

Quakerism today

Any statement about Quakers today is inevitably to some extent an interpretation of the Society's history. It must also be a response to the kind of concerns or even anxieties that have been voiced over recent years about the future of the society. This paper will aim to address these two issues in reverse order and from those considerations to offer some personal thoughts on the future. I will argue that Quakerism was at its inception a product of a historical moment, when a voice of challenge to political and religious authority could be heard, and that perhaps we have reached a parallel moment of crisis when that voice is again needed.

What Friends have been saying:

I was only fortunate enough to 'find' Friends in the 1990s. That is my positive gloss on the time it took me to get here. All the time that I have been an attender and then a member of the Society of Friends, it seems that there has been a sense of Friends questioning what they and their society are about. I have grown into Friends with the self-conscious language of 'in-reach' and 'out-reach'. In browsing through my meeting's library I sense that the debates that led to the currency of these terms run like a thread through the pamphlets and lectures of a decade or more. Alastair Heron's survey and commentary on membership encapsulated a concern about falling membership in the Society, cautioning Friends on the need to improve our in-reach to attenders.ⁱ

In his earlier study, *Our Quaker Identity*, Heron expressed concern about a 'secular trend' in the Society,ⁱⁱ about Quakers changing from a Society of Friends to a Friendly Society (p.47) and conversely about a need to improve the 'spiritual health' of our meetings (p.44). Looking back to other Quaker writing in which he detected a similar message he quoted from essay written in 1980 by Joan Fitch. Heron's emphasis from his reading of her section on 'The Contemporary scene' is on her comment that there seems to be a dearth of expression of what Quakers find in their encounter with God in worship. This supports his view that our chief failing is in the realms of the spiritual life.

However, he does also include another quotation from the same text, a section entitled 'The Quakers: present'. The italics here are my own choice of emphasis in this paragraph:

How do I see the Society of Friends here and now? I see us as a small body: quiet, sober, respected, ageing, middle-class, compassionate, incorruptible, usually liberal *but rarely radical*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Philip Rack also wrote a response to the misgivings being expressed about the

changes happening in the Society of Friends. His study, *Quakerism in the 21st Century*, concludes with a set of questions about the direction Friends might be going in. One possibility, he says, is to 'carry on strolling down the little lane that is Quakerism' which he gently suggests may offer us an enjoyable, quiet path. But his final thoughts are more unsettling:

Or shall we stop worrying about what we believe, or what anyone else in or outside the Society believes? Should we simply conclude that navel-gazing and *angst* will not get us anywhere?^{iv}

As I embark on another few thousand words of 'navel-gazing', I hope to show that in response to Rack's last question: 'Is it enough to concentrate on what Quakers have always been best at, which is getting down to it and doing things?' I would give a qualified 'Yes'.

Revisiting our history:

In looking back on Quaker history I would not presume to offer a reinterpretation as such. What I would like to do here is to set the birth of Quakerism into its historical context as I understand it, as that is how it makes most sense to me personally.

The 17th century was a time when a republic was born in England. However imperfect, it provided a space for people to speak out: Diggers and Levellers, and then Quakers. The Quakers came last and their movement lasted, a fact I would like to explore a little in context.

The philosophy of the Diggers has been described by Reay as a form of 'pro-agrarian communism', which they briefly practised in their famous stand over the issue of common land at St George's Hill.^v Their convictions as expressed by Gerrard Winstanley have found a special place in the history of political thought. Winstanley's writings speak out about the nature of government and law, always rooted in Christian beliefs. 'Government,' he says, 'is a wise and free ordering of the Earth and of the Manners of Mankind by observation of particular Laws and Rules, so that the inhabitants may live peaceably in plenty and freedom in the Land where they are born and bred.'^{vi} Of government he notes: 'There is a twofold Government: a Kingly Government and a Commonwealth's Government'.

Kingly Government governs the Earth by that cheating art of buying and selling, and thereby becomes a man of contention, his hand is against every man, and every man's hand against him...' (p.191)

The laws are there to support this power: they are the King's laws (p.231). The alternative, as he sees it, is the Commonwealth's government whose aim is to provide

freedom for the free enjoyment of the Earth for all (p.192).

Reay records that the Levellers were referred to as purveyors of 'Practical Christianity', taking 'action against oppression in its various forms' (p.14). They insisted that government must be founded on the continuing consent of all citizens^{vii} and they were the spokesmen of manhood suffrage in the Putney debates of 1647 (p.51). At least one prominent Leveller, John Lilburne, later turned to Quakerism^{viii}.

George Fox and his followers first and foremost challenged the authority of the Church, calling for people to read the Bible for themselves. Fox insisted that there they would find no evidence to support the structure of the Church and of kingly power but clear evidence that the people were called to love God above all else and to love each other equally. Before God there are no differences between people. They called for the disestablishment of the state church and spoke out against the law as the tool of the nobility and gentry to keep the poor in bondage^{ix}. In doing so they were connecting with the egalitarian philosophies of other contemporary groups, notably Diggers and Levellers. Reay has noted that early Quakerism was 'very much a creature of its age, part of the radicalism and enthusiasm of the revolutionary years' (p.32).

The first Quakers read the Bible and came together for meetings for worship, sitting quietly until moved by the spirit. George Fox's journals provide evidence that their leaders also spoke to large gatherings of people at length, though comparatively little of what they said remains for us to read. Quakers were imprisoned for lack of respect for and obedience to laws they considered unjust. They did not try to draw a line setting some subjects or actions apart as being 'political' but accepted that their concerns must be the whole of life and particularly the systems on which power and privilege were based.

It has been suggested that perhaps the return of the monarchy was hastened by the success of the Quaker movement; that the upper and middle classes were afraid for their own positions in the face of a movement so fired by ideas of equality that they saw the return of the king as the only protection of their privilege.

Within a few years, and after the momentous events on the political scene, the Quaker movement also changed. Reay identifies what he sees as the moment when the Quaker movement backed down from its radical egalitarianism. He illustrates this from the *Apology* of Robert Barclay (1678): 'Let not any judge, that from our opinions . . . any necessity of Levelling will follow, or that all Men must have things in Common. . .'^x

The testimonies remained, evolving in response to society and applied it seems to the parts but not to the whole and not to the system. Quakerism stepped aside and

demands for equality were left to the working class to voice on their own behalf, while Quakerism slowly became quite respectable, and its life as a Society focused on its spiritual path.

What remains of early Quakerism is a tension between being in the world, and seeking the depth of the spirit, a tension, it seems to me, that is reflected in the writings of most religious movements and creeds. So today, not surprisingly, when Friends ask the pertinent question as to why the society's membership is falling, why it is losing members or not replacing members, many have responded by considering that the answer lies solely in a deficit in its spiritual life.

Yet what people see from outside are the fruits of the spirit – often good work which attracts new members. But others who have joined ask, 'But what are Quakers doing about the system, the whole culture of our society?' There is certainly a problem out there. Many in our country today feel lost and bewildered. The politicians who were believed to be able to lead them have failed and the parliamentary system which validated their role has been discredited. There is a vacuum of leadership. We have to ask which voices will be heard and fill the vacuum, knowing from history the dangers of such a situation. At the same time perhaps we can see from our own history the work that is to be done. Are we ready to take up the task again?

Reay, writing about the transformation of Quakerism in the 17th century commented: 'The Quaker dictate "let your lives speak" could betoken withdrawal, quiet separation from the world; but it could also sound forth in more militant, clarion terms. The latter predominated in the 1850s.'^{xi} What will be our response today?

What to do?

Firstly, I would suggest, the Society of Friends as a whole need to make the effort to understand the world we live in thoroughly – and that is no easy task. I do not believe that holding in the light the society in which they lived could be undertaken by early Quakers without that deep engagement with the issues of their time. That is my perception of what was happening in the time of George Fox. Today again we need then to bring our deeper understanding of the world's problems into the light in our shared worship, as is Quaker practice with all concerns we have engaged with in our history. To put this in Christian terms, the question then is 'What does Jesus life and teaching ask of us when we hold this whole world of ours in the Light?'

What is it that we need to be more fully engage with in relation to our society today? Many Quakers are active in peace and justice movements nationally, locally and internationally, are very knowledgeable in these areas and disseminate their knowledge so that it could be said the Society of Friends as a whole is well-informed on many such issues.

What we have seemed to draw back from is engaging with roots of inequality in our country and in the world. For instance, George Fox openly criticised the power of the king, within a social context where such comments undoubtedly aligned him with the views of Diggers and Levellers. Today 70% of the land in the UK is owned by 1% of the population. This maintains an elite group immune to financial vicissitudes of life and permanently a privileged class. Do we see this as needing to be challenged?

World-wide those with inherited privilege and wealth are prominent among the group who sit on boards of corporations and finance houses. To protect their interests the system of international economic institutions was put in place and has continued to grow in power, undermining national governments, who the majority of ordinary citizens still naively believe to be acting solely in their interests. The reality is that at the World Trade Organisation where trade rules are set and contested, national governments speak on behalf of the corporations. No-one is there to represent the interests of the people. The purpose of the WTO has been shown to be to remove barriers to trade whether they be the welfare of people or attempts to protect the environment. Ultimately the philosophy which is in charge can only be characterised as one of greed. The legal structure we have given to the corporation or business organisation ensures this, since their sole obligation is to maximise the profits for their investors.

The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank continue to enforce adherence to neo-liberal policies of the Washington consensus which, again naively, the people of this country thought they had thrown out when they voted out the last conservative administration in 1997. The Agreement of Trade in Services (GATS) rumbles along with its rounds of talks to privatise services world-wide, and the majority of the population in the UK have never heard of GATS, which might explain why they are not queuing up to demand that their politicians tell them which services are to be privatised in the next round of negotiations, negotiations which thus clearly by their secrecy perpetuate division in society, and which by the nature of delivery of services through companies who expect a return on their investment will further reduce the services available to the poorest in our society and the world at large. It is not a secret that all the evidence points to the work of these organisations having resulted in more poverty and greater inequality world-wide.

If Quakerism as a Religious Society is faltering is it because we do not appear to receive a response when we bring this state of the world into the Light, or if we do, do not speak out for others to hear, as George Fox did?

I suspect this is partly because Fox himself carried the message forward in the 1650s. He later initiated and others developed after him a structure which, while providing support for Meetings to survive across the country and indeed across the world,

ensured that Quakers are not readily provided with a 'voice' to speak out to challenge root and branch a system that will ensure that inequality increases, and which is killing our planet.

What is to be done? If we are a 'silent' group of people today, we might begin by trying to understand our own history: to find out how this came about; to analyse the historical changes over almost four centuries. I don't think the planet or those starving minute by minute in our unequal world can wait for that.

What is to be done? Does it matter now what happened after Fox's death? - whether Quakers then were right or wrong to engage with society as reformers, to lessen their challenge to the system in the interests of having influence on the subjects they addressed? What matters is today and the future that we can help to influence. Perhaps our three centuries of relative quietness were, in fact, a passage through which the Society needed to go, a price to be paid for the degree of respectability which fits us for our role today, giving us the opportunity to speak and be heard.

What is to be done? Making ourselves well-informed on the state of the world and its systems of power might be step one, and much is happening in the Society of Friends today. Then we need to be able to respond to the promptings of the spirit as we hold this world in the Light, inspired by George Fox's courage. We need the courage to ask the question of ourselves: 'What are we going to do about it?'

What has all this got to do with the problem with which I began: the falling numbers of Friends in membership? I think it probably has quite a bit to do with it. I am aware of people who began to attend meetings, drawn to the silence of the Meeting for Worship, but also not a little influenced in their decision to explore Quakers by the perception that Quakers act on their beliefs, having seen Quakers in peace organisations and justice groups, living their faith, or read of high moments of active Quakers in the past. What these newcomers might expect, I think, is that they will find Quakers talking about and addressing together the ills of our time, and providing deeper insights into what is wrong in practical terms with our world but also ready for action. In our country when people are feeling lost, distrustful of politicians and not knowing where to turn for guidance and information they can trust, as well as spiritually under attack from an all-embracing consumerism, do newcomers find a Society calling them to act out the insights of their faith?

What is to be done? I would like to belong to a religious movement that can stand firm in love and responsibility for our fellow human beings and the earth on which our lives depend, as Jesus taught us; collectively willing to stand up and speak out on behalf of all human beings – those whose lives are corrupted, polluted or endangered by the system, whether they are perceived to be exploiters or exploited. This will involve the difficult task of acknowledging that my own security now may be built

on others' suffering, that my silence could be seen as acquiescence in the status quo, and that speaking out can be a 'lonely' undertaking.

My optimism about the future of our world as well as my own thinking about responsibility has been greatly influenced by my reading, initially almost two decades ago, of the writing of the French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. His ideas are becoming more widely known and, as they so wonderfully bridge the differences between religions getting to our common root, I find this a cause for great optimism. Levinas as a philosopher sets out to show that ethics has to be 'first philosophy', that the question of grasping the nature of our ethical being comes before all other philosophical questions about life. He argues that to perceive and accept an unending responsibility for 'the other' is the base and essence of our ethical being. He expresses this as a vision of a moment before words, when the 'I' encounters an 'other' and in the face of the other recognises human need. Responding to the presence of the face of the other, the 'I' accepts responsibility for the 'other' without compulsion and without obligation. He also talks of the 'nudity' of the other, or of the face in this encounter as being 'emptied of all "social role"'^{xiii} and my response as always insufficient, always in deficit.^{xiii} It is a transcendental moment. Noting a closeness in his thinking here to the message of Matthew 25, Levinas adds: 'In my relation to the other I hear the word of God'.^{xiv}

Levinas was asked in an interview what it meant to him for a religion such as Judaism to suggest to its followers that they are 'chosen'. His answer is challenging:

Chosenness does not privilege; it has only a moral meaning. The moral man is the one in a group who does the thing that has to be done. In so doing he is chosen. The prophet who demands justice is chosen not by others: he is chosen because he was the first to hear the call. (p. 163)

On the other hand, to know you have the choice to take responsibility, to be aware of the need and not to accept responsibility is for Levinas, the greatest failing (p.155).

When I first began to attend a Quaker Meeting I was unnerved by my first encounter with the title of our national business meeting. The name 'Meeting for Sufferings' was embarrassingly antiquated. I learned more and was not so surprised when the modernising programme did not remove that name. I respected the preservation of a strong link to our Quaker history. Now I would suggest it may be time for a rethink. If we recognise the world as I have described it and continue with a quiet business as normal then how can we pretend that the name Meeting For Sufferings means anything to us at all. I think the retention of the name has been a strong spiritual insight. Today it is a sign post from the past to our future, reminding us to ask why that happened, reminding us to recall the nature of the threat Quakers posed to the establishment that led to their persecution; calling us to wake up to the reality of our

world, to reach down in to the spiritual roots for our strength as a movement and then once again to find our voice.

To return to Rack's question, 'Is it enough to concentrate on what Quakers have always been best at, which is getting down to it and doing things?' my answer is 'Yes' if this means a return to how George Fox did things. My vision for our Society is of a religious movement that encourages its members to gain more understanding of the systems of power in our world today, to deepen our spiritual lives and to bring these together in action that challenges power and works for change. The planet and its poor can't wait. Can we prove ourselves ready?

Word Count: 3780

- i Alastair Heron, (2000) *On Being A Quaker. Membership: past – present – future*. Curlew Productions: Kelso, Scotland, p.66.
- ii Alastair Heron (1999) *Our Quaker Identity: Religious society – or friendly society?* Curlew Productions: Kelso, Scotland, p.40.
- iii Joan Fitch, (1980) *The Present Tense*, p.21, quoted in Heron (1999) p.15.
- iv Philip Rack (2002) *Quakerism in the 21st Century*. William Sessions Ltd: York, pp. 47-8.
- v Barry Reay (1985) *Quakers and the English Revolution*. Temple Smith: London, p.14.
- vi Lewis H. Berens (1906/2007) *The Digger Movement in the Days of the Commonwealth*. Lightning Source: Milton Keynes, p.191.
- vii David Wootton, ed. (1986) *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England*. Penguin: Harmondsworth, p.57.
- viii Reay, p.20
- ix Reay, p.39.
- x Quoted Reay, p.110.
- xi Reay, p.45.
- xii Jill Robbins, ed. (2001) *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, p.114.
- xiii Emmanuel Levinas () *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*. Martinis Nijhoff: The Hague, p.74.
- xiv Robbins, p.171.

