

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Several years ago I was given the opportunity of attending a week's course for Prison Chaplains from a range of denominations. Each day participants were expected to attend three acts of worship. Responsibility for holding the services was passed around the different churches represented. We four Quakers found ourselves offering a Meeting for Worship at the close of the week, which seemed a bit formidable in the face of all those 'professionals' but we should not have worried, they joined us wholeheartedly. I came away impressed by the diverse priests and ministers and much moved by their devotions. Yet I also felt that as a Friend I had been entrusted with a religious tradition and practice of great value, that must be kept going. But how best to do that?

So the theme for this essay proved the occasion to stop mulling over ideas and to address the issue squarely by contributing to the creative dialogue that is taking place among Friends (and maybe their critics). My leading is that the dialogue, even when it has to focus on detail, needs to remain aware of the broad context of that wonderful infuriating world that we find ourselves living in. A core question then has to be: what is the nature of the human condition that leads to religious practices? Next, how is the world changing in ways that affect religious perspectives? Turning to the Religious Society of Friends, what changes is it experiencing now and what are our anxieties regarding it? What are its strengths? Finally, what might/could the RS of F be like in the future that appears to be looming ahead of us? What needs to be perpetuated is not just an institution but the spiritual values that inform it, that bring people to life.

The Human Predicament

Who remembers now the shock of their birth? We carry with us from childhood a bundle of images, sensations, fragments of the self that was to emerge as a distinctive *Me* among other people who introduced us to a remarkable world. 'Seize life' they might have said 'and the good that it may offer you'. But then it began to enter our understanding that lives would end in death, often in agony, sometimes at the hands of other people. Our precious being was not for all time and beliefs in an after-life asserted by some could not be verified. Wishful thinking? Even our food consisted of the remains of what was formerly alive. So children are given much to bear that we all continue to carry.

Later on, of course, they may come to appreciate that humans possess the special

ability to reflect upon the nature of the universe in which they find themselves. A remarkable consciousness has emerged in the process of creation and it has been entrusted to us, though we speculate that there may be other beings with a similar gift out somewhere in the cosmos. But however carefully science describes the intricacies of the natural world, relating phenomena in ever more subtle ways, it cannot avoid a profound mystery. Why does the world exist at all and ourselves within it? Could it be any different from what it appears to be? And how on earth should we live upon Earth, especially an Earth in a state of flux where its diverse peoples often fall out with tragic consequences?

Religion makes an entry here. Rather than removing the 'mystery' in which we have our being it asks us to recognise that one exists, to accept the uncertainty with good grace while shedding the burdens of self-centred insecurity. The idea of God serves not as an explanation of the cosmos but as an expression of that 'mystery' surrounding us that carries the conviction that 'good' is worth striving for, such as in the vision endlessly painted by Edward Hicks of a *Peaceable Kingdom* (1). So religious practices provide cultural forms for marking occasions for thanksgiving, the need for forgiveness, lament, marking birth and marriage and death, affirmation, praise, pleas for help, remembrance, calls to remain steadfast as in Psalm 23. . . . As Quakers we have our own distinctive ways of doing such things, although our practices across the world vary from silent worship into more directly programmed services.

A Changing World

A striking feature of our current world is the frantic rise in the human population. Advances in technology, agriculture and medicine enable more people to live longer but they are crowding into sprawling cities. Many other changes follow on from that: intense demands for materials, energy and water that lay environments to waste or pollute them, though it has to be said that those demands come strongly from the wealthy communities which indulge rising material expectations rather than the poor faster-growing ones. We sense that before long if we don't stop contaminating the very atmosphere, climate change will render many regions uninhabitable either for ourselves or for other living creatures. And the humans most affected will be the poor who crowd into the low-lying margins of the land. They will join the refugees; they will be labelled as 'the problem' by whoever wields political power.

Power - who has it? Just as in the past when a nation might come into dominance for a while then wane as a rival takes over, this century looks bound to see countries like China, India and Brazil exercising real clout. Perhaps an indication of this arose

when, straight after the Chinese had hosted the Olympic Games with a flourish, business malpractice in the USA tipped the whole world into a financial crisis. A super-power was exposed as vulnerable, not only to invasive attack as on 9/11 but to its own corruption.

But the urgent problems facing the world are not simply who are to become the top-dogs but those of coping with the effects of climate-change. Carbon dioxide, that docile gas that Joseph Priestley in 1772 was pleased to employ in making soda-water, has become cast as an arch-villain because we now generate more of it than plant-life can absorb. It's crucial that humans should make effective and fair use of ever more limited resources and reduce their over-reliance on armaments, notably nuclear weapons. If other living creatures had a voice, apart maybe from lice they'd be quick to make it clear that they would be better off without us and our arrogant disrespect. These global issues require global co-operation. A framework exists for this in the form of the United Nations. The organisation is often criticised for being unwieldy, ineffective, costly and so on, nevertheless it does signify that all countries in the world are entitled to a voice, that serious problems are no respecters of national boundaries, we need to get a whole-world act together and soon. Unfortunately such over-arching attempts at international diplomacy are relatively new in human history. Are we learning fast enough? One positive sign is the award of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics to Elinor Ostrom for her studies into how communities can successfully co-operate in the management of scarce resources.

Although so recent in arrival the internet is already bringing about profound changes in people's lives, how, what and when they communicate. The invention of printing led to readers isolated within the pages of their books; the internet creates persons plugged in to an interactive network of contacts where information keeps fizzing in umpteen directions world-wide. There is scope for spontaneous unpredictable activity as never before, people's lives are being seriously affected by it in terms of how they learn, occupy their leisure, publish, buy goods and services, act politically, conduct business, and as with any new technology commit novel crimes - sin finds a way. On the side of virtue there are 120 computers in Friends House; the Quaker Bookshop operates on-line; there's a stylish website. Come to think of it, I'm using a computer to write this; without one, I'd not have started.

How does religion fare in all this? It's very much still there but given to turmoil and often called upon to boost political aspirations. Christianity in all its manifestations still claims the most adherents but one in four of the world's population are Muslims.(2) Islam has spread away from the Middle East where it originated to become a significant presence in many parts of the world. There are estimated to be

1.6 million Muslims in the UK in addition to Hindus, Sikhs and others. People from the former British colonies have in their turn come to colonise us bringing their faiths with them; their places of worship might be just down the road from our own.

When I was a Quaker Prison Minister in the 1990s I saw the construction of an interfaith centre that afforded space for the statutory Christian Chapel together with a multi-purpose worship area equipped with rack for discarded shoes and showers for ritual cleansing. I read Muslim pamphlets on worship that were left for the taking and found much in common with what was expressed there. In such ways we are exposed to the complexities of faith as never before alongside an increasing bombardment from the militant atheists.

While other faith traditions are being brought into this country the Christian churches appear to be increasingly under siege. Congregations are frequently in decline. The Anglicans world-wide communion has screwed itself into a tangle over gay priests and female bishops. In bookshops the main-stream religious publications occupy just a few shelves, up-staged by “Self-help, mind and soul” guides and eclipsed by solid walls devoted to crime novels - reading about sin’s OK if you can package it as entertainment. Sunday morning activities for many people amount to life-style choices where going to church is simply an option alongside washing down the car, taking the kids to their football matches or curling up for an extra hour in bed with *The News of the World* or an iPod. Churches that grow tend to be evangelical, hard-nosed in the certainties of their message.

In his book *Down to Earth* (1996) Donald Reeves looked at the plight of the Christian Church in the light of his experience as an Anglican priest pursuing a radical ministry in the West End of London.⁽³⁾ His analysis remains pertinent and has much to offer Friends. As a young man he had for a while attended an Anglo-Catholic church which was confident in its teaching, impressive in its rituals and those who attended formed a cheerful fellowship. But to Reeves there was one fatal flaw, the church was all-consuming, everyday life was pushed aside, the congregation’s life experiences were neither valued nor welcomed let alone trusted for the insights they might bring. The church had isolated itself from the earthy world in which Jesus walked among the ordinary people ministering to their needs where he happened to find them. So Reeves left. After several years wandering in a spiritual wilderness he discovered a vocation as a priest which led him eventually to take up a post where he might “draw together a Christian community which would be as inclusive as possible and where the boundaries would be blurred”.

Current Fears and Opportunities in the Religious Society of Friends

Viability of Local Meetings

Because we don't employ Pastors and most Meeting houses are relatively modest buildings with scope for hiring out for community uses the Society of Friends is cheap to run compared with most other denominations. We also practise 'Small is Beautiful' - Quaker worship is inherently flexible; a small group can get going almost anywhere. Nevertheless, if a Quaker presence is to be sustained in one place there needs to be a strong core of active Friends. Unfortunately, in common with many other churches, people decline into infirmity, move away or just lose interest, so local Meetings can reach a point where the routine procedures no longer enable Friends to function but begin to feel a liability. It becomes harder to fill what are regarded as essential posts because people fear being 'lumbered' with responsibilities when life loads enough onto them as it is. Many members are fending for themselves in socially demanding times, while others have partners not in membership who will respect a certain level of commitment but draw a line under it. Though a drive to bring in more members would be an answer, a struggling group may find itself unable to work up the energy to do this effectively. So Meetings fade away. When they do so are they ever missed?

In practice Meetings within a regional area will often attempt to help each other out in these circumstances. Quaker Quest has proved a useful means for outreach where smaller Meetings can join forces. The format of the presentations does not require much in the way of resources; its strength emerging from the quality of the personal testimonies that Friends offer. What's needed now is other forms of witness that can be taken out into the communal spaces where the rest of the world spends its time. We have created a unique institution in Quakerism, yet what matters profoundly is sharing, speaking out for, the clutch of values from which that institution arose rather than a set of regulations.

What's to be done? Stop waiting for people to find us. Find them!

Membership

About twenty-five thousand people are pleased to associate with Friends. What seems to be apparent is that although that level remains quite steady the proportion of those who take up full membership is dropping. Are Attenders wary of what might be asked of them? Could the concept of 'Membership' be a problem?

In some respects the way in which we treat membership is peculiar. In other denominations those intending to be received into membership often undergo a period of induction, such as the Anglican Confirmation Class. Formal admission takes place at a special service where the person concerned makes a statement of faith and commitment to the doctrines/ practices of the Church. In the case of the Baptists this takes the form of total immersion, which is a fairly dramatic process that follows the giving of a personal testimony. The person then becomes a member of 'The Church' essentially for life. As a new Catholic Tony Blair commented with satisfaction that the Church that he had joined was truly universal. A way of looking at it might be to say that one's relationship with God is not subject to geographical boundaries.

What about Quakers? An Attender who has come to feel at home in our ways will probably discuss making an application for membership with Elders and Overseers who will encourage them to make sure that they have a broad experience of Meetings and have read appropriate literature. There are a few events arranged to help Attenders in this position but no one is *required* to go to them. Then a letter of application is written to the Area Meeting Clerk and visitors are appointed to talk to the Attender usually in their own home (in my own case I occupied a hospital bed!) The visit is the heart of the process, a profound experience for all concerned, not an interview but an occasion for questions to be asked in both directions. It is a privilege to hear of the stages in someone's spiritual journey and to support them in taking a further step. The visitors draw up a report and I am pleased that in current practice the applicant may see it and suggest amendments if they so wish. At an Area Meeting the report is read out, a decision is made, rarely other than acceptance, and a Friend is asked to welcome the new Member at a suitable opportunity. So the moment you become a Quaker you are not actually present in the flesh! There is no rite of passage beyond the simple welcome that comes later, though you may be given a copy of *Quaker Faith & Practice*.

The next thing to notice is that the membership relates to the geographical region of the Area Meeting. Here is the community in which you hope to play a part and the one that accepts a commitment towards you. However, if you move away there has to be a formal transfer of membership. But since we all may participate in the life of Britain Yearly Meeting why not be admitted regionally into a national membership?

Anomalies arise when Members drift apart from us and then, if attempts are made to contact them, they declare that though they no longer wish to get involved in Meeting they still feel themselves to be Quakers. Should one regard this as 'sentimental membership' or could we be missing something? Sometimes a turn in life's fortunes brings them back. The 2001 Census revealed that more than 70% of people described

themselves as Christian, though of these only 15% were active members of a church.(4)

In contrast most meetings include an Attender or two who are as devoted to its welfare as one might wish yet for perhaps arcane reasons resolutely refuse to apply for Membership. Does that put the whole notion of 'Membership' in question?

So why do people join organisations? It's not only the Churches that are finding themselves short of adherents, the main political parties also share similar problems. Away from socialising on 'Face-book' people band together readily enough to form protest groups when there is an immediate issue at stake, an aircraft runway scheduled to cross their back-yard. What else draws crowds and passionate involvement? Pop festivals and football come to mind. In the case of the latter supporters enjoy the emotional swoops of the game, shout themselves hoarse but neither get called upon to risk incurring nor to take a penalty. After the match they travel home where life carries on much as usual, though being a supporter of Everton, say, rather than Liverpool becomes part of their personal identity..

For me, having to make an application to join the Religious Society of Friends is a worthwhile experience because one has to take stock, review one's spiritual development and knowingly accept that Membership may bring challenges as well as fulfilment. In my own case years ago I made an application in rather strained circumstances. Some time later I happened to meet again the two weighty Friends who had been assigned to visit me. One looked at the other with a sly grin saying "Were we right to let him in?"

What's to be done? Take a fresh look at all our assumptions about membership.

Matters of Belief

Forty years ago the implications of the visitor's question were given real edge by a forthright analysis of the woes of the Society of Friends by L. Hugh Doncaster who discerned a trend:

In the last ten or fifteen years there has been a marked trend within London Yearly Meeting towards individualism and away from corporate commitment, so that any Friend can believe anything and the Society of Friends stands for nothing.

He summed up 'authentic Quakerism' as:

. . . A corporate response in Christian discipleship to the leadings of God, testifying not only to the reality of the light of Christ in the hearts of all men, but to Friends' conviction that a true following of this light involves a whole range of response in relation to church organisation, social concern and personal living.

He conceded that a variety of belief among Friends was acceptable but feared that there was too much fluffy mindedness about and this did us no good. His concern surfaced at Meeting for Sufferings which decided to circulate to all Meetings a discussion document prepared by him. The accompanying minute includes the following comment:

. . . a concern that our increasing diversity is imperilling our spiritual unity. There has always been diversity, but there has always been clarity as to what the Society of Friends stands for in Christian faith and practice. Yet at a time when, as in the seventeenth century, multitudes are seeking a faith to live by, we tend sometimes to represent ourselves wholly as seekers rather than finders, as exponents of a "do-it-yourself" religion which can easily be misinterpreted as a "do-as-you-please" religion, non-dogmatic, non-creedal and ultimately non-Christian. This can give rise to a representation of the testimonies as optional extras rather than as organic parts of our faith, springing from our corporate experience of the guidance of God. Hugh Doncaster has reminded us of the dangers of legalism and rigidity, the danger of static support of the establishment without openness to change, but he has also reminded us that the mechanism of change is built into the structures of Quakerism. . . . (5)

Writing recently in *The Friend* Edward Hoare strikes a similar note when he argues that 'non-theist Friends' are misrepresenting the Quaker faith.(6) In the same article he also draws attention to anxieties that were being expressed in 1837 by an Orthodox Friend in Philadelphia about those who are ". . . carried away by the stream of popularity and fashionable opinions which now seems threatening to overwhelm our poor, tired, religious Society. . ."

Outside observers are quite prepared to join in. A Guardian leader "In praise of the Quakers" which welcomed our decision to conduct marriages for gay couples prompted a testy letter complaining that the Quakers were described as a 'church' because they did not represent "the Church as Christ's body".

They are in effect a religious sect grounded in human-centred religious emotionalism where the creed is not obligatory, Christ's divinity is an optional add-on and any doctrine of revelation is based upon personal feelings. It has simply taken Quakers 40 years to catch up with the zeitgeist, the spirit of individualistic self-fulfilment that has possessed the west and seeks to suck in and transform all the churches. Quakers' silent "worship" is yet another example of western liberals looking into a deep well and seeing their own reflection.(7)

No one saw fit to counter this letter though beneath it in the correspondence column was one expressing gratitude to the Quakers for their involvement in the Kindertransports during 1939. Perhaps matters were best left there, though we cannot rest on the laurels of an act of compassion now seventy years old.

If I am right in regarding these examples as straws in the wind, then maybe we should accept that tensions between different expressions of Quaker faith, if not the frothings of rampant individualism, are a near permanent feature of our community. I would advise that we simply accept this but strive to ensure that discussion about deeply-felt issues be conducted in a peaceable manner. The Swarthmore Lecturer for 2009, Peter Eccles, reviews how we try to achieve this when he discusses the Quaker business method.(8) Meetings for Business create an arena, if ever there was, for practising virtues that can transfer to other social contexts.

We already have established (if occasionally forgotten) means for dealing with problems: personal concerns can be worked over in specially convened 'threshing' meetings; outcomes may be approved by an Area Meeting and then forwarded to Meeting for Sufferings as in the example of Hugh Doncaster's prophet-style analysis of our ills quoted above. Guidance does emerge but not in the form of official doctrine. Our position about creeds is that we do not put members through any form of creedal test, which is not the same as indulging them to believe just what they like.

Lacking a formal priesthood who might be charged with bringing backsliders into line ministry is a responsibility that we all carry, at once a source of strength and a potential weakness should our hearts and minds be left unprepared. One reason why people might not wish to join Quakers is that they fear being unequal to the apparent burden of spiritual discipline involved. We cannot assume that given a suitable book-list people will readily take on board the subtle complexities of Quaker practice. Those coming to us nowadays, in my impression, are often not particularly well-versed in religious culture. They realise that there is really something in it for them but hardly know where to begin, not least because many of the traditional

formulations seem off-putting or they suspect that a church may be an outfit with designs upon them rather than a community prepared to share the quality at the heart of its life.

Fortunately as Quakers we are becoming much more aware of and responsive to such difficulties. Woodbrooke has for over a century provided a powerhouse for Quaker studies. In recent times what it provides has shifted emphasis from long-term courses to the short and sharp intense experiences that people can afford in terms of both cash and time. It also goes out on- the-road to reach those who might never trek to Birmingham. And then it has begun producing study packs that Meetings can use as the basis for enabling people to grapple with Quakerism. *Hearts and Minds*” was a successful example and “*Becoming Friends*” promises to help those who have responded to our outreach programmes. This change in strategy is obviously sound. However, it does make great demands upon the tutorial staff involved, who are exposed to the dangers of burn-out in their need to respond brightly to ever-changing groups of newcomers.

Apart from the stream of short courses available from Woodbrooke the scheme *Equipping for Ministry* offers a part-time but substantial alternative to the former term-length residential programmes of study. Above all it helps to develop Friends well-grounded in their Quakerism who will be able to lead discussions and other activities at the local or area level.

An innovation this year at the Britain Yearly Meeting/ Gathering was the material provided beforehand for Local Meetings to work through. This meant that not only those attending the event in York were well prepared but the Friends who stayed at home could be involved too. I am sure that this contributed to the success of the occasion. I trust that these developments will be sustained; we need to become a Religious *Learning* Society of Friends, inclusive of all abilities

If that comes to pass, I do not see us arriving at a neat package of beliefs. A core of agreement about many things, I trust, but religious concepts like ‘God’, ‘Christ’, ‘Inner Light’ are essentially contested, that is to say what understanding we have of them must arise from reflection, discussion, respectful exchange of insights and findings. Finality is not to be expected. The history of Christianity is littered with the casualties from doctrinal disputes, their moans echo still. We must not add to them. Rather we must continue to cultivate our tradition of careful listening in generous encounter with others. That means loving our neighbours even if they seem to entertain some curious ideas or they in their turn regard us as strange (well, we are a little bit strange aren’t we?).

But after all that what does 'belief' involve? The White Queen told Alice that in her youth she had believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.(9) But should religious belief be regarded as a regime of spiritual press-ups where the tougher it is to take on the more fit does the believer become to be counted as a Christian? Believing is a disposition to think within a certain frame of reference that may or may not manifest itself in a person's overt behaviour. Any belief will arise in a context which gives it whatever significance it may carry. So beliefs may be practical (a flu' jab will protect you from infection), normative (you ought not steal), superstitious (touch wood to avoid harm), or incidental i.e. have no direct bearing upon your life.

If you believe something to be true, say that smoking is injurious to health, then you might justify your position by calling upon a range of medical studies that supply 'factual evidence'. You'll then abstain from smoking and advise others to do likewise. However, a doctrine like the 'Virgin Birth' arose from interpretations of a limited ambiguous text about ancient events. Subsequently church tradition has invested value in the supposed miracle but I hazard that most of those who accept the belief will pursue their lives little differently in consequence (unless they accept the notion that acts of procreation are inherently 'unclean'). What it might do is to lend significance or meaning to special circumstances. When we come to the idea of 'God' all we have is a great mass of stories and cultural commentaries which are compounded by the mystery mentioned earlier that human consciousness exists at all.

So what do Quakers say about ourselves? Those neat yellow 'business-cards' designed to give an enquirer a quick Quaker fix declare:

- ★ There is something sacred in all people.
- ★ All people are equal before God.
- ★ Religion is about the whole of life.
- ★ In stillness we find a deeper sense of God's presence.
- ★ True religion leads to respect for the earth and all life upon it.
- ★ Each person is unique, precious, a child of God.

That will do to start a conversation. But what is behind those apparently simple statements is a network of implications that Quakers have teased out in confronting that question 'How should I live in this world among other people?'

What's to be done? Avoid becoming fearful or resentful about our diversity, which is unlikely to grow less in the modern world, but relish it. (10)

Reading the Bible

Although Bibles always feature in our Meeting Houses I suspect that they are read much less often by Friends now than in earlier times. If so, Friends are missing out on a remarkable resource. Understandably people steer clear of 'Bible-bashers', those who rigidly insist on finding a text for every purpose and have set interpretations that you must accept if you are to be reckoned among the Godly. The Bible is a compendium of documents of many kinds: legends, regulations, songs, genealogies, letters, poems, diatribes, history . . . and it takes a bit of effort to appreciate each one in terms of how, why and for whom it was written, and what has happened to it since. The Bible represents accumulated material about the developing religious experience of the Jews and the outcomes from which Christianity emerged. A mass of documents were sifted by the early Christian Church to establish an approved collection that became the source of what we read today. Much later the Protestant Reformation liberated the texts into languages that everyone could read for themselves and the early Friends soaked up that freedom to encounter what they contained. For them it was an authority but one to be read in the full awareness that the texts had been composed by humans drawing words from the light of their own religious experiences.

From the nineteenth century onwards scholars began to deconstruct the Bible. Instead of simply venerating it as a volume with quasi-magical properties, as it is still used for swearing in witnesses in a Court of Law, they asked the awkward questions of it that they might have raised in respect of any other historical document. And of course they revealed anomalies, oddities and gaps. If this were indeed the divine word then God could have done with some editorial help. Such an approach would be upsetting to any who seek security in the authority of a text that, although it describes earthly events happening in a past world, has been set loftily on a brass lectern way above our level.

In my student days various Christian groups arranged Bible Studies and I attended some of these because I felt that even if I were to finish up as an atheist I ought to know what it was I wasn't believing. Discussions were always rather earnest and directed towards finding some kind of pre-approved answer which God had tucked in there for us. Afterwards the young men involved tended to engage in horseplay indicating that the strain had proved altogether too much and they needed to show that they were not really softies. Of course I came to realise (and I hope the others did too) that Bible study does not have to be like that. These days I relish occasions to probe deeply into the Bible as a book that has emerged from human struggles. Many of the characters behave badly, yet their failings chasten ours.

In the New Testament we meet the awesome yet immediate figure of Jesus. There was nothing in his teaching which had not already arisen in the Hebrew tradition. What he did was bring people afresh to experience the vigour, simplicity and inclusiveness of that tradition. In view of all the later Christian accretions his message was plain: love God and your neighbour as yourself; you would count as his Friend if you would but obey his command, namely to love one another. That's the heart of it and breathtaking in its implications. The only time he wrote, according to the Gospel, was when he was challenged about the woman taken in adultery. Weighing his judgement he wrote with his finger in the dust.(11)

It was through active engagement with the people he found about him that he showed what he was getting at. He enacted innumerable acts of compassion, set aside conventions and told stories that illustrated love in action. In the face of danger he stuck to his mission, carrying it into Jerusalem where the critics of his radicalism were concentrated. And putting a seal on his commitment he chose not to avoid the resulting death. But that was not the end; a living spirit inflamed his followers and the mission spread beyond the Jews to all peoples who would listen.

What does this call for from us? Not a great deal in the way of belief, simply a willingness to act according to the tenet of loving God and one's neighbour. The demanding part is forever summoning up the imagination to discern God in the grain of sand and to acknowledge everyone else as within the compass of God's love. Drawing upon the Bible helps here. Friends please note.

Once the Bible reached a particular size it stopped growing. Many devotional works came to be written without being added to it. Something we have done as Quakers is to compile our own spiritual anthology, *Q. Faith & Practice*, which is a record not of doctrine but of often hard-won discoveries arising from what we do. Other Yearly Meetings produce them too. There is a new edition in each generation to include developing experience, insights, wisdom. The next one should appear a decade ahead. In time successive editions of *QFP* will build up into a kind of sacred journal for our faith community which should be valuable also to a much wider circle than ourselves.

What's to be done? Recover the wonderful short bible commentaries that used to be contributed to The Friend by Stephen Allott and find other writers to add to them.

Quaker Testimonies About Language

Quakers tread some rather fine lines about language. The basis for setting aside creeds is that religious experience may be a place from which words arise but even the best of those words fall short of adequate description. A creed may indicate the scope of belief; it should not become elevated into dogma. On the other hand in our Meetings for Worship we allow “the promptings of love and truth” to find expression as vocal ministry. One of our testimonies is to upholding the truth and we utter slogans like ‘speaking truth to power’ (Machiavelli did as much)(12). In Meetings for Business we take scrupulous care to record accurate minutes which record how we have attempted to respond to what we discern as the will of God. So we work language hard as a tool for conducting the life of our religious community and for taking action out into the world. Like all tools it needs to be handled with care for appropriate tasks.

The early Quakers claimed that it was possible for all to be directly open to the light of Christ that would enable them to see the world anew and how far it fell short of the ‘peaceable kingdom’. Truths would be revealed to the clear-sighted. The word would be given with the freedom to speak out. Indeed many precious insights were gained, as we know.

‘Truth’, however, is not a concept that is always cut-and-dried. It cannot be handed round like candies from a paper bag. In different contexts what might be counted as ‘true’ will have to satisfy criteria that fit the case: the rules of logic; factual evidence; the interpretation of values etc.. I suggest that we place our emphasis upon the process of truth-telling, the striving to be truthful, while being honest to God about our uncertainties. Constructive dialogue may function to clarify misconceptions; it is an important aspect of Quaker peace-building in action.

What’s to be done? Speak up but mind what we say and how we say it.

Quakers and the Arts

Casting aside frippery and folly, not without good reason, the early Quakers turned against decoration, music, drama (though George Fox did have a flair for street theatre, unrecognised as such). Rather than discern what might be worthwhile, they would have none of it. Science and technology flourished to excellent effect in Quaker hands but the Arts were viewed with suspicion right into the 20th century. There was an implicit creed: “Thou shalt be grey!” (John Dalton discovered the

phenomenon of colour blindness by mistakenly buying his sister red stockings.) It was the numerous botanists and nurserymen who quietly brought colour into Quaker and many other lives.

Friends House in the old days was a dignified, soundly-built structure but bleak. It neither reflected nor offered much to the warmth and humanity of the people who used it. But going in there once I was astonished to hear music pounding the bare corridors. A peep through a doorway revealed Adrian Boult rehearsing the National Youth Orchestra in the suite from *Carmen*. The place was brought alive!

By the 1950s a fair sprinkling of Quakers were active in various Arts and Crafts. Yet they felt that what they might have to offer the religious community was little appreciated or even resisted. (Even now, when the policy document *Framework for Action* came out there were grumbles about using photographs to give it the impact that might ensure it would be picked up, read and respected.) So the Quaker Fellowship of the Arts was formed to encourage the pioneers cultivate the creative imagination, show what might be possible. For me a key example came at an event arranged by the QFA at Congénie, a village with Quaker associations in the south of France. Groups of us were asked to create a musical setting for a few lines from the Latin Mass using no more than improvised instruments - and in a hurry! The resulting performances were crude but intensely powerful; they melded into a vital embodiment of worship to be carried over into later silence.

In the past half-century much has happened to lead Quakers from the tundra. The Arts have powered several Swarthmore Lectures. The Peace Action Caravan showed how drama could launch one of our testimonies vividly in the market places around the country. The Leaveners also used drama, this time to engage the energies and imaginations of young people in discovering the power of faith. An oratorio *The Gates of Greenham* filled the Royal Festival Hall. From a start as an activity in a children's meeting, the Quaker Tapestry emerged as a major craft project that involved hundreds of workers and now has been visited by thousands. Applesseed is a long-standing programme that nurtures spiritual growth by drawing upon the ways whereby the Arts afford access to the depths of one's being. Woodbrooke includes a well-equipped art-room among its facilities as a matter of course. All over the country Meetings arrange concerts and exhibitions. Our membership now includes many fine poets, artists, actors and musicians. Run on a shoe-string the QFA eventually ran out of steam but its job had been done. The new Quaker Centre at Friends House illustrates how an aesthetic sensibility can enhance all our values by offering the world a welcome that is engaging without being superficial.

What's to be done? Welcome what the artists among us can offer to the community. They too may have prophetic gifts, can bear witness and show us how to connect with the essentially human.

Some Quaker Strengths

Our central insight is that our faith means nothing if its implications are not lived through in the world. Time and again Quakers have in a spirit of compassion taken on small practical projects that have grown beyond their origins. A good example is the "Circles of Support and Accountability" as a means for steering sex offenders away from further trouble and enabling them to contribute positively to the community.. The Mennonites in Canada pioneered the approach but Quakers brought it into this country and saw it through its early trials until it has now become a national scheme with off-shoots abroad. Complementing that initiative "Surviving Together" supports women who have suffered the effects of sexual abuse. It is spreading from a modest start in Norwich. Faced with an evident need we ask: What can be done about it?

Quakerism is readily portable. Worship can take place almost anywhere, spontaneously. Meetings can be replicated quickly, if the will is there. Young and old participate on an equal basis, they are all given the freedom to offer service. We have come to realise that the inner light shines all the brighter when it is not shaded under a bushel. We speak personally to persons as in the simple but powerful format of Quaker Quest.

I must admit to being startled when a visitor who had been given a copy of our *Advices & Queries* was highly critical of its language, the mannered style. What even that cherished opening? We can't be complacent. However, what I find significant about *A&Q* is the approach which conveys a sense of care for the listeners. One is asked to reflect deeply on matters of spiritual concern but without being harassed or nagged - much more likely to win a constructive response.

The testimonies to 'Truth' (bearing witness), 'Equality' (respecting all other persons), 'Simplicity' (cutting the cackle; sparing the trees) and 'Peace' (striving to build trust in difficult relationships) are broad brush in the spirit of the commandments of Jesus. They call upon us to keep interpreting them in terms of the here and now; it forms the essence of our radical prophetic tradition. The Arts are relevant here because they nurture the creative imagination required to travel through a culturally complex world. Think of the poems by U.A. Fanthorpe that gave a voice to people marginalised by hospital routines.(13)

Our business method really is distinctive. Yes, it can prove long-winded and numbing to the buttocks but the practice nurtures many admirable qualities in those who take part: inclusiveness; integrity; the capacity to listen as well as to speak; a willingness to think outside one's individual concerns or interests to find what might be a Godly solution to a problem; care in drafting minutes that all present can accept there and then.

Those qualities transfer to situations requiring mediation, where parties in dispute need to find common ground where their differences may be resolved. For a small society we do manage to get ourselves heard quite often in the public sphere on account of a strong track record. That could be because although we bring religious insight to a situation, we don't claim special privileges beyond a fair share of respect. The social stresses arising from climate change will place a premium upon those who can facilitate co-operation between competing factions.

What's to be done? Add to this list.

Discovering What the Religious Society of Friends Could Be

The recent 'Outreach Issue' of *the Friend* presents an excellent view of where the RSF stands now. Growing beyond that the 'Framework for Action' sets out a programme of development for the next five years in which central support will be directed towards assisting initiatives taken at the local Meeting level. But there needs to be more of us. As mentioned above there is a large number of people in the UK with a vague religious allegiance. Surely we can offer them something in terms of a spiritual community where there is an unforced fellowship, affairs are conducted with integrity and service is offered to society at large. To reach and to stimulate them we'll have to go to all those places where they spend their time, down the market, up the Festival!. How about aiming for a membership of a hundred thousand by 2020? Not so much larger Meetings but more of them, though letting a lot more people into the Society will change the Quaker dynamics. Faith will be called for.

To achieve that aim we must build upon what we have done so far to become a consciously learning society both for our own good and all the better to explain ourselves when called upon. Increasingly Friends will be active on-line because through their education young people simply take the cyber-world for granted. But the traffic need not be just one-way from 'suppliers' to 'receivers' In five or six year's time thoughts about the next edition of *Quaker Faith & Practice* will be in order. The present edition is available on-line. An editorial group will be appointed

to revise it. Their task might be helped if a website were to be set up on which Friends could down-load suggestions for material to be included. Moreover there might be opportunities for others to comment on what's being put forward - call them 'Friendly Tweaks'. So new contributions could emerge from an on-line open dialogue among Friends.

The silent Meeting for Worship, despite the vulnerability of the process, is of immense value. I would never wish to be without it. That critic's remark that we do but look into a deep well and see our own reflections made fine rhetoric but is well wide of the mark. Yes, it may bring us to see honestly who we are in the eyes of God but worship can take us beyond ourselves out into the world at last given strength to play our part alongside others in mending hurts or celebrating the gift of life.

Nevertheless, as I found at that musical workshop in France and in a multi-denominational group of prison ministers, that form of worship is well complemented by different kinds. So let's be daring and try some variations. A number of Meetings already do this by holding 'all-age worship' that makes it easier for children to participate.

Thinking of children and young people is a good place to close. It is a taxing world that they are growing into. Let us leave them a Religious Society of Friends that will prove equal to that world and sustain them through their lives as it has done for us.

Notes & References

- (1) For an illuminating critique of the paintings by a non-Quaker see: Jon Silkin, "Edward Hicks (1780 - 1849): The Peaceable Kingdom" *Stand*, 1978, 19 (2), pp.36 -62.
- (2) *The Guardian*, 9th Oct. 2009.
- (3) Reeves, Donald, *Down to Earth, a New Vision for the Church*, Mowbray, London, 1996.
- (4) Open University website, www.open2.net/christianity.
- (5) Minute 2 of Meeting for Sufferings held 4th Oct. 1969. Along with a supporting statement by Hugh Doncaster it was circulated to all local Meetings for discussion.

- (6) Hoare, Edward *The Friend*, "Time to speak out", 16th Oct. 2009.
- (7) Brazier, Paul, letter to *The Guardian*, 3rd Aug. 2009.
- (8) Eccles, Peter J., *The Presence in the Midst*, Quaker Books, London, 2009, Section 7.3, pp. 126 - 8.
- (9) Carroll, Lewis, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, ch. 5. Carroll was an ordained Clergyman, so he probably had in mind early morning services in the college chapel.
- (10) I find the same point very well put in a recent article by Felicity Kaal in *Friends Quarterly*, 2009, 37 (4), pp.40 - 47.
- (11) John's Gospel, ch. 8., vv. 1 - 12.
- (12) Of course, Machiavelli in 16th C. Italy spelled out the strategies that rulers should adopt in holding onto power, at whatever cost.
- (13) Fanthorpe, U.A., *Collected Poems 1978 - 2003*, Peterloo, Calstock, Cornwall, 2005. See particularly the section "Side Effects".

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