

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain
- towards spiritual renewal

It is one of the great paradoxes of Quakerism today that it does not have wider appeal. In an age of individualism, it might be thought that we were particularly well-positioned to attract those who thought for themselves and had rejected outmoded dogma and tenets. Why, when the Religious Society of Friends appears so closely in line with the spirit of the age, are our numbers instead steadily shrinking? Why, given the spiritual curiosity and hunger so evident in contemporary British society, does Quakerism not strike a more resonant chord?

For here is a movement which, over three and a half centuries, has consistently been at the forefront of social thinking. From its earliest days it opposed warfare and capital punishment, and later was a major factor in the abolition of slavery and in prison reform. The Quaker testimonies to peace, truth, simplicity and equality find many echoes in present-day society and political life: the growing unease about and mass demonstrations against warfare as a solution; the emphasis on transparency, accountability and integrity in public and commercial affairs; the recognition that our lifestyles must be simplified if we are not to wreck the planet; and the care shown by society for the weak and dispossessed. Quakerism established the equality of women from the outset – something which remains a major issue for many religious bodies.

Indeed, it may be argued that Quakerism has consistently anticipated significant shifts in social attitudes, exerting an influence far beyond its size. The whole way in which warfare is now conducted reflects all sorts of fundamental Quaker beliefs about the equality of all human beings and their essential divinity. The Geneva conventions, rules of engagement and position on torture all reflect fundamental Quaker positions. While we may not be able to claim direct credit for the way in which Western society has come increasingly to question the wisdom of resort to force and violence to settle political disputes, the consistent stand taken by Quakers against warfare and their refusal to serve in the First and Second World Wars have been significant factors in creating a change in attitudes that would have been inconceivable a hundred or so years ago when the British Empire was at its peak.

Quakerism has, in short, consistently been attuned to the spirit of the age, anticipating the way in which society was evolving. Indeed, it could be said that if we want to know where society might be heading in the next 20 or 30 years, we should simply take a careful look at Quakerism – such as the emphasis on our personal responsibility for the environment, our concern for asylum-seekers and now unequivocal support for same-sex marriages.

On top of that, the Religious Society of Friends has also been at the forefront theologically. Where orthodox and especially fundamentalist Christian denominations have floundered in the face of Darwinism and modern science, the lack of dogma means that Quakerism has been able to take all this in its stride. Quakerism is closely in tune with and open to scientific enquiry and discoveries. The lack of a credal basis means that

it has not been shaken by modern Biblical scholarship and the totally different way in which many of us now look at Jesus and the Bible.

And indeed we have attracted “refugees” from other churches and faiths who, with the great reduction in birthright Quakers, are a highly significant part of the Society. But the “Honest to God” revolution of the past forty years has not seen people flocking to the Religious Society of Friends as one might have expected.

Why should this be so? If we look at what has dominated our attention in recent years, we find that our energies have been taken up on the one hand by a massive exercise in reorganisation (Recast) and a consultation process to decide where our priorities should lie (the Framework for Action).

Top of the priorities identified by Friends was the spiritual life of our meetings. May this, however, be precisely where our problem lies? We have a spiritual hunger, reflecting the widespread desire in our increasingly secular society for something deeper beyond ourselves. But we have not to my mind addressed or nurtured it as we might. Spiritually, we are at risk of floundering. In terms of belief, we do not offer any clear vision. Our energies have gone into reorganisation, managerialism and planning, with an absence of any spiritual white heat.

It is sometimes said that one of the great strengths and also great weaknesses of Quakerism is that it is all things to all people. It is a smorgasbord or supermarket religion in which people can pick and choose as they see fit. We respect everyone’s beliefs to the point that outsiders don’t know what we stand for. We tell them that in order to understand Quakerism you have to experience it.

But even that is becoming increasingly problematical, as we have lost our spiritual voice and a common spiritual language. From having agonised over the Christocentric/Universalist debate, we now face a division between theist and non-theist Friends. In our own confusion as to what God and indeed spirituality mean and our desire not to offend others worshipping with us (although we’re not sure what worshipping really means, or what it is that we worship), we have muzzled our spiritual language. We no longer read from the Bible in Meeting for Worship, or say prayers. Many Friends in my experience say that ministry has become more secular. When we struggle to find any deep meaning in what has been said, we console ourselves that the words may always unexpectedly speak to someone’s condition. Through it all, glimmerings of spirituality remain, with the occasional truly gathered meeting, and even business meetings when the wind of the spirit is almost tangible; but they have become rare.

To some extent these observations are a caricature, but most of us will, I think, be able to identify with them. The main emphasis of this essay is however to argue that far from being lost in diversity, we in fact have a deep unity which does not come to the surface as much as it might and needs to. If we go below the surface, we find that far from being divided, Friends have a remarkable unity of belief and experience. Our differences are, I

believe, more apparent than real, and the task before us is to rediscover and live out our common ground.

Early Friends would be astonished at the Quakerism they find now. Much of that reflects the changes in scientific thinking and knowledge since the 17th century, when the world was entirely different. It had been as it was since time immemorial, created by God. The concepts of evolution and modern cosmology were totally lacking. Now, we see ourselves as having evolved from a mysterious Big Bang some 13.7 billion years ago. Out of that, stupendously, evolved life and consciousness and, in the case of human beings, self or reflexive consciousness: we are conscious of our own consciousness.

For this to happen a very special set of circumstances had to be in place. The basic physical principles on which the universe is based need to be extremely finely tuned for the Big Bang to give rise to the universe as it is, instead of imploding or being cold and empty. On top of that, it took a planet with very special features (size, speed of rotation, distance from the sun, presence of the moon and the existence of Jupiter to suck in stellar debris, to name but a few) to enable life to evolve as it has. For some, the extreme improbability of such a concatenation of circumstances provides evidence of a guiding hand, while for others it shows that far from any divine purpose we are simply the outcome of physical chance.

On top of that, we have become aware of the tenuousness of life. At some point the sun will burn up and life on earth will cease – assuming the possibility of life as we know it has not been destroyed long before then by collision with a meteor, by nuclear disaster or by climate change. Traditional religious concepts of eternity certainly do not apply to our human habitat.

Ours is an age of unparalleled individualism, wealth, education and freedom of thought – at least in this country and in the West generally. The lay-person has access to the insights of Newtonian physics and to Einstein and our Friend Eddington. At the touch of a button we can familiarise ourselves with evolution, quantum mechanics and the latest thinking on consciousness. Our culture in the West is one of rationalism, logic and scientific endeavour.

With these advances in thinking and understanding, we have come to realise just how contingent our existence on Earth is. We are no longer the centre of the universe, but just one species among many, and a highly destructive and flawed one at that. We have discovered a startling genetic similarity to many other species. We are an animal just like any other.

Except that we have greater intelligence, reflexive consciousness, creativity, compassion, conscience, a capacity for awe, and an appreciation of beauty – and, many would say, a spiritual awareness. Arising out of all this, we find ourselves tugged in two directions. In the first place, there is the path of rationalism and reductionism: the world simply is as it is by chance, and our time on it is fleeting. When we are gone we are as expunged as any

flattened road-kill. This is the path of humanism, which places the emphasis on the human spirit but does not believe in any sense of divine purpose or order.

On the other hand, many of us feel a sense of mystery. We may experience this when moved by the grandeur of the natural landscape or a sunset or by a cobweb bedecked with dew. It may come to us through music, in a relationship, or in communion with an animal. We may discover it in intellectual endeavour, such as solving a mathematical problem. Many of the great scientists have spoken of a sense of awe. Richard Dawkins even speaks of “Einsteinian religion” as distinct from the fundamentalism to which he takes such exception.

As I see it, Friends in contemporary Britain are caught between these two. There are those for whom “what canst thou say” means rigorous scientific honesty and a reluctant or in some cases enthusiastic discarding of anything divine or supernatural. For others, there is a sense of being part of a greater whole. Like the Roman god Janus, we are born facing two ways at once: we have our extraordinary individuality, but are at the same time connected to the greater whole. We come, as Wordsworth says, “trailing clouds of glory”.

These two approaches are producing real tensions within Quakerism. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, are children of our rational, scientific age. We approach the idea of “God” very differently from what Friends even a hundred years ago did. It is right and proper that this should be so and that we should be sceptical and have doubts and be continually questioning, for the world as we understand it is changing around us. We cling at our peril to a faith relying on specific historical events, as there is always the possibility that these could be disproved, or that scholarship could force us to look at holy writ through different eyes.

What this means is that for many contemporary Friends, “what canst thou say” means – very little indeed. Apart from the out-and-out humanists, we just have a vague sense of “something out there” or “something greater than ourselves”.

On top of that, however, certain people have inexplicable and in some cases very deep experiences, which can change their lives. These are not something that we talk about very much in Meeting, and yet, in my experience, a great many Friends have had one or more such experiences. And not just Friends: whole books have been written on peak experiences and psychical occurrences. The evidence is massive and impressive, and it is curious that in our scientific age we should disregard it. The scientific approach dictates that we address evidence, and not dismiss it because it fails to fit in with our preconceptions.

Let us be clear: I am not just talking about isolated individual experiences but about what goes on in Meeting for Worship, including our business meetings. We talk of discerning the will of God and, although we may have no idea what God is, we do have a sense of presence or at least an awareness of being taken into a different realm by entering into the process known as meeting for worship. One humanist F/friend once accused me of

describing meeting for worship as though it were some kind of séance, and indeed that is just how I see it: there is something deeply mysterious but also beautiful and positive about a truly gathered meeting. It is not something we can explain, but we can feel and know it and it is what keeps many of us coming back time after time. We have the mystical tradition of the American Quaker Rufus Jones, providing as it does the basis of our approach to Quakerism in contemporary Britain. Quaker Faith & Practice is studded with examples of inexplicable occurrences that had a profound effect on people's lives – ranging from Rufus Jones's own intimation in the United States that something terrible had happened to his son, then about to disembark in Britain, to the sense of "coming home" that people so often report on first attending meeting for worship.

Curiously, we tend to play these down, even though we would not be here had it not been for Fox's mystical vision of an ocean of darkness and an ocean of love and light, or had his heart not leapt for joy on hearing an inner voice say, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition".

In our rational, scientific age we tend to gloss over such experiences. They are not much mentioned in ministry. And yet – when it comes to the extraordinary communications we sometimes receive from people who have recently died, and to instances of clairvoyance and precognition and above all unbidden experiences taking us beyond words, these rare moments are when the veil parts, when the person concerned knows that the world is not as it seems and when their life can be changed forever.

We cannot, to my mind, simply dismiss these occurrences as maunderings or tricks of the mind. Where the evidence is particularly solid, the sceptic is apt to say that we may not be able to explain such happenings now but that one day science will be able to provide an explanation. That may be so, but if that were to happen it would require a quantum shift in scientific understanding at least equal to anything we have had before. If we are to explain phenomena such as the mother who knows that a child far away is in grave danger, our scientific understanding must allow us to cut through time and space. We end up with a profoundly different worldview, based around the inherent connectedness of all things.

This, interestingly, is precisely where modern physics appears to be heading. The observer affects the observed. The spin of a particle in one part of the universe will affect that of another, previously twinned, subatomic particle over a vast distance. Quantum physics requires the incorporation of non-locality to explain linkages that transcend time, space and the basic force fields.

Similarly, the boundaries between the individual and the surrounding world become blurred. The more we look at our individuality, the more tenuous it becomes. We are intimately bound up with everything around us. We interpenetrate with the people with whom we are in contact. We do so in meeting, when someone ministers on something which, later, turns out to have been on the mind of others in meeting. We resonate with other people at very deep, unexplained levels. We have an inner gnosis or knowing, and even the scientist or mathematician will admit to working intuitively, on the basis of

symmetry, form and beauty: something has to be right because it fits. Solutions come to us apparently unbidden.

All this to me suggests an intimate interconnection with the world around us and that our individuality is, ultimately, illusory. Ours is essentially a world of connectedness. It is interesting that Friends increasingly refer to God in terms of connectedness; God becomes the great unifying principle, our Janus-sense of the greater whole.

So the reductionist falling back on the notion that science will in due course have an explanation for even the unlikeliest of occurrences is in effect saying that science will at some point evolve to the point at which it becomes based around the unity of all things. This is something which all the great faiths, and mystics, have known for a long time. Now, modern science has reached the stage at which those at the cutting edge of quantum physics are saying that the next challenge lies in incorporating consciousness into their equations.

In other words, the scientific explanation for deep mystical experiences will, of necessity, ultimately end up in a position very close to that of the “unity of all things” around which the profoundest religious truths are based. In that sense, I think that the differences between humanists and more traditional Quakers are more apparent than real. If we go deeper, we all end up at much the same place.

What has happened, though, is that the demolition of fundamentalist approaches to God and the Scriptures has left us without an effective language in which to convey and share our experiences. We have become spiritually neutered. And yet, Friends are in my experience remarkably similar in the way they see God and the divine. I can think of our time in my own meeting when we went round the circle and shared what God meant to us. We were all spectacularly inarticulate, except for falling back on “a sense of something greater” and all rather desperate to return to the silence in which these things can be known.

In ministry now, it has almost become de rigeur to say “God for want of a better word”. And yet we still happily use the word God in our formal minutes. For some people this jars, while others accept this as a necessary shorthand for the sense of connectedness between us all. Once we see the divine in terms of connection, everything changes. Prayer, instead of being about supplication, is about entering into that subtle forcefield binding us all together. That energy may be subtle and deeply mysterious but it can also be highly tangible in its effect.

If reductionist Quakers are prepared to accept that a paradigm shift in science will leave us all in much the same place in terms of the unity of all things, there remains one further and perhaps final point of division. We can either say that this sense of interconnectedness is a purely physical, scientifically inexplicable thing, or that there is something more. If we take the purely scientific approach, the connection simply is and is not in any way value-laden. It shows the world to be richer than generally perceived with our superficial senses: instead, there is a vast labyrinth of unifying energy, of which we

can become aware through (unbidden) experience or disciplined meditation and practices; but there is nothing more.

We can, however, also say that this interconnection goes further than that. We can ask why the unity of silence in our meetings produces compassion, awe, kindness and even nobility of action – rather than some kind of downward, darkening spiral of hate, rivalry and violence. Why is it that those for whom the veil parts, for example in a near death experience, report a benign, ultimately benevolent universe? Why is an infinite, all-enfolding, indescribable love – the “everlasting arms” – and joy such a frequent part of such peak experiences?

For those who have not had such experiences themselves, the choice is either to reject them or to say that if there is such a commonality among all things, the experiences of others are necessarily the experiences of our own. This is why we can read great poetry with a sense that only we know precisely what it is that the poet is trying to convey with the rough-hewn instruments we call words. It is why we can read the experiences of the mystics with a sense of deep resonance in ourselves. Whether or not we have had such experiences, we can be in tune with the infinite and open to the music of the spheres.

All this comes down to the fact that there is so much we could be exploring together as Friends. This is a time of convulsion; but have we come to grips with it? We have been through an exercise in reorganisation and prioritisation in the Religious Society of Friends. It has not always been apparent where the spirit has been in these exercises, which some Friends have greeted with dismay as a distraction from the true work at hand. But let us accept that these have been necessary building blocks. The task now, surely, is to build on them. We have identified our areas of work and the structures in which these are to be performed. What we have not done so much within our meetings is to go to our spiritual roots. Might the way ahead for the Society be to conduct an exercise similar to Recast and the Long-Term Framework in respect of our spiritual truths? We have done so to some extent through the Hearts and Minds programme and with the Testimonies Toolkit. Now, I would hope that we could look, in the spirit of “oneness” Friends rather than “theist”, “deist” or “nontheist” Friends, at what we believe. What *does* God mean to us? Do we need an entirely different word or set of words for what we are trying to convey, such as the Spirit or Universe or Connectedness – in short, a new Quaker language? Are we evolving in the direction of Buddhism, deeply spiritual despite but not having a word for “God”? How do these inner promptings of the unity of all things guide our actions, both individually and as a body of people?

This could be a combination of a major one-off exploration of our beliefs and values and an ongoing process of continual review at local meeting level. The benefits of doing so would be threefold. First of all, honest and deep sharing would bring us closer together as Friends. We would be clearer about what we really share, and divisions may prove to be more apparent than real. We would have a clearer sense of identity and belonging, and feel freer in our ministry, meetings, minutes and discussions to share and articulate what really matters to us – whereas now a hesitancy has set in. We could rescue ourselves from a secular drift in which we are so tentative about what we believe that we become

accused of navel-gazing, self-indulgence and looking at our own reflection in the silence. But there is so much richness to explore. Where do we stand on God, Jesus, the Bible, mystical experience, the glories of Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi writings? We could share our doubts and uncertainties in this scientific age of which we are inescapably and indeed gladly part. We could share experiences going beyond the ordinary. We could uphold, love and learn from one another and open out our lives.

Secondly, a major exercise of staking out what we do in fact believe in this rationalist age could be a powerful source of outreach. Even if we were to conclude that there are no certainties and that the best we can say is that there is more to life than there seems and that “there is something out there beyond us” which we can’t quite define, that might well resonate with many others who feel exactly the same way. Our “unique selling point” is the way in which that sense of connectedness is bound up in our meeting for worship and gives rise to social action. We may not know what it is we worship, but we do have a clear and powerful sense of the unity of all things, as expressed in our private meditations and our corporate worship. We would provide a questing to which other inquirers in our secular age with a sense of something deeper would be able to respond joyfully.

Thirdly, going back to our core beliefs would spiritually underpin all the wonderful things that Friends already do in so many different ways: working for restorative justice and the abolition of child soldiers, reaching out to asylum-seekers, peacework in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, and the myriad ventures at local level in which so many Friends are involved. Such faith in action, or action in faith, is an expression of our unarticulated, deeper values based around a sense of the divine in all people and our testimony to equality. We would be establishing more clearly, both to ourselves and to the outside world, what the social action so characteristic of Quakerism is based on.

When the spiritual base is secure, the way opens up. The issue of climate change, for example, is not about making adjustments here and there to reduce our carbon footprint (desirable though that may be). Environmentalists, government officials and now the public at large are all in favour of this – largely out of a sense of preservation of the species. Our contribution can be to place such action in the context of seeing “that of God” not just in all people but in all things: of approaching life reverentially and sacramentally, of being deeply in tune with the world from which we come and of which we form part.

Approaching the huge challenge of climate change from an essentially spiritual angle changes the debate. It no longer becomes a matter of tinkering at the margins but of addressing the way in which we approach life. Our lodestar ceases to be consumerism and the pursuit of material ease, comfort and wealth: an ultimately exploitative kind of “happiness”. To some extent this is being forced upon us by the onward march of events. We can embrace the necessary change grimly and reluctantly or, in this process of immense challenge, find a way back to a sense of belonging, combined with individual and shared responsibility, discovering that true fulfilment lies elsewhere.

These are values that resonate deep within us all. Our age is crying out for a return to deep meaning in these dislocated times. Friends have shown the way before on so many fronts. Were we to go deep within ourselves and share the sense of mystery at the heart of life, we could not just reinvigorate and consolidate the Society that is so dear to us but help open up new directions for society more generally. Never have the values of peace, simplicity, equality and truth been more required. Our testimony to those pillars has value only if based on a deeper awareness, and it is this that we need to explore together, as deeply as we can, for it to lead us where it will.

