

## **SOCIETY OF FRIENDS OR COLLECTION OF FRIENDS?**

### **THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN GREAT BRITAIN**

“Here’s Yearly Meeting Letter for 2009. There’s nothing in it.”

[Spoken by a Meeting Clerk, tossing the letter on to the central table. She proceeded to give out other notices.]

Can the deliberations of Britain Yearly Meeting be so easily disposed of? Had this clerk incisively or intuitively discerned some truth that others have missed? What has BYM to say, at a time of ferment in UK society at large and across the planet as a whole? Does it have good news? Is there hope?

#### **The writer and the story**

I first attended a meeting of about half a dozen people – on a good day! – held in a 17<sup>th</sup> century meeting house, full of atmosphere and damp, in a small town of 20,000 in the north of England. Like many Friends I can vividly remember the first meeting for worship I went to and the content and manner of the ministry. I later became a member of a meeting of about 25, held in a Victorian meeting house in a village in the north midlands. I moved job again and as a result transferred to a meeting of about 20, this time in a town in the south west of England. This met in the deadening atmosphere of a so-called ‘community centre’. Another job change took me to a central England city which was home to a big meeting. But, after 18 years in the same south western local meeting, on arrival in this new place I chose to explore the different meetings of the surrounding area every Sunday before putting Quaker roots down again in one place. The recipe was morning meeting, a leisurely pub lunch and a long afternoon walk, allowing plenty of time for reflection after Meeting.

These moves of meeting took place over about 30 years, during which, in common with many Friends, I served as an elder and took on some of those smaller jobs that oil the wheels of any local meeting. In total I visited roughly 40 meetings, mostly in recent years, to try to broaden my spiritual horizon, deepen my experience of Quaker worship and listen to Friends’ experiences. This was happening alongside difficulties as well as joys in my personal and family life and employment. The difficulties included the sort of life experiences which are forced on many, including the illness and death of my wife and the going sour of one of the jobs I held. Finally a life-threatening illness proved to be a knock on the door in terms of testing my own spiritual experience and reserves. It was the loss of the last innocence - living as if we are immortal.

I felt immediately at home among Friends and still cannot imagine worshipping regularly with any other religious group, but along with this I felt a deep, increasing and incurable disquiet, that although the Society was full of strong minded individuals (thank God!), its collective mind, if I might so describe it, was getting progressively or even deliberately less clear and as a result, much weaker. There was no longer one voice, only divergent voices, perhaps combining in the false harmony of ambiguity. The deliberate cultivation of ambiguity is hard to defend, let alone

combine with the long Quaker tradition of plain speaking. The accidental cultivation of ambiguity should be seen as a weakness capable of resolution, 'Can do better' in school report terms!

One of Quakerism's strengths is surely the way it treats its members and attenders as adults and does not seek to feed them spiritual pap or prescribed doctrines. But it has also in more recent times given newcomers the firm impression that because there are no Quaker creeds, there is also no core of common belief or that corporate belief doesn't really matter. This is sometimes trumpeted as an achievement when it should really be seen as 'dumbing down.' That was never the case for the first 250 years or so of Quaker history. For those centuries Friends were strong individuals who chose to submit to certain disciplines and held definite beliefs and values in common, for example that Christ had indeed come to teach his people himself and that primitive Christianity had been re-discovered and should be shared with the world.

But it is not just the SoF but wider UK society that finds concepts of discipline and authority extremely difficult, especially in the realm of the spiritual. No wonder the title *Book of Discipline* was abandoned! Wider UK society also has problems in common with the SoF about commitment and membership, which have declined in political parties and many other voluntary organisations, including churches, in the last two or three decades. Secularisation in this country, so much greater than most of the rest of Europe, has left the activities and busy-ness of many religious organisations resembling the shifting of deckchairs on the *Titanic*. Secularisation, the loss of the story (whatever the foundation story is), is usually followed by the loss of the life style and associated beliefs. The UK has experienced a relentless secularisation process in the last 60 years, well chronicled by sociologists of religion, gleefully or regretfully according to their own personal beliefs. A trivial example of this is the all-year sale of hot cross buns in supermarkets, a practice roughly ten years old. In this case, the symbol becomes divorced from its associated story (the events of Good Friday) and its significance is lost. Has that somehow happened, in a more complicated way, with Friends? Have we stopped telling the spiritual narrative of the last 350 years with the result that it is lost to more recent entrants to the SoF, who see it as an accident of history? This is the lost discipline, in its older meaning of the practices associated with and intended to cultivate discipleship.

My disquiet about the loss of common direction and purpose among British Friends – linked almost certainly to this loss or abandonment of common beliefs - has led to this essay, written not to in an attempt to win a competition but to enable, even compel me to think through issues and face uncomfortable truths, not only about the Society, but about my place within it. Do I fit any more? Have we become a comfortable place that allows people to be, and no longer a movement with a common purpose? The language matters. The one, 'a place to be' is static. The other, 'a movement' is active. But 'movements' are more effective if they do not lack direction. Otherwise they dissipate energy and waste time.

One can recognise the loss of common beliefs from much evidence across the Society's activities and outreach. For instance it is succinctly reflected in the current Woodbrooke brochure, in which the blurb for one course talks about 'the tension between traditional Christian faith and emerging expressions of Quakerism'. Superficially this is a description of a real state of affairs in BYM. But several implications of this are worth comment. One is that traditional Christian faith was

never part of the Quaker view. Another implication by use of the phrase 'traditional Christian faith' is that Christianity is somehow static, unchanging, stuck. To be spiritually cool, we have to shed 'traditional Christianity', which in reality we never had, as a Society, embraced. The other part of the phrase, 'emerging expressions of Quakerism', recognises the lack of coherence, direction, leadership. They are merely 'emerging'. Are we reduced to helpless bystanders in an evolutionary process? This implies a passive centre, around which developments happen, perhaps promoted by special interest groups, but not by the main body. We shall return to this later.

My start point is a simple one, and it is that Britain Yearly Meeting has lost its way, but that putting the clock back is never an option. If I am right, we face great and unresolved issues whose complexities have not fully been identified, but there is also hope. World Quakerism is a different and even more complex matter than BYM, but falls outside the scope of our consideration here. If it seems judgmental to claim that BYM has lost its way, then I plead guilty to making judgments. But they are not of individuals or groups, but of trends and patterns, which can sometimes like an overflowing current carry individuals and groups helplessly along with them. Sometimes we can all become victim to cultural trends from which it is hard to achieve detachment and critical distance. It is easy now to see how evangelicalism influenced – one might say 'infected' - Friends in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but harder to see what might be 'infecting' UK Friends in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Except that in our national UK society, still strongly influenced by rampant individualism and consumerism despite the recent financial crises, it will always be easier for Friends to frown on excessive consumerism than on excessive individualism. Also, being open to truth from whatever quarter it may come can sometimes, regrettably, lead to the suspension of critical faculties as well. Sloppy thinking will not help us plot a course for the future. If as Quakers we should be 'patterns' there is no excuse for failing to seek more precisely what the pattern should be, to clarify our discourse and help our intention. That would help us greatly as a Society and it would help those outside, who have been set by us the daunting task of puzzling out exactly what our shrinking Society is and stands for... if they can be bothered to make the effort.

In the case studies that punctuate this discussion, everything described really happened in one or more of the meetings I attended or visited (a couple of cases are composites), but I have assigned new names to protect their anonymity. The names chosen are of real places in the UK and, for the interested, a small appendix lists where these villages may be found. But none of the real villages holds a real Quaker meeting according to the 2009 Book of Meetings and if by any chance they do, it is emphatically *not* their meeting that is described here.

Finally by way of setting the scene, I should explain that this essay did not come from a detailed plan, carefully constructed in advance and written up section by section as academic writing might. Instead I allowed it to flow from within, intensively, over several weeks including four long train journeys, at one point with an hour and a half on a balcony café at Manchester Piccadilly station with the world hurrying past as I tapped away on the laptop. At the start I did not know where or what the ending would be. It was given. Of course I honed what had emerged in this way by a mixture of critical thinking and silent waiting over time. Now it is right for others to join in.

### **Case 1, Yelling Meeting**

Many Yelling Friends felt obliged to state clearly and frequently in ministry, that they were universalists, non-theist Friends, Qagans (Quaker pagans) etc. Some Yelling Friends were heard to say that they felt biblically-based ministry, on the rare occasions when it occurred in their meeting, to be 'oppressive'. They lost no opportunity to dissociate themselves from Christianity, especially institutional Christianity. While some enquirers welcomed the freshness of this anti-Christian bias, others found it hard to fathom. Friends in the meeting who considered themselves to be Christian felt marginalized. It was hard to see what united this meeting, except that in worship sometimes silence prevailed...

### **Case 2, Soundwell Meeting**

Soundwell Friends, in contrast, were in gentle harmony. They enjoyed their peaceful Sunday mornings. They had no wish for disunity and their ministry, far from coming from the deep place, consisted mainly of pleasant thoughts that drifted like the beams of dust exposed by shafts of sunlight in the high meeting house windows in the summer months. They did not wish to offend anyone. Their pleasant thoughts were very nice, far pleasanter than unpleasant thoughts. Soundwell meeting was very restful to visit, but it was hard to see it as more than a congenial club for people who enjoyed a bit of silence on a Sunday morning...

### **Case 3, Nobottle Meeting**

Nobottle Meeting was held in a rented room. One day Nobottle Friends were surprised to receive a legacy, sufficient to buy a meeting house, enabling them to offer facilities to other like-minded user groups, to create a visible presence in the town, host Quaker weddings and funerals, along with mid-week meetings and school visits as part of RE lessons. But Nobottle Friends could not agree on this. Some Friends felt 'a stop in their mind' about the principle of owning property. Others worried that an ageing meeting might not be able to deal with the minutiae of property management. The vociferous minority opposing the acquisition of a meeting house meant that at every Business Meeting at which the issue was raised, the matter had to be left 'on the table' while the meeting slowly got older, less visible, less inclined to take financial and organisational risk. One day a recent attender asked why it was that Quaker business procedure protects the minority from being bullied by the majority but apparently not the reverse...

### **Case 4, Bedlam Meeting**

Bedlam was a big meeting by Quaker standards, in a large city centre meeting house. Eldership was devolved to the whole meeting so there are no designated individual elders. Meetings close exactly on the hour and never by a sense of 'the mind of the Meeting.' Meetings for worship are frequently full of ministry. It is not uncommon for ten or more people to speak within the hour, many of them predictably and often on unrelated subjects. When links in ministry are made, they are sometimes slightly akin to a debating society, with an occasional hint of gently correcting previous

speakers. It is hard to see how speakers are disciplined by the silence or how ministry has grown out of it, because there is so little sustained silence for it to grow out of...

### **Case 5, Wasps' Nest Area Meeting enquirers' weekend**

Ann Anglican went along to her area meeting residential enquirers' weekend with high hopes. She had been attending meeting for worship regularly and thought she was perhaps moving in her personal spiritual journey towards an identity as a 'Quanglican', like Paul Oestreicher, Terry Waite and others, holding dual membership of both groups. But at the enquirers' weekend one of the speakers made highly disparaging and, as it happened, factually incorrect remarks about the Church of England. Ann was upset by both the manner and the content of these remarks, which went unchallenged by Friends present on the panel. She did not feel confident enough, as an enquirer, to challenge them. She concluded that although as a newcomer she was already aware that not all Quakers would identify with Christianity, she had not realised that the Society had moved further and become anti-Christian.

These five cases, real cases, illustrate some of the issues facing Friends in BYM. One is the very identity of the Society. Another is the nature of our worship, including in business meetings, and our willingness to accept the real discipline of a waiting silence. Another is about what it means to live adventurously. Finally, several of these cases raise the underlying issue of who can speak authoritatively for the SoF and exactly what message the Society, via BYM, appears to have commissioned them to present.

### **Quaker Christianity, Christian Quakerism, neither?**

Is Quakerism a unique branch or version of Christianity, offering radical inclusivism in relation to other faiths and ways of life? Within the period during which it understood itself to come fully under the aegis of the world Christian umbrella, British Quakerism offered the notable emphases that

- God can and does speak direct to the still, attentive whole person, without the need for intermediaries
- There is 'that of God' in every person.

From these simple foundation values logically flowed all the rest: no priesthood or set forms of worship, absolute equality of sexes, each person acting according to the measure of the Light that is in them, the peace testimony, reaching out to the excluded in society - all subsequent Quaker social action derives from these principles. Has the case for Quaker Christianity been sufficiently made – or willingly considered? When? Or has Quaker Christianity been assumed by Friends to be identical to 'traditional Christianity' as understood by mainstream Trinitarian churches, with the Quaker way of worship as the principal difference?

Why was the Quaker contribution to Christianity not explored and extended in the period in which it was also welcomed? That of God in every sentient being - with the consequences for farming, animal husbandry, eating habits and a fuller

understanding of the nature of the spiritual life? Spirituality in animals? That of God in the living planet? So many missed opportunities. We have still hardly begun to explore these matters, yet Quakerism might have offered a very distinctive contribution that could have helped 'traditional Christianity' to move forward and influenced many people. Instead, BYM appeared to find Christianity wanting and discarded it.

Moreover, although there has been an ongoing and now rather tired debate among some members of BYM about Christianity and Quakerism for decades, there has been no agreed definition or description of the Christianity under discussion. This can only have led to considerable obfuscation and confusion in those conversations. Why, when we have 'dropped out' of the mainstream churches, do we frequently appear to have been content to accept their descriptions and prescriptions of Christianity as the basis for the debate about whether or how far Friends are a Christian body? How can we possibly discuss the positioning of the SoF in relation to Christianity without some shared understanding among ourselves of what Christianity is? Yet our long debate has happened without this. *It may be that we have had the wrong debate.* If this is so, we are unlikely to have reached the 'right' conclusions.

It is hard to deny that the Christian narrative, the Christian understanding of a loving God and the historical (first century, Jewish) Jesus, while they might be acknowledged, are certainly not being actively promoted by BYM in their representation of Quakerism to outsiders. Two Friends, Alistair Heron and Terence Copley, have already independently analysed in more detail the process by which this retreat from Christianity came about. The rate of biblical illiteracy among BYM Friends must be much higher than even one generation ago. Can it be that many Friends don't know what they are talking about in forming attitudes towards the Bible? What have been the gains and the losses resulting from this dispensing with biblical wisdom? It is a delightful quirk of Friends that when they do read a gospel (rarely), the Gospel of Thomas is deemed more attractive by many than the four biblical gospels. Apart from questions about its historicity, it is significant that the Gospel of Thomas presents what purport to be sayings of Jesus, but nothing of his life and Jewish context. BYM appears to have become detached from the life of Jesus and semi-detached from his teaching. That will impact for good or ill on every enquirer, attender and applicant for membership in their perception of the Society – and what they tell their friends.

### **A separate Quaker universalist religion?**

If BYM is gradually dissociating itself from Christianity and turning to the 'emerging expressions of Quakerism' as the Woodbrooke brochure calls them, to preserve honesty it should 'come out' in public as a tiny new religion entirely distinct from Christianity, alongside Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism etc. In this case strictly it ought to call itself BYM Quakerism, as this separate religion position would be sufficiently different from the position held by many (most?) world Friends no longer to be accurately known simply as Quakerism. The outreach edition of *The Friend* for Quaker week 2009 omits Christianity, to focus instead on 'the Quaker faith.' The Quaker faith, according to this publication, deals with silence, peace, equality and social issues, including green issues. Jesus and Christianity don't explicitly appear. The shift from *Christian Faith and Practice* to *Quaker Faith and*

*Practice* and the reduction of biblical / Christian referencing in Yearly Meeting Letters also confirm that a new religion is emerging or being deliberately promoted.

It is a fact of sociology that new religions can be born - and that old religions can die. They can embrace bits of previous religions, indeed *must* do so in order to be intelligible in their originating context. Thus, in favour of this emergent Quaker religion, one could claim that early Christianity had to embrace much of Judaism (which we have subsequently forgotten) and early Quakerism had to embrace much of Christianity (which we have also forgotten). 'BYM Quakerism' aka 'the Quaker faith' would therefore not be by any means the first religion to embrace or retain bits of other religions as part of its own identity. Sikhism has notably done this. Hinduism has persistently demonstrated a quality of finding other religions easier to cope with and integrate than those other religions can reciprocate.

There would be nothing unique about an identity as an inclusivist religion which employed and enjoyed silence. As a matter of historical fact, the Baha'i faith got there first. Its emphasis on the oneness of humankind, the harmony of religion and science, the elimination of prejudice, the importance of education, the use of the critical faculties in the exploration of religion, the equality of men and women and an optimistic view of the evolution of world civilisation – all these things and more mean that a separate Quaker religion, minus its Christian past, would find many of its emphases already catered for. Moreover Baha'i houses of worship admit of no preaching or musical instruments. There is no professional priesthood. Of course, there are also some major differences in Baha'i beliefs, moral values and practice from those of BYM.

But apart from the issue of whether any existing religion already offers what a separate Quaker religion might provide, would this separate Quaker religion, purged of its Christian element, prove sufficient to provide unity, common purpose and a shared vision to take BYM forward? Could Quaker pagans, Quaker Hindus, Quaker non-theists and the rest find common ground even in a separate religion, even with Christianity deleted? What exactly would be 'the Quaker faith'? If we decline to define it, we ought to be able at least to describe it or cite its characteristics.

### **Quakerism wrongly categorised - not a religion at all?**

Another interpretation of current Quaker outreach materials is that BYM is implicitly promoting a position of rising above religions, which are rather out of favour in current western culture, and into the delectable pic'n'mix of spirituality. Liberal Protestants have long talked in language that implies there is a sort of higher essence above specific religions and which is capable of being distilled. So Quakerism as a non-religion could be a credible position to adopt in an age in which our definition of religion suggests an un-negotiable package that tells us what to believe and how to behave and apparently offers the choices only of obedience or rejection, whereas spirituality is seen as a wonderfully DIY affair. You do as much or as little as you like, believe as much or as little as you like and no-one can upbraid you for failure! You can get up at 4 a.m. to meditate for three hours, or stay in bed all morning. It's up to you. Spirituality is wonderful plasticine, or rather like the old advert for a Playtex bra, which claimed that you can mould it in whatever direction you like to fit your personal contours. Quakerism – the individually contoured girdle?! This emphasis for Friends on spirituality could provide the antidote to Protestantism, at the hands of

which some individual Friends in their pre-Quaker days had very unhappy experiences.

Quakerism might therefore cultivate an identity as a non-religion, since it could cogently argue that religions are based on beliefs and it has none, collectively, only practices. Within the Lutheran tradition, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have already argued that Christianity was itself not a religion and was only, so to speak, wearing the clothes of religion because of the way in which it had emerged into the ancient and religious world milieu. But they were very clear about what Christianity should be proclaiming, namely that in religions humankind reaches towards God and in Christianity God reaches decisively towards humankind (Barth) or that having grown out of religion and dispensed with it, humankind can at last see Christianity as a radical call to discipleship in the footsteps of Jesus in a secular world (Bonhoeffer). A Quaker non-religion, as anticipated here, would excise core beliefs as part of the trappings of unacceptable religion, to create space for individual spirituality. In this it could find some analogy with Buddhism, many of whose adherents would not wish to see Buddhism categorised as a religion but rather as a way of life in which issues around God are not considered to be of central significance.

As a non-religion, we would therefore place ourselves on the Mind and Spirit bookshelf, somewhere between scientific research into near-death experience (the rational in religion) and *What your Crystal means for You* (the irrational). But it might be difficult to leave religion behind entirely, especially in the minds of many onlookers who might continue to place the SoF on the smaller Religion bookshelf despite our protests that we do not like what has been done in the name of religion. But then if we investigated further, we might equally dislike what has been done in the name of atheism, secular humanism and irreligion. Narrow-mindedness, intolerance, willingness to persecute opponents, distortion of the truth, each has been neither the monopoly of the religious nor the anti-religious in the course of human history. Moreover on the surface of the planet, religions demonstrate that they are alive and flourishing: potent, disturbing, life-changing forces, not always for moral good, in the lives of women and men. They show no sign of disappearing and can still re-shape individuals, nations and cultures, despite European secularism and its grip on Britain, England in particular, on which the researches of Grace Davie shed much light. The problem we have with 'religion' might have more to do with English culture than religion itself.

### **There is no necessity for a corporate Quaker identity?**

There is one more possibility, seldom canvassed in discussion about the future of the Society. This is perhaps the least palatable and it is that the Society has already allowed the replacement of individualism by *de facto* anarchy in which each Friend is left to define the Society as they will, ie in a post-modern age (if we really play this game we should go on rigorously to explore the implications of post-post-modern), the Society has no remaining collective identity, only structures and, ironically in the light of the early Friends' testimony, outward forms. BYM Quakerism wears the clothes of local meetings, area meetings, membership matters, worship on the basis of silence...but inside the clothes there is no-one there. It is the reverse of the emperor's clothes fable, for the emperor had a body, but his clothes were invisible because they were unreal. BYM has clothes, but is there any longer a body inside? In other words,

if the corpus has gone, logically there is no corporate identity for Friends. From corpus to corpse in a mere thirty years!

In this interpretation, the Religious Society of Friends exists to give me the identity I choose to project upon it. So I could be a Christian Quaker, a Qagan, a non-theist Quaker etc, because the Society is like a blank screen onto which we each project our own film. If so, the honest and open criteria for membership should be simply that the applicant wants to join and that she or he has some sort of beliefs about the universe, even if atheistic or nihilistic. The Society then becomes a collection of individuals linked only by a taste for quiet, the trophy of having engaged with issues of belief at a personal level (definitely no rewards for any particular 'answers' except that illiberalism is absolutely verboten!) and perhaps veneration for the peace testimony? What is most chilling about this possibility is that it may already have happened, largely without notice or debate. Is this really what we want? It offers little more unity than that shared by users of a library with a good section on philanthropy. Silence enables the users to access their chosen material better. British Quakerism would therefore be re-defined as a mood and no longer a movement.

### **The non-debate and our puzzling attitude to Quaker origins**

Currently we seem to be largely avoiding most of the painful, radical and necessary debate about identity. Perhaps we are confusing having an identity with having creeds. Perhaps there is the lurking fear that BYM might split or fall apart if the issue were brought into the open, but worse things than schism could actually happen, just as worse things than divorce can happen in a marriage. Perhaps there is ultra-sensitivity towards the difficulty and limitations of words in describing experience and belief, or the hope that by trying to sweep so big an issue under the carpet and into the shared silence, such matters will go away and we can concentrate on – what? What could be more important? The Society could easily fade away before the issue fades away.

While this non-debate is ongoing, instead of re-appraising Christianity, we are relegating it by default to an important, uncontroversial but essentially historical role in the formation of the Society of Friends. The argument runs something like 'of course, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Friends were conscious of their Christian identity', or the SoF 'is rooted in Christianity' (Advices and Queries 4). In other words, we still respect Christianity, but we do not especially identify with it. Yet it is really inadequate to talk about the Christian *heritage* of the Society of Friends in a country in which the word heritage has become associated with ancient history and ruins (English Heritage) and clapped-out trains on railway branch lines ('heritage rolling stock'). The current Advices and Queries 4 uses this unfortunate word in the Query 'How do you interpret your faith in the light of this heritage [Christianity]?' Moreover the use of the word heritage implies an accident of birth...Quakers just happen to have Christian origins. They might have easily been something else (what else could Friends *easily* have been?) etc.

There is also the deeper psychological issue of the extent to which we can dispose of our origins at all, as individuals, as a Religious Society of Friends or as a (UK) wider society, or whether in so disposing of our childhood we simply promote bigger and further problems than the ones we think we are solving. Those individuals who can't integrate their suppressed childhood into their adult present need at least

psychotherapeutic help. What happens if we come to regard the electric, transformative, explosive, energising, contagious and sometimes vituperative Christian spirituality of the 17<sup>th</sup> century origins of our SoF as merely 'roots', by implication suitable material for the Friends Historical Society, the archives at Woodbrooke and Friends' House Library? Methodist preachers were required to study the sermons of John Wesley. Should we be re-reading the Journal of George Fox and those of his contemporaries and requiring applicants for membership to do the same?

Moreover, the outright rejection of Christianity by some Friends must appear to others an unintentional piece of spiritual arrogance, as if Friends are expected to be open to the Truth wherever it may come from in the entire universe *except* from Christianity... and if Jesus was OK but Christians were bad, or their doctrine was bad, or Christian-sanctioned wars were Bad Things, we have to be far clearer about what exactly we are rejecting. So if Christianity can't be so easily disposed of or reduced to 'heritage', what are we to do with it without offending Friends of a different, ie non-Christian persuasion? Are the divisions between British Friends already too deep and painful to discuss, let alone to resolve?

The other issues that appeared in our five case studies – the nature and spiritual depth of worship, the quality of ministry, what it means to live adventurously spiritually – actually depend on an understanding of who we are and what we are about as a Society. The five cases address separate issues, but at another level they are all the same issue – *who are we?* The case that follows is a reminder that Friends are not alone in having a crisis caused by identity issues.

## **Case 6 Unitarian and Free Christian Churches**

In the beginning of Unitarianism in the UK, usually associated with Fox's contemporary John Biddle (1615-62), Unitarians were largely orthodox Christians who did not accept the doctrine of the Trinity and discarded imposed creeds. There was also an increasing tendency among them to stress the rational in religion – a trend that became fashionable among many 18<sup>th</sup> century British Christians. For some Unitarians the rejection of the Trinity was based simply on its not being biblical, for which a strong case can be made despite Matthew 28.19 and a sprinkling of other passages in the New Testament. So they emphasized instead the unity of God and in those 20<sup>th</sup> century days before gender consciousness began to be reflected in language, their churches were often found to have a poster outside proclaiming 'We believe in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.' It encapsulated the Unitarian stance very well and placed Jesus into a niche of which many Friends might approve, that of essentially a religious or spiritual or moral teacher. (Why have Christians and Quakers been apparently reluctant to start with him as a *Jewish* teacher?) But as time passed, Unitarians became much more universalist and individualist (the individual was encouraged to define their own beliefs) and their worship, although in buildings and a liturgy derived from Christian nonconformist chapels, became much more world religion-based. Now the consciously Christian Unitarian churches in the UK are few.

What has been the result of these trends in UK Unitarianism? The answer is simple – spectacular numerical decline. They are far outside the orbit of mainstream churches and have so far not managed to appeal to a wider outsider group. This has

not been the case in the USA and some other countries where different sociological factors have been in play and where the Unitarian move away from Christianity has been less decisive. The question this process raises for Friends is this: why don't we look scrupulously into the detail of the UK Unitarian story and see what we can learn? It is sometimes easier to examine the problems of others than to face the pain and emotional involvement of our own. The Unitarian case study appears to support this hypothesis: if individualism is unqualified and unchallenged, individuals will see no logical point in joining a group, whatever the existing or residual group attempting to appeal to them thinks it is about. Is it the fulfilment of the Counter-Reformation Roman Catholic jibe against Protestants - every Protestant becomes their own Pope?

### **Case 7 Badcall Meeting**

Badcall Friends, probably not consciously, considered themselves slightly superior to the churches. For some Badcall Friends had themselves left churches twenty or thirty years ago, not always without pain or regret, but because they could not with honesty subscribe to the required doctrines or creeds. But Badcall Friends were not aware that empirical research in the last ten or twenty years has demonstrated clearly that in most Christian denominations including Roman Catholic, whom they pitied the most as the victims of elderly male authoritarianism, the beliefs of the 'person in the pew' were shown to be frequently at variance with the creeds and official pronouncements of the church, sometimes wildly so. Many members of mainstream 'orthodox' congregations not only espouse 'unorthodox' beliefs and values, but emphatically do not allow themselves to be told what to believe by anyone, Pope or no Pope. How else could British Roman Catholicism have acquired such a low birth rate? Not by abstinence! Badcall Friends did not realise that the churches have moved on since they left them, that this opens up opportunities as well as problems for them and that an interesting dialogue between Friends and mainstream churches (perhaps not always those in their hierarchies) might now be possible.

### **Is current Quaker diversity not enough? Let's bury our head in the sand!**

It is an amazing statement of unity that Friends manage to hang together in their meetings both locally and nationally, granted the immense diversity of beliefs and values represented in so small a Society. But is this 'unity' any more than tolerance based on the common denominator of silence? Diversity is much prized. It gives us the ticket to hold our own entirely individual (Quaker) views. We have reduced diversity into a prop for unchecked individualism. Diversity is not an automatic sign of strength, unless there is a common base or framework to diversify from. Without that it is a sign of division, that the centre is empty, like the middle of the famous Polo mint. Of course the watchword 'unity without uniformity' rightly resonates with Friends – but wherein does unity lie in BYM? We can see that there is no uniformity much more easily than we can identify the unity. The SoF at present in the UK is not reflecting unity – except in the secular language increasingly being used as a common denominator between very different individuals and groups within it. In the language of confectionery this is fudge and not mint. Secular language always operates in a reductive way in relation to religious and spiritual values. This is not real diversity, from a common base, but suppressed or ignored division. The root of this division lies *not* in individualism, but in *unqualified* individualism.

Perhaps in the end Friends will be happy with this state of affairs, to be associated via a club, BYM, a sort of lounge or gym or free space for the spirit, in which each member is entirely free to do their own thing and the club per se needs neither direction nor particular energy, except that required to co-ordinate philanthropy. In this interpretation, BYM and local meetings are essentially resource provisions. That would be no mean thing, in the frantic wider society in which we live and move and have our being. But is that all? Quakerism: a space to be. Could this be interpreted in Hindu yogic terms as *tamas*, the tamasic quality, that is to say, being like a lump of stone, dull, lethargic, like the locked-up energy in a block of ice, or the energy latent in the season of winter? If this interpretation is valid, we should instead be cultivating *sattva*, the sattvic quality, that is to say the power of wisdom, harmony, balance, light, purity, with the image of a beautiful statue as the analogy and moving via *rajas* – dynamism, change, activity, heat, ‘chiselling the stone’ - to the *sattva* to which we aspire. That is the only way we can even begin to approach what Hindu wisdom would identify as the seventh chakra, the spiritual, magenta chakra, whose sound is silence.

To challenge untrammelled individualism, still more to transcend or change it without a relapse into the prison of *being told* and therefore a sort of spiritual slavery, requires a communal *raison d’ tre* and a will to move on. A *raison d’ tre* requires common beliefs, values and world view. It would require a real *Society* of Friends and not just a random *Collection* of Friends. If only we could go back to those uncomplicated days of confidently Christian Quakerism... If only we could at last leave Christianity behind and move on... This looks like the Good Old Days versus the Crock of Gold at the Rainbow’s End. There is no going back, because there is never any going back. Even successful revivals can fall apart, as Wesley’s UK Methodism has been doing for at least a hundred years.

There is no leaving behind either our essential Christian identity, as some Friends see it, or the formative childhood of our Society as it may appear to others, because no healthy person or group can abandon their childhood or identity. But nor can we hide in it, without stunting our adulthood. Neither is there a crock of gold at the rainbow’s end. But if we take the view that the journey or process matters more than the product, we have condemned ourselves in advance to not arriving, to getting nowhere that matters. It is actually the spiritually de-energising *present* of BYM which we need to leave behind. So the first necessary journey has to be inward within BYM. We have to commit ourselves to search for the place the child (Christianity) retains within the adult. When we find it, the adult will be released to go forward. Until we find it, the adult will be petrified, turned to stone, *tamas*. At present we are stuck in a morass of unquestioned assumptions and unasked questions. We might describe BYM paradoxically as *busily frozen*.

So how *can* we proceed?

### **Case 8 Healing Meeting**

Healing Friends embraced widely varying views. They recognised that there were serious problems about unity in their meeting and in BYM and decided to hold a series of discussion groups, in which the emphasis would be on shared worship rather than the exchange of strongly held views. They wanted to avoid monologues

interspersed by silence, masquerading as ‘discussion’. As a result of shared study over a period of months, there was a gradual and growing recognition that history matters. That is, Healing Friends were aware that they sat in their meeting Sunday by Sunday because of the lives of two principal people – Jesus of Nazareth and George Fox – and many other spiritual ancestors, both Quaker and pre-Quaker. Some of these ancestors were physically close – they lay just outside the meeting house in the burial ground. Healing Friends were ready to acknowledge that without these two people – and the many and often anonymous others - their meeting would simply not exist. They resolved to know them better and to tap into their spiritual energies and insights. They also recognised that this was in itself no solution to the issue of who British Friends are or should be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rather the tentative but essential beginning of a shared journey in search of a solution.

### **Enabling the future we want**

We have so far concentrated on issues in the present to be identified clearly, including the implications of adopting particular identities for BYM, as a new religion, as an alternative to religion etc, and how we should relate to the 350 years of our Society’s *life* (I deliberately do not use the word ‘past’).

We now turn to the *process of becoming* which may help BYM forward. I am couching this like the Advices and Queries in order to be concise, as well as to continue to ask questions and propose ways forward. This may also help individuals, study groups and meetings to engage with the issues.

### **1 The terms of the debate**

As you approach the potentially painful and searching discussion of your identity as BYM, do you avoid the use of negative, dismissive or hurtful language? (Spot the joke implicit here, for I have just used mildly negative language myself!).

Friends should never define themselves in negative terms (!): I am a non-theist Quaker, a non-Christian Quaker, a non-universalist Quaker etc. It is always more helpful to see what people affirm than to hear the litany of what they deny. Consider this comment: “While I could never call myself a Christian, I find the life of Jesus inspiring.” If we met this person, it would surely help us more in our own spiritual journey if they were willing to unpack the second part of what they are saying rather than the first?

Do you avoid labels and stereotyping wherever possible, remembering that many labels (Quaker, Methodist, Christian) started life as badges pinned onto groups by onlookers or enemies?

## **2 Christianity**

In considering the relationship of the Society of Friends to Christianity, do you pay careful attention to what you and those with whom you are engaging mean by Christianity? If Christianity cannot be neatly defined and contained in formulae, how would you attentively *describe* it? How far could Christians known to you, both inside and outside the SoF, recognise themselves in the description you are proposing? Where do living a Christ-like life, loving unconditionally like Jesus did, fit into your description of Christianity? What about the uncomfortable challenge of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the conviction of which certainly (historically speaking) brought into being the first Christian groups and plays a continuing central part in mainstream Christian self-understanding now, especially in the Orthodox Churches of the east (a third of the world's Christians) and their iconography? How does 'the mind of Christ', a phrase favoured by some Friends, relate to the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth?

## **3 Global warming, climate change and spirituality**

It is a truism to note that we live at a time of ferment, with global warming and climate change. Great shifts across the planet are already in progress. They will affect our whole way of life and therefore our spirituality. Their effects might include a shift away from the material; the end of individual modes of transport apart from bikes and horses; the need to work in groups to survive, so speeding the decline of western individualism; a return to localisation and a growth of community; a greater awareness of the living and damaged planet etc. In the realisation that we are part of the created world and not merely walking over it, how are we going to re-vision BYM as a Society in which individualism is transcended by something greater, wider, kinder, more inter-connected, in which individuals still flourish but no longer dominate? Otherwise the untrammelled individualism that underpins British Quaker identity in 2009 will quickly become seriously outmoded and irrelevant. It may even come to be regarded as the over-inflation of the Self, a form of idolatry. If Friends cling to it, healthier and more appropriate forms of spiritual expression are likely to develop *outside* the SoF.

## **4 Authority**

Who will speak with authority for Quakers, especially to enquirers and those outside? How will they be identified and prepared, periodically replaced and if necessary kept in check?

If, at its worst, Quaker worship offers a free pulpit for any strong-minded individual to sound off in, how will misleading or un-Quakerly ministry or ministry that has not arisen from the deep place be identified and dealt with, without the enforcement of a dull conformity? Can eldership work in the absence of a common identity?

Are we ready, in the process of seeking to discover a common Quaker identity, to seek inspiration and support from God, the Great Spirit, the Life Force, the ultimate Self, the Universal Guardian(s) or whatever other names this transcendent Reality is

known by? Do we seek communion with the divine? Are we willing to pay heed to God – to ‘submit’ to God in Islamic language – or do we submit to no person or agency, human or divine (each our own Pope...)?

## 5 Energies

Modern physics, especially quantum physics, has become involved in the question of energies, the connected universe and the primacy of consciousness over matter. Jung spoke of synchronicity many years ago. What insights can psychology and psychotherapy offer to us as a SoF?

The great religions of the world practise healing. Jesus of Nazareth was a healer. Even his opponents could not deny that he healed people but had instead to resort to impugning his authority to do it, suggesting that he used demonic powers. George Fox too was a successful healer, although the record of his work in his *Book of Miracles* was lost or even suppressed, as they were perceived to be embarrassing by some later Friends. Are we embarrassed by Jesus and / or George Fox?

In a sick world, in which formal western medicine has become restricted to a ‘cut and chop’ approach and many modern hospitals have to work like factories in order to process the numbers of people whom they are treating, Friends should become healers again. Friends need to start a dialogue with holistic healers and consider the healing process based on a total acceptance of the person. ‘Your sins are forgiven’ (Mark 2.5) might be better translated ‘your failings are forgiven.’ We all need help to address and then let go of our failings. This healing addresses a much wider area than that of ‘illness’ but it embraces many forms of dis-ease. Current healing practitioners (eg the National Federation of Spiritual Healers) are trained to expect and accept the energy of the divine as a matter of course. They do not attempt healing in their own spiritual strength or without permission from the Source. They have an implicit theology, in which the divine Source is seen as benign, energetic, positive, wanting only wholeness for humankind, immediately available to help. Are Quakers ready to do the same, first for themselves as a Society, then for individuals, groups and even nations, in a fresh understanding of the peace testimony?

Friends should explore energies. The universe is full of energies. Dowsers are exploring earth energies and energies for healing, not merely looking for water or lost coins. Shamans call on the energies of our ancestors to help us now. Are our spiritual ancestors present in our meetings for worship in our old, established meeting houses or do we assume them to be fast asleep in the burial ground outside? Can we sense their presence in the room of meeting, willing us forward, praying us closer to the divine, deeper into the silence? All religious societies are founded on energies, immense, explosive spiritual energies. The ripples from the work of the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, George Fox, John Wesley and thousands of others, are still being felt in the world. How do we tune into those energies in ourselves? How do we tune into those energies outside ourselves? How do we draw on the energies of those before us, living and dead? How do we become a people and a Society of spiritual

energy and healing in which it is recognised that even death, although it is ‘an’ end is not ‘the’ end?

In this process, how do we identify and enlist the specifically female characteristics and creative energies? What can all Quaker women – through 350 years – teach us in this exploration? Since God is without gender, how are we drawing on the properties of the Goddess?

If we aspire to be inclusive, where are the working-class Quakers? How are they to be reached? Is Quakerism happy to be a graduate-dominated Society? It was said of Jesus that ‘the ordinary people heard him gladly’ (Mark 12.37). Does ‘the person in the street’ hear us at all?

### **6 The mystery and truth of resurrection, for individuals – even societies?**

The resurrection of Jesus – or the experience of this by the first Christians - was the indisputable foundation event of what only later became known as Christianity. Sceptical explanations (he revived in the tomb, moved the stone himself, convinced his followers he had come back from the dead and then disappeared to die alone etc) are as difficult to believe in as the event itself and show more about our need to explain away the unsettling, incomplete and unknown. The incomplete Gospel of Mark records the resurrection as an awesome event, more about fear than immediate rejoicing, as well it might have been. The biblical accounts of this event or alleged event show that the risen Jesus was not, according to most appearances, recognisable immediately. He had a spirit body, even though some writers were at pains to deny he was a ghost. The earliest writer, Paul (I Corinthians 15, cAD50) is also honest enough to acknowledge that some of the many eyewitnesses doubted their experience. If we are reluctant even to consider this as an event of history (the mysterious footprint of a loving God?) what does that show about us? Bob Leaney, a professor of New Testament studies, was apt to remark that if the degree of scepticism were applied to ancient history that has been applied to the gospels, most of Julius Cæsar’s life would be called into doubt.

It has always been the experience of some bereaved people that they see their loved one again, dramatically, clearly, vividly, apparently bodily. Sometimes conversation occurs. Accounts of this cannot all be dismissed as a deep form of trauma or grief. They have common features, like those of near death or out of body experiences, cutting across religions and cultures. The appearances gradually recede. Experience reverts to memory.

Have Friends become conditioned against the importance of examining these accounts, ancient and contemporary, and the challenge they produce for our material and limited assumptions about reality, the power of Love and the nature of life and death? Like the unresolved issue of crop circles, whatever their origins, they challenge our assumptions of reality and remind us that there are immense truths, realities, universes, energies, beyond us, of which we are only barely aware. By ignoring the resurrection claims made about Jesus and the related data from human experience about possible post-death survival, what spiritual insights, potential energies and hope have BYM Friends surrendered?

## Conclusions

Dear Friends,

This essay cannot provide instant solutions to the many challenges and issues confronting BYM, for who would dare to *tell* people as indomitable and free-spirited as Friends the solution to anything? But BYM undoubtedly stands at a cross roads as it looks towards the future. BYM has a serious identity crisis because it has shed one identity – Christianity – and not found another, despite talk about the ‘Quaker faith’. Diversity is not an identity, but a remarkable quality that can arise from a group identity in which people are secure. In shedding or reducing their Christian identity, British Friends have been careless, sometimes naïve, in their assumptions about what Christianity is or is not. The assumption by some that one can ditch the last 300 years of the Society and focus forward simply from the last 30 years is both harshly and unnecessarily dismissive of Quaker lives and legacy and also harmful to Truth. Equally, the last 30 years are not to be written off as an aberration. They too are a valid part of British Quaker experience. But if the tail wags the dog, the dog becomes dizzy and disoriented.

Having no common, agreed and explicit purpose and no common programme for the religious and spiritual education of our members, leaves the Society prey to very strong-minded individuals and groups who, not necessarily deliberately or consciously, want to stamp their identity, sometimes their pain and insecurity, onto it. This can do damage in local meetings, in enquirers’ meetings, in the media and in groups like Christians Together. The vacuum of non-identity will always attract strong forces to fill it. But these are not representative voices. Moreover, those with loud voices can sometimes, however unintentionally, intimidate or bully.

Having no common, agreed and explicit identity within BYM also drains Quaker worship of that deepest sense of centredness which can arise when a meeting has a common mind of what it is about. BYM Friends do not at present even agree about who or what we are worshipping in our ‘meetings for worship’ or whether there is Anyone ‘there’ at all. In this situation what early Friends called a ‘covering’ is not likely to occur, nor is the electric sense of Presence that I experienced regularly in one united meeting of which I was fortunate to be a member. Here one sensed that the walls of the meeting house might explode outwards, so powerful and energising was the Presence in the midst. We too often settle for second or third best worship, by a collection of individuals in a sometimes silent room.

The SoF can continue to disintegrate gently and embrace its future as a clearing house to put in touch friendly and peaceable people with a powerful social conscience, mostly over the age of 40. This role as a place of refuge is not ignoble. BYM can hope that the diversity it proclaims will ipso facto work the magic of renewal. Or it can forge a new identity, not ex nihilo, but starting from the spiritual richness of its entire 350 year life, to fit it for the years ahead. There will either be gentle drift and numerical decline ahead of us or difficult choices and very painful processes, akin to the pains of labour or perhaps the bereavement pains of divorce.

But there *are* real choices. We can go on as we are, hoping that diversity at the price of subterranean disunity will cure all. We can allow the vacuum at the centre, which might eventually be occupied by a faction or fashion (a study of Quaker history reveals that this has on occasions happened in the past), in which case division and

resignations will inevitably occur. Or we can face the dilemmas I have tried to outline, together, recognising that neither a neatly packaged return to the past nor a shedding of our religious experience over 350 years as a Society in favour of tolerant but essentially discordant voices provides a solution. How difficult this will be...

But it is Quaker experience that God is always with us and ready to communicate, provided we are still enough in our whole being to hear God's voice. We should never under-estimate God or write God off. God is not an idea to be believed in or not, according to our personal choice, like phlogiston. In plain speaking we have to say that those Friends who have sacked God have missed out. Or else we have to recognise that we are not continuous with the history of our Society and its experience across the world and in different cultures and we in BYM have become something else, no longer Quaker as the world Quaker community understands the word. But whoever God is, or is not, 'I' am not God. Therefore if I espouse unqualified individualism, I forfeit that necessary humility in the presence of the Other.

God, by whatever name or narrative God is known, is a living experience, a present energy. God skips and dances nimbly around the scenery and backcloth of our lives, drawing close when invited, speaking quietly, sometimes whispering, not always being heard. The resurrection shows that like a Jack in a Box, God pops up again when we have written God's energy off in our grief, anger, disunity or despair. When we think we have defined our reality, God un-defines our definition and challenges us by love. In the presence of all that Mystery, all that Energy, all that Love, it is fitting to keep silent and wait to discover not who we once were, nor even the complexities of who we are now, but who we can be, re-energised and re-formed into a living society, with a new name, direct from the Source (Revelation 2.17).

## **Appendix**

Locations of the villages whose names I borrowed to disguise real meetings.

In cases where several villages have the same name, only one is listed here.

Badcall - Highlands

Bedlam – North Yorks

Healing - Lincs

Nobottle – Northants.

Soundwell – Gloucs.

Wasps' Nest – Lincs.

Yelling – Cambs.