

Quakers in Transition

We are living in extraordinary times. A combination of climate change, energy crisis and resource shortages are undermining the industrial civilisation that has dominated the globe for the last two centuries.

The questions and struggles of British Quakers over the coming decades will not be those of the past. The most pressing and controversial issues will no longer be about our relationship to our Christian and theist roots, or the challenges of pluralism and secularism. These were the debates of the age of globalisation, which effectively ended with the financial collapse of 2008.

The debates of the age of the 'long descent' will be quite different. How do we prepare for a future of diminishing energy resources and a contracting economy? What aspects of our religious tradition need to be revived or transformed to meet the needs of the future? What ways of life, habits of thought, practical skills and spiritual practices can sustain us and our children through the profound changes that we are facing?

This is not a perspective that comes easily to British Friends, and it may turn out to be exaggeratedly pessimistic. It is certainly unrealistic, however, to expect the next few decades to continue on the same trajectory of accelerating economic growth and energy consumption that we have lived through since the 1950s.

The usually unacknowledged basis of much of the prosperity of the late 20th Century was cheap and abundant fossil fuel energy, chiefly oil. Just as Britain's Industrial Revolution was powered by coal, it was the cheap and ever-increasing supply of oil that fuelled the last century's massive expansions in industrial capacity and technology, first in the USA, and then throughout much of the world.

However, the physical limits to oil production are well-established. Once the cheapest and easiest to reach oil deposits are extracted, production first plateaus and then goes into an irreversible decline, as each remaining barrel of oil requires more energy and expense to extract. This pattern has already repeated itself over most of the world's 800 major oilfields (including the North Sea). It is also a pattern that applies to the world as a whole, in which oil discoveries peaked in the 1960s, and oil production must inexorably follow it. The International Energy Agency, official energy policy advisor to the main Western governments, has recently predicted a peak in world oil production by 2020, with a global 'oil crunch' within the next five years.

As rates of oil production start to decline, the energy available to power our society will become increasingly scarce and expensive. Renewable sources of energy will become increasingly important, but they cannot provide enough energy to substitute for declining oil. This is largely because of the sheer volume of energy currently derived from oil, and the much higher costs of energy production from renewable sources. These additional energy costs are even higher for other options such as nuclear power, tar sands, and 'clean coal', along with additional disadvantages of (respectively) nuclear waste, huge carbon emissions,

and the absence of working technology.

These hard facts of resource depletion and energy scarcity have far-reaching consequences for a civilisation that has been built on the necessity of continuous economic 'growth'. That is, a constantly increasing rate of consumption of finite resources. A prolonged period of economic contraction with spiralling energy, food and fuel costs, at the same time as climate change is blighting much of the world's food producing capacity, will have deep political, social, cultural and spiritual effects as well as economic ones.

How will these global shifts affect our society, our economy and our own lives and neighbourhoods? How will they re-order our priorities and concerns as a religious community? And what resources and relationships will we have to draw on to guide and support us?

Over the last half century British society has experienced a period of exceptional affluence and rapid social change, which have profoundly shaped the practice and values of British Quakers.

One of the most significant changes has been the growth in size and influence of a 'new middle class' of educated workers such as teachers, academics, social workers, health professionals, creative and media producers, IT technicians and managers.

These socially and geographically mobile professionals have driven the increasing social liberalism of British society. They have also come to dominate Britain Yearly Meeting, which now has an overwhelmingly new middle class social composition, particularly from the 'caring', educational and public service industries.

Many of these new middle class professionals come to Quaker Meetings looking for an inclusive, non-dogmatic and non-hierarchical 'space' in which to explore their individual identity and to 'recharge their batteries'. For them, Meeting for Worship can be a refuge from hectic, information-saturated lifestyles and overcrowded schedules.

This experience of Quaker Meeting as a 'Quaker Space' for personal reflection has largely eclipsed the more traditional understanding of a 'Quaker Way', which involves personal discipline, religious commitment and communal accountability. Many people in Quaker Meetings do not know that there is a distinctive Quaker tradition of spiritual teaching and practice. Instead, the vacuum of teaching is often filled by other spiritual traditions, as well as the background assumptions of the dominant culture. Contemporary culture is narrowly materialist, except when it is superstitious (hence the popularity of horoscopes etc). Following this dominant cultural pattern, British Quakerism is increasingly tending towards secular and materialist interpretations of human experience, often in combination with a variety of 'New Age' practices.

Many of the progressive values that British Quakers pride ourselves on also reflect the shared world-view of the new middle class subculture, rather than any distinctive Quaker experience. Feminism, anti-racism, gay and lesbian equality and an opposition to traditional social hierarchies are all widely-shared values of the liberal new middle class subculture. These important political and ethical advances have largely been achieved by secular movements, but have subsequently been adopted as the basis of British Quaker culture. By

contrast, traditional Quaker testimonies to truthful speech, personal integrity, and avoidance of unnecessary consumption and possessions ('plainness'), which are not widely shared middle-class values, have become much more marginal to contemporary Quaker culture.

This process of assimilation to the surrounding culture is not a new phenomenon, and is not restricted to Quakers, although it has arguably gone further among British Friends than most other religious groups. Through these influences contemporary British Quakerism has become in part a post-religious movement; for many people the primary motives for participation are understood in psychological or social terms rather than religious ones.

The debate about 'non-theism' is a symptom of this growing conformity of British Quakerism to the dominant culture. As entirely materialist explanations of human life have come to monopolise our culture, so traditional Quaker language and practices have become less credible to many Quakers and attenders. This has made central concepts such as 'God', 'worship' and 'testimony' problematical for many, and they are increasingly being re-interpreted in purely secular terms. Core Quaker practices such as the 'Meeting for Worship' and 'Meeting for Worship for Church Affairs' (or more commonly 'Business Meeting') are also called into question by a materialist world-view.

The Quaker understanding of 'vocal ministry' in Meeting as a response to a specific leading of God is unintelligible in purely secular terms. For this reason spoken ministry in some Meetings inevitably tends toward the familiar categories of secular public discourse – political speech, moral lesson, group therapy or Radio 4 review. Similarly the practice of the 'Quaker Business Method' rests on a shared commitment to collective discernment of the will of God for the community. In a secular context this can only be practiced as a form of 'consensus decision-making' aimed solely at an outcome that is broadly acceptable to everyone who turns up.

The overall tendency of this process of secularisation is to threaten gradually to evacuate British Quakerism of any distinctive content. As we enter the era of 'energy descent' this anaemic version of Quakerism may prove inadequate to the spiritual demands of the times.

British Quakers will be among those groups that are especially vulnerable to the social consequences of energy-constrained economic contraction. Quakers of working age are disproportionately employed in public sector occupations such as teaching, social work and higher education, that are most vulnerable to cuts in public spending resulting from declining revenues. Relatively few British Quakers are currently employed in areas that are likely to see an increase in numbers and status; such as agriculture, engineering, skilled trades and policing, as the economy is re-gearred towards core priorities of food and energy security, economic localisation and domestic security.

There are already signs of a re-ordering of political priorities away from higher education and social welfare, as the main parties have converged on a programme of deep public spending cuts, due to the crippling cost of the recent bank bailouts. As resources available to all governments become ever-more constrained by a shrinking economy, these cuts will affect growing numbers of public service employees.

Prolonged economic recession will also threaten those dependent on retirement pensions, as

the value of invested assets is affected by falling share prices and the potential collapse of vulnerable financial institutions.

Over coming decades most British Quakers will be forced to come to terms with a long-term decline in our standard of living, social prestige and life choices, which will profoundly alter the context of our daily life. This will also create new spiritual needs and priorities, as Friends struggle to come to terms with drastic reversals in their lives, and in the apparent failure of our society to deliver on its promises of continuous social and technological 'progress'.

A loss of faith in the ideal of progress that has provided a dominant narrative for our civilisation for over two centuries, will be a profoundly disorientating experience for many. It will challenge British Friends to seek a basis for 'hope' that is not grounded in the prospect of inevitable improvements in social conditions. To what can we turn if it is no longer possible to believe that the future will always be 'better' than the present? This crisis may encourage us to explore alternative perspectives on time and history, which have been superseded by the modern narrative of progress.

Christianity drew from its Jewish origins a concept of historical time as a period between the fall from original innocence, and the expected redemption by the historical intervention of God. Early Quakers, however, often claimed that this period of waiting for the final intervention of God was at an end, since 'Christ has come to teach His people Himself'. They believed that they participated in the 'end of history' when God was gathering the whole world to fulfil the prophecies of scripture, as all people would be united by the immediate guidance of the Spirit.

As Quakers moved from being a prophetic popular movement to a conservative denomination, this view of time proved difficult to sustain. Eventually their hope ceased to be located in the intervention of God in human history, and was removed to the secular future of social progress.

But the ancient perspective of 'prophetic time' can perhaps remind us that hope does not need to rely on optimism. There are historical periods when it is foolish or impossible to be 'optimistic', but hope is always possible, if it is rooted in faith in a God who is able to act through human lives in any situation to liberate and transform. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman describes the prophetic view of time in this way:

"Ancient Israel's prophets held to a vision of an alternative world in season and out of season because they understood that the new alternative to come was not to be derived from present circumstances. Their hope was not grounded in their sense that things are going to get better, nor in the notion that things were evolving in a desired direction. Their hope was independent of the present, because the new world would be a gift from God, who acts in unqualified freedom."

(Brueggeman, 'The Prophetic Imagination')

Another important aspect of Quakerism that is likely to have a new relevance during a prolonged period of economic decline and diminishing material security, is the benefit of belonging to a community of mutual aid. This was an extremely important aspect of Quaker

Meetings (as of other churches and secular societies) in the period before the Welfare State. As many Quakers begin to experience employment insecurity and falling incomes, due to declining public expenditure on social welfare and education, our Meetings will increasingly be needed for mutual support.

There are great benefits to belonging to a community of mutual aid in a period of severe economic insecurity. Belonging to a Quaker Meeting will provide an important 'safety net' for many people experiencing a rapid dislocation in their work and personal lives. Sharing of skills and practical help, benefit funds for those in severe financial hardship and social enterprises to provide employment opportunities, may become widespread priorities.

Other resources of the Quaker tradition will also become increasingly important over this period. A shared vision of the 'good life', which is not based on material prosperity is likely to be a powerful resource in an energy-constrained society. For many in our society, falling incomes, more limited opportunities for travel and energy-intensive consumption will be experienced as a disaster, which consumer culture has provided no resources for making sense of.

Our Quaker testimony to simplicity will take on a new significance in this context. Over the last half century for many British Quakers the testimony to 'simplicity' in lifestyle and possessions has been increasingly difficult to practice in a hectic consumer society. In our new conditions of life, it may help us to see not just the material hardships, but also the possibilities to live slower lifestyles, more connected with our local communities, and more focused on real social and spiritual values than on material consumption.

This perspective will not come easily to any of us whose life experience has been shaped by the consumer society. But the writings and example of earlier Friends such as John Woolman will acquire a new contemporary relevance in an energy-constrained society, providing a rich resource for collective reflection on those goods of life that are not dependent on material living standards.

"My mind, through the power of Truth, was in a good degree weaned from the desire of outward greatness, and I was learning to be content with real conveniences that were not costly; so that a way of life free from much entanglements appeared best for me, though the income was small... I saw that a humble man with the blessing of the Lord, might live on a little; and that where the heart was set on greatness success in business did not satisfy the craving; but that commonly with an increase of wealth, the desire for wealth increased."

(John Woolman, Journal 1743)

In this new society, in which material scarcity is becoming a widespread, bitterly resented and disorientating experience, the testimony to simplicity may take the form of an acceptance of scarcity, an equanimity that does not deny the real hardships involved, but also honours the spiritual goods made possible by material simplicity of life. The testimony will not necessarily consist of a different material standard of living to others, but an alternative perspective, which embraces material simplicity as an opportunity to pursue the true goals of the 'good life' – relationship, community, spiritual practice, and useful work for human and ecological flourishing.

The challenges of a society in energy-descent may also highlight a new contemporary significance for other Quaker testimonies. Some of the potential social consequences of falling living standards include the scapegoating of migrants and minorities, fuelled by anger and resentment over competition for increasingly scarce resources. As climate change puts increasing pressure on food and water resources in climate-sensitive areas of poor countries there is also a likelihood of large-scale forced migration and civil and regional military conflict, leading to growing numbers of refugees seeking sanctuary in relatively 'stable' countries in the developed world such as the UK. The British government may also attempt to respond to the economic and political challenges of energy descent by taking a greater role in the management of the economy and society, creating a greater potential for abuse of State power, corruption and militarism.

All of these challenges will highlight the urgent significance of Quaker testimonies to peace, equality and integrity. We will need to renew our commitment to becoming communities of mutual support in responding faithfully to the leadings of God, in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and speaking Truth to power, as this becomes more urgent and costly than ever. Quakerism may once again be led to become a subversive force within British society – offering refuge to persecuted minorities and publicly challenging scapegoating, violence and propaganda.

Other Quaker traditions and practices will also offer powerful resources for negotiating the transition to a low-energy society. Any period of rapid social change involves drastic and unforeseen changes in ways of life, and a re-evaluation of expectations and values. For many people, this is likely to be deeply traumatic, as our culture has provided few resources for this kind of fundamental reflection.

The Quaker tradition of discernment can offer some powerful and well-tested practices which support new ways of seeing and personal and communal transformation. Communal discernment in the Meeting for Worship for Business, Meeting for Clearness and Threshing Meetings provide the Quaker community with powerful tools for negotiating change and conflict, which may become increasingly important to Quakers and others experiencing disorientating personal and social change.

Times of social upheaval tend to cause many people to seek new 'certainties', which appear to offer a source of assurance and stability. For this reason we may expect a growth in dogmatic religious and political groups. But many whose world views and personal expectations have been overturned by 'energy descent' will be stimulated to ask new questions, and seeking support in their process of reflection and questioning rather than a pre-packaged set of 'answers'. For them, Quaker Meetings will have some rich resources to offer.

The 'Transition Quakerism' that emerges in response to the needs of a society in energy descent will also need to place a much greater emphasis on the formation of our children and young people. One of the consequences of rapid and largely unforeseen social change is that young people will be coming to adulthood in a society for which their formal education has left them largely unequipped. The current education system reflects the perceived economic needs and social priorities of a high-technology, service-orientated economy. Few of the skills and aptitudes that will be essential to an energy-constrained society such as food production, small-scale manufacture, or maintenance and repair skills, currently receive

much emphasis in the school curriculum.

As Quaker communities struggle to support young people through social changes, we may also be challenged to think more deeply about the other skills, practices and traditions that will help them and the wider society through the process of energy descent. In recent decades all aspects of the education of young people have increasingly been delegated to the school system. As we re-examine the usefulness of State-designed curricula for our young people, we may also recognise that fundamental intellectual, social and spiritual needs have often been neglected by the education system. Quaker families and communities may begin to take a greater responsibility for meeting some of these needs, by sharing and teaching conflict resolution skills, centering practices, group facilitation and decision-making, nonviolent direct action, ecological understanding and our Quaker religious tradition.

As our society gradually learns to adapt to the new era of energy descent it will create new patterns of economic, social and political life that reflect the reality of diminishing energy availability. In the long term, any society must be able to function within its ecological and resource constraints if it is to survive. Our current 'industrial growth' civilisation has failed to do this, has encountered its ecological limits and is beginning the 'long descent' towards a much lower energy and resource-intensive society.

No one can know what the new society that emerges at the end of this process will look like. It may well develop by exploiting another non-renewable energy resource (starting from the much-reduced options left to it by our society), until it passes a depletion threshold and enters a further decline.

In the long term, if a sustainable civilisation is ever to emerge it will need to develop a culture that recognises objective limits to levels of production, consumption and waste. In rejecting the goal of endless economic growth, a sustainable society will need to find other goals for human life, not dependent on material 'progress'. Quakerism has much to contribute to this new civilisation, as do other religious traditions that embody understandings of authentic spiritual goods of human life.

As our society enters its long energy descent, Quaker Meetings may come to provide both a refuge for people struggling to adapt to changing social realities, and also a midwife for a gradually emerging culture. British Quakerism could offer long-tested practices of communal support and discernment, and insights into spiritual values for human life that do not rely on material growth. Quakers, in partnership with communities of other faiths and traditions, may help to weave part of the fabric of a new, sustainable civilisation.

