

## ***Into the dark, smiling ....***



"... What can you say today that will guide Quakerism  
 in Britain over the coming decades? ..."

Not quite 'What canst thou say?' but it is difficult not to be reminded of that familiar, much-quoted challenge. Few things are more perilous than futurology. Every day, on radio and television, we hear the weather forecasters hedging their bets, especially if they are looking more than, say, 48 hours ahead. And with good reason, because our weather is the result of the interplay of scores of independent, interacting factors: wind, air pressure, jet-stream, clouds, seasonal cycles, and so forth. If we are so cautious in forecasting the weather several days ahead, how much more cautious we might well be in attempting to foresee the future of Quakerism and of the Religious Society of Friends some decades ahead. And yet -

*" What canst thou say? "*

To state with certainty that it will snow in four days' time is bold, foolhardy even. To say, however, that the weather systems approaching us indicate a sharp drop in temperature and substantial precipitation in the offshore area to the north-west of Europe, would not be unreasonable if you are a meteorologist (which I am not!). Similarly, to say that by the year 2040 the Quakers will have split into three groupings, representing respectively the humanist, the liberal and the traditional tendencies within the Society, or that we will have merged with the Unitarians, would be bold indeed, and probably foolhardy, for the same reason that the weather people hedge their bets. The future of the Quaker tradition depends on many factors, internal to the Society, and environmental. So, to predict with any precision is, really, not feasible, but perhaps it is possible - and useful - to identify trends within Quakerism and in our environment, and to consider how they may develop.

Like all analogies, however, the comparison with weather forecasting is valid only up to a point. Our ability to influence the weather, in the short term, is minimal, virtually negligible. We do, though, have considerable influence on the future development of our religious community. It is for that reason that we should consider where we appear to be heading, what are the options, and what principles should guide us in steering our little ship. That is what I shall attempt: to identify trends within the Quaker community and in the wider society in which we live and work; and to consider how best we might respond to those trends and redefine our historic mission.

Such an approach, I believe, is most quakerly. In matters of belief, we eschew dogma and dogmatism, preferring to rely on that Inward Light to guide us, individually and collectively, in the particular circumstances in which we may find ourselves. So, in peering into the dim contours of the future, let us likewise review the available facts and commentaries, and in all humility seek helpful insights and leadings. I shall return to that thought at the end of the essay.



Someone wise (or, at least, sensible) once said, "If you don't know where you've come from, it's unlikely that you know where you're going." In life, as in map-reading, it is indeed helpful to know where we are starting from, the direction in which we are facing and how we got here: in other words, to know (and understand) something of our past, be that our own life or the story of Quakerism over the centuries.

Quakerism is very much a child of the 17th century. George Fox and his companions were among many thousands in Britain, and northern Europe more generally, who threw over many of the old dogmas and institutions, seeking Truth, rather, in the bible and through direct communion with the transcendent. The early Quakers, however, went further than most, in rejecting a separate clergy (let alone prelates), empty rituals and inert creeds. Since the earliest period of Quakerism, we have been characterised by our practice (unique, I think?) of silent worship, 'waiting in the Light'. This must be the ultimate reaction against the highly programmed, elaborate rituals of the pre-Reformation Christian church: relating to our own experience of the Eternal, the Divine, not through a priest or a ritual, but directly, personally - and in a gathered group of fellow seekers. It is quite remarkable, really, that 350 years on, that simple practice remains utterly relevant to people's spiritual needs today; indeed, I shall suggest later that it is particularly in tune with the emerging ethos of the 21st century.

Quakerism has been redefined or, if you prefer, 're-oriented' several times over the centuries, but the essence, I believe, remains intact: our quiet reliance on the Inward Light and our expression of our Faith not in words but in our lifestyle, as represented by our Testimonies. This is another strikingly contemporary feature of the Quaker tradition. Since the Middle Ages, and later the Enlightenment, scholars have put great reliance on language, by which to analyse, define and express 'truth'. In the 20th century, however, philosophers, psychologists, linguists and scholars in general have come to distrust language. We now understand better than before that meaning is as often traduced, lost, distorted, concealed by language, as it is expressed. That very 20th-century craft of 'public relations' has made a science of misusing language, to say what people want to hear rather than what one wants to say. More recently, the infamous 'spin doctors' have begun to apply similar techniques in the world of politics and government. As a consequence, people are increasingly coming to realise that it is safer, more reliable, to judge people by what they actually *do* rather than by what they say, or seem to say. The early Quakers appear to have been well ahead of the game in that respect: the concept of 'Testimonies' is another part of our heritage that remains very relevant in the 21st century.

Let me mention just one other part of our tradition which I believe very relevant to the world of today : the Quaker way of doing business. Democracy as we know it, despite its Greek name, is another child of the Enlightenment, still truly less than 300 years old - so, in a sense, younger than Quakerism. Until recently, it was generally accepted in Western, 'democratic' societies, that 'one person, one vote' is an indisputable axiom of justice in human affairs. Now, with the benefit of experience, often bloody and painful, we realise that the situation is far, far more complicated than that. One can hardly imagine a less just state of affairs than where 51% of a group (or 51% of those who bother to vote), feeling tepidly in favour of something, can impose it on 49% who are passionately opposed; and that is without even getting into the intricacies of voting systems, proportional representation and all that. In the corporate world (voluntary and non-profit as well as 'business' in the usual sense), where results are what ultimately count, it has long been recognised that a show of hands, whether in a board of management or at a mass meeting of workers, is a crude, misleading and often dangerous way of making decisions. The effective leader (as one says nowadays; 'manager' is so yesterday!) must cultivate a collective view, help the group towards a shared perspective, and then express that common ground, whether in words or actions, in a way that all, or nearly all, can accept. That is a very contemporary approach to group decision-making, but it is a venerable tradition in Quaker circles - the 'Quaker Business Method'. Of course, the Quaker way of doing business wasn't invented as a management technique: it is a direct expression of our conviction that there is 'that of God in everyone', that everyone's opinions and feelings deserve respect and consideration. The Quaker Business Method is, really, another Testimony.

Books have been written on the Quaker heritage and how it relates to today. I want to highlight only a few, for me, key aspects of our tradition, which I consider to have particular relevance for this forward look. They are: our silent worship and the bedrock beliefs that it represents; our Testimonies as living expressions of what we believe; our freedom from dogma and our continuing search for insight and understanding; and our way of reaching collective decisions. As has so often been said, all of these are really expressions of the same thing: our distinctive way of relating to God, or however we name our ultimate point of reference.

Which touches, I suppose, on the well-worked question of whether Quakers are Christians; indeed, are all of us even theists? For the purposes of this essay, I propose that these are 'non-questions'. Just as we have no Creed, because Truth is to be found not in words but 'in the Light', so also whether we are Christians (or theists) depends on what you want those words to mean. To state with certainty that God is this or that, or that Jesus said such and such, by which he meant something in particular, is to pretend, in rather unquakerly fashion, to a knowledge that we simply can not be sure of. It would be fair to say, I hope, that there is far more to human existence than what can be learned in laboratories and libraries. What is the ultimate meaning of human life, of human experience, is a question that we Quakers explore throughout our spiritual lives, but we should not really expect to reach any final conclusions, any more than have our many, many predecessors. Instead, we rely on the *experience* of spiritual life to provide purpose and significance to our lives. And again, scholars have, of late,

come to agree with us. Developments in quantum physics over the past 100 years have made it very plain that even the apparently solid, comprehensible material world is far less well-defined than Isaac Newton and his contemporaries imagined. Rather, it seems to be an infinite regression of less and less definable, less and less predictable sub-entities. In philosophy and theology too, the predominant view now is that if there is a 'supernatural' order of existence, then by definition, we can make no meaningful statement about it, because our language, our reasoning, our stock of concepts, belong inescapably within the 'natural' order which we inhabit. And the historians, in partnership with archaeologists and textual analysts, are pretty well agreed that we know very little indeed, historically, about Jesus of Galilee, and that we can not really be sure of the origins of much of what is attributed to him. In the face of so much uncertainty, the traditional Quaker approach of non-dogmatism, of relying on our own direct spiritual experience is, again, wondrously appropriate. Let others say whether, by *their* definition, we are Christians; let others say what is or is not, for them, God and therefore who are and are not 'theists'. It is not at all clear to me that these questions (or non-questions) really have any significant bearing on Quaker practice - as will, I hope, be apparent as our discourse unfolds.

That Quakerism is part of the Christian tradition is not, though, in doubt - just as it is part of the English, the European, religious tradition. That Christian tradition, though, is not frozen in the 4th century AD, nor the 12th, nor the 16th: it moves on, as it always has, and Quakers, historically, have been at the forefront of that advance.

These issues are very much issues of Today, and no doubt will continue to rumble for some years to come. Someone once said that the Present is nothing more than that moving point at which the Future becomes the Past. Certainly, it is very difficult to disentangle 'Now' from the immediate past and from what is unfolding as we speak; so, let us move from our backward glance, to consider the Future, as represented by what appear to be significant trends today - by which I mean 'yesterday' for the reader !



There is no shortage of issues and concerns that one might mention and which may well define our future: the environmental/ climate crisis; world population, food and water supplies; the accelerating pace of technological change, including genetic and medical technology; the widening gulf between the rich minority and the poor majority around the globe; the ever-present prospect of nuclear holocaust, perhaps the end of our species, and many others besides; the constantly increasing interdependence of countries and peoples, technologically, economically, even culturally; the growing power of the quite small number of immense multi-national corporations, almost beyond any external control; the greater clash of cultures (and religions) as people travel more and the mass media make the whole world 'one community'; the phenomenon of the Internet and telecommunications technology, creating a whole virtual 'world' without geographical or social limits; the apparent crumbling of traditional social structures (family, marriage, communities, churches, stable employment) more rapidly than we seem able to reform or replace them ..... and so on.

Clearly, a world of dizzying change. So much is changing, so quickly and on such a vast scale, that it is well-nigh impossible to comprehend it all, let alone do much about it before it has all moved on again. Rather than even attempt to describe and analyse it all, what I propose to do is select a few 'meta-trends' which I believe underlie all or most of these trends, and consider how these meta-trends impact on Quakerism in Britain, today and tomorrow. Of course, these meta-trends are not independent; each interacts with the others, but they will, I hope, help to put some order into a perplexing scenario.

The first and the most fundamental of these meta-trends is 'Change' itself: primarily technological change but also social, political, psychological and ecological. Now, there is nothing new about Change! Our world has been changing remorselessly as long as it has existed - geologically, climatically, biologically and, more recently, socially. What is new, however, is the pace of change. We do not know when fire was first harnessed by humans or when the wheel was invented, but we may assume with some confidence that until about ten thousand years ago, change was extremely slow, measured in tens, even hundreds, of thousands of years. Then, a few thousand years after the last great ice age, mankind discovered how to domesticate animals and cultivate crops. The old hunter-gatherer way of life, after a million years or more of continuous practice, gradually but inexorably gave way to a settled way of life. The settlements, from small farmsteads for an extended family or clan, grew quite rapidly to the cities of the Indus Valley, Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. (Something almost identical took place in East Asia and Meso-America too.) Townships allowed specialisation of occupation, which led inevitably to invention, development of techniques, consequent changes in lifestyle and social structure, eventually to conflicts between these new, urban societies, nearly always over land, water and food, because population grew exponentially in these settled societies. And the rest is history: Bronze Age, Iron Age, Athens, Rome, Byzantium, Islam, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, Imperialism, Today. Throughout these 10,000 years, technological Change has continued and (with a few interruptions) steadily accelerated, far outstripping mankind's ability to cope and adjust. In traditional, tribal societies, Change occurs slowly, over many generations, and everyone lives and dies in essentially the same world that they were born into: for the individual, there is no Change to speak of - until the conqueror arrives. Until about the time of the Roman Empire, urban-agrarian society just about coped, by occupying new territories to feed the fast-growing population. Since then, in truth, it has been a history of failure, as one urban society collides with its neighbours, wars have been end-to-end for 1500 years, and poverty, disease and inequality are ubiquitous. Now we have reached the ludicrous (yet tragic, really) state of affairs where we do not even have time to learn about new technology (say, the latest generation of mobile phones), let alone adjust our lifestyle, social arrangements and values, before the next wave of technological innovation hits us. Can this continue much longer?

My second meta-trend, in terms of priority and importance, is Population. To some extent, this follows from technological change, but not entirely. All hunter-gatherer societies that we have had opportunity to study, have techniques of population control: if they don't, they die out. Of course, these peoples don't think of it as population-control; for them, it is 'the way

it has always been'. Late marriage, sexual abstinence at specified times, prolonged breast-feeding - and early death - all serve to keep populations relatively stable, at a level which the local environment can sustain. Agriculture changed all that: one can always extend the area under cultivation, and children are invaluable in that cultivation, tending pigs and sheep etc. So, invariably, when a people turns to agriculture, as virtually all peoples of the world now have, population soars ..... until they bump into a neighbouring, soaring population. Result: instability, war, slavery, inequitable distribution, and elaborate ideologies to justify aggression, competition and constant economic growth. The human population of the earth 10,000 years ago was probably a few million - like that of many other primates. Today, it is over seven billion, two-thirds of whom live in misery and die early. Scientists say that it may peak at about ten billion within this century. Theoretically, the planet can feed ten billion people, but at what cost to the environment? And, having failed for 10,000 years to come up with equitable systems of distribution, it seems unlikely that we shall manage within the next 50 years. So, what's to be done ?

The third meta-trend sounds rather like what we have just been considering - Scale. Not only has the human population grown phenomenally while our technology has been developing at an accelerating pace; we have also been organising ourselves in ever larger units. Jesus probably lived in a village of a few hundred souls, fewer than a hundred families. The year 2009 will be remembered as the year when a majority of the world's population, for the first time in history, live in an urban environment, in other words at two or three removes from the agriculture that feeds us. The largest cities in the world contain over ten million people apiece, creating all manner of problems, medical, social and environmental. And these cities, for the most part, are in countries which are themselves getting bigger, with military establishments to match. China and India each have a population of over a billion; USA, Europe and Japan are considerably less, but far richer. These large populations create large economies, which spawn large institutions to serve them: factory-complexes, ports, shopping malls, banks and other financial institutions, media organisations, health and education apparatus, vast government bureaucracies ..... and the notorious 'multinational corporations' who have outgrown their native lands, have assets greater than many countries and are in many respects beyond the control of any authorities, national or supranational. Mankind has, apparently, created social structures that we are no longer able to govern, any more than we seem able to manage the technology that we have created.

My fourth meta-trend also follows from technological change but deserves, I believe, mention in its own right : Globalisation. Technology has created innumerable forms of transport - cars, trains, ships of many kinds, aircraft and, for the very few, spacecraft. Where once British people travelled 50 miles to the seaside for a holiday (if they had holidays), today a 1500-mile trip to the Mediterranean is more typical, and 5000-mile trips to other continents by no means unusual. At the same time, communications technology has advanced even more rapidly: telegraph, telephone, radio, television, worldwide web, communications satellites. It is a commonplace to note that commerce is now global: Coca-Cola is known in the most remote villages of Amazonia and New Guinea. Thousands of businesspeople travel constantly from continent to continent; millions communicate around the globe every day. We are all now part of one global economy, increasingly

one community, one culture. A handful of languages claim the title 'world language' and minority languages, with their associated cultures, thousands of years old, are dying at the rate of one a week. Space travel and advances in astronomy have made us all aware (without necessarily reflecting on it) that not only are we all part of one global community but that the globe is itself a minuscule part of a vast and growing Cosmos.

Finally, a meta-trend that many of us are familiar with on a daily basis - the Internet. This came into existence as an offshoot of developments in telecommunications and computer technology - a mere 25 years ago! - but has long since taken on a life of its own, quite distinct from the technology that gave it birth. Every month of every year, a new development takes place in the 'alternative world', so that increasingly, people, especially young people, live as much in their virtual world as in the physical world. It is now quite common to have more friends on the Internet (through Facebook, for example) than in one's locality; to communicate with people by text, twitter and e-mail rather than by conversation or telephone; to learn about the world through Google and Wikipedia; even, indeed, to find a life-partner through online dating agencies, chat-rooms and the like. So, while the world we have known for a million years, more immediately for 10,000 years, spins out of control, a parallel world is coming into existence, a virtual world whose implications we have barely begun to think about.

Although this look into the future hasn't mentioned Quakerism or the Society of Friends, in fact all these meta-trends have massive implications for us over the next few decades. The catalogue of changes that was set out a few pages back, may be thought of as the result of the interaction of these meta-trends. The future of Quakerism and of the Society depends very much on how well we react, how creatively we respond, to these trends.



The central thesis of this essay, which has been touched on several times now, is that *in essentials* Quakerism is almost uncannily suited to the challenges of the 21st century. At the heart of the problems facing the world today and tomorrow, is the unbridled career of technology, for the past 500 years or so, but most dramatically since the widespread application of electricity, just 100 years ago. As a direct consequence of this unchecked development, contemporary society is besotted with economic growth and consumerism; we are destroying our own biosphere, our habitat, and teeter on the brink of destroying ourselves in a nuclear war. Indisputably, the technological juggernaut has to be halted, or at least slowed down, brought under human control. This is a condition to which the Quaker testimony of Simplicity speaks with total clarity and relevance. If the world doesn't 'Go Simple', quite soon, then the human species will very likely cease to exist within a century or so, or will perhaps be reduced to a small remnant, humbled and clinging to bare survival.

The world's gross human over-population (heading for ten billion) can only be supported if the privileged few (the 'West') accept unequivocally that all humans have an equal right to the Earth's bounty. If we (mankind) do not, very belatedly, move in that direction, then the only credible alternative is ever-growing poverty and hunger, leading to more migration and conflicts, minor and major, over food, water and economic opportunity. All of that will

be exacerbated by global warming, probably no longer a threat, now a fact. So, the Quaker testimony of Equality is no longer an ideal for an enlightened few, but a pressing imperative for the 21st-century world. How exactly mankind will cope with the parallel challenges of global warming and over-population is an enormously complex question. What is clear, though, is that the approach we have used for the past 10,000 years has been a catastrophic failure; a solution, solutions, will only be found if and when people accept that 'we are all in this together' and that only by cooperation and mutual respect can we survive - which is what the Quaker Peace testimony has been all about for centuries past.

The problems of Scale - super-powers, multinationals, mega-cities, impersonal bureaucracies, banks 'too big to fail' etc. - can only be solved if ordinary people - thee and me - take power back from the quite small number of politicians, oligarchs and financiers who have dominated our economies and our government for the past hundred years or so. 'Speaking truth to power' is something that Quakers used to be good at; of late, we have been rather more discreet, but perhaps the situation is now so desperate that we must once again say fearlessly what has to be said. What is most lacking in public life today is another Quaker testimony, Integrity. On our own, we are very few and very weak, but perhaps in partnership with others of like mind - the Christian churches, other religions and denominations, the Greens, Amnesty, World Social Forum and their friends - we might just manage to turn the ship before it crashes onto the rocks. It certainly behoves us to declare boldly what we believe to be true.

We have noted how travel, migration and telecommunications have shrunk the world to a so-called 'global village' and how astronomy has brought home to us all just how small and vulnerable our 'village' is. I can not offer concrete evidence, but I have formed the view over the years that both these trends, in combination with the enormity of the economic and environmental threats confronting us, have generated a widespread *anomie* in the population at large. The multi-cultural nature of contemporary society, especially in Britain, has destroyed a lot of the old certainties, and the (perceived) cynicism of many politicians, commentators and other public figures, has fostered a prevailing scepticism, and pessimism. Many age-old institutions appear to be under threat from the fundamental changes we have considered: the family, both nuclear and extended, local communities, shared values, familiar employment structures, even religious, educational and political structures. This lack of certainties, of structures, of categories, of parameters, is sometimes called 'postmodernism' (although one of the chief uncertainties appears to be the actual meaning of that word!); many would argue that the flight into drugs, alcohol, improbable sects and political extremism are fuelled by this moral, spiritual, communal vacuum. No society can function successfully without some moral fabric; it seems most unlikely that the big, institutional churches will be able to adapt and adjust quickly enough to this fundamental challenge. Some might argue that humanism is the religion of the postmodern era; while I respect the rational and ethical merits of humanism, I cannot see that it speaks to mankind's *spiritual* needs, as religion does. For tomorrow's world, however, a traditional, institutional, more-or-less authoritarian religion is almost certainly not the answer. What is required is a minimalist religion, firmly based on clear, shared values but allowing a variety of individual paths to



spiritual growth and expression. In its essentials, that is what Quakerism is: a 350-year-old postmodern religion.

None of the early Quakers foresaw the Internet; in truth, no one did until it was upon us, and almost no one seems bold enough to predict where it is going. Almost everything that we as humans have done for the past hundred thousand years, is likely now to be replicated in 'virtual' form. What would 'virtual religion' look like? - I don't know. What might 'virtual Quakerism' look like? - I don't know. It is, really, totally uncharted territory; I would suggest, though, that Quakerism is better placed to adapt to 'cyber-reality' than are other traditions. George Fox insisted that Truth is not to be found in steeple-houses, nor in the formulae of priests and vicars. Is it conceivable that it might be found through the Internet? - I don't know, and yet a virtual Meeting for Worship seems rather less improbable than virtual eucharist or virtual ordination (of priests). Of only one thing we may be sure: the Internet is assuredly part of the future of Quakerism .....

[ *To be continued.* ]



So far, this discussion has been at a fairly high level of generality, in large part because of the 'weather forecasting' problem: to state, in broad terms, how the future may turn out, is a reasonable undertaking; to translate those general trends into specifics, is fraught with peril. So, I should like to re-emphasise my general thesis, that Quakerism is surprisingly well placed to speak to the needs of people, in Britain and around the world, in the unsettling circumstance of the 21st century. That cannot mean, however, doing nothing, just congratulating ourselves on being such a thoroughly contemporary 350-year-old. Clearly, some adjustments will be necessary to meet the demands of the new century. But what?

Let me then, very tentatively and with numerous caveats, attempt to suggest, in somewhat more concrete terms, how that general thesis might be developed in practice. I repeat: I do not believe there is any need to review our most fundamental beliefs, especially our non-dogmatic stance on questions of belief. More than ever, notions of 'truth' are subject to constant revision in the light of the latest advances in science, technology and scholarship. Spiritual truth, we believe, is not to be found in books, but within ourselves, open to what we call the Inward Light. I think that is probably quite close to what Buddhists and many Hindus would call 'enlightenment'; Quakerism, though, is located firmly within a European, Christian tradition, while Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Taoism, while sharing some of our insights, sit within Asian religious traditions. In essentials, then, No Change.

In some ways, our Testimonies serve a similar purpose to a Creed in other denominations: Quakerism is defined by how we live, how we *express* our beliefs in practice. That is actually a very profound idea. If you ask twenty mothers to define, to describe, their relationship with their children, you would no doubt get a great variety of responses, and yet, in practice, the feelings of a mother for her children do not vary a great deal from generation to generation, culture to culture, as evidenced by the behaviour of mothers around the world. So much for words! It is often said, is it not, that our

Testimonies all overlap, that one follows from another, that they are all aspects of one set of beliefs, imperfectly expressed by the phrase, 'that of God in everyone'. So it is right that they should be re-expressed from time to time, reflecting changing circumstances and priorities. It may therefore be a fruitful exercise to revisit our Testimonies in the light of everything that has been said about the near future.

For me, the greatest Testimony is Truth - often expressed as Integrity, but I am not sure that everyone is quite clear just what the word 'integrity' means? We are utterly dedicated to the pursuit of Truth in our spiritual lives, wherever that may lead ..... and, in a sense, everything follows from that? Our lives should reflect the insights gained in silent worship (and other times), as tested with our fellow seekers. Our commitment to Truth should extend to every aspect of our lives, without exception: in family life, at work, in politics, in financial matters, in our social lives ..... because all of life is for us sacramental, an exercise in worship, how we relate to our God. The implications of that simple statement are immense. Integrity, truthfulness, is sorely lacking in modern business and modern politics; there is a great deal that Quakers and the Society can do to improve that - which I shall address in the final section of the essay.

I am probably not alone among Friends, in placing Equality alongside Truth, as a Testimony central in my life. Not one of us is, really, any more important than any other. It is precisely that Equality which has been tragically lacking in human society for the past ten thousand years, never more so than today. If we are to save our species, then it can only be by a dramatic change of attitude on the part of mankind, from selfishness, materialism and competition, to something fairer and more sustainable. Never mind all the -isms; they are just Creeds by another name. The consistent application of Fairness, of Equity, in communities, in business, in politics and in government, would transform society. The Society cannot achieve that single-handed but in partnership with others of like mind, we just might achieve something.

One area, paradoxically, in which Equality might be applied is in the matter of 'democracy'. So-called parliamentary democracy barely works in Western countries (in terms of equitable outcomes) and yet we are busy exporting it all over the world - often, sadly, coupled with so-called capitalism or 'free-market economics' - where in many cases it is demonstrably not working at all. I do not pretend to have something better, ready for use, but the inequities which thrive in so-called democracies are so offensive that I do believe that Friends, again with other people of good will, should be exploring alternatives, based on the principle of cooperation, on small, local communities, on conflict resolution processes, on traditional arrangements that enjoy trust and have been honed over the centuries. I suggested earlier that the Quaker Business Method might be viewed as a Testimony, an expression in practice of what we believe. That is very apposite in the context of the 21st century, as it is one of the very few, well developed alternatives to one-person-one-vote, actually in wide use today. It may not be perfect (it is certainly time-consuming!), but it has been developed over many, many years and it *works*. As one elderly Friend put it: "God may not care much about what kind of carpet we have in the Meeting Room, but He certainly cares about how we decide". How true.

Simplicity is different in kind from Truth and Equality. As I understand it, it is a determination not to be distracted from our spiritual concerns, by secondary material and social concerns. That has been expressed in different ways at different periods of Quaker history, because the potential distractions vary. Today it might very well be expressed in a commitment to the environmentalist, 'Green' agenda: zero growth, sustainable consumption, equitable distribution. People sign up to the Green agenda from a variety of motives: might Quakers be seen as the 'spiritual' wing of the Green movement, as we have for long been of the Peace movement ?

Personally, I have always had a difficulty with the Peace testimony, because it seems to me to be unlike the other three. How does one 'practise' Peace ? Conscientious objection one can practise, or pacifism, or non-violence, or conflict resolution, but 'Peace'? All right, it's only a word and we know what we mean - 'Peace is a process, not a state' etc. - but I remain uneasy because use of the wrong expression may lead people to miss the point: Why Peace? Not because it's more pleasant than Conflict, not because we are temperamentally non-aggressive. No, our Peace testimony springs from our commitment to Equality - 'that of God in everyone': every human being deserves respect, as do her opinion, his culture, their economic interests. But it's not enough to subscribe to the general principle: we Quakers should testify by our behaviour what we believe in. That may mean conscientious objection but it may equally mean vegetarianism, feminist activism, anti-slavery campaigning, anti-racism, volunteer work in Burundi, or working with the homeless in Britain. Peering into the 21st century, I see lots of conflict looming up, but I also see lots of causes of conflict, the greatest (I think) being economic injustice, almost everywhere. So, while I cannot envisage myself ever bearing arms, I actually get much more animated by the tens of millions of unnecessary early deaths every year, through malnutrition, dirty water and treatable diseases. So, should our fourth testimony not be something like 'Social Engagement' (or a snappier equivalent) ? We should actually *do* something beyond our own personal lifestyle, to apply Quaker values in the wider world, be that peace demonstrations or promoting Fair Trade.

And yet, and yet, am I not guilty of the very mistake we are trying to avoid: over-defining our beliefs? I think it was a Quaker who said, 'Religion is an art, not a science'. Very well put.



Having discussed Principles, and Practice as expressed in the Testimonies, what of Organisation, of the Society itself? Can the traditional form of the Society, more particularly of Britain Yearly Meeting, even as modified in 2009, survive the postmodern tsunami? Again, as it happens, our early Friends were remarkably prescient and devised a structure which is relatively minimalist, when compared with, for example, the Roman Catholic church, or the Church of England. However, it would be truly astonishing if a structure devised in the 17th century were, even in modified form, entirely suited to the circumstances of the 21st century. In considering questions of organisation, it is always salutary to remember that organisations exist to serve prior purposes, not the other way around. As the German sociologist Robert Michels so astutely observed, about a century ago, whenever an organisation is created, be it a business, a church, a political party or a

voluntary organisation, there appears to be a tendency for the interests of the 'organisation' as such to displace the original purposes for which it was created - what he called the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy'. So the Society (BYM and, indeed, other Yearly Meetings) should be so organised as to preserve, promote and support the Quaker Way of believing, worshipping and living.

If we are agreed that silent worship in a gathered meeting lies at the heart of that tradition, then the place of the local meeting would appear not to be in question, although there is probably scope for some exploration of alternative forms, including 'virtual meetings' ? Local meetings cannot thrive for long, however, without some kind of supporting structure: even Congregationalists have a national organisation. As there inevitably are, and will continue to be, legal issues pertaining to a particular state and legal system, some kind of organisation at 'national' level (in this context, UK/Great Britain) seems only sensible. Many services, such as publishing, education and training, external relations, are more effectively provided at the larger than at the smaller scale, so an entity not unlike Euston Road seems very probable. Between these two - national and local - it is by no means clear what kind of structure would be most suited to the 21st century. Many of the traditional functions of Monthly/Area Meeting and Quarterly/ General Meeting may be better performed through the Internet. Local Meetings, though, do consist of *people* who will certainly still want to share their religious life with others of like mind, so some form of 'regional' structure, at a level permitting reasonable travel to gatherings, seems necessary. Whether, though, such regional entities - let's call them 'Area Meetings' ! - should function as Area Meetings do now, more or less as Monthly Meetings did, must be open to question. Their primary purpose, I would suggest, should be to provide support and fellowship to local Meetings within a reasonable geographical area; beyond that, let's keep an open mind. When the population is so much more mobile than it was in the 19th century, let alone the 17th, should membership of the Society really be located at Area level ? Need Area Meetings (or equivalent) hold substantial assets, with all the attendant administration ? Some of these functions might be better located at 'national' level, or be handled by regional offices, serving groups of Areas ? 'Form follows function' - or rather, it should.

I shall not pursue that line of thought further, because it is so dependent on how things actually evolve over the next 10-30 years and because that aspect is less important than the qualitative aspects of organisation. The trends that we identified earlier do indicate that already, and increasingly in the future, people rely ever less on 'associations' and on 'meetings' (in the general sense, not 'Meeting for Worship') to get things done. More and more, people rely on loose networks, ad-hoc organisations and open communication arrangements: think Google, Yahoo Groups, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, e-Bay, interactive websites, single-issue campaigns, one-off gatherings, World Social Forum .... Quakerism cannot stand apart from such trends. Already we have websites and an online bookshop, but that is almost certainly only the shallow end of the pool. I am no expert on information and communication technologies, but I have no doubt that a large part of our future lies in that direction. As good Quakers, we should not have a dogmatic view on how things will develop: enough to be in the field and open to new ideas, from whatever source. A virtual Meeting, complete with Clerk, Elders, Overseers, for isolated and housebound Friends, might be a good start ?

'Yearly Meeting' is both an event and an organisation structure (like the Trades Union Congress). Venerable as the 'event' is, I wonder how suited it is to the 21st century? In recent years, we have got into the way of organising 'Gatherings' to complement Yearly and General Meetings. Might it be that the spiritual, social and interpersonal, the human, aspect of BYM would be better served by something like a Gathering, for all Friends (and Attenders), while the business side of BYM would be done online and by shorter, smaller, ad-hoc meetings? It is not the purpose of this essay to make detailed predictions or recommendations, but there is, I believe, a question here deserving some thought.

Quakerism is, first and last, a tradition, a way of thinking, believing and living: what I like to call 'The Quaker Way'. That tradition is best represented by the gathered Meeting - and I am confident that that will remain the case for a long time to come - but since the earliest days there has been a place, too, for publications of various sorts: Advices & Queries, successive Books of Discipline, periodicals, printed versions of important lectures, sundry books and booklets. Communication media today are changing fast - Internet, mobile phones (now with internet access), satellite broadcasting, podcasts, e-readers, and so on - but the need for 'publication', for information, communication, dissemination, remains. I perceive this side of our organisation as second in importance only to Meeting for Worship and all that goes with it. At local, regional and national level, 'The Quaker Way' should be made better known by whatever media are most effective. Publications for Friends, containing information about events, debates, activities and other publications, are important for the effective functioning of the Society; but much more important are publications suitable for Friends, Attenders and others alike, expressing a distinctive Quaker view on contemporary society, on social and economic issues, on religious and spiritual topics, on the arts and what is often called 'lifestyle'. Perhaps the new 'Quaker Voices' will be, or will come to be, such an outward-looking expression of 'The Quaker Way'?



The Religious Society of Friends, though, isn't just an organisation, whether structural or conceptual. In the end, we are what we do, so I should like to conclude this forward look by considering, in the light of everything I have said about what we are, the world we live in, and where we seem to be heading: What we should be *doing* over the next few decades, other than each pursuing our own personal spiritual journey, in association with fellow seekers.

What we do, as Quakers, whether individually or collectively, should of course reflect our beliefs: what we do is our 'testimony'. Historically, we have laid great emphasis on Peace, for example; indeed, we are probably better known for that than for anything else? I have already suggested that our Peace testimony is perhaps more properly one expression of a wider testimony, a commitment to social engagement, to accepting responsibility for the state of the world. In the new, bewildering circumstances of the 21st century, what action would best express our testimonies, including that 'Responsibility'?

Over the centuries, we Quakers have been led to areas of social action that not only reflect our beliefs, but are relatively neglected by other people, other churches even. No cause has been more neglected over the centuries than Peace, but Prisons have also featured, and Slavery and, more recently, sex offenders. All thoroughly unfashionable causes to espouse, but all eloquent expressions of our belief in 'that of God in everyone'. What might be the equivalents in the 21st century? Despite the hazards of forecasting, I do incline to the view that in the coming decades, the combined effects of global warming, of population pressures, and of the widening gulf between rich and poor, will be to create unprecedented competition for scarce resources: most acutely, food and water, but also habitable land, fuel, work and housing. At worst, we may endure a series of conflicts, local and regional, which in turn might spark a global conflagration. Whatever should occur on the military side, however, there will undoubtedly be a continuing and growing tide of refugees and migrants, from the poorer regions, especially Africa, to the richer. That is already a major issue in Britain, in Europe and across the affluent world. It can only get worse, spawning problems associated with ethnicity, religion, culture, lifestyle, housing and employment. All too readily, those in privileged situations look first and mostly to their own interests, creating harsh policies to exclude migrants, to contain them, to deny them full equality, and in other ways discriminate against them. This will always be an 'unfashionable' and unpopular area of social action, where an input by Quakers (or, more accurately, a greater input) would be invaluable and wholly in keeping with our traditions. Locally, we might seek to ease tensions, promote mutual understanding, and alleviate migrants' most acute needs; nationally, we might support calls for more benevolent policies and better education; globally, we might, even more vigorously than hitherto, promote the view that the world and all its riches belong to all of mankind, not just to those who happen to be born in a particular place, of particular parents.

A more specific area of social action that perhaps also deserves our attention is that of Housing. That is one part of the problems of migrants, but it is a growing problem for several other groups besides. Because of advances in medical technology, we are living longer; at the same time, birth rates are much lower than in the past; as a consequence, the elderly represent, and will continue to represent, a growing proportion of the population. At the same time, traditional family structures continue to crumble, and local communities are ever more transient and impersonal. Government-funded social services appear to be overwhelmed by the demands that fall on them as a result of all these social changes (and appear to spend a disquieting amount of time and energy on administrative matters?); housing problems, whether of the elderly, of migrants, of those with mental health problems, of ex-prisoners, of the unemployed and recently redundant, of the victims of family breakdown, are only one of many problems confronting social services departments, so are often left to local authority 'Housing Departments' who are ill-equipped to cope with the complex issues involved. The result, in extreme cases, is homelessness and rough living; in less extreme cases, it is a poor quality of housing that must in turn cause all manner of subsequent social problems. Again, this is not a popular, nor a fashionable social problem - "The Government should do something about it!" is the usual cry - but the scale and complexity of the problem - and the cost, and the electoral unpopularity? - seem beyond the ability of Government to cope. Housing associations and charities do a certain amount but the problem

remains a scandal in an affluent (nay, a rich) society with claims to social enlightenment. So, here is another area that Friends might make our own. There is already a Quaker Housing Association but it does not loom large in the work of BYM - and is concerned, I think, primarily with the housing needs of Friends? A particular attraction of Housing as an area of activity for Quakers is that it can be addressed at all levels from the most local, where Friends can take part in local action for the homeless and for social housing, to the regional level, where actual housing initiatives might be undertaken, to national level where policy could be developed, expert advice provided and support services organised. Quaker housing should, surely, be primarily for those most overlooked by other agencies?

Finally, in the decades ahead, the Society could make a major, arguably a unique, contribution to the development of religion, of spirituality, of belief, in Britain. All the indications are that traditional, dogma-bound, institutional churches will fare badly in the decades ahead. What people seem to need, and increasingly seek, is a 'postmodern' religion, with loosely defined boundaries, adaptable to rapidly changing circumstances, essentially 'provisional' in character, and accepting of a wide variation of spiritual perspectives. Quakerism fits that need very well indeed. There are other denominations who are similarly non-institutional, open, defined by their core rather than their coat. Within the Christian tradition, Unitarianism is closest to Quakerism, differing chiefly in its mode of worship - and our silent worship is not, perhaps, suited to everyone? Buddhism and Taoism, too, are non-dogmatic in their approach to the spiritual life, but of course belong to respectively a South Asian and an East Asian tradition. Nevertheless, many westerners find their spiritual home in these traditions, with whom Quakerism has much in common. I might also add 'religious humanism', less well known in Europe than in North America; it too is religious and non-dogmatic. With all these denominations we might usefully have fruitful dialogue about the challenges that face us all, and there may well be fields where we could work together. One such field, perhaps, is counselling, because the dogmatic denominations are severely handicapped by their non-negotiable creeds, in providing counselling in a genuinely impartial way. Just as the Samaritans provide counselling for those contemplating suicide, and Relate for those with marital and relationship problems, so Quakers, perhaps in partnership with other non-dogmatic denominations, might provide counselling for those with problems of purpose, identity, belief?

Such dialogue need not be at the expense of our ongoing dialogue with others in the Christian tradition. Many Quakers consider themselves 'Christians' by one definition or another, and I hope that most Quakers would agree that Quakerism sits squarely in the Christian tradition. The truth of the matter is that there are probably more *members* of the Church of England who would, privately, agree with the Quaker position on the question of dogma than would disagree - especially if they have ever read the Westminster Confession. The proportion among Catholics, Baptists and Methodists is probably less, but even in these denominations, there is a great deal of questioning about the old 'certainties'; very few church-goers could say with much confidence *exactly* what their church's creed is. So, our Christian cousins are heading in the same direction as we are, albeit 300 years behind! As fellow believers within the Christian tradition, we have plenty in common, plenty to share. Whether the Religious Society of Friends

should be described as 'Christian', as I said earlier, is a question that answers itself: it depends what you mean by 'Christian', and most Christians would have great difficulty in agreeing on exactly what they mean by that epithet. For us, that need not be a problem, but we do have a major contribution to make, in taking the whole religious debate forward, amicably and with respect for all involved.



And so we arrive at the end of this excursion into the future. Is it possible to pull together, in a paragraph or three, the key ideas that we have explored together? First, and fundamentally, there are even fewer certainties in the future than in the present: we should approach the subject in Quakerly fashion, humbly seeking clearness. However, as good Quakers we should not ignore the challenge, 'What canst thou say?' In looking to the future, let us remain conscious of our past, where we have come from, and seek to distinguish the essentials in the Quaker tradition, from the incidentals, particular to one age, one place, one situation. On two or three bedrock elements, we are all, I think, in agreement. For Quakers, Truth is to be found - or, at least, *sought* - in direct communion with the Divine, not through priests, books and rituals. That may be anywhere, but we have found that it occurs most powerfully in the silent worship of the gathered Meeting, where our promptings may be tested against the insights of our fellow seekers, fellow Friends. Our beliefs are expressed, not in elaborate creeds and catechisms, but in our Testimonies, how we live. And in organising our affairs within the Society, our testimony of Equality finds expression in the Quaker Business Method, a unique way of reaching collective decisions. These, I hope, are the key elements in the Quaker tradition, on the basis of which we confront a challenging future.

No one knows for sure what the future holds (we're none too sure about the past and the present, either) and scores of trends may be identified which may, or may not, hold the key. I have suggested - in a spirit of humble 'perhapsness' - that we might identify five 'meta-trends' underlying and permeating all the particular trends: Change (especially technological) and the accelerating rate of Change; Population-pressures; the unprecedented Scale of contemporary and emerging social institutions (cities, states, corporations etc.); Globalisation, of society, of culture, of language, of religion even; and the Internet, which may be creating an entire virtual world, parallel to the geographical world.

The central thesis of this essay is that Quakerism is uniquely well placed to respond to these challenges. Our Testimonies allow us to respond appropriately and honestly, without having to rewrite, re-interpret sacred texts. The preposterous rate of Change calls out for a move to Simplicity, perhaps in the form of the Green agenda; population pressures will, almost certainly, cause continuing conflicts throughout the world, crying out for the Quaker Peace testimony; the problems of Scale call for a realignment of the distribution of power and wealth, only possible if Truth is more evident in public and private life; Globalisation is probably irreversible, and calls for a religious response, based not on the traditions of one society, of one culture, but on the universal experience of mankind, as reflected in the non-credal faiths like Quakerism, Unitarianism, Buddhism, Taoism; where the Internet may take us is beyond the powers of this writer, but most certainly an open,



tolerant tradition such as The Quaker Way will be much better placed to cope than the traditional, institutional churches.

Even our very simple organisation, of local, Area and Yearly Meetings, however, may have to flex somewhat to survive what lies ahead. The local Meeting for Worship is almost part of the definition of Quakerism; some kind of 'national'-level organisation seems unavoidable, for legal and administrative reasons; beyond that we should be open to all possibilities, including 'virtual Meetings'. A looser, lighter organisation, however, will need, even more than today and yesterday, effective communication media, to enunciate and support The Quaker Way, not just among ourselves, but in the wider world. Within that looser, lighter organisation (if indeed that is where we are heading), we Quakers should be continuing to live our Testimonies in ways appropriate to the changing world we find ourselves in. All manner of action is possible but I have suggested, for consideration, that we might engage in: action for migrants, refugees and other displaced persons, at local, national and global level; housing action for the homeless, for migrants, for the elderly and for other neglected groups; and work with fellow believers, especially the non-dogmatic denominations, to develop relevant religious responses for the 21st century, and to take forward mankind's aeons-old spiritual search.

A lot of words but in essence only a handful of somewhat tentative ideas. My hope is that some of them may strike a chord with readers, open them to some helpful leading, so that we may all go forward together in honesty and Friendship. The future is indeed daunting but our Society is better equipped than most, so, in the words of Quaker Faith & Practice (29.01),

"Let us walk with a smile into the dark".

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