

THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

This essay takes the form of an exchange between an informed interviewer and a Friend.

Interviewer *So, you are a Quaker?*

Friend Yes, I joined nearly 25 years ago.

Interviewer *There were more Quakers in Britain then, weren't there? I understand your numbers here are falling, as they are in other churches.*

Friend Overall numbers are falling, yes.

Interviewer *We're here to discuss the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain. Do you think it has a future?*

Friend Yes, I do think there could be a future for us. We may have to change a bit, or even a great deal, but fundamentally I think we've got a lot of what people need.

Interviewer *And what would that be? Isn't it true to say that church attendance is declining because people generally don't find religion relevant in their lives?*

Friend You're right. In fact they argue that religion has been the cause of many wars and much genocide. They will say that religion means believing in things that can't possibly be true, like dead people coming to life, or virgin births. But actually I've found the main objection to religion, at least in our nominally Christian country, is that people have been told that God is both all-powerful and all-loving. They can't reconcile these two aspects and so they stop believing in God altogether.

Interviewer *So what would you say to these people?*

Friend I'd say, 'Why don't you come at it from the other end? Forget about what you've been told – decide what God means for you. Religion should be about how you live your life, not about subscribing to a set of beliefs that someone else has decided for you. Why not invent your own religion, your own God'.

Interviewer *That's a novel idea. Is that what Quakers do?*

Friend Well, that's what a lot of us do. Speaking personally, it's this delicious freedom from intellectual and spiritual constraint that drew me to Quakers in the first place and keeps me there now. One of our main tenets is that everyone has their own experience of God, and may not think of God in conventional terms at all. Quakers are always discussing God, trying to find words to describe their own individual concepts of God.

Interviewer *So you're not bound by tradition? That's quite refreshing, quite liberating, really. Is that what you meant when you said you thought Quakers had what people need? A new approach?*

Friend It's one of the things, yes. Freedom to explore ideas, to doubt, and not to be required to hold beliefs one is not utterly convinced about. Of course some people are perfectly happy with a set of prescribed beliefs, and Quakers wouldn't be right for them.

Interviewer *Can you tell me about the other things you can offer that people need?*

Friend Well, I've already touched on the exploration of ideas. Quakers may worship in silence, but they love talking, too, as I've already hinted. We run all sorts of programmes and courses, some at local level in the form of small discussion groups, some as large conferences. I suppose all these groups have a sharing of ideas as their aim – and by sharing ideas with others one can be helped along on one's spiritual journey. I think people do need this sharing of their deepest thoughts with others who are not going to be judgmental.

Interviewer *What else can you offer?*

Friend Well, at its best a Quaker Meeting is a microcosm of how we would like the world to be – a community where everyone is valued and accepted, and disagreements are handled in a constructive way. It gives people a sense of belonging, and that's something most people need. Another thing people need is a feeling of usefulness, and Quakers support a great number of social projects and charitable causes, both with money and with time.

Interviewer *So to sum up, then, you are saying that Quakers can offer a fresh approach with freedom to explore and share ideas, a community, and an opportunity for social action. Is there anything else?*

Friend Well, of course Meeting for Worship is central to the Quaker way – it's where Quakers draw their inspiration from, their strength to go out and meet the world's challenges and try to make it a better place.

Interviewer *It all sounds pretty good to me – but why do you think Quakers remain such a small group? Why aren't people flocking in?*

Friend The sixty-four-thousand-dollar question! I think it's for a number of reasons. One is that we aren't well known, and I think part of the reason for that is that, even if they *have* heard of us, people often think of us as just another slightly strange sect, something like the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses, so they dismiss us without ever exploring further.

Interviewer *How are you going to tackle that attitude?*

Friend I think Quakers will need some different marketing. I think we have to uncouple ourselves from religion as it is generally perceived, and in particular, though I hardly dare to say it, from Christianity. If we continue to be seen as a branch of the Christian Church I think we will have only a minority appeal. We need to open our arms wider, and we need to be seen to be doing so. After all, I know we have welcomed Jews, Buddhists and Pagans into membership, and quite probably those of other religions. We aren't a religion anyway, in the generally accepted sense – more a way of life. An alternative to religion, rather than an alternative religion.

Interviewer *Uncouple yourselves from Christianity? But haven't you always been Christians?*

Friend We certainly started as Christians, but I would hazard a guess that most people who join us nowadays do not subscribe to traditional Christian beliefs. I think that, as a Society, we are moving beyond orthodox Christianity – and to my mind, that's a good thing – a growing point, I would say. We aren't rejecting Christianity altogether – we're holding

...on to what we find meaningful and inspirational in it, and broadening out from there.

**Interviewer** *You said there were a number of reasons why people didn't flock in.*

**Friend** I do think that being a Quaker requires a certain attitude of mind. One needs the courage to believe in one's own convictions, and a willingness to question authority. Not everyone is able to do this – it requires a degree of emotional maturity. This is why most of the people who come to us are in their forties or older.

**Interviewer** *Is there any way you could attract younger folk?*

**Friend** I wish we could. I sense a huge spiritual poverty among young people today, and I wish we could address this. I think Quakers are uniquely placed to offer spiritual education without any religious bias – I'd love to see us going into schools – especially state schools – and colleges more, not for purposes of recruitment, but just to talk with children and young people and make ourselves known. I know that in my teens I was trying to find a church that suited me – I got as far as the Unitarians and then gave up. I wish somebody had told me about Quakers then.

**Interviewer** *Can you see Quakers as a body engaging with schools?*

**Friend** No, not on a large scale at the moment anyway. I can see there would be a lot of suspicion of our motives. We would have to work hard to convince people we were not proselytising. Maybe we could produce some children's books on spirituality, though again it's a question of marketing, of getting them known and distributed more widely. We do have a website for young people, which is a positive development.

**Interviewer** *It's a bit of a problem, then, attracting young people.*

**Friend** Yes.

**Interviewer** *Are there any other problems you'd like to air?*

**Friend** Well, one of my worries about the way the Religious Society of Friends is going is that we are getting swamped by bureaucracy. A great deal of this is because we are being asked to fulfil the requirements of other bodies – to follow their rules, not ours. When I joined Quakers I was struck by how straightforward everything was, and how we could all understand what was going on, at least at local level. Everything we needed to know about our organisation was contained in a slim volume entitled 'Church Government'. Perhaps I didn't realise how much was done by Friends House, but at least the local meetings were free to concentrate on what they do best – that is, worshipping God and nurturing their own life. Now we have got all sorts of complications, mostly to do with trustees and charity law, data protection and child protection. All these complications take up increasing amounts of our precious time, and I'm afraid that if we are not careful we will start to put our faith in pieces of paper rather than in our mutual care and trust.

**Interviewer** *But don't you have to do these things by law?*

**Friend** Yes, but I'd be happier if I felt that they actually made a difference.

**Interviewer** *Could you explain?*

**Friend** Well, to take an example, I don't think that requiring people whom we know well to have CRB checks will make our children any safer – and it's almost an insult to ask known and trusted members of the Meeting

to undergo checks every few years. Then, in matters of finance, I don't see the need for trustees at the local level – we tried to resist this requirement at first, saying we were all responsible for the running of the organisation, all accountable for the use of our money, but in the end we yielded. Trusteeship seems to have given rise to a great deal of extra work. I will concede that data protection is necessary – it's something that has arisen quite recently - and so far the paperwork is fairly minimal, although it does add to the overall burden. But in general, individual Quakers have less time available than before – many nowadays have spouses or partners who aren't Quakers, and that means they cannot commit their time as fully. And at the same time there is more administrative work to be done.

Interviewer *Where do you see all this leading?*

Friend I'm not sure. It isn't a trend confined to Quakers, of course. If the bureaucratic onslaught continues, and if we don't resist it, I can see us gradually fading away because fewer and fewer people will be willing to serve, especially as clerks, trustees and treasurers. I can already see signs of stress among the people in my Meeting appointed to do these things. And it may explain why, in the context of falling membership, we have increasing numbers of attenders – perhaps they are reluctant to commit themselves to membership because they can see that as soon as they join they will get sucked into all the bureaucracy.

Interviewer *Is there anything you could do about this?*

Friend Well, we could make a stand at some point and get back to keeping things simple – after all, simplicity is one of our guiding principles. It would need a radical rethink, though, and I'm not sure that we would dare to do it in today's litigious climate. I dream of it, though. After all, the Quakers of old weren't afraid to stick their necks out. Sometimes I wonder if we have become too timid.

Interviewer *You've painted two pictures of the future of Quakers in Britain. One, the welcoming community, with an emphasis on spiritual nurture and social service, reaching out to all seekers, including the young; and two, the dwindling organisation, choked by legislation and paperwork, that has lost sight of its original purposes.*

Friend Indeed, and I fervently hope it's the first. I believe we have a lot to offer.

Interviewer *It's up to you, isn't it?*

Friend Yes, and so it should be. Let's finish with a few minutes' worshipful silence, and may God be with us always.

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