

**The Future of The Religious Society of Friends in Britain**  
**An analysis**

**What should we “turn in” to?**

**Introduction**

May I be honest, and say point-blank that it is not possible to analyse the future. Even were my prophetic tendencies more developed I would be ultra-presumptuous to try. Nevertheless I have some very real concerns for the Society on all levels, and some very real hopes, too, even bearing in mind the fact that our country especially, and the world in general is entering a period of great change, the outcome of which we can only speculate.

I believed the literature that told me I was joining with a society that valued experience and rejected doctrine and creed, but having been in membership for just over ten years I find this to be a half-truth. What I mean by this will be revealed later on. I find a society with such diverse views of spirituality, or the lack of it – or even the need for it, that there is a feeling that a schism might arise. This would be a catastrophe for such a relatively small religious society. We need each other on what we tend to call our “spiritual journeys”. What follows, though not specifically addressing this concern, shows a way forward that can accommodate everybody whether or not they even feel they are on such a journey.

There is no worshipping group – whichever way that is interpreted - with which I would feel happier. I value Quaker worship, Quaker ways of working together, and above all, the people I have met through membership. That we seem more “people” based than “religiously / spiritually” based is at first sight – or even “second sight”- not a thing to be criticised. In our person-to-person skills we excel, and long may this continue to be the case. To throw in a different perspective, though, we cannot afford to forget, even for a moment that humanity is only a part of the *whole* of the natural world. We need all of nature in its myriad forms, not only its biology but also its chemistry. If we permit the world, the organism of which we are only temporarily a part, to slide, then we lose all our futures. I don't mention this again, because it is self-evident.

I will explain how and why I feel personal experience is undervalued if it doesn't tally with what “weighty Quakers” regard as acceptable. I will take into consideration how the make-up of British society has completely changed over the last generation, and how we can profit from this. Growing out of this fact is the acceptance of the possibility that our future lies *in conjunction with* those of other faiths; that the spiritual guidance we have maybe lost through the 350 years of Quakerism could well be found in those faiths. Conversely, we may become aware that something which those brought up in other faiths may need, is to be found within our ranks. A new word for this interaction came to mind and will be revealed later on.

Our future has its roots in the past. Some teachings from our past are more relevant to us now than they may have been to our forefathers. Let us take on board new light from

wherever it comes, *new* knowledge from our own *past* teaching, because seen in the light of today, we are able to see deeper into its meaning, making the old new – eternal, maybe.

### **Rooted in Christianity – our launch pad**

“The Kingdom of Heaven is within”; “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.” Here we stand at the heart of the teaching of Jesus Christ – or if we object to using that name translated into the tongue of his country’s conquerors, the Romans, and use Aramaic, his own language, we must say Issa Masih (Messiah). Islam uses this form of that name, it being also Arabic. But we are also standing 2000 years along the line of Christianity. If the early disciples had been asked to write their equivalent of an essay about the future of their faith, would any of them have envisaged Quakerism – (perhaps yes?) or any other of the myriad forms sprung from that faith? (most possibly, no!). Are we closer to the way preached by the first Christians than most other denominations, and if not, would it matter? I might say, “yes”. We must try for the depths of Jesus’ teaching because they *are* our roots; and if we forget our roots, we have forgotten our essence. And the original teaching remains as relevant today as it was then.

### **Open to new understanding**

*“The lamps are different but the light is the same.” Jalal ud-din Rumi*

#### **The near east**

I see in Jesus’ words (I will use the Roman form because of its familiarity to us though as a Jew might it have been Jeshua?) the essence of Judaism – Jesus was more versed in the books and other teachings of the Jews than most of his race from his very youth. Jesus was very strongly a Jew, recognised by his contemporaries as a teacher (rabbi), and came from an intensely devout family. He said quite forcefully that he came not to replace the prophets but to fulfil their prophecies. His religious background was fundamental to his preaching. After the crucifixion, with Jesus’ brother, James as head of the church in Jerusalem, there was a real opportunity for Jesus to be accepted by Jews as an important prophet, or even, indeed as the Messiah. But with the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of most Jews, the opportunity was lost. We must remember that a very few of those early Christians went to that centre of empire, Rome, and the greatest majority went north and east – to Damascus, then to Arbil and beyond. The descendants of these first Christians, when Mohammad came along, mostly converted to Islam in which they recognised a faith closer to their inherited religion than the Christianity of their new Byzantine masters. The Christianity in which Quakerism is ‘rooted’ comes from that of the few disciples who were to become the established European church through the Roman Empire. By this time, the move away from Judaism was pronounced. It might have been imperial, but the future of western Christianity needed the influence of the Roman Empire.

#### **Further east**

I see Jesus at the heart of Islam. In my mid- twenties my sitar teacher encouraged me to read the Koran. I replied, “I follow the teachings of Jesus”. “So do we,” he replied. I love the works of Idries Shah, the Sufi writer. In the introduction to his book, “The Way of the

Sufi” he asks why it is that Christianity only uses four of the gospels, implying that Islam knows of many more. A local Moslem friend reminds us that Jesus is not only at the heart of their religion, but is there at the end-time, and will be our judge.

I have read of a tomb of Issa Massih, ‘prophet of the Children of God’, which is in Kashmir. I noted in a book whose title I seem to have lost, that a certain King, Rajah Shalewar, visited Issa in the Himalayas towards the end of the first century of the Christian era. He asked him, “What is your religion?” and was answered, “Love, truth and purity of heart.” I notice frequently on programmes on the television showing the streets of India, taxis and lorries showing not only the Hindu devas, but also photos and images of Jesus, and of the Madonna and child. Jesus is present among Hindus.

### **And further still!**

Recently I read a book by Colin Thubron called “Shadow of the Silk Road”, and learned that Colin did some research of his own in China just over three years ago (2005, and found evidence that there had been an early Christian church in China:

*The stele I was hunting was quite another. The dragon that crested it writhed around a flaming pearl, and a vivid superscription. Along its base and sides, running like a light cavalry round the Chinese columns was a cursive script which turned out to be Syriac. The carved inscription read: Record of the transmission of the Western Religion of Pure Light through China. And it was crowned by a Christian cross. Raised in AD 786 the stone recorded the arrival of the priest Aloban from the West a century and a half earlier. ‘If we carefully examine the meaning of the teaching it is mysterious, wonderful full of repose,’ the Emperor decreed astonishingly. ‘It is right that it should have free course under the sky.’*

Here we see that the origin of Pure Light Buddhism, now found quite extensively in Japan, is in Christianity.

### **Pan-Christendom**

Thus we learn that Jesus himself is fundamentally connected to all the main religions; that any missionary work to be done has been done long ago. We might have agreed in their day, even less than a hundred years ago, that Quaker missionaries were necessary, not only to preach Christ’s teaching, but alongside that, for their much needed humanitarian work; but through present day ways of thinking, with our newly gained knowledge, we would call their religious motivation misguided.

Our mission today is not to spread Quakerism, nor even Christianity, but to spread this understanding: that inspired teaching is to be found in scriptures from elsewhere – that not only do other teachings also carry a proved and tested spiritual way, but that we share some of the same spiritual history as most other people in the world – that religions are not a cause for conflict, but for mutual understanding and communion, true communion. *We have, however, to be aware that as well as Jesus being found in Islam, Hinduism, even Buddhism, and rooted in Judaism, Christianity itself, has been moulded doctrinally way beyond the founding teachings of Jesus. If we are to undertake “missionary work” of any kind, it needs to be with other Christians, and even within our own ranks. And this would be by far the most difficult option.- to bring people to an understanding that divisions are unnecessary; and that where division exists, to recognise that different types of people*

*have different characters different backgrounds, climates, cultures, therefore different ways of practising faith.*

### **Evolution in our own ranks**

George Fox, in his zeal for Christ is quoted in his journal as saying: *I was to bring people off from all the world's religions, which are vain – that they might know the pure religion.* (Quoted from *GF, a Christian Mystic*, McGregor Ross)

But not long after we see that at least one influential Quaker had moved on from Fox's thinking when William Penn said:

*Devout souls are everywhere of one religion.*

Within a hundred years Quaker experience had moved them on. It is essential for our future that we must always be willing to move from our comfort zones to see where we must be – to see clearly our real physical world, and by “turning in” to our Quaker proven methods we will be equipped to step out to our service in the world. We are one with all people, and must see beyond all divisions. We must resist the ever-present tendency to divide into tribes, and by showing that all divisions in society are ultimately illusory, become the glue that binds all people together.

### **Our spiritual path**

How does all this fit into an essay on “The future of Quakerism”? Earliest Quakers encouraged us to “Turn in” to seek the kingdom within. (More republican-minded Quakers who object to the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven”, may quite legitimately refer to it as “the Spiritual Dimension”. After all, Jesus said, “God is Spirit.”) This method of meditation – which is quite clearly what “turning in” leads to, is identical to the meditation I practised under my yoga teacher, whose main spiritual guidance was from Tibetan Buddhism. He assured me that such meditation was practised by Jesus during his forty days' fasting, this being the initiation period prior to his beginning his ministry. Yes, our roots are to be found within the Christian church of history, but our method of worship is acceptable to all religions. It is for this reason that we have within our ranks Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists and Jews. Isn't this unique, and a great asset and treasure?

When I applied for membership, one of my visitors, on hearing that I had been involved in yoga and meditation, said, “You know that meeting for worship is not meditation, don't you?” I remained silent for a second, then had to say, “yes”, though I felt that early Quakers meditated to a very deep level, and many found mysticism. I said, “yes” feeling it was an honest answer, but had reservations. After years in the Society, the “yes” is still valid. Some Quakers go elsewhere for their meditation training. The “turning in” training given to early Friends is not in evidence now. Light groups may help, but they do not go far enough. The soul searching, and self-searching is only one of the stages of the spiritual way. We need to go further, as quite evidently from their writings, early Quakers did. If we feel impotent to offer such training, we should not feel averse to asking those from other faith traditions to instruct us – not just at Woodbrooke and Charney, but everywhere “devout teaching” is to be found.

We should freely accept that meditation methods from other cultures are useful to us, even in meeting for worship, and that anybody searching for their deep self in meeting is not in

any way misusing the worship. The calm and detachment that springs from this will be felt by the whole worshipping group. We will all gain.

Such worship as ours *is* the way of the mystic. George Fox was a Mystic – yes, from the Christian tradition, but it is easy to see that wherever he came from, whatever religion might have been in his background, his life and his way of worship would be the same. William Penn’s quote has to be given here: “Devout souls are everywhere of one religion and when death takes off the mask they will know one another.” Mysticism and unity with those of other faiths go hand in hand. They both lie at the root and foundation of the Quaker way. But how much are they valued or even acknowledged today? In this day and age of multiculturalism, it is our very duty to work single-mindedly at these fundamentals. They are not only our peace testimony turned in upon ourselves, but they are our only future – our predestined path.

What drove me as an intense only child to study the religions was what I saw as the tendency for conflicts and wars to be driven by faith differences. In my teenage years I sought a church where I could find guidance. I remember asking my Mother what other churches there were. She mentioned Quakers. She said they were good people, but belonged to a higher social class than us, and were very influential people. “But what do they believe?” I asked. What she told me resonated with my needs, but that was as far as I could go at that time. I am pleased to say that due to Quaker Quest and such attempts to broadcast our message, the general public are getting the chance to evaluate what we have to offer in a fresh light. This reaching out must be an ongoing process. I cannot overemphasise that it is up to each and every Quaker to let their friends and acquaintances know – when and how appropriate - that (s)he belongs to Friends, and to let it be known why they are convinced.

The time may be here to acknowledge to the world that whereas we are from Christian roots, our creedless core has meant that we can and have taken teachings from all faiths. It has led to us being able to welcome those of any faith or indeed none into our fold. It has led Quakerism to become an inter-faith way or, as has just come to mind, *an intra-faith way*.

### **“Spiritual experiences”**

I have experienced a number of what must be called “spiritual experiences”. They are my own pearls. But I was told emphatically by a friend in meeting shortly after beginning to attend not to talk about such things. It was not that they would not be believed, but rather that any such talk indicates a spiritual pride, a form of spiritual one-up-man-ship! Nothing could be further from the truth. Seeking the kingdom of heaven (sorry – the spiritual dimension) is what religion is in its very essence. Jesus demanded that we should. *Yet we are not allowed to talk about our search, and where it has taken us*. Jesus also said, “What you hear in the ear, that shout from the rooftops”. Well, I whisper from the rooftops occasionally, in the hopes that others too will talk about their discoveries, or to be more precise, openings. Those who hear me look askance. Yet I know (via the Religious Experience Research Unit, the Alister Hardy Society and many readings) that all

spiritual/religious researches throughout the world shows that over 50% of all the populations studied – and there have been many - experience the spiritual dimension in some form. So, over half the world's population has direct knowledge of the spiritual. How then can it possibly show spiritual pride to mention it? There is a feeling that many Quakers consider it not grounded in the physical world enough – not proven, and therefore not to be acknowledged. There is, to me, no part of the physical world where the spiritual cannot be found. In the future Quakers should be directly encouraged to share their experience of the numinous, and the divine. This experience of our very own members should lie at our core. We must inspire each other in matters spiritual, and uphold each other in the face of possibly inevitable scorn. We are not invited to “believe” – that would be by definition “creedal” – but to have open minds and hearts, and to experience. Because ultimately, all we have is our own experience.

### **“Spiritual”**

I think we need a definition here. Talking to others, it is evident that different people mean different things by this same word. That is probably why we are called a “Religious” rather than a “Spiritual” society. Some will associate it with spiritualism, some with airy-fairy notions. Some use it to define elements of beauty. Beauty can lead to a spiritual awakening, and is equally hard to define.

Yoga is a spiritual science. It is precise, progressive and proven by its results. Yoga (raja) defines seven steps, equivalent to the seven chakras. The chakras five, six and seven are active in sensitivity to and development of spiritual characteristics. But all chakras need to be balanced. It is because of the likelihood of an uneven physical, emotional and spiritual development that yogic development needs guidance from teachers.

The spiritual to me - and it is in this sense that I use the word in this essay - is another dimension usually beyond our everyday senses, but not necessarily so, depending on the individual development. This dimension is here, now (as Jesus told us the kingdom of heaven is). We need to have (again quoting Jesus) eyes to see and ears to hear. As I said above, God is spirit. When we talk of spirit, we are talking of heaven.

### **But “spirit” has many forms.**

It can roughly be described as like finding the on-switch on a radio. There's good, bad and very indifferent on the radio, or television! Once the spiritual has been incorporated into one's life, (or as is said by Jesus through Thomas' gospel, once the two – the spiritual and the physical bodies -have been made one) there is a responsibility – a great discernment is needed. Not all the spiritual is good. Far from it. St. Paul talked about discerning spirits. There are many channels, many to be rejected. And it is for this reason that the church over the years has heartily and determinedly endeavoured to wipe out all evidence and all people who have dared to reveal their openness to the spiritual. Yes, there are dangers. So are they in every other part of life. But to seek the kingdom is our first commandment. In our future, the future of Quakerism, this search above all else should be encouraged.



Being spiritual is not unusual. It is not special. To *acknowledge* the spiritual *is* unusual. We might well be branded a heretic, or even burnt at the stake – inevitable in some periods in history. But Jesus’ mission was to wake people up to that spirituality. Fox tried it too. His experience meant he felt he must broadcast his openings to the world. He broadcast from the rooftops – or Firbank Fell actually - and founded a fundamental Christian sect. Maybe he would not recognise our Quakerism, and we might well not be comfortable with his. We have moved on too. We have moved from the doctrinal, the creedal, in our endeavour to be all embracing, to only dwell on that we know to be true. We KNOW our experiences are real. The problem is that our individual experiences are personal; they are ingrained into ourselves. They cannot easily be shared or repeated – so are branded unscientific, unproven. But they shape us – we cannot escape their effects on us, they are part of us. I read early on in my search into Quakerism that Quaker society values experience above all other teaching. I have found that this is only true so long as it is *not spiritual experience*. The main reason for this *is* that it cannot be shared. Neither can our innermost thoughts or inspirations. The best things in life are so personal they cannot be shared. Let us in the future value insights, and things spiritual as we have not done for generations.

### **A changed outlook; a changed people**

The future of our valued Society will be nothing more than a group – an able and powerful group – of social activists, and people who like to get away from daily life for an hour on a Sunday for a bit of peace, unless we value and deeply culture what we call “that of God within”. The deep peace of mind and love for mankind that follow - that should show in each Quaker’s face - is to be valued way, way above material security. We need very little in our path through this world, but we need to know *that of God within us – within our own very selves*. We will then know the same within others, and this will resonate. It is our duty to help this resonance to become, person to person, family to family, faith to faith, and so on.....

The more I have studied, the more I have realised that the basic essence of all religions is the same. We have a great asset and treasure as a Religious society in that our way of worship is acceptable to all faiths. We should celebrate this at every opportunity, and broadcast it widely; it is at the heart of our peace testimony.

But we must never forget that our first priority is the inner spiritual search – to seek the Kingdom of Heaven within our hearts, to open ourselves to that spiritual dimension.

When we truly “turn inward”, the Spirit of Christ will amaze us, showing us what we can become, what we can achieve, showing us our higher potential; and we shall recognise ourselves for what we are, truly an intra-faith people.

