

Quo Vadis Whither goest thou?

Isaac Newton said "We stand upon the shoulders of giants" and this is true of the Society of Friends. While in recent times we have been known best by our Peace Testimony, it is integrity founded upon a discipline of doubt and testing which has underpinned our Society from the beginning. It is this which made our founders refuse to accede to the inconsistencies and contradictions of the established churches, and it is this tradition of integrity which will continue to be our best guide to the future. Above all integrity opens the way for us to address new challenges unfettered by dogma, and to speak to a world increasingly disaffected with political spin and deception, and weary of hearing the apologetics of selfishness and greed from the commercial world. We can offer values which can be shared universally, and a wholesome life style which can offer satisfactions beyond mere material possessions. These are our foundation for the future. Whilst our history may define us, we must learn to look less towards the past and more towards the future. John W. Rowntree observed "Churches generally, not least our own fail to inspire people" and our society today tends to relegate religion to the sidelines. The two essential ingredients needed in the Quaker message are inspiration and a vision which seizes people as speaking to their desires for a better world, and a life style which offers happiness. The rapidly changing world calls for an expansion of our ambitions for it, and we will therefore need to touch upon some of the many areas which can contribute to the way we interpret our beliefs to the world, and to our personal growth. We must find new purpose and direction to meet change and the will to drive our ambitions for it forward. At the same time we must also meet more demanding standards of credibility, and Friends may find themselves severely challenged.

The contribution of Friends is primarily in influencing the moral basis of behaviour and there are three particular areas which will determine the future. The economic framework which regulates society, scientific progress which conditions our understanding and from which many current ethical dilemmas arise, and the design of social systems which favour humane and civilised behaviour.

Our vision must enable us to respond to a vastly different world where climate change and rising populations increase competition for resources. The resulting conflicts are likely to become even more frequent and ever more violent, and reinforce the importance of our most traditional testimonies of peace and social justice. Large forced migrations are predicted to more favourable, usually northern and western countries, and many of the problems will involve national and commercial interests competing for resources and power. These issues will impact to the greatest extent upon the poor, and will be compounded by claims of sovereignty and ownership of resources. We are likely to see the number of power centres increasing together with dissident groups acting outside the law to promote their own interests. Together with the probable consequent rise in disease and starvation we have a potential escalation of all the causes of war. A glance at the wars which are presently conducted all too enthusiastically, and are a source of military and commercial profit, together with the difficulties confronting peace makers we are compelled to the conclusion that the world lacks a universally acceptable global morality to guide it.

Yet we all have the same fundamental needs, and paraphrasing Wm. Penn - "When death removes our masks all men and women of goodwill will be found to be of but one religion". Our greatest asset in realising our vision of a global morality is the foundational principle of Quakers that everyone is respected for their worth.

Our witness must move emphatically towards prevention of conflicts. Friends are unfettered by creeds, and our strength must lie in our integrity and tolerance which place us in an ideal position to help. We must encourage fears to be confronted openly and unflinchingly, and the courage found to set mistrust aside. The keys which open the door to trust and co-operation are integrity and reciprocity, while willing and truly representative consent is the key to agreement and compromise. We must put these tools to full use. The way forward was succinctly expressed by Abraham Lincoln when he said "Have I not destroyed my enemies when I have made them my friends?".

The biggest obstacle will be persuading the 'haves' of the need for redistribution of resources, and motivation becomes vital. We often fail to realise that the promotion of greed and self interest is built into most societies in quite fundamental ways. For example the framework provided by the Thatcher-Reagan 'supply side' economic philosophy denying the very existence of society gave a free licence to self interest and greed whose influence still persists; additionally classical economic theory is founded upon the assumption that every individual will always act in their own best interest. If we wish to help build a just society we must think in globally and long term, we must dig down to fundamentals, and we must realise that if elected government does not provide a framework in which civilised and socially responsible values may thrive, then both our democracy and our education system have failed us.

Our respect for the worth of everyone means we move forward by mutual consent, and education. These are the forces to be deployed rather than the imposition of the will of one upon another by force, either military, political or economic. Free consent means respect and benefit on both sides, and there are no political or religious beliefs so perfect that one cannot learn from the other. We can learn from Islam that peace is not possible without justice, and from Gandhi that justice based upon an eye for an eye leads to a world which is blind. Nor should we assume democracy is the panacea. Judging by recent American reactions a plebiscite would leave no place for compassion in its legal system, and yet how is the world to progress if we do not demonstrate the values to which we aspire? We must be prepared to overcome prejudice, to educate and to lead.

Our thinking must be expanded into global terms, and the vision which Quakerism should be carrying into the 21st Century is that morality must be central to life, and to decision making at all levels. A universally acceptable global morality needs to be developed and defined which is inclusive and from which the divisive claims of theologies are absent. Confused thinking is dangerous. Nationally it has led us into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the individual level religious prejudice may jeopardise the eradication of genetic diseases. Clarity must be the lynchpin of Quaker thinking.

In developing a universally acceptable morality we need to examine the nature of morality, and the biological sciences have given us a new perspective of its origins. There is the obvious point which should be central to education that we are all members of the same single, if polytypic species, and that our similarities exceed our differences. We are now placed firmly in the animal kingdom, and most importantly it is now realised that systems which regulate behaviour between individuals and between groups and which fulfil the definitions of morality, are not confined to *homo sapiens*. They exist in the animal kingdom where we can observe compassion, altruism, empathy and reciprocity together with penalties for antisocial behaviour. These systems are species specific, and relate to the group needs of the particular species, i.e. social mores in monkeys will differ from that of dogs, and those of predators from prey. Similarly comparable human moralities are group specific, e.g. as between tropical and temperate zone man reflecting in a comparable way the differing pressures of geography and competition. For example historically we see a change with rising prosperity from communal living in 'long houses' with predominantly group rights, to separation out into family units with a corresponding increase in individual rights. In human history we see many varieties of social organisation each with their own mores varying historically and geographically, and in recent years biologists have come to the very important recognition that social groups themselves are subject to evolutionary selection pressures to which they must adapt or die. The Society of Friends is no exception.

There has been a tendency lingering from religious dogma to see man as qualitatively distinct from all other animals, but just as in the Renaissance the earth lost its place as the centre of the universe with Man as the unique creation, Man can no longer think of himself arrogantly as the unique object of his God's interest. Morality itself can no longer be seen as invariant and handed down to a uniquely worthy individual at a fixed period in time. Instead of the origins of morality being a matter of divine revelation, the codes of behaviour, the position of ethics, and the development of theologies are all bound up with the diversity of social needs, environmental pressures and competition. Successful adaptation places the

survival of the group above that of the individual, and there are therefore sound biological reasons for seeing morality as helping social cohesion and favouring altruism and co-operation. Underlying morality are compassion and reciprocity which are the indispensable agents needed to help generate the openness and trust which are the essential ingredients in building co-operation in any society.

The important and very practical implication is that morality is not fixed but adapts and evolves with the group, and its test is whether it favours the group's long term survival. It can be changed.

For Friends compassion lies at the very heart of morality, and yet this is the very quality that is the first to be lost when priority is given to dogma. Indeed it is often replaced by cruelty, even more wicked when it is supported by a belief in the benefits of suffering. Defining morality by long term group survival provides a needed test for solutions to problems, and allows flexibility in our approach to modern problems rather than turning to formulaic solutions extremely distant from today's conditions. It is fruitful as it lends itself to deliberation and a universal approach, but is still open to the wisdom and insights of past times. One of its most important aspects is the realisation that morality is not static.

If we are to try to mend the world we should understand how the world and its civilisation work. On the way to a global morality we must address some major problems, in particular those of poverty and social justice.

We must ask whether the current strategies work? On the global scale reducing poverty by even the smallest of amounts with the current strategies requires an enormous increase in consumption by the already rich. It has been estimated that to raise the poorest to an income of \$3 per day would need 15 planets worth of biocapacity, which suggests that the earth's resources will have been destroyed long before even the most abject poverty has been eradicated. The economist's argument that growth is the only means of relieving poverty therefore encounters severe difficulties. In this country the gap between rich and poor is widening and although a wealthy nation we have a long history of child poverty which has hardly improved in a decade. A sea change in the climate of opinion regarding redistribution of resources globally and nationally is essential and this requires a general moral shift. To achieve it we must also take account of the power of antagonistic commercial, financial and military interests to protect themselves, and the amount of control they have over propaganda via the media.

Classical economics contains 'moral' assumptions, and Adam Smith in his "Wealth of Nations" makes the basic assumption that everyone will always act in their own best interest. Reagan and Thatcher took the position to an extreme in 'supply side' economics which assumes that only by the rich being rewarded by tax cuts, and markets being freed of regulation will economic growth be promoted. Continued growth is the mantra of contemporary economics and is in conflict with the obvious fact that the world's resources are finite and already showing signs of strain. The Thatcherite assumptions however are intended to justify selfishness and greed, with results which have been seen in the recession caused by the failures of the financial and banking sectors. Such serious failures must surely compel a fundamental re-examination of the underlying theory and its assumptions. The obvious starting points are to challenge the basic assumption of perpetual growth and to challenge the assumption of self interest and its corollary of maximising profit upon which economic theory is based.

Although necessary in the short term to move us forwards from our present situation, perhaps the aspect of traditional theory most dangerous to the long term interests of society is the belief in continual economic growth. It was foreseen by Adam Smith that growth would eventually reach an end, and economies would have to stabilise around a 'zero' growth point. With rapidly rising populations, and consumption rising exponentially in some areas particularly in the developed world it would be prudent to plan for the long term and perhaps medium term future on a basis of approximate equilibrium and a need to conserve resources.

World population numbers are rising at an alarming rate and further increase the pressures upon the poor, thus making it even more difficult to relieve the problem of poverty. Compounding this is the threat of climate change damaging food supplies, water and therefore agriculture, with large tracts of the world predicted to become uninhabitable. The rate of change makes it urgent to find workable

solutions on a global scale which will allow us to adapt in a timely way to a radically different emerging world. Perhaps the most serious problem is the present mismatch between the rate of climate change and the rate of development and application of remedial measures, which is compelling scientists to consider yet more sophisticated and perhaps more risky preventive measures. The fundamental need is for the acceptance that we face a future which threatens us all, and that remedial measures will need to be supported by a shared morality.

Fuelling a consumer driven economy by policies of pure economic growth is ultimately unsustainable, and the capitalism from which it springs has been described as “a perennial gale of creative destruction”. Perpetual economic growth, the mantra of traditional economics is incompatible with finite resources, and it has become clear that social justice and ecological sustainability are both essential ingredients to successful adaptation to climate change. A sustainable ‘non-growth’ global economy at or near equilibrium will need to be based upon a morality driven by social responsibility rather than by maximising profits. Near stable economies predicate less competitive systems and redeployment of labour towards environmentally neutral work. This may perhaps be achieved by increasing the regulation of capitalist systems for the public good, but many see a need for a more radical approach to existing economic theories with their myths of *homo economicus* and perfect competitive markets etc. The devil is found not in the detail but in the highly questionable and damaging assumptions upon which contemporary economic theory is based.

A fundamental issue is to balance consumption with sustainability, and the public should beware of accepting superficial short term approaches from politicians interested in the next election, or business interests concerned with next years balance sheet. There are a number of organisations working upon sustainable economies based upon social justice and redeployment of labour towards an environmentally neutral world. These are still at an early stage and Friends should be supportive in this developing area.

Redistribution of resources will be strenuously resisted by the ‘haves’, and important as finding technical solutions will be, overcoming this resistance will be a major obstacle to success. We have only to remember the well argued cases which have nevertheless failed in the face of powerful vested interests, protecting commercial and military budgets. A step change in moral attitudes is needed. This is where Friends could have a particular role for which their tolerance, lack of creed and reputation for integrity uniquely equips them. We need to create a climate of opinion which recognises both the needs and the difficulties and creates the moral will to deal with them.

Compounding the effects likely to result from climate change are those of population growth, which has the twin aspects of growth in numbers and consequent growth in consumption. The rise in population will be greatest in the poorest nations with already strained resources and development aid, and this will place further strains upon education and public health programmes. Slowing down the rate of population increase is essential if we are to sustain our natural resources and civilisation, and there are only two options. Either the birth rate is reduced or the death rate is increased. Without human intervention nature will reduce the population, but if we intervene to reduce the birth rate humane methods must be found. This means recognising the generation of an excessive number of children as conflicting with the requirements of an emerging global morality. Time scales are once again a major cause for concern.

Poverty and ignorance combine to foster high birth rates, and must be countered in two ways. Firstly by making family planning and safe abortion available to all, with the important aim of making every child a wanted child. This must become a moral imperative. Secondly women must also be empowered to take control of their lives by providing increased access to education and employment, so that they can play a full part in their nation’s affairs.

As a small and ageing society we may feel individually helpless in the face of the immensity and complexity of the issues. Together with the fact that other organisations have developed expertise in specialist areas which we cannot match, our small numbers are critical and our resources have become increasingly stretched. We have the added problem that our low profile places us at a disadvantage in

our ability to influence the world. Furthermore our silence upon so many issues of public concern is alarming, and symptomatic of the Society's need to revitalise itself. Our near absence of a public presence also contributes to falling recruitment, as the public see us just as quaint rather than knowing for what we stand. Today only a society bent upon suicide can allow itself to remain unseen and unheard. A fatalistic response is not only defeatist and an abdication of our responsibilities, but is an acceptance of a death sentence. We must adapt or die.

First we should realise that we are far from helpless, and then we must devise a strategy to overcome our disadvantages. We can compensate for our small size by quality, and with quality we can become opinion leaders, as we have in the past. Our best strategy is to rationalise our activities upon what we can do well, and identify and develop the skills we need. Perhaps most important of all, where our resources are insufficient we should operate a policy of creating a climate of opinion favourable to our goals which inspires others with better resources, and which influences decision makers.

In 1895 at the Manchester Conference John Rowntree remarked a "mistrust of Church and Chapel", and because of their obdurate adherence to outdated dogma religious bodies remain as distrusted now as they were in his day. We need to recognise that many of the challenges of today's world will require an informed response based upon science or technology.

Any general will advise that success depends upon good intelligence, and the greatest asset today is knowledge, which modern information technology makes readily accessible. Knowledge is our best ally, and we must make ourselves the best informed in the business. We should ensure that we have the necessary expertise to organise and interpret the information within our ranks, or we must be prepared to pay for it from outside. This is where the extremely relevant studies of the Rowntree Trust must be gratefully acknowledged and ways found to support and extend it further and utilise its findings better.

Survival in itself is significant to Quakers only if our witness bears fruit. It cannot be overemphasised however that if we are to have a viable future we need more than good intentions. Effectiveness must become part of our vocabulary, and operating an effective policy calls for sharp definition of objectives and clear focus upon the means of achieving them.

Above all 'speaking to the world's condition' i.e. exerting influence, means that what we have to say must be heard. Our present efforts to use the media cannot be described realistically as bringing Quaker's witness to public attention, and our numbers are too small for example to have a very significant effect. Our success will depend upon the quality of what we have to say to the world.

We need to inspire society with our ambitions for a better world, based upon respecting the worth of all and built by compassion, empathy and reciprocity. Our 'mission' should be to encourage the setting of social goals in the long term interest of society, and to develop a global morality to help guide us through the emerging problems. We must offer a vision of what we wish to achieve, and a strategy for ourselves which gives purpose and direction to our resources.

Friend's inspiration must extend our concept of social justice from a right to the mere necessities of existence to the quality of life, and a right to happiness. In the past the difficulties of measuring happiness have prevented real progress in terms of introducing happiness into policies, but in the last decades new developments have given us statistical tools of measurement which meet academically acceptable standards. These allow comparisons to be made within groups and between countries from which useful conclusions can be drawn.

The success of nations as well as that of their citizens has traditionally been judged in terms of their balance sheets, and yet research confirms our belief that happiness does not correspond to wealth. Status and success have come to be increasingly judged in terms of material possessions, but economic indicators alone provide little or even sometimes misleading information upon the happiness of the nation. The major exponent has been America where the extremes of capitalist culture have been extolled and exported by the entertainment industry, whose trivialisation and commercialisation of values have become addictive to the young. Trivialisation of relationships especially causes major damage to society, particularly when aggressive and often abusive confrontation rather than problem

solving is made the focus of attention. The dream of fame and wealth is portrayed as determining status, too often acquired at the expense of others, and too often lacking social responsibility. The dream has become a nightmare with its capitalist dynamic of accumulate or die.

Feeding upon it we have seen how the greed and subsequent panic of the financial institutions has caused a world wide recession, and it is noteworthy that the only ones to emerge from it better off are the institutions which caused it, and who now intend to evade effective but essential regulation. It is noteworthy that the media repeatedly ask the wrong question whether the matter is one of financial misdeeds or of going to war, i.e. "Is it legal?" rather than "Is it moral". This is an evasion which Quakers should be seen to challenge by insisting that the right question is asked.

The essential logic of a social system is revealed by what it respects and applauds, and if values are superficial and trivial they will fail to deliver long term well being to the society. Studies of western nations show that while wealth has increased there has, with one exception been no corresponding increase in happiness. Above a certain threshold it seems to be personal income relative to that of others, which seems to determine satisfaction. In interpreting this type of data the cultural expectations of the group must also be taken into account. In the west where growth and consumer activity are applauded, a high sense of personal esteem and material success give meaning and satisfaction in life, but a society based upon individuals competing for status of this type is not a recipe for happiness. On the other hand in Japan contentment tends traditionally to be associated with fulfilling social responsibilities and family expectations, with self discipline and friendliness being highly valued. Changes towards western values have been accompanied by raised suicide rates.

If Friends wish to build a society which favours happiness we should be encouraging policies which prize kindness and co-operation, and reward service to others. In personal terms our own happiness is best secured by trying to increase the happiness of all those whose lives we touch.

Legislation is in danger of displacing conscience in our over regulated state and putting people as much in control of their own lives as possible is both needed and a contribution to well being and initiative.

We find that our goals of social structures supportive of happiness march hand in hand with the social changes needed to respond to climate change and rising population, together with our concept of stewardship of resources. There will have to be reorganisation of work patterns and objectives, with changes in reward structures, together with corresponding changes in life styles. Our awareness of our interdependency upon one another will demand social justice, without which peace is jeopardised. As offering better guidance to the state of the nation than purely measures of its financial condition, Friends should be encouraging the use by government of happiness ratings together with health, welfare and education measurements as important quality of life indicators.

Our vision must have the prime purpose of offering a life style based upon moral values which are effective in today's world. With the larger churches struggling with mediaeval doctrinal problems involving gender, contraception etc., a voice of clarity is desperately needed. We can supply a morality which is clear and based upon a universally acceptable definition, and helpful in resolving the moral issues of today. The engines of our morality are respect for the worth of everyone, reciprocity, empathy, and compassion. But we appear to be inaudible, and an unheard message is a lost message.

With what are material values to be replaced? We need to expand our social ideals. For Quakers the fundamental proposition from which all our Testimonies derive is respecting that of God, or of worth in everyone. Compassion, empathy and reciprocity stem from that respect and give life to understanding. We do not measure worth by financial status but by the contribution to society which its members make.

Research has shown that acts of kindness and generosity are passed on as far as three degrees of [social] separation. Copying plays a central rôle in learning, and kindnesses done by other respected members of the group make a very significant contribution to spreading values through society. Friends are wedded to the principle of doing a kindness without reward but while this sets a good example and is good for our own souls, it may not be the best way to spread generosity through society. This research

gives us good reason to understand that on the right occasion making it a condition that a kindness is passed on to someone else might facilitate the spread of reciprocity in society and reduce selfish behaviour. Reciprocity can also be a major catalyst in conflict prevention and resolution as a means of generating and reinforcing trust. This research reinforces the value of social networking, and also suggests that as part of group adaptation there exist social mechanisms favouring moral behaviour. Friends need to expand their ambitions towards building a society which encourages virtue to prosper, and we see here a technique we can use in shaping its development.

We must realise that the future will require a moral shift of some magnitude in the goals we set and in the attitudes to possessions. The young in particular need to be prepared for the need for social change, and if democracy is to work we need to educate children to admire the good, remembering too that their aspirations will shape the formation of their own identities. In addition to the needs for social justice in our own society we should ask what sort of world and what sort of values do we wish to leave to our children and grandchildren?

Children are increasingly becoming the prisoners of TV. with its love affair with sex and violence, its exaggerations and its distortion of life's values. Rôle models taken from television and the entertainment industry tend to result in empty goals, trivialisation of life and dysfunctional behaviour. This has never been more obvious than in the commercial pressures upon young girls forcing them too early into maturity. Manipulation of self image and self esteem are aimed at girls as young as 10 to become sex symbols, with reliance upon cosmetics, outward appearances and all too ready to adopt uncritically the mores of their peer group. Binge drinking and drugs are too often the deplorable outcomes, as well as young people ill equipped with values upon which to found lasting relationships. The best defence for our children against exploitation is firstly to teach them to apply a critical approach to everything they see or hear, and secondly from the earliest age to give them a sound framework of values against which they can judge behaviour. To respect others we need first to respect ourselves.

One of the biggest problems is the example given of confrontational, abusive and often violent behaviour as the response to differences. Far from the Quaker way of sitting down together and reasoning out difficulties in relationships this starts from a premise that aggression is a the way to resolve problems. We need to teach that the starting point of problem solving is the entitlement of each to expect love and understanding from the other, and that retirement into silence can be therapeutic.

It is in our use of silence that we make our distinctive contribution to the art of living in a frenetic world. When we clear our minds of the heat of the day's toils and dig deeply to know ourselves in our practised Quaker way, we are using wholesome techniques likely to have therapeutic benefits in dealing with stress as well as helping towards better problem solving. This is far from the mind numbing mantras or blank landscapes of Eastern religions, and its introduction in childhood is likely to have lasting benefits into adulthood. Studies from war zones have shown sleep deprivation to stunt growth by depressing growth hormone, which emphasises sleep's contribution to health. Sleep studies also show the importance of facilitating sleep by introducing a period of calm at the end of the day whether by cuddling, stories etc. for smaller children, but without the distractions of electronic gadgets. This is a time when the brain tends constructively but subconsciously to review the events which have taken place during the day, and this is continued into sleep. The practice of quiet reflection, apart from its value in teaching us to know ourselves often helps to provide insights and to sort out the important from the unimportant, and what we can alter and what is outside our control. It is an important routine introducing our use of silence which is difficult for adults to learn, and carried over into adulthood is useful to all in problem solving and helping to deal with stress. At a time when parental influence is under attack from the increasingly limited time which working parents can spend with their children, the use of silence is a great Quaker treasure we can offer our children as the foundation of a wholesome life style. In the pressured lives so many lead today the proper use of our silence as a time when we can release the tensions of the world, and view affairs with detachment and dispassion is a contribution to the art of living which cannot be exaggerated, and upon which we should concentrate explicit efforts.

We have seen many signs of a dysfunctional society; the break up of marriages, the increase in single parenting, and the alienation of so many of the young people who have little opportunity to absorb deeper values. The Rowntree Foundation, continuing the groundbreaking studies upon poverty of its founder, has pointed to the increasing gap between rich and poor, and in almost every international study of reputed social conditions in UK figure near the bottom of the league.

The 'social contract' between parents and state has placed increasing control in the hands of the state, with the dangerous assumption that the state knows best. Parents obviously have a duty to provide love and wise guidance, but a responsibility also lies upon the state to provide a framework of support which delivers acceptable values. The young are too often demonised in a society whose knee jerk reaction is to reach for punishment with little concern for causes or effectiveness. Young people's fundamental needs are for security, respect and hope, and it should be part of our expanded social aspirations to encourage policies which provide them, and be severely critical of those which fail.

If we wish to foster a climate of opinion favourable to meeting the needs of the next generation we must offer a clear vision in which younger idealists and older idealists can meet. The meeting ground is in the values of the higher life, the expansion of our social ideals and the development of a global morality which are the Quaker messages we should be offering the world.

The Manchester Conference was radical and shocked many Friends, and we must beware of trying to find solutions to today's challenges merely by reverting to stereotypes. It might be expected at this point that the claims of simplicity would be urged, as they appear to correspond so well to countering the effects of climate change. However we do not live in a simple world and simplistic solutions, reflecting an antique aesthetic are rarely effective. We can however advantageously modify our position with the advice to 'avoid excess', which perhaps does better justice to our intention than does frugality.

Although the name has died out of use the Seekers contributed much to the beginnings of our Society, and the spirit of seeking remains I believe, the prevailing one in our Society today. The search for truth led to the challenge to authority which characterised early Friends, and sprang from a habit of doubting and testing which forged their integrity.

John W. Rowntree [J.W.R.] in 1895 at the Manchester Conference observed a "mistrust of Church and Chapel" which resonates today in the discredit which internal conflicts over gender, contraception etc. continue to bring upon the established churches. The privileged status claimed for faith by priesthoods making it immune to critical examination is now unacceptable. It has as its corollary an inbuilt distrust of reason which tends to rebound upon them, and the continued application of outdated beliefs and mythologies to the problems of today has severely damaged confidence in conventional religion. We now live in a secular, better educated age, where standards of plausibility have become more critical, and evidence based reason is seen as replacing faith as our guide and the only safe way to deal with the world's complex problems. J.W.R. made an apt analogy between the 1895 Conference and the Renaissance, when blind faith was displaced by reason which then became the instrument of liberation in the search for truth.

John W.R. saw our history as one of liberation from Church dogma following the opening of an English Bible to examination, to a liberation from "Bible Worship" with the advent of new scholarship, and next to an acceptance of the liberating insights of science. The most important lesson we can learn is that to speak with a secure, confident religious identity it must be founded upon a sustained and unflinching habit of critical thought.

Religious organisations tend to resist change, and it is important to be conscious of how we adapt or fail to adapt. Failure is the outcome for some who retreat to fundamentalism, which is a regression to mediaeval superstition often with a morality to match. By making their beliefs yet more rigid they separate themselves still further from reality, and this is dangerous to everyone. Others fail to adapt successfully by retreating from the concrete world of reality into an increasingly insubstantial world of

mysticism, the psychological equivalent of shutting out reality and escaping into a monastery. As that realist Wm. Penn said “True Godliness don’t drive men out of the world but...excites their endeavours to mend it.” Quakers see their endeavours springing from what in Whittier’s treasured words is a “Rightful Mind”, and in days of catch phrases this might be reintroduced advantageously into our vocabulary.

But although willing to join with anyone in good works we need to be very wise in our ecumenical activities so that we do not appear to assent to the contradictions and inconsistencies which were the cause of the dissent of early Friends. Public credibility as a forward thinking society may suffer if we are seen to associate with churches fighting last ditch defences in support of mediaeval dogma.

There is a need for clarity to make progress upon some issues. The important ethical problems facing us today have moved to a significant degree from nuclear weapons to biological issues, and the most serious threat to mankind may well come not from nuclear war, but from disease in the form of pandemics contributed to by urban dwelling and international air travel. Co-operative international action in the face of universal threats of disease is already a reality through the WHO, and in our concern to counter the causes of war we should not overlook the need to build upon such co-operative endeavours. In a world too often driven by the propaganda of hate, and a media focussed upon antagonisms the importance of raising the good to the public eye should not be lost.

Many contemporary ethical problems arise from scientific progress, particularly in the field of medicine. Examples are advances like stem cell research, the possibilities of designing out genetic diseases, improving sustainability via genetically modified animals and plants, cloning and animal-human hybrids to assist in research or to provide organs for transplant, and many more. The application of formulaic responses is no answer, and instinctive reactions based on previous experience are particularly hazardous when the situation is novel. We need to bring clarity, which our test of the long term interests of society provides, and above all compassion to these problems.

Vague terms are always a major source of confusion. An example is the use of labels such as “unnatural” to oppose propositions which may be distasteful but to which a logical rebuttal does not come immediately to hand. Homosexuality is a good example. Such attitudes tend to be vague, emotionally loaded and favour harmful decision making. John Stuart Mill argued that the term “natural” was a source of false taste, false philosophy, false morality and bad law. Rather than formulaic responses the same moral test of the interests of society brings clarity

Similarly vague objections based upon ‘playing God’ have been raised to screening cells before they are implanted in the womb to prevent genetically transmitted diseases like Huntington’s Chorea and genetically dependent breast cancer. Arguments which would deny parents the right to remove a dreadful disease and a fatal risk, have to be set against clear benefits in situations which cry out for our compassion. The test of whether actions are in the long term interests of society is the most appropriate test and helps to clarify issues of this sort. Confused morality is at the bottom of many conflicting arguments and is a major inhibition to progress.

If Friends are to give a moral lead in areas of vital public interest they must be well informed and have clarity.

False arguments leaning more heavily upon self justification than dispassionate regard for truth are often used to disguise motives. The ‘selfish gene’ has been seized upon to justify greed on pseudoscientific grounds from Thatcherite politics to economic theory. Dawkins came under heavy criticism from his fellow primatologists and other biologists with his “Selfish Gene” theory because the concept of selfishness was at odds with the altruism and empathy they observed regularly in their subjects, and fails to explain the evolution of social groups. It is important to ask of a theory “what is its effect?”

The certainties of bygone generations are no longer open to us, but we cannot stand in the ashes of discredited beliefs crying “Woe” like Old Testament prophets. John W. Rowntree said “the age of the faith which comes by tradition is gone, and men can no longer believe unless they know why they

believe; if they are expanding those partial views of the truth that were inevitable in earlier times, then such a change will bring us, as its ultimate result, not weakness but new strength.”

There are now many Friends who do not place Christ at the centre of their beliefs, some are agnostic and some atheist. These are valued Friends who have their place in a Society which cares little for theology but a great deal about humane behaviour. We all recognise that without the Bible we would not stand where we are today, and we must also recognise that the intellectual integrity of these Friends may provide a growing point for the Society. For Friends it is the value of the truths we offer that must justify us rather than the survival of tradition.

However we must also be sensitive to the many Friends who take comfort from traditional and reverentially held beliefs, and they are due our tender apologies if the path followed here takes them upon a painful journey.

If we are to continue the process of liberation which J.W.R. recognised and accept the empowerment which rigorous application of reason offers we must accept the discipline of asking ‘How do we know this to be true?’, and have the integrity to seek the falsifying question. We must then have the courage to discard whatever fails to withstand examination.

The next great step of liberation for Friends is to rid themselves of belief in supernatural intervention. Beginnings were made when ideas like ‘heaven’, ‘hell’ and the ‘devil’ were dropped from Friend’s vocabulary, but we must continue the logical process.

There are those who still retain residues of Biblical belief in the supernatural in the form of an interventionist God from whom we may solicit help through prayer. The process has been described cynically as “the admittedly unworthy soliciting the suspension of the laws of nature in their favour”. Historically human suffering has been attributed by church doctrine to sin, but if history teaches us anything events like the holocaust together with natural disasters mean that such beliefs encounter severe difficulties. Voltaire asked pithily following an earthquake in Lisbon whether London or Paris were any less sinful than that city? But perhaps most poignant of all is the story from the holocaust of a group of Jews who put God on trial, and after finding him guilty went off to say their prayers!

If we ask “how do we know?” it becomes clear that knowledge is discovered not revealed, and neither research nor experience support intervention by supernatural forces as a result of prayer. It seems plain that if strengths are gained they come from within ourselves, but if our journey compels us to discard the baggage of the supernatural what is lost on the one hand may be gained on the other. We are still products of the creation, and our inner security gains if we reject belief in magic. Discarding the need for a father figure is a matter of putting away childish things, but does the efficacy of prayer matter if the good in us is still raised up? If we understand that strength comes from within ourselves we cease to be passive agents and gain by placing an instrument in our own hands which, in our silence can be forged to meet our challenges.

Integrity demands of us that we continue to refine usages with which many Friends are uncomfortable, and which may now be an obstacle to both ourselves and others. The Manchester Conference made radical changes and was prepared to break with traditional to meet the challenges of its day, and we should be equally ready. Quakerism does not mean donning the clothes of the archetypal Friend, but rather following in the spirit of integrity to truth which is our inheritance.

It follows that we need to re-evaluate some common usages. Words can become tyrants, and the word “spiritual” is such a word, perhaps the commonest in Quaker usage. Its meaning of “emanating from God” contains a vagueness from which the mistaken association may emerge that whatever is the content of the proposition should be granted special treatment. Speaking ‘in the spirit’ has been problematic from the first days of Christianity, and claiming to be a Spirit led Society, or to be granted discernment after waiting upon God are both rather pretentious statements. We tend to assign spirituality to ideas which spring unbidden into our minds together with a feeling of ‘rightness’, particularly in what we consider appropriate circumstances. In other situations we would describe these feelings as ‘intuitive’, and this simpler explanation might well be preferred. Intuition arises spontaneously and is

derived from the recognition of patterns stored from our previous experience. Research shows it is strongly connected with the parts of our brains controlling emotions. Where experience is valid intuition may serve us well, but it may be overvalued particularly where emotions are attached to strong personal views. In our silences, whether in our Meetings or in personal retirement we should be aware of the forces which may be acting upon us, and when we respond to the “promptings of our hearts” we should remember the importance of using our conscious or ‘deliberative’ reasoning to control and if necessary override emotional responses where they are inappropriate. Perhaps we should use Occam’s Razor and accept the simpler proposition that we are guided by the Quaker consciences inherited in our traditions, forged in our Ministry and in the conduct and conversation of Friends.

Friends are an ageing group but there are benefits of which we should take advantage. The perspective of mature Friends is an important asset for the Society because if we are to contribute to the future we must be able to hold up a mirror so that society can see itself. Having seen the follies of this world older people are anxious to defend their grandchildren and help them live in a better one. Our social ideals together with the quality of the Quaker life style may render older people more receptive to our views, and the rising national proportion of older people together with their concern for future generations indicates an increasing potential to form a politically significant body of opinion favouring our values.

Whilst we must sensitise the young to Quaker values most of our Attenders are of mature years, and we should be clear in our minds that with the predicted increase in longevity and fitness in advancing years this remains the group from which most of our enquirers will continue to come.

Belonging to religious groups confers health and longevity benefits upon its members, which probably stem from feeling part of a caring and supportive community sharing a common ethos. Ageing Friends often suffer from isolation and feelings of being no longer wanted or of use. We should be careful to nourish the essential strengths of our Society by attaching great importance to ensuring that Friends feel needed and valued. Our tradition of Friends acting without need for thanks may be counterproductive.

Many of today’s Friends are the only individuals of Quaker conviction in their family, and lack the transmission of our values from grandparents through to children which has been so important in cultivating a “Rightful Mind”. This transmission of values also helped to offset our rejection of a creed, and calls for conscious efforts to counter its absence. There may also be a tendency among less seasoned Friends to conform to a stereotype which risks following the letter rather than the spirit of Quakerism.

Changes in life style will result from the aging population, and modify the time and commitment which can be given both to business, and to the contribution many Friends can make to the Society. These pressures will continue and call for conscious adjustment of the way we conduct our affairs.

In 1652 life was short and brutal, with authority vested in Church and State and with disease and death peering over everyone’s shoulders. Religion therefore occupied a dominant place in people’s lives, and provided a mythology which for centuries had appeared to explain and give meaning to the world around them. It was the ‘only game in town’, but its explanatory power has had to yield to new light from science, although the need for religion remains powerful for good reasons. Belief systems have a vital role in enhancing security by binding societies together, contributing to individual identity, and offering meaning to life. For the logician however, religions are *in principio* unverifiable, and have the added difficult but necessary ingredient of requiring a reality beyond ourselves. Nevertheless they must meet expected standards of consistency and credibility.

The vital question for religion is whether there is indeed a reality beyond ourselves, for if there is not we are chasing an illusion.

Einstein himself rejected an interventionist God, when he said “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with human beings”. This is the God of the cosmologist, intellectually comprehensible as setting in place the laws of physics but remote from human affairs. Nevertheless Einstein plainly implies a belief in a reality outside ourselves.

The spectacular successes of modern technology may encourage us to overestimate our knowledge, but impressive although our understanding of the physical world is, reality is a taxing concept for physicists. Before considering whether there is a reality beyond ourselves, we need to understand the nature of our knowledge of the physical world. When we move from the concrete world of solid everyday objects to the microworld of particles which underpins everything in it, and ask for example what an electron is, the answer is given in a set of complicated differential equations with which an electron complies. These equations consist of mathematical symbols whose relationships to each other can be defined precisely but which have no other reality. This is the nature of mathematics, which is the language in which we understand the universe. Arthur Eddington in his 1929 Swarthmoor Lecture makes the position plain. "The exploration of the external world by the methods of physical science leads not to a concrete reality but to a shadow world of symbols".

For the writer the most persuasive argument for a reality beyond ourselves lies with Plato, respected by Penn and other early Friends. Plato understood absolutes like the good, truth etc. to exist timelessly and incorruptibly 'out there'. In his analogy of the cave he suggested that life was but a shadow of a greater reality whose existence we could infer. These views can be very simply illustrated in their mathematical form, and have been embraced by Gödel, Penrose and many others who like Plato see [true] mathematical objects as existing in a timeless world outside ourselves. Objects like straight lines, circles etc. can only exist as approximations in the world of physical things, and the "ideal" or perfect object exists only in the mind. For Plato such perfect objects like absolute truth, goodness, and justice are timeless inferred truths because they are not subject to the corruptibility of the flesh.

From that most rigorous of disciplines the mathematician Roger Penrose has stated his belief in the accessibility of this reality by the creative mind "breaking through" into the transcendent Platonic realm and many others have related similar experiences. He offers a good illustration of the modern argument for the Platonic existence of mathematical concepts. The Mandelbrot set is a truth independent of the particular mathematician examining it, and computers can only ever provide an approximation to its structure. This structure has a deeper existence of its own independent of the computer which generates it, because however powerful the computer there will always be a finer set of detail still to be found beneath the last expression. Interestingly it also generates beauty.

Friends may feel that here there may be the plausible arguments we seek to support the existence of a transcendent reality, and that if we infer a reality outside ourselves which we can reach, we may also understand it as existing in "Mind".

Arthur Eddington, who co-operated with Einstein in testing his theory of relativity and was also part of the group taking part in the Manchester Conference, became influential in resisting the materialism of the age at a time when scientific advances were revolutionising our understanding of the physical world. But however great the awe inspired by his cosmology he did not find an important connection with his faith, probably because he did not see it as helping to tell the difference between right and wrong. However both Eddington and Einstein were passionate believers in humane behaviour, but as we have seen to provide a rational explanation for morality we have to turn not to physics but to the much more complex science of biology.

We see order in the universe and there are rational grounds for accepting a reality which transcends ourselves. Friends and others of similar persuasion may identify that reality as implying the existence of "Mind", which however miniscule our understanding of the cosmos we can to some degree comprehend. If we accept that truth is discovered not revealed then we observe a slow development of our understanding of our place in the cosmos. The order we recognise in the world helps us to survive by allowing us to make at least some predictions of the next event. This resonates with the order we see in the universe and makes it comprehensible to us. "Mind" is an important concept not only as an integral part of being human but because if there is to be a bridge between science and religion, it is here that it must be crossed.

Einstein said that “the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is its comprehensibility” and the fact that we can recognise order in the universe and reach out even if ever so feebly, and find something unexpectedly comprehensible is a source of renewal of our faith. Plato’s analogy of the cave remains the best paradigm of in our knowledge which has the substance of shadows on a wall, but allows us to infer the light which produces them.

Quakerism is ultimately experiential and science is giving us a deeper understanding of the world which allows us to expand our experience to include our relationships with everything in the world around us. What we bring to the future discharges our debt to the past only if our increased understanding of the world helps us to speak to its condition better. This does not mean we put on the outward clothes of Quakerism past but rather that we nourish the principles which gave it life. New light often means radical reappraisal of treasured beliefs, but out of the whirlwind can spring a deeper vision and a renewed faith which can empower our love in a way which can speak more clearly to the condition of the world today.

The challenge for Quakerism is posed by the still small voice which came after the earthquake, wind and fire asking “What doest thou here?”

In Friendship

