

The Future of The Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

By Dorothy Searle.



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The imminent demise of The Religious Society of Friends in Britain has frequently been predicted over recent decades. Fortunately, these predictions have proved to be about as accurate as my local weather forecast; since the expected heavy rain always turns out to be no more than a bit of drizzle. But we do need to be concerned, our numbers are definitely falling and we cannot ignore that fact since, otherwise, there will come a point where there is just too little energy left for Quakers to have any useful effect on the world in general. Numbers of Quakers have fluctuated over the centuries, and no doubt will continue to do so, but hindsight can help us to learn from our predecessors' successes and failures.

The time when Quakers were at their most conspicuous, both numerically and as a proportion of the British population, was in the late seventeenth century. This is not surprising, since George Fox was a charismatic person with something to say to people who were ready to hear it – the right person, in right place, at right time. That was a time when recent memories of civil war made the idea of peace popular and very rigid class distinction, with its meaningless rituals and marked differences in dress, made simplicity and equality a welcome novelty. At the same time, religion was fashionable and many new sects sprang up. All of them were looking for new ways of finding Truth, and Quakers offered a way of seeking which did not need the mediation of priests, the use of particular buildings or the unquestioning acceptance of Scripture. Not surprisingly, such radical ideas frightened the authorities - both civil and religious – and Quakers were persecuted. However, the very fact of persecution seems to have encouraged people to join. There was a notion that Quakers were different, set apart from those who simply did as they were told without question. Unfortunately, this idea of being set apart is probably why the laudable ideas of plain dress, plain speech and plain manners began to be taken to excess, only to become as restricting as the rules that Quakers had previously challenged.

Early in the eighteenth century, when it became apparent that there was no realistic hope of the whole world becoming Quaker, the initial enthusiasm waned. Numbers fell dramatically and those left, feeling themselves to be a 'precious remnant', concentrated on the things that marked them out as being different. The plain dress, already restricted to a tiny colour range in spite of Margaret Fox's comments¹, became a uniform. The arrangement of a shawl and the colour of an apron became of major importance². It was the custom in the eighteenth century for London fashion houses to send dolls, dressed with meticulous detail, to people living in the provinces, so that they could keep up to date with the current fashions. Quakers also followed this idea in order to show scattered communities what the correct form of dress was. Some of these dolls still exist³, and it is interesting to note the expensive cloth and labour-intensive styles of dress-making they exhibit. It would appear that the concept of uniformity was considered rather more important than that of simplicity. But even nit-picking details of conformity had far less effect on the numbers of Quakers than the practice of disowning those who married outside the Society. Strangely enough, eighteenth century Quakers were open to new ideas and discoveries in science, seeing new knowledge as new revelations of Truth; but, otherwise, they kept themselves to themselves in a closely defined (and confined) society.

Early in the nineteenth century, Quakers began to see that changes were occurring in mainstream British Christianity. The Methodists had recently brought a vibrant and down-to-earth system of worship to ordinary people, challenging the laxness of some of the clergy as Quakers had done more than a century before. An evangelical zeal gripped Christianity in general, and Quakers began to follow on. In America, there was actually a split between those Quakers who embraced this new idea wholeheartedly - with its missionary work, clearly defined worship and pastors - and those who wanted to keep the traditional silence, leave 'convincement' to God, and maintain the idea of the priesthood of all believers. In Britain, there was compromise; Quakers moved a little towards the conventional Christians, but kept their own traditions. These traditions included the integrity which grows from searching for Truth, and Quaker businesses became trusted and found that they thrived – some of them doing so well that their owners could (and did) become very practical philanthropists. The tradition of Quakers opening businesses was largely the result of the combination of good education (which had always been seen as essential) and the fact that, at that time, anyone who wanted to enter a profession had to take an oath – something most Quakers are still not prepared to do, since it implies a double standard of truth-telling. However, numbers were still falling. Few Quakers were 'convinced', nearly all were born into Quaker families. But, as the century progressed, Quakers began to become more involved in society in general and more open to new ideas. Plain dress and plain speech became optional, those who married out were no longer disowned and art and music ceased to be seen as worthless distractions. The catalyst for much of this change was the 1859 essay competition, which this essay commemorates; and the door to a new age was probably opened by the 1895 Manchester Conference⁴, at which 'establishment' ideas were challenged by a younger generation. Quakers were coming out of their tightly restricted environment and accepting the world as it was rather than as they thought it should be. There was still no great effort to look for new Quakers, although the family stability of the time kept children within the Society. But it was definitely a new start, and in a new direction.

In the twentieth century, the gradual broadening of beliefs and minds continued and Quakers, at last able to do so, began to find their way into the professions, especially the 'caring' professions. Two world wars highlighted the need for ways of life that promote peace, and some conscientious objectors became aware of Quakers and joined. Friends House came into being, bringing with it the opportunity for increased central organisation and making the concept of 'Quaker Work' more practical. The rapid increase in the pace of life was very marked in Quakers, many of whom saw helping to improve the world as their constant duty. This led to increasing busyness – sometimes at the expense of doing things properly, or leading to large committees consisting of people who were all too busy to attend meetings. There was still a definite policy of not proselytising. The frequently repeated idea was: 'They will find us.'; but few actually did. One huge and accelerating change was that, of those who did join Quakers, many either had no Christian background or were trying to escape from the one they did have. This led to a sometimes uneasy relationship between those who put Christianity at the centre of their Quakerism and those who did not; with each group seeming to be afraid of the other.

The twenty-first century has only just begun. The difficulties between the Christocentrics (those whose belief is centred in Christianity) and the Universalists (those who see God in all religions, and elsewhere) have been joined by those between the Theists (which, presumably, are an amalgamation of Christocentrics and Universalists) and the Non-

Theists. Quakers put great importance on individual spiritual experience, and are well aware that this leads to a huge variety of belief, but there is great anxiety about what seems to be a more and more uneasy relationship with the tenets of mainstream Christianity. Many attempts are made to stay in touch with the churches, most of which are far less accepting of diversity than we are, but often at the cost of using language which implies that all Quakers are Christians. The problem is clearly there and is much too big to be swept under the carpet. So far, only one major change which clearly shows our independence is apparent. Recently, we have taken the dramatic step of finally deciding definitely that we wish to welcome those in same-sex committed partnerships as full equals to those who are married in the conventional sense – and to treat them as ‘ordinary’. We have embarked on the ambitious process of seeking changes in the law that will allow them to marry in a ceremony which is both Quaker and legal. While, for Quakers, that is a logical final step on a path which we have been following for years, some other faith groups and many of the general public were completely taken by surprise. They are as shocked by our decision as many were in the seventeenth century when they learned that Quakers relied on their own experience of God rather than accepting the authority of the Church or the fixed, literal truth of the Bible.

My Great Aunt Hilda used to say: ‘If things don’t change, they’ll remain as they are.’ The apparently unassailable logic of this statement falls down immediately when the idea of ‘remaining’ is put into its real context. We live in a world where everything around us is changing all the time; nothing ever stays the same. This means that the environment in which we exist moves on in a way that we do not control and will, in practice, sideline anything unable or unwilling to adapt itself to changing circumstances. No doubt the ‘precious remnant’ of the eighteenth century would have disappeared completely if it had not begun, in the nineteenth century, to look outwards at the changing world and to accept that trying to maintain so sterile a way of thinking and so exclusive a life-style could not possibly benefit them or the rest of Humanity. Perhaps they had re-discovered William Penn’s words: ‘True godliness don’t turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it...’⁵.

Quakers have changed in many ways over the last 350 years, and can change again. There is a favourite Quaker saying, a partial quotation from George Fox: ‘Walk cheerfully over the world, answering That of God in every man’⁶. To me, it means: ‘Travel through life with a positive attitude, taking time to search out and respond to that part of everyone that comes from outside the material world’. However, George Fox meant something rather different. A translation of the seventeenth century language, taking into account its context and what George Fox said on other occasions, might well be: ‘Trample courageously on the things of this world, questioning everyone about how well they are nurturing the things of God and admonishing them when shortcomings are found’. We no longer assume that we know what spiritual path or relationship with God is right for every individual, and these changes in meaning show an enormous shift in our attitude to people and in our concept of duty to others. The world has changed and so have we. We have already lost our censorious attitude to those who wish to dress as individuals or to enjoy things that are not thought of as strictly religious. We still believe that every part of life is sacred - that nothing is separated off as secular - but I suspect that George Fox would not have taken kindly to our modern, much more inclusive and less controlling, attitude.

However, we must avoid change for change's sake. Many Quaker institutions have stood the test of time and it would be unwise to lose them without good reason. Modern life is so fast that there is a risk that we may not take enough time to consider all the implication of what we are doing. In the everyday world, it is often much better to adapt and refurbish a sound old building – carefully and with much thought, so that its new form does fulfil its new purpose and can adapt as that purpose changes – than to pull it down and rebuild within modern planning restrictions and constraints on cost. It is fortunate that Winchester Cathedral is not a new project; there would be no chance of getting planning permission for it nowadays!

Frequently, we hear reports that most British people recognise the existence of their own spiritual lives and would like to deepen them. However, few want to join an existing organised religion; they do not want to be told what to believe, to find themselves bound by a fixed set of rules, or to be required to recite a creed which does not quite reflect their personal experience. Quakers offer exactly what they seem to be seeking – so why are we not overwhelmed by enquirers? Recent scandals about bankers' greed and MPs' unreasonable claims for expenses have excited moral indignation, and we insist on integrity. Modern electronic communications enable us to reach many, especially the young, easily and cheaply. This should be the right time for the number of Quakers to grow dramatically, but newcomers are few. Either we are failing to make ourselves known in the right places or there are other things about us which are not so attractive. I suspect it is mainly the former – and we must find new ways of making our presence felt, ways which will appeal to the young, not just to the bus-pass generation. However, we need to get our own house in order too, ready to welcome them when they do arrive. We must be clear ourselves about who we really are and what we have to offer. We may have become complacent, and perhaps we are failing to notice the obvious problems that could be discouraging potential new Quakers.

We have become very tolerant, perhaps too tolerant, so that what we stand for is not always clear. It could be said that the Quaker path has become so broad that it has lost its edges and is disappearing into the mud. There often seems to be far more emphasis on ethics and Quaker work than on the spiritual life that supports them. But that is not necessarily what Quakers in general want. Local Meetings were asked recently to set priorities for central work, so that a 'Framework for Action' for use in the immediate future could be established. The exercise caused some surprisingly vehement reactions. The use of a questionnaire was seen as far too much like looking for a majority opinion. The most common top priority stated was that of nurturing the spiritual life of our Meetings, and the role of central work was seen as supporting, rather than managing, Quaker projects. However, *The Friend* recently carried an advert for a journalist and described itself as 'bringing news and views from a Quaker perspective', with no mention of a spiritual dimension. Could it be that Friends' House and *The Friend* are drifting away from Quakers in general?

There will always be a tension between being and doing, but there must be a stable point of balance between them. Some individuals can only 'be' and some can only 'do', but most of us can manage at least a bit of both. Modern communications mean that we are all only too well aware of the plight of the world. It is obvious that there is simply far more that needs to be done than our small numbers could possibly accomplish. We must neither let ourselves become overwhelmed by the enormity of what is needed nor try to do far too much

- and fail to do anything well enough to be useful. We have to be selective and assume that others will do what we cannot. Frequently, the right progression has been from the 'Concern' of an individual who feels impelled to take up a particular cause personally to a group which starts a new movement which gradually matures until it can stand alone and carry out its tasks without its original Quaker label. We have to know when to let go, and then perhaps turn our attention to something else that needs us. But 'doing' effectively needs strength and tenacity. We also need to 'be' so that we can refresh ourselves with wholesome spiritual food on a regular basis, and we need to know where to find enough of that food. Meeting for Worship is the obvious place to look first; but that represents only a small part of our lives, we need to listen to the inspiration that we find there at other times too.

I believe that our first priority must be to put God back at the centre of Quakerism. That is actually to do it, not to discuss the possibilities, worry about diversity and come up with a fudge of politically-correct words. However, that immediately raises the enormous question: 'What is God?'. I should be amazed if any Quaker thought of God as an old man with a long beard sitting up in the clouds, making detailed notes of everything we do wrong and punishing entire communities with natural disasters. But, beyond that, the concept is diverse and sometimes nebulous, and the word is surrounded by connotations which have accrued from many sources and may well be off-putting. To me, 'God' is a convenient word to sum up something which is too big to define. What I believe in is a Reality which, while dwelling beyond Space and Time, underlies and pervades our material world. That Reality is beyond our total comprehension and beyond literal language. Archaeological discoveries and studies of many centuries of literature seem to show that every civilisation has been aware of the Reality and has devised its own metaphorical language to communicate what it found and its own traditions and rituals to fix it in people's minds. While each of us can see a little of the Reality (not necessarily the same bit as anyone else), as with any talent, some people are better at it than others. Over millennia, individuals with exceptional insight have been inspired to communicate what they have seen. Occasionally, the time and circumstances have been right, and then what might have been a temporary cult has developed into a movement and finally into a religion. But what that inspired person saw is still only part of what is there, and no one religion can contain the whole of the Reality. God and religion are not the same thing; just as a clock makes apparent one aspect of Time, one religion displays only a part of God. What matters is not which of the many types of metaphorical language we use but the Reality beyond that language. With the Native American, who did not understand English but listened to John Woolman's preaching, 'I love to hear where the words come from'.

For me, the best metaphor for the Reality is 'Truth'; but I realise that others would prefer 'Love', 'Power', 'Energy' or a variety of other concepts. However, since I cannot picture 'Truth' I often use 'Light' instead; then I can visualise unambiguous clarity, pure beauty, a place which draws me to it and something I can concentrate on. I suspect that religions which use icons or statues do so for the same reason. There is certainly no need to exclude the Non-Theists from my conception of God, since it does not necessarily require God to be in the form a person - or indeed to take any particular form. The form God takes for me, at this time, is that which communicates best with me - and sometimes that is as a person, and sometimes it is not. As far as I have been able to ascertain, Non-Theists understand the word 'God' as being a symbol either of the best of human values or of the ultimate good. At least with the second, there is no suggestion that they reject any of the

ideas I am trying to express; they simply keep their feet on the ground and see everything as natural, not supernatural – surely they are just using another set of metaphors. And, in practice, where Reality is concerned, can there be a distinction between natural and supernatural?

Truth, with a capital 'T', is simply there, not something which is said or done; it is recognised, but it is not possessed or controlled. Currently, some Quakers are distressed by the use of Christian language, and others are distressed when its use is questioned. This makes no sense. We should all use the language that expresses what we want to say and should all try to understand the words others use. We must not equate choice of language with rigid beliefs - new things can be said with old language and tired things with trendy words.

At one point early in our history, Quakers called themselves 'Friends of the Truth'. Have we lost that vision? To me, 'Truth' is 'That which is' - something which we must search out without preconceptions and use as the background for all our decisions and ideas. I am very sad when 'Truth' is replaced by 'Integrity' since, while integrity is a very important and noble human quality, it is a way of living in harmony with Truth, not Truth itself. Truth is far bigger than that, in fact I often have to remind myself that Truth is far too big to be confined to those who agree with me.

We claim to welcome diversity among Quakers, but that does not seem to extend to whether or not Quakers should be Christians – there are many extreme views (in both directions) stated on this subject. Quakers began within Christianity (albeit an eccentric version of it) but many modern Quakers had little or no previous connection with it, and are not looking for such a connection now. Why should Quakerism not stand alone nowadays, rather than putting itself in any other context? There is no reason why the idea of dual membership should not include Christian Quaker along with Buddhist Quaker and any other combination. That way, both those whose path to the Reality follows the Christian route and those whose path is different could follow their own leadings without fear of causing conflict or being criticised. Then, we could all contribute to the richness of Quakerism itself without detracting from it by fruitless argument. We are all relying on our personal experience and, since we all have different experiences, we are going to find that we have varying knowledge and beliefs. We must stop bickering about words and labels.

Our Testimony has been expressed for a long time in the four words: 'Truth', 'Simplicity', 'Equality' and 'Peace', but we seem to be downgrading them nowadays. Apart from the tendency to replace 'Truth' by 'Integrity', 'Simplicity' often refers only to plain living - omitting simplicity of mind, the childlike clear-sightedness without prejudices and preconceptions that Jesus referred to when he said: 'I tell you, whoever does not accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it'⁷. 'Equality' is very much in our minds, but we must be careful to be consistent, not to favour the under-dog we see at present to the extent that we create a new one somewhere else. 'Peace' is too often seen as a synonym for 'Pacifism' and the companion (probably more useful, and certainly more generally acceptable) concept of working to 'take away the causes of war'⁸ is given less prominence. There have been stories of Attenders deciding not to apply for Membership because 'Peace' has been interpreted to them solely as 'Pacifism' and represented as an essential belief for

Membership, even though other parts of the Testimony are given the status of ideals to be strived for.

I think we need a new spiritual structure, one that can provide sufficient space for every approach to the Reality. The idea of a 'framework' is very fashionable at the moment, in Quaker circles and in the world in general. I have a tendency to visual analogies and I see us providing such a framework, one that will create a huge, welcoming space around the Light – a space where all can contemplate the Light and immerse themselves in it as it flows outwards.

As Quakers, we already have the materials we could use to make such a framework. Over the centuries, we have already developed the concept of Right Ordering; we know how to divide essential work between Elders, Overseers and Clerks so that everything gets done; we have our Book of Discipline, which we are not too proud to allow each generation to update; we state our Testimony in words which are brief but full of meaning; and, above all, we expect to be Spirit-led. These are things we should cherish. My limited (and admittedly second-hand) experience of Meetings who have combined the functions of Elders and Overseers – rather than just ensuring that the two groups communicate effectively with each other – is that the Elders' work simply does not get done.

The big change, which would cause distress initially for some, is that we should no longer be trying to fit into a Christian mould. Instead we should be wider than any formal religion that has yet existed. We should still be ourselves, but should also be making space for people of all religions and none. Anyone with a sense of the Spiritual can relate directly to what I call the Reality - while respecting and listening to the wisdom of others (past and present) and using whatever traditions and symbols are helpful. The current difficulties with what language we should use can be overcome if we remember that all spiritual language has to be metaphorical – there are no exact words in such a context. Allowing others the freedom to be themselves does not need to threaten us as individuals; we have that freedom too. Yes, we definitely need to stop bickering about labels and see them as labels, not substance. As William Penn said: 'The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here makes them strangers. This world is a form; our bodies are forms; and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit.'⁹

Jesus and his contemporary followers were Jews, but modern Christians recognise themselves as being different from Jews. That Link was broken very early on; first century Christians made a definite decision that those who were not born Jews did not need to go through Jewish ritual in order to follow Jesus¹⁰. Many Quakers still value and use Christian thought and belief and keep them at the centre of their own spiritual lives, and there is no reason for them to feel pressured into changing – their personal experience is what they must follow. But, as a Religious Society, we should no longer have to try to find forms of words – words which frequently bend the truth - that allow us to fit in with main-stream Christianity. Obviously, it is still essential that we should co-operate with Christian churches

and maintain friendly relations with them, but we should not have to compromise our own integrity in order to do so.

I realise than some will experience much pain when considering the idea of growing beyond Christianity and placing Quakerism, effectively, above it. It is not something which can be rushed; time and Spiritual guidance are essential. However, I do believe that such a process is necessary if The Religious Society of Friends is to have, and deserve, a future. We have just taken a decision which many had previously felt should be resisted. But, when Spirit-led, Quakers can do amazing things. I believe that an apparently minor fact was the spark which ignited the Sense of Britain Yearly Meeting this year. After years of discussion and concern, Yearly Meeting leapt forward to reach the conclusion that committed same-sex partnerships should be viewed as identical to marriage. That spark was realising that those already in such partnerships wanted to be considered 'ordinary' - and that takes the whole idea out of the abstract and gives it an unmistakeably Human face.

What catalyst do we need to galvanise Quakers into, if not striding, at least stepping reasonably confidently, up to the challenges of this new century? What is holding us back? Is it fear of the unknown, fear of losing what we hold precious?

Could we start by remembering that we have plenty to offer to the world in general? That is, we have plenty to offer as long as we are totally clear in our own minds what it is. We can offer a way of finding the Spirit without all the baggage that usually goes with organised religion; we can offer a supporting framework without making it a cage. We can offer newcomers freedom to be themselves in Spiritual matters, with room to grow at their own pace and in their own way. We can offer a platform for putting faith into action. Many people value silence in this noisy world, even if do they assume that a few minutes is enough. But human beings are adaptable, and they will soon realise that given time, silence will deepen into the stillness which allows us all to listen intently to what is beyond the material. And, above all, we can offer a safe place to take a leap into the Unknown.

We must remember that our habit of silent listening to the Reality, in our Meetings for Worship and at other times too, does enable us to hear things which are inspiring; and that sometimes everything falls into place and the way forward becomes clear. There is no need to worry that our personal faith will be harmed by putting it into a new frame; new glass might make the picture more clearly visible, rather than less so. Quakers never do anything in a hurry, and we can use that fact to ensure that every step we take is in the right direction – and re-align the next one if it is not. We are accustomed to the idea of living adventurously,¹¹ and here is an opportunity to do just that.

Do we need anything else as a catalyst? We know that our numbers are falling in spite of the fact that we have much to offer the world. We know that we have difficulties that we could deal with if we faced up to them. And we want our Society to continue. What else do we need?

So let us go forward cheerfully, in both senses of that word, positively and courageously.

Notes.

¹ 'We must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them, nor wear them: but we must be all in one dress and one colour: this is a silly poor Gospel.'

Abridged from Margaret Fox, 1700, Quoted in Quaker Faith and Practice, 1994 (QF&P) 20.31.

² 'Notes on Quaker Costume' by Margaret Bodley.

³ Illustrations 41 and 42 in 'English Dolls, Effigies & Puppets' by Alice K. Early, Batsford 1955.

⁴ 'Manchester Conference of the Society of Friends – 1895. Headley Brothers, 1896.

⁵ 'No Cross, no crown', 2nd edition, part 1, chapter 5, section 12 by William Penn, 1682. Quoted in QF&P 23.03.

⁶ End of 'Exhortation to Friends in the ministry' by George Fox, from Launceston Prison, 1656. Quoted in QF&P following 1.02.

⁷ New English Bible (NEB): Mark, chapter 10, verse 15.

⁸ A variation on George Fox's Journal, ed J L Nickalls, 1952, p65 (entry for 1651). Quoted in QFP 24.01.

⁹ 'Some fruits of solitude', William Penn, 1693, maxims 519 and 507, Quoted in QF&P 19.28.

¹⁰ NEB: Acts, chapter 15.

¹¹ QF&P 1.27

Glossary.

Book of Discipline: The publication (Currently 'Quaker Faith and Practice') which lists Quaker ways of doing things and contains useful and inspiring examples of individual writings.

Britain Yearly Meeting: The highest administrative level of British Quakers.

Bus-pass: A card enabling persons of 60 and over to travel free on off-peak buses.

Clerk: The person (appointed for a limited time) who is responsible for administration and the conduct of business meetings.

Convincement: Being sure that one has to be a Quaker.

Elder: Someone (appointed for a limited time) who is one of a team responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of a meeting as a whole, for providing opportunities for individual spiritual development and for seeing that everything is done in Right Ordering.

Friends' House: the building in London which is used as a Quaker 'headquarters'.

Local Meeting: The lowest administrative level of British Quakers and that at which most Meetings for Worship are held.

Meeting: Either a coming together for a purpose or the equivalent of a church congregation.

Meeting for Worship: The Quaker equivalent of a church service.

Overseer: Someone (appointed for a limited time) who is part of the team responsible for the pastoral care of individuals.

Quaker: The usual name for a member of the Religious Society of Friends or for an established attender at Meetings for Worship.

Right Ordering: Quakers ethos; the way Quakers expect things to be done.

Sense of the Meeting: The collective decision, reached by listening to God, that the Meeting has made.

Testimony: A statement of Quaker values.

The Friend: A weekly Quaker publication.