

A Pearl of Great Price: The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

NB: Referencing System: Quotes are identified in brackets by author and page number or, where appropriate, chapter and verse; the works are then detailed in the bibliography.

In one of his parables, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven with “a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” (Matthew 13, 45-46). Common sense dictates not putting all your eggs in one basket, but as he often does, Jesus flies in the face of common sense. In this essay I intend to argue that our core belief, encapsulated in the interchangeable terms *Inward* or *Inner Light* and *that of God in everyone*, is the equivalent of that pearl of great price, and that we should invest everything in it, instead of squandering our resources on other, lesser concepts as some may demand.

To be a Quaker is a fine thing. We number among our past members the founder of Pennsylvania, Noble Peace Prize winners, the lady on the five pound note, and pioneers in the fields of enlightened economic enterprise, social reform and mental health care, to name but a few. In my lifetime I have been privileged to know two Friends who went to prison for their principles, one as a suffragette and the other as a conscientious objector. More recently, Friends have been involved in important peace building activities, from the abolition of the slave trade to Amnesty International and Alternatives to Violence. Most recently, the decision by Britain Yearly Meeting to recognise and celebrate committed same sex relationships has been welcomed by many, both inside and outside the Society.

Generally, twenty-first century Quakers are kind, tolerant, thoughtful and conscientious. They think globally and act locally; they recycle and consider their carbon footprint. Yet whilst they are good at identifying needs and responding in a practical way, when it comes to expressing their beliefs they are often reticent and tongue-tied. In fact they find it easier to list negatives: “We don’t have a creed. We don’t go in for bells, organs, hymns, sermons or set forms of worship. Some of us read the Bible, but we are definitely not fundamentalists. No, I wouldn’t call myself a Christian ...” When an enquirer steps into this apparent void, Friends do their best to accommodate the newcomer’s views, whatever these may be. In fact, they try to be all things to all people – and in doing so, risk diluting and dissipating their spiritual heritage.

Imagine a Sunday morning, just as meeting for worship is about to begin. The meeting house sign outside has been vandalised, and the student who staggers in with a laundry bag needs new glasses. Delighted to see a new face, the doorkeeper extends a warm welcome, but soon discovers that the young man is under the misapprehension that he has entered a launderette. Ever helpful, ever hopeful of bringing a young enquirer into the fold, the doorkeeper offers the use of the washing machine in the utility room. Laundry loaded, the student sits down with Friends in the quiet room for a nice snooze (having spent the previous evening in the Union bar, doing what students do best). And so the meeting continues peacefully, until the worshippers are seriously startled by the noisy spin cycle.

The question is: should the student have been redirected to the launderette?

Whereas the above scenario is allegorical, the following situation could really arise in any of our meetings. Mary, a lapsed Roman Catholic turned militant atheist, feels the need for some quiet time after her busy week as a social worker. She starts coming to meeting, likes the peaceful atmosphere and feels refreshed by the experience. She becomes a regular attender and, in the fullness of time, is admitted into membership. Unfortunately, Mary doesn't like it when the silence of meeting is interrupted, especially if the ministry is of the more traditional kind. One day Dot, a sweet and simple soul, rises to speak about the beautiful flowers on the table, how God designed their colourful petals, and so on and so forth. Over coffee after meeting, not quite out of earshot of Dot, Mary complains to another Friend in no uncertain terms about the use of "god-language". The other Friend is too polite to disagree, and Dot slinks off, deeply hurt and vowing never to offer ministry again.

How do we feel about this scenario? Perhaps, having sat through many instances of "daffodil ministry" ourselves, we sympathise with Mary. Maybe we are incensed at her intolerance and tactlessness. Perhaps we feel that Mary has missed the point of meeting for worship altogether and would be better off at a yoga class. It is in fact deeply worrying that such conflicts can arise in our meetings and, judging by correspondence in *The Friend*, that they are not uncommon.

Many enquirers are attracted to Friends by the very fact that we do not have a creed or set forms of words, or indeed many words at all, in our meetings for worship. This seeming absence of a religious identity would suit those who do not wish to become embroiled in religious rituals. Our true identity however is not to be found in the *absence* of such things. The reason for not having a creed is that we believe in the individual experience of God. We have no hymns or liturgy because we fear that it would be dishonest to repeat someone else's words without experiencing their meaning in our hearts. We worship in silence because we are waiting upon God, allowing the still small voice to speak to us in the gathered meeting.

It is apparent, then, that the reasons for our eschewal of religious forms are in themselves religious. However, if this is not made clear to enquirers, they might just see a Quaker meeting as a nice opportunity to rest from the hustle and bustle of their everyday lives. Before long we could be nothing more than a friendly meditation group. Even the terms "Quaker" or "Society of Friends" usually given when a religious affiliation has to be declared, afford no clue as to the nature of our faith. Some Friends have actively campaigned for the "Religious" element of our title to be dropped.

There are a number of possible reasons for these anti-religious feelings. For one thing, world events through history, from countless religious wars or the burning of heretics to suicide bombings, have turned many people off religion. "Look what is being done in the name of religion!" they will say, and, throwing the baby out with the bathwater, resolve to have nothing to do with it. Revelations about abuse, exploitation and outdated policies in religious organisations reinforce this stance. The point is that the perpetrators are *human beings* who unilaterally give religion a bad name. True belief is a two-way process: defined as Love, God surely does not ask humans to commit acts of evil.

Secondly, as a result of the development of secularism, religious experience is now often seen as a mental disorder, and indeed such experiences *can* be symptomatic of some psychiatric and neurological conditions. The poet William Blake saw angels sitting in trees: no doubt he would be offered anti-psychotic medication in this day and age, as would George Fox and most other prophets. To speak the kind of religious language they used would today cause serious embarrassment, at the very least. Ever since the triumph of the scientific spirit that followed the publication of *The Origin of Species*, some people have seen religion as being in conflict with rational thought. Now atheist missionaries of science, chiefly Richard Dawkins, deride and ridicule believers, and with some justification where obdurate fundamentalists are concerned.

Once almost everyone belonged to a religious group; today, many have a secular outlook. In stark contrast to the practices of some other, still deeply religious communities living amongst us, especially Sikhs and Muslims, many nominal Christians only turn to the Church for milestone occasions: baptism, weddings and funerals. Some people will say: "I am not religious, but I am a spiritual person", meaning that they do not want to be bound by the rules of organised religion (the word comes from *ligare*, meaning to bind), but are aware of a spiritual element within themselves - what we would call "that of God". To fill the place once taken by organised religion, many turn to alternative therapies, eastern practices such as yoga, tai chi or feng shui, or even astrology, psychics and tarot readers.

In this secular climate, it is understandable that some wish to shed the word "religious" from our title. And yet, we *are* a religious society. It would never have occurred to George Fox and the early Quakers to doubt this. In fact they once called themselves Friends or Publishers "*of Truth*", so certain were they of their cause. Our founders have handed down to us a set of core beliefs (central to which is the Inward Light) that has informed the actions of Friends through more than three centuries. If our Society were an organism, these core beliefs would be its DNA, which gives us our spiritual identity. Its expression can be found in *Advices and Queries*, in the journals and writings of Friends and in our most cherished testimonies: those relating to peace, equality and simplicity.

If we look at these writings, we find frequent and unashamed reference to the divine. What is Quakerism without the idea of "that of God in every one"? That much-loved phrase of George Fox's is only one of many instances of so-called "god-language" which permeate his writings. (This idea is not unique to Quakerism – it is found in Buddhism and Sikhism, for example, and also in paganism, where the divine element is thought to dwell in the whole natural world, not just in humans - but Friends are perhaps singular in having made "that of God" the central, guiding principle of their faith and action.) George Fox's belief in God was based on direct experience of the Trinity: "the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I know him not but by revelation, as he who hath the key did open, and as the Father of life drew me to his Son by his spirit. And then the Lord did gently lead me along, and did let me see his love, which was endless and eternal..." (Fox, *Journal* 11).

Like a prophet or apostle of old, while struggling through the inner turmoil of these revelations, George Fox set about sharing the good news with others, and convinced many. At huge gatherings in outdoor places such as Pendle Hill, Firbank Fell and Pardshaw Crag, the message he preached was that everyone could have direct experience of the love of God, without the intervention of priests or the need for sacraments such as baptism or holy communion. He told his followers: "Abiding in the faith which Christ is the author of, ye will have peace and access to God. ... Therefore ye, who know the love of God, and the law of his Spirit, and the freedom that is in Jesus Christ, stand fast in him ..." (Fox, *Journal* 17). His message reached and convinced thousands, enabling them to experience these things for themselves. It was the personal experience of the love of God which gave early Friends their tremendous joy, as expressed in the writings of Isaac Pennington or Margaret Fell, for example, and also the courage that enabled them to cope with persecution and imprisonment.

Friends were exhorted to "wait patiently upon the Lord, whatsoever condition you be in; wait in the grace and truth that comes by Jesus." (Fox, *Journal* 12). Here we have the origin of our silent meeting for worship. While a new enquirer may only experience the absence (for the most part) of words, and a certain peaceful atmosphere, what is in fact happening in a gathered meeting is much more than just silence, *and it is based on religious belief*. We become aware of ourselves, of our relatedness to others, and of our " 'oneness' with life itself" (Gorman 40). The early Friends "saw their meetings for worship as occasions when they were 'gathered in the Living God'." (Gorman 45).

This idea was still current in the 20th century, as expressed by Hugh Doncaster in the 1972 James Backhouse Lecture: "Believing that in every worshipper, regardless of age, learning, sex or any other human label, the promptings of God's spirit are at work, Friends meet together in entirely unprogrammed silent prayer, opening themselves to him. It is our experience that in such corporate worship ... we are led into a depth of communion with God and with one another that is deeply meaningful and spiritually refreshing." (Gorman 50). In 1994, Britain Yearly meeting expressed it thus: "Our shared experience of waiting for God's guidance in our meetings for worship and for church affairs, together with careful listening and gentleness of heart, forms the basis on which we can live out a life of love with and for each other and for those outside our community." (QF&P 10.03). Thus we see that the "spiritual DNA" of Quakerism which first came into being in the seventeenth century was still very much in existence some 300 years later.

In the 20th century, our core beliefs were beautifully elucidated in *A Testament of Devotion* by the American scholar and missionary Thomas Kelly. He writes movingly about the Light Within, which requires only a willingness to respond to it continually: “The ‘bright shoots of everlastingness’ can become a steady light within, if we are deadly earnest in our dedication to the Light, and are willing to pass out of first stages into maturer religious living. Only if this is possible can the light from the inner sanctuary of the soul be a workaday light for the market-place, a guide for perplexed feet, a recreator of culture-patterns for the race of men.” (Kelly 5). Thomas Kelly instructs his readers in the practice of living in the Light. “Begin now, ... to offer your whole selves, utterly and in joyful abandon, in quiet, glad surrender to Him who is within. ... Keep contact with the outer world of sense and meanings ... Walk and talk and work and laugh with your friends. But behind the scenes, keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship.” (Kelly 12).

This Light is not a prerogative of Quakers or even Christians, but belongs to all “who seriously mean to dwell in the secret place of the Most High.” (Kelly 8). Here, universalism is affirmed, as indeed George Fox meant when he spoke of walking “cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone” (Fox, *Essays* 75). The belief that there is that of God in every man (and woman, of course, and indeed some would include the entire natural world) has enabled Quakers to work on behalf of convicted criminals, to see African slaves as human beings when others regarded them purely as a commodity, and to extend practical help to the losers of two world wars while they were still widely being demonised by the rest of the world.

In today’s Society of Friends, some of us have been known to put the cart before the horse by initiating our projects and doing our good works without first having sought guidance from the Inner Light. It is rather like a plant trying to produce splendid flowers without actually having any roots. As well as giving us spiritual nourishment, the Inner Light also gives us powers of discernment, good ideas, and a positive and joyful attitude to all creation. It even shows us how to simplify and co-ordinate our social concerns: “we learn to say *No* as well as *Yes* by attending to the guidance of inner responsibility.” (Kelly 84).

Of course there was no smooth transition from George Fox to Thomas Kelly. The Religious Society of Friends moved on from the turbulent times of its origin, when religious sects were springing up like mushrooms, but only a very few survived for any length of time. There was a period of quietism and looking inward, when Friends tried to retain their identity by forbidding their members to “marry out”. (In biology, the dangers to of inbreeding to the genes are well-known: there is a parallel in “spiritual genetics”.) “Marrying out” was just one offence for which 18th century Friends could be disowned. John Stephenson Rowntree in his 1859 essay identified several instances of rigidity and wrong-headedness in the Religious Society of Friends of 18th century Britain: “the neglect of teaching, the failure to establish an effective ministry, the formulistic character of devotion, and above all, the rigorous imposition of disownment on those who married out or strayed in any way from the orthodox path.” (Paz 91). Largely in response to this young man’s inspired essay, the Quaker Manchester Conference of 1895 led to much more liberal practices, as well as to the publication of learned works on Quakerism (notably by Rufus Jones) and the establishment of educational facilities for the training of our lay ministers.

It was good for our spiritual genes when our Society became more open and outward looking. However, we may now have gone too far the other way. In many meetings, Friends whose beliefs correspond to those of the early Quakers are now in the minority. Our spiritual DNA is at risk of mutating into something else altogether. Worse, (and a mixing of the metaphors may be inevitable here), we are in danger of becoming a house divided against itself. If we decide to return to our religious roots, we must consider how to guard against squandering our heritage. If we expend some of our spiritual capital on every bauble that comes along in the form of ideologies and trends, there will be nothing left for the pearl of great price.

The literature we send out to enquirers, our posters and press releases should display our religious credentials and reflect our spiritual heritage. There are such eloquent statements of faith to be found in our collected writings, from William Penn: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion." (QF&P 19:28), to John Woolman: "as mine eye was to the great Father of Mercies, humbly desiring to learn what his will was concerning me, I was made quiet and content." (QF&P 27.02), and countless other well-loved sayings of Friends who lived their beliefs, through the ages. Our publicity materials should leave no one in any doubt that we are a *religious* Society. They should, of course not only consist of venerable Quaker quotes, but also be written with clarity and flair by contemporary Quaker writers. In fact, it could be the main purpose of the home service department at Friends House to produce and disseminate publicity materials that promote our core beliefs. They could become, as it were, the Vestal Virgins of Euston Road, guarding the sacred hearth of the Inner Light.

Of course we must not turn away any attender who may be drawn to us for whatever reason. At the point of applying for membership, however, there should perhaps be a more rigorous process than is currently in use. At present, after applying for membership, the attender is visited. "The visit should be a sensitive exchange of thought between seekers; it should provide an opportunity for, and result in, mutual understanding and enrichment. It also serves to provide clear information to help in making the final membership decision. It should not, however, be undertaken in a spirit of examination." (QF&P 11.13). Fair enough, a Spanish Inquisition is not required. But how often is an applicant accepted "warts and all", possibly in order to swell membership numbers? Actual rejections of applicants must be very rare.

Also, it is a bit late at the visiting stage to provide "clear information". A copy of QF&P is usually presented when the applicant is welcomed into membership – maybe it should be given *well before* the visit, with an urgent recommendation that it should be read. I would go so far as to suggest, rather than merely informing the applicants in due course that they have been accepted, a welcoming ceremony should be established in which the new member, in the company of his or her local meeting, solemnly accepts the new role and affirms that he or she will uphold the core beliefs of Friends and do nothing to damage these. Just as our wedding promises, to be faithful and loving to our partners with divine assistance, are morally rather than legally binding, such a ceremony would at the very least remind all present what Friends are all about, and at best give the new members a very real sense of their role and responsibility in the community.

To recapitulate, I am not advocating excluding any seekers from our meetings or making them subscribe to a formal creed. But those wishing to be members should be aware of, and in agreement with, Friends' core beliefs (neatly summarised, for example, in our *Advices and Queries*) and undertake, at the very least, not to undermine them. We should encourage independent thought, but we must not make a 180 degree turn from our original beliefs to a totally negative, anti-faith position.

Today there appears to be far more emphasis on the financial responsibilities of the new member than on the matters discussed above. (In the index of QF&P under "Responsibilities" there are 4 references under "financial", but only two "to God.") Of course financial contributions have to be made, and our trasurers usually handle these matters with the utmost flexibility, discretion and consideration. Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel it a sign of the times we live in that a disproportionate amount of time is spent in meetings for church affairs on matters financial.

A huge amount of corporate time and money is spent on our premises. Any Quaker community with a meeting house will know this: there may be a premises committee which takes up some of the burden, but the community still has to make decisions on repairs, cleaning, gardening, lettings, energy efficiency, facilities for the disabled, whether to employ a warden and so on. And all this costs money, apart from lettings, which are supposed to bring in money. And so in giving time, energy and money to these matters, we are allowing ourselves to be tied firmly to the ground when our spirits could, and should, be soaring outside of our narrow perimeter.

Remember that the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. Most of us are lucky enough to have a home where to lay our heads – do we also need a "second home", solely or mainly as a venue for our worship once a week or so? You may protest that your meeting house is regularly let during the week to many worthwhile groups, providing a service to the wider community, and that is all to the good. Every situation is different, and meetings must make their own decisions. Some meeting houses are very old and venerable and it would be difficult to sell them or alter their use. I would just like to plant the thought in Friends' heads that it is not necessary to own a meeting house. Some meetings are so small in number that they could easily meet in each other's homes, like the early Christians. Alternatively there are rooms to be rented cheaply in, for example, senior citizens' clubs, schools or other organisations that do not open at weekends. Apart from the other considerations, think of the carbon footprint savings to be made by not maintaining a special building.

Some Quaker buildings should of course be maintained if at all possible, including a number of historic meeting houses. They may be listed, or changing their use would not be practical. The debate as to whether we can afford to keep Friends House has been raging for a while. It certainly is a useful place to have in London, and so close to the railway station! On the other hand, Friends living in remote parts of the country, especially the far north, might prefer to relocate our administrative hub to a more central location. It has even been suggested to use Woodbrooke for this purpose. (Another Quaker place in London, the excellent Quaker International Centre, has fallen victim to the costliness of its location.)

Woodbrooke is an example of a place we should hold on to. It was eventually established as a Quaker college resulting from the 1895 Manchester Conference, to deal with the perceived lack of adult education in the Society. At first, summer schools were held on a large scale, to encourage Friends to become familiar with modern Biblical scholarship, with the claims of science (Darwin and all that) and with their own Quakerism. In 1903 a permanent "settlement" for religious and social study was established in Birmingham at the former home of George and Elizabeth Cadbury. Initially a private venture, the settlement was to be open to persons of either sex and any age, for training in Quaker ministry and teaching, and for general studies to raise the level of interest of the whole Society. Over the years, Woodbrooke underwent various transitions, from being a residential, international college to its present use mainly as a centre for short courses. With its pleasant buildings, excellent library and peaceful grounds, it is indeed, as John Wilhelm Rowntree (a relative of the young essayist) had proposed, "a place where the dusty traveller, stepping aside for a moment from the thronged highway, shall find refreshment and repose." (Davis 17).

In most of our meeting houses or venues, we have hearing loops and other facilities for the disabled. I would suggest that we should embrace other new technologies, too, to facilitate participation in our meetings. How about using video conferencing or web-cam technology to enable those who are unable to attend, such as housebound Friends or carers, to join in worship? Internet meetings for worship already exist, but what I am proposing would enable the members of a particular meeting to join in worship with their own community in this way. While on the subject of computer technology, I think this should be used much more to replace the mountains of paper that often overwhelm the clerks of local meetings.

Our meetings for church affairs, or business meetings, constitute another precious part of our heritage. Collectively seeking the will of God instead of debating and putting the matter to a vote is quite a unique decision-making process. From my time of service as PM clerk, I know that the practice does not always live up to the theory. Personalities can clash, some Friends can be overbearing, while others are too shy to be heard. But with good will and the use of silent worship periods, decisions are reached which reflect more than just consensus. Living in the Light extends from the personal to the communal.

The church affairs of local meetings might be better served if Britain Yearly Meeting were decentralised. Instead of policies coming from central committees at Friends House, we could revert to something like Quarterly Meetings, where the minutes from preparative and monthly meetings used to be dealt with. The area covered by Britain Yearly Meeting could be divided into regional General Meetings with autonomy to deal with matters and concerns arising from local and area meetings. Such a "devolved" system would make the work of local meetings more relevant to their locality, and increase their motivation to involve themselves in their community.

If we are to be true to our testimony of equality, we should address our attitudes to ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and unemployment. It is a fact that most British Friends today are middle aged, middle class, middle income, and if not retired, are probably working in education or other caring professions. Correspondence in *The Friend* has revealed that attenders from ethnic minorities have sometimes felt unwelcome, and have been the victims of unwitting, low-key racism. This may be partly due to a generation gap, whereby older Friends are not aware of politically correct terminology. Similarly, unemployed Quakers have been upset by being asked, upon meeting a Friend, “And what do you do?” as if they were defined by their work or lack of it. We must all be more vigilant, and willing to seek that of God in others, rather than try to fit them into a mould of our choosing.

Having considered some “housekeeping” matters such as membership, premises and organisation, we should now look at Quaker work in the wider world. Like our personal and communal lives, this work should be generated and sustained by the Inward Light, rather than being informed by calculated decisions, forward planning and balance sheets. Then “a life of amazing, victorious faith-living sets in. Not with rattle and clatter of hammers, not with strained eyebrows and tense muscles but in peace and power and confidence we work upon such apparently hopeless tasks as the elimination of war from society, and set out toward world-brotherhood and interracial fraternity in a world where all the calculated chances of success are very meagre.” (Kelly 78). This does not mean that all rational and co-ordinated behaviour goes out of the window: “There is a unity and coherence and rational continuity in the out-cropping guidances of Spirit-led men.” (Kelly 79).

Historically, we know what amazing results Quaker work can bring. For example, the feeding programme (*Quakerspeisung*) Friends undertook in Germany after World War I so impressed the then unknown Adolf Hitler that when he came to power, he tacitly exempted Quakers from persecution (unlike the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who were also war-resisters). Under guidance from the Spirit Friends have fearlessly expressed their principles of truth, equality, simplicity and peace before monarchs and magistrates, in prisons and in palaces. Always practical and to the point, Quaker-led initiatives have saved many lives – for instance through the *Kindertransport* which rescued many Jewish children from the Holocaust, because there were British families willing to sponsor them.

Such noble efforts, based on Friends’ concerns, should of course continue, but we should guard against duplicating work that is already being done by other agencies. In the charity sector, there are already far too many organisations, all competing for funds and employing expensive directors; it would be much more efficient if they would band together more. Again this is a matter of guarding against too much diversification, not trying to be all things to all people. It might be better to concentrate our efforts at this time on a few areas of social concern, and leave other matters like famine relief to large, experienced agencies like Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Red Cross. It is not for me to prescribe which areas of social concern should be Friends’ priorities, but my personal choice would be the “4 Ps”: Prison, Peace, Poverty and the Planet.

Prison reform has been a traditional area for Quaker concern, partly because early Friends spent so much time as prisoners of conscience, partly because the belief in that of God in everyone prompted Friends to treat prisoners with more sympathy than the rest of society. The efforts for reform by Elizabeth Fry and John Howard are well known, and some present-day Friends still work in criminal justice. The Circles project, originating with Canadian Mennonites but taken up by British Quakers, works intensively with sex offenders and has, I understand, been entirely successful to date. The Alternatives to Violence training programme helps prisoners as well as pupils to control their behaviour. Restorative Justice is an excellent project which benefits the victim as well as the offender, and leads them forward rather than into a downward spiral. There is still much to do in this field, as the Howard League for Penal Reform points out. In most cases prison is not the right place for young people, women with children, people with mental health problems and many others. Alternatives to prison should be a greater priority, but unfortunately we live in a punitive society

Peace work is another traditional Quaker speciality. In each era “cometh the hour, cometh the Friend”, so to speak: whether it is witness through conscientious objection, the Friends Ambulance Unit, reconciliation work, the Quaker presence in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, the Campaign Against the Arms Trade, direct action such as Trident Ploughshares – the list of Quaker initiatives is endless and laudable. The accompanying projects, where Friends and others show solidarity and protect vulnerable civilians in conflict areas through their presence, are an outstanding example of contemporary peacemaking.

Personally I would like to see some of our creative talent (The Leaveners and other theatre groups, for instance) being used to counteract the military propaganda that tries to get people to enlist in the armed forces. The folk and protest songs of the 60s and 70s, by artists such as Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger and our Friend Joan Baez, inspired a generation. For instance, the lyrics of the anti-war song performed at Woodstock by Country Joe & The Fish are only too topical 40 years later (substitute *Afghanistan* in the appropriate place):

“Now come on mothers throughout the land, pack your boys off to Vietnam
Come fathers don’t hesitate, send your sons off before it’s too late.
Be the first one on your block, to have your boy come home in a box.”
(Lyrics - Internet source)

The American documentary maker Michael Moore has shown that during the Iraq wars, most of the recruitment for the armed forces took place in the worst economically deprived areas of the United States. The same applies in Britain, where recruitment adverts are targeted at the young unemployed, with promises of skills training and health care. Therefore, if we wish to counteract the pull the military exerts on the poorer sections of society, we much also address the underlying poverty and deprivation through political and social action.

As Shipley N Brayshaw said in 1933: “Unemployment is in truth an astonishing evil ... poverty caused by enforced idleness, and in the presence of plenty, is so glaring an

injustice that no man should accept it tamely.” (QF&P 23.69). What is more, as we have seen over the last century, unemployment is a seed-bed for racism and social discord in our communities. Friends are already working to bring about social justice: from the ever-vigilant Joseph Rowntree Trust, researching and publishing the causes of poverty, to the campaigning work of the Child Poverty Action Group (which is non-denominational but was founded by Friends); from Quaker Social Housing projects to the Open Christmas and the library van that provides books for the homeless people of the capital. But more can be done to try and “make poverty history”.

In the 21st century we must also develop a deep concern for our planet, which is at a very vulnerable stage, thanks largely to human greed and carelessness. With prescience, John Woolman was aware of this in 1772: “The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.” (QF&P 25.01). Woolman may well have been influenced by his contacts with native Americans, and today we would all be wise to look to indigenous peoples who don’t regard the earth as something that can be possessed. Yet the majority of “civilised” humankind has exploited, used and abused the planet until its land, seas and the very air around it are almost hopelessly depleted and polluted.

Now, reaping the storm, we are facing global warming and all manner of catastrophe. As individuals, many Friends are setting an example by simplifying their lives, by adopting green alternatives to polluting practices and so forth, but we in the developed world could all go much further in this respect. Within our Society are scientists who could disseminate information and help to develop greener means of energy production, for example. Again we need to seek guidance from the Light. “For the experience of an inflooding, all-enfolding Love, which is at the center of Divine Presence, is of a Love which *embraces all creation*, not just our little, petty selves.” (Kelly 80). “The Infinite Love is the ground of all creatures, the source of their existence, and also knows a tender concern for each, and guides those who are sensitive to this tender care into a mutually supporting Blessed Fraternity.” (Kelly 83). Therefore we should work for the good of the planet *as a whole*, not just thinking in terms of the greenhouse effect, or the shortage of fossil fuels, or whether nuclear power is preferable to wind turbines.

We can do this by looking at our own lives and changing things as necessary for the good of the planet, whether it be by insulating our homes and saving energy there, by modifying our means of transport, or by consuming locally grown and seasonal food. We should “be patterns, be examples” (Fox, Essays, 75), influencing others and those in positions of power. “Speaking Truth to Power” has never been easier or more versatile. It was Philip Noël-Baker who insisted that letter-writing makes a difference, and as those of us who have written letters for Amnesty or other causes can testify, this does sometimes bring results. But today there are so many alternative methods too, from non-violent direct action to on-line petitions. One can even buy a few shares in a company, let’s say an energy provider, and then use shareholder privileges to influence their policies. All things are possible, and there is no need for despondence.

In conclusion I would like to relate some accounts of the immensely comforting and uplifting power of what Thomas Kelly calls the Invading Love, especially *in extremis*. The first concerns John Wilhelm Rowntree: "as he left a great physician's office, where he had just been told that his advancing blindness could not be stayed, he stood by some railings for a few moments to collect himself when he 'suddenly felt the love of God wrap him about as though a visible presence enfolded him and a joy filled him such as he had never known before.'" (Kelly 70).

The second is a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran resistance leader against the Nazi regime, even as he was awaiting a brutal execution.

"Wondrously surrounded by friendly powers
That quietly and faithfully protect and comfort us, ...
We confidently await whatever may befall.
God is with us in the evening and in the morning
And every new day, of this we can be sure."

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer Website; transl. Annette White)

The third account comes from John McCarthy, the former Beirut hostage, who, as he says, "had never had any great faith, despite a Church of England upbringing." Nevertheless, while in captivity, "drowning in hopelessness and helplessness", he called to God for help. "The next instant I was standing up, surrounded by a warm bright light. I was dancing, full of joy. In the space of a minute, despair had vanished, replaced by boundless optimism." (McCarthy & Morrell 66). It is interesting that these accounts from different persons and different times use the same vocabulary: they speak of joy, and of being wrapped or surrounded by love. No doubt one could find many other accounts of such experiences.

In this essay, I hope to have given a reasonable account of our core beliefs, their historical background and their importance for the future of the Religious Society of Friends. Some ideas have been put forward about priorities and possible procedures which may help to keep the focus more firmly on that pearl of great price. The suggestions I have made for the direction the Society might take, based on constant reference to the Inward Light, are just that, suggestions. "For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him." (Isaac Penington, QF&P 27.13).

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