill or mourning the loss of someone they had loved. Another panel member, an Elder and a well-known public figure, would have offered even less comfort. He said very firmly that he couldn't speak for other people but that he was one Quaker who didn't believe in an afterlife.

I was, and still am, shocked by those replies. What had I expected? Perhaps; that most Quakers fervently hoped and believed that there *was* a life after death. At least one member of the panel might have remembered and quoted some of William Penn's words on death and bereavement, recorded in *Faith and Practice* (*Christian Faith and Practice* in those days of course). It is surely impossible to reconcile the loving God revealed to us in Jesus Christ with a world in which so many of our fellow men and women, each one of whom according to our '*Advices and Queries*' is '*unique, precious, a child of God*', lived lives that were brief, poverty stricken, disease-ridden and full of pain - unless this life is a purely transitory one, and there is another life beyond the grave.

It was quite a while before I noticed that in articles and letters in *The Friend*, and in Ministry in my own Meeting, there were fewer references to the Inward Light of Christ within each human soul and more to the rather more vague concept of '*that of God*' to which would sometimes be added, rather self-consciously, '*whatever we may mean by God*'. I have, on occasion, heard '*that of God*' further diluted to '*a capacity for goodness*'. Of course there is a capacity for goodness in each and every one of us. It would be a sad thing for humanity if there were not! It is hardly a thought though to bring us to Meeting for Worship week after week! There is, believe me, also a capacity for evil in all of us. It is not for nothing that we are taught to pray, '*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*'.

It was then I learned, largely from articles and correspondence in '*The Friend*' that there was a conflict between the outlook of 'Christian Friends' and 'Universalist

Friends'. This puzzled me at first because I had always imagined that we were all 'Christians' and that we were all Universalists in our belief that everybody, whatever their ethnic origin, colour or creed, was endowed with the same sacred principle, the inward light that Quakers knew to be the Light of Christ. This accounted for the fact that much of the message of many leaders of other faiths was very similar to that of Jesus.

I and, so in my innocence I had imagined, most other Quakers differed from the followers of those leaders in our conviction that Jesus Christ was not a *prophet* of that sacred principle but its embodiment. He, '*spoke with authority, and not as the scribes*', because he was in unity with the divine source of all love and all wisdom. He was different from the founders of other religious faiths not merely in degree, but in nature.

This does not give Christians greater privileges than others. It gives them greater responsibilities. They not only have the inward light prompting them towards truth, love and forgiveness, they have the teaching and example of Jesus, the incarnation of that inward light, to be their guide. We are asked to live in the imitation of Christ. At every crossroad in our lives we should ask two questions: Am I being led to treat some other person exactly as I would wish to be treated? Is the action or attitude to which I am being urged, one that would receive the blessing of Jesus as we know him from the four Gospels?

How often during the course of history have professed Christians ignored those two golden rules! Lord Byron wrote,

*'Christians have burnt each other, quite persuaded  
That all the apostles would have done as they did!'*

Christians have tortured and hanged and burnt their fellow Christians. They have enslaved their fellow men and women and have rained death - death in its most horrible forms - upon them from the sky.

Did they really imagine that they were treating others as they themselves would have liked to be treated? Did they really think that their actions would have received the blessing of Jesus of Nazareth?

Quakers as a body have perhaps rather less to repent than most. Yet would they, in the past, really have disowned their members for the sin of marrying out of the Society, or for having the misfortune of bankruptcy, had they followed those two golden rules? As individuals we all of us, try as we might, fail to live in the imitation of Christ. We all need to pray, '*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us*' and to thank God for the Christian doctrine of the forgiveness of sins.

All of this is meaningless to those who believe that Jesus was just a very gifted teacher and healer who, after just two years of activity, fell foul of the authorities and was cruelly executed. The idea of his resurrection was, they are convinced, just the wishful thinking and self-delusion of some of his followers. If that were the case does anyone imagine that Jesus would have featured, even as a footnote, in the history of the Roman Empire and of the world?

Nevertheless, I fear that that has been the direction in which the Religious Society of Friends has been drifting during the past half-century.

The years 1994 and 1995 were, I think, a watershed. Those were the years in which revised books of Christian Discipline, including *Advices and Queries* were approved by Yearly Meeting, combined in one volume and published as *Quaker Faith and Practice*,

Preparative and Monthly Meeting had been informed that major revision was to take place and invited to suggest any alterations, additions or deletions that they thought were desirable. My Preparative Meeting, as far as I can recall, suggested no amendments to *Christian Faith and Practice* and just two minor amendments to *Advices and Queries*. We felt that throughout, the pronoun *you* should be changed to *we* so that the content sounded less accusatory. At the suggestion of a woman Friend we also asked that, in the section dealing with Christian marriage, reference should be made to those who find fulfilment in a single life.

Other Meetings had clearly suggested many more and much more radical changes!

Quite apart from the title and content, the decision to publish *Church Government* with the former *Christian Faith and Practice* as a single volume was surely a highly questionable one. The latter volume had been a valuable devotional aid, and a guide to Quaker thought and faith over a period of three centuries. Browsing through it had given pleasure and spiritual sustenance to hundreds of people, Quaker and non-Quaker alike. My wife and I gave a copy as a Christmas present to our Anglican daughter-in-law, confident that it would give her pleasure, an insight into the faith of her in-laws and perhaps, a deeper understanding of her own faith.

An Anglican priest told me recently how much he appreciated his well-thumbed blue-backed volume.

I would hesitate to give the present volume as a gift to any non-Quaker friend or relative. Opening it casually they would be as likely to find details of the proper conduct of business meetings or of Quaker funerals as of food for the Spirit. Open casually near its beginning and unwary readers might find themselves confronted with pages filled with a language that they don't understand and might, or might not, recognise as being Welsh.

Are there really a substantial number of people in Wales who can't, or prefer not to, read English? If there are, ought we not to publish a Welsh language edition of the entire book rather than include a small section of it in Welsh as well as English? Being English I find the small Welsh section mildly irritating. If I were Welsh I think I would find it patronising.

I deeply regret the change of name to *Quaker Faith and Practice*. I had always felt that its former title '*Christian Faith and Practice in the experience of the Religious Society of Friends*' expressed its content and purpose precisely. Quakerism



is not a new religion but a new and exciting approach to the 2,000 year old Christian Faith. This change, and changes of the content, suggest a systematic attempt to 'de-Christianise' Quakerism.

Much of the content is obviously the same. However, some paragraphs that had stood the test of time had been deleted. There was, for instance, the statement signed by William Penn and other prominent Quakers that made it quite clear that their beliefs regarding the nature of Jesus and the purpose of his incarnation were identical with those of other mainstream Christians of their time.

New paragraphs of dubious value had been inserted. One was from an anonymous husband who claimed that when his wife had terminated her pregnancy, for no other reason than that she had always had 'an aversion to babies and the idea of maternity', he had had a spiritual experience at the time of his wife's abortion that left him with a conviction that 'all was well and his child was safe.' I am sure that I was not alone in finding that particular contribution to *Quaker Faith and Practice* extremely disquieting, not least because the compilers of the anthology had considered it appropriate for inclusion.

The process of de-Christianisation continued in the new edition of *Advices and Queries*. It would be an exaggeration to say that there is no mention in the new version of Christ or of the Christian faith. Here, in full, is *Advices and Queries* No. 2:

*Bring the whole of your life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ. Are you open to the healing power of God's love? Cherish that of God within you, so that his love may grow in you and guide you. Let your worship and your daily life enrich each other. Treasure your experience of God, however it comes to you. Remember that Christianity is not a notion but a way.*

That is pretty positive. Then there's *Advices and Queries* No.4:

*The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus. How do you interpret your faith in the light of this heritage? How does Jesus speak to you today? Are you following Jesus' example of love in action? Are you learning from his life the reality and cost of obedience to God? How does his relationship with God challenge and inspire you?*

Again quite positive, though only the first sentence is an actual affirmation, and it refers to the past rather than the present or future.

And that is it. In the other forty *Advices and Queries* there are no further mentions of Christianity and the only other mention of Christ is in *Advices and Queries* No.31 where the question is asked, *Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ?*

Compare the above with the previous edition of *Advices and Queries*, approved in 1964. This was little changed from its predecessor dating from 1921, the year of my birth. In this edition the *Advices and Queries* were not numbered, and the *Advices* were separate from the *Queries*. Here are some extracts that make clear how important Jesus Christ and the Christian Church were to British Quakers during the

first seventy-two years of my life and the first forty-five years of my Quaker membership.

From the Advices:

*The love of God draws us to him, a redemptive love shown forth by Jesus Christ in his life and on the cross. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As his disciples, we are called to live in the life and power of the Holy Spirit.*

*Live in love as Christian brethren, entering with sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other's daily lives.*

*Worship becomes sacramental as we receive the spirit of the living Christ in our midst and offer ourselves to his service.*

*Watch with Christian tenderness over the opening minds of your children. Seek to awaken in them the love of Jesus Christ and an understanding of his teaching. (I can imagine the disquiet that that would cause among some Friends today! Is it suggested that followers of other faiths do not watch their children develop with tenderness? Is it – surely not! – urging that young, developing minds should be indoctrinated with the idea that the Christian religion is in some way better than others?)*

*Make every effort to understand the Christian faith. Be ready at all times to receive fresh light from whatever quarter it may come; approach new theories with discernment. Remember our testimony that Christianity is not a notion but a way.*

*Bring the whole of your daily life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ.*

*Be faithful in maintaining our witness against all war as inconsistent with the spirit and teaching of Christ. Seek, through his power and grace, to overcome in your own hearts the emotions which lie at the root of conflict. In industrial strife, racial enmity and international tension, stand firmly by Christian principles, seeking to foster understanding between individuals, groups and nations.*

*As members of the world-wide church of Christ, try to strengthen its witness at home or abroad. The basis of Christian unity lies in a common commitment to the leadings of his spirit. While remaining faithful to our Quaker insights, seek to understand the contributions to Christian thought and action made by other branches of the church. In your own localities, seek to enter into fellowship, prayer and work with your fellow-Christians*

And from the queries:

*Do you seek to follow Jesus, who shows us the Father, and is himself the way?*

*As disciples of Jesus, what do you do to awaken in men a realization of God's kingdom? Are you, in your daily lives, obedient to his call wherever it may lead you? Do you maintain a steadfast loyalty to him as head of the church?*

*Do you watch over the children and young people in your meeting, desiring that they may grow in the knowledge of their Heavenly Father and in devotion to Jesus Christ?*

*When your life brings weariness or frustration, do you draw patience and encouragement from the way in which Jesus met these experiences?*

*Do you faithfully maintain our witness against all war as inconsistent with the spirit and teaching of Christ?*

*Do you, as members of a Society within the world-wide Christian church, try to share in the life and fellowship of the whole Christian community? Do you co-operate as fully as possible in its work, availing yourselves of local opportunities for worship and service with your fellow-Christians? Is your distinctive Quaker witness characterised by humility and a willingness to learn from others, so that differences are transcended in a common loyalty to Jesus Christ.*

I have discussed the *Advices and Queries* at some length because it is they that are by far the best indicator of current Quaker thought and Quaker attitudes. Every Local Meeting is asked to use and read them and to report regularly to Area Meeting on how this has been done. My own local Meeting asks a different Friend each month to read from them when they feel it right to do so, and to record the passages they have read. The idea is to read them all over the course of each year. I imagine that most, if not all, Meetings do the same.

They therefore become familiar to every member and regular attender, and become the generally accepted definition of Quaker attitudes, faith and practice. The quotations above surely make it clear how greatly the Quaker faith of the final decade of the twentieth century differs from that of the preceding three centuries. Jesus Christ, once central to Quaker Worship was becoming an 'optional extra' – and Quakers were less willing than before to consider themselves part of the Universal Church of Christ.

There are many other indications of this difference; the editorial content, particularly the published readers' letters, of *The Friend*, for instance, and attitudes observed in area and local meetings. In my own local Meeting I remember that we used at one time to have only two or three different translations of the Bible, perhaps two copies of 'Faith and Practice', and two copies of the separately published 'Advices and Queries' on the Meeting House table during Meeting for Worship. Fifteen, or perhaps twenty, years ago one of our elders added a copy of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*'. I thought that this was a good idea but there were objections and it was removed. Today we still haven't got a *Book of Common Prayer* but we have got a copy of the Koran and a volume of extracts from the Buddhist scriptures. The Bible is still the most widely used source of spoken ministry but quotes from Buddhist or Hindu texts are by no means uncommon.

I referred earlier to a dichotomy between Universalist and Christocentric Friends but now we have specifically non-Christian Friends (there was a report of one of their gatherings at Woodbrooke in our Area Meeting Newsletter a few months ago). Then again there are those who might not wish to describe themselves as non-

Christian Friends but who would be reluctant to say they were 'Christians'. They did not thus describe themselves in the last census. I am quite sure that had religious faith been asked for in censuses taken at any time in the first seventy-five years of the previous century, very few Friends indeed would have had any problem in entering 'Christian'.

A more recent development has been the advent of the 'non-theist' Friend. I don't know quite how a 'non-theist' differs from an 'atheist' but we learn from the columns of *The Friend*, that there are lots of them and that they are clamouring for our acceptance. God, like Jesus Christ is becoming an 'optional extra' to Quaker faith.

I can't quite understand why it is that someone who doesn't believe that there is a God, should wish to join in a worship that, described at its very lowest, is based on the conviction that there is '*that of God*' in every worshipper. I hope that it isn't because they have been told, perhaps by a well-meaning Friend eager to boost our numbers, that our Meetings for Worship are nothing to do with God but are just a kind of communal transcendental meditation. If atheists, or anyone else, wish to attend our Meetings as enquirers I am sure they should be welcomed – especially if they are prepared, as we are urged in *Advices and Queries* - '*to consider the possibility that they may be mistaken*'. I really don't see how they could possibly be welcomed as members, nor can I imagine that they would wish to be.

What of the future for the Religious Society of Friends in Britain? I can see two possibilities. The first, and the one for which I fervently hope, is that our Society will rediscover and revive its Christian roots, declare once more that '*Christ has come again to teach his people*' and once again will experience his *presence in the midst* of every Meeting for Worship. Would this result in the loss of some attenders? I doubt it, but in any case is it imagined that de-Christianisation hasn't cost us any loyal members? I believe that we would attract new attenders and new members as we proclaimed our regenerated faith.

If we regain our trust in the living Christ ever-present at our Meetings, we might even function as an ecumenical spiritual powerhouse in our local areas. Folk loyal to other Christian traditions might come to recharge their spiritual batteries within our based-on-silence worship; some perhaps as attenders over short periods, others entering into dual membership.

Unlikely? Perhaps – but with God all things are possible. Possibly, even now there may be signs of a counter-revolution. *The Friend* of 11th September carries the story of the newly formed *Kindlers* who seem determined to breathe new life into our Society, following the universal Christ who, they say, is not necessarily bound within the Christian story. He isn't - but he isn't separate from it either. If not from this group, it is from groups such as this, that our salvation may come.

*For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain;  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main*  
Arthur Hugh Clough, 'Say not the struggle naught availeth'

There is, of course, another possible future for the Religious Society of Friends that some may feel is more likely. The process of de-Christianisation will develop, as it is currently beginning to, into a process of de-Spiritualisation to accommodate the growing number of 'non-theists' who have no intention whatsoever of considering the possibility that they may be mistaken.

'Religious' will be dropped from the title of our Society (*'It is a word that carries too much baggage for many of today's enquirers'*). For similar reasons all references to Jesus Christ and Christianity, except of course in a strictly historical context, will be dropped from *Advices and Queries* and reduced, with a view to total elimination, from successive editions of *Quaker Faith and Practice*. Whether or not the word *Faith* (*'hardly 'baggage free'*) should be retained, will be subject to heated debate. The traditionalists will probably win the first round after it is been pointed out that *'faith'* does not necessarily imply *'belief'*.

By the end of the first decade of the next century (C.E. of course, by then no-one will be using A.D.) the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain will have evolved into small scattered groups of very nice, overwhelmingly white, middle class and well-educated people who believe, quite strongly, that deep down, everyone else is very nice too. They will meet once a week (when they have nothing more important to do) to sit in silence, think nice thoughts about themselves and others, and occasionally rise to express those nice thoughts. Meeting will close with a traditional hand-shake, a nice cup of decaffeinated coffee and a nice, friendly chat.

Even then, not all hope will be lost. Someone (possibly even one of those very nice New-Quakers) somewhere, may one day be lost in deep depression at the total futility and pointlessness of his or her existence, and in despair at their total loss of faith and hope for themselves, and for their world. It is possible that it will be in that moment of blackest despair that they will hear a still small voice that says, *'There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition'*, and new Religious Society of Friends will be born.

It all depends on whether or not God has further work for our Society to do.

