

The future of Quakerism

The Religious Society of Friends originated in the 17th century England, where George Fox as a young man was very much worried about life. When he experienced “openings”, he was inspired for a Christian religion that looked for the truth in silent meetings for worship. He induced a major movement, which appeared politically dangerous to the king. As a result of the ensuing repression a large number of Friends were jailed and died in jail. This condensed summary of the beginning of Quakerism shows that the movement was quite inspiring, that a large fraction of the population became Friends, and that they were ready to suffer for their beliefs. To day the Religious Society of Friends is a small elitist group in most countries, which by far is not as contagious as at the times of George Fox. It risks to become a fossil hat witnesses to the great deed of George Fox, but lacks impact now.

It is my feeling that Quakerism should be spiritually inspired to the extent that it will be at the forefront of evolutionary changes in modern societies. If it fulfils this mission it even might be a trend setter. Such a development will come about only, if Friends follow scientific, cultural, and spiritual developments as they arise. As a result they will be able to include them in their thinking, in their spirituality and in their lives. In this way Friends may again be at a spiritual forefront, which will not only retrospective – i.e. looking at the merits of George Fox - but also prospective, i.e. looking into the creation of the future.

Such a development in the Religious Society of Friends can come about only, provided a group of persons is willing to perceive and to analyse trends in the society, where currently a number of very interesting phenomena and concepts seem to arise. From my limited view I like to mention just a few. There must be many others.

1. **Theory U by Otto Scharmer** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Scharmer has studied decision processes at the level of top scientist, top managers and top artists. From this experience he developed a technique for decision making in business that comes very close to some ideas of George Fox and to the silent meeting for worship. In his method he describes a process of downloading of the daily problems, suspending of personal feelings and images, sensing from the field, letting go, and then “presencing” in the depth of the person. The ensuing upward process involves letting come, crystallizing, prototyping and performing. He feels that in this way decisions may evolve that are “whole” in regard to all possible aspects to be considered. Such decisions therefore also are ethical. They would correspond to the “sense of the meeting” or of the person, who has to make the decision. I feel that we could very much learn from Otto Scharmer. (C. Otto Scharmer, Theory U, Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge Ma, 2007, <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/>)

2. **Nonviolent Communication by Marshall Rosenberg**

Rosenberg has developed his wonderful concept of Nonviolent Communication and described also how to practice it. His ideas fit very well with the Quaker peace testimony. Some groups of Friends have already started to teach alternatives to violence. Yet, this is not enough! I feel that we should become the specialists for nonviolent communication and should become recognized as that! (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_Rosenberg)

3. **Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) by Gary Craig**

EFT is a technique, which allows solving emotional problems much more easily than in

the past. It presumably is more effective than ordinary psychotherapy and certainly much less painful. I feel that EFT is a wonderful gift for Friends, because emotional problems tend to inhibit spiritual growth. Knowing about EFT we may approach spirituality in a more open way. Again I feel that we should become experts in using this tool in order to help Friends and friends of the friends to find their way to a deeper spirituality. There are already some Friends, who are competent in EFT, but my question is, whether or not EFT should become a commonplace among Friends. (www.emofree.com)

4. Scientific Approach to Spiritual Phenomena

Recently I read the book by Charles T Tart on "The end of materialism: How evidence of the paranormal is bringing science and spirit together". There are several other such books. Their fascination lies in the fact, that George Fox was inspired by "openings", i.e. by paranormal phenomena. Apparently, he also was a healer. To me it is important, that we maintain a scientifically critical attitude toward the paranormal. Yet, today there is scientific evidence for it. Therefore we should study it and see, what it does to our understanding of George Fox and also to our own longing for inspiration by the Inner Light. (Charles T Tart, The end of materialism, how evidence of the paranormal is bringing science and spirit together. New Harbringer Publications, 2009)

5. Neurobiological Research

Investigations of brain functioning have recently destroyed the concept, that the brain is hardwired by a genetic program. There is now ample evidence that the brain has much plasticity and that even spiritual practice may modify the brain. (Sharon Begley. Train your mind, change your brain. Ballantine Books, 2007) Recent research goes even so far as to reconstruct contents of inner images from brain imaging. Brain function presumably is a prerequisite for Quaker spirituality, but this may not be all. Neurobiological research should be followed by Friends in order to better understand, e.g. what happens in the brain in a silent meeting and how spirituality and personality interact with each other at the level of the brain.

6. Concept of Health

In the past years a Friend has been working on the question, how health should be described. The main reason was that the definition of health by the WHO of 1947 is no longer adequate to day. The new definition includes two potentials, a biologically given potential and a personally acquired potential. Their contributions to health vary throughout life. As the biologically given potential diminishes with age the personally acquired potential becomes more and more important. This is relevant in disease states and in advancing age. Part of the personally acquired potential obviously is spirituality, the "transforming power of the inner light". In that sense the new definition might be a concept that is helpful for Friends.

(Bircher J. Towards a dynamic definition of health and disease. Med Health Care Philos 2005, 8: 335-41. <http://www.meikirch-modell.net/?Publikationen>)