

Quaker Essay Competition 2009 (Final copy with Bibliography) ...POSTED
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One Friend's view of 'The Quaker Way':

Where have we come from? Where are we now? Where do we need to be?

This essay follows the pattern of its title. Initially I indicate a few important features of the development of the Religious Society of Friends, in particular those that raise issues relevant to the main content of concerns expressed here. Then I take account of the fact that there seems currently to be some tension between the different priorities of members. Finally, having made my own position clear, I attempt to outline a new interpretation of the potential of Quaker Meeting for Worship in the contemporary world. There are two aspects to this: one is in terms of individual spiritual maturing and the other is a matter of corporately understood aims (Testimony) for the betterment of mankind.

Where have we come from?

There is evidence that in its early days Quakerism was a fully spiritual religion: ¹ A religion based on experiential 'inward' knowing of the Spirit of God through Christ. ² The early teaching of Fox was concerned to restore the sound spiritual basis of Christianity to all genuine seekers. However, in its development, it soon became evident that the large numbers of early followers would need to receive guidance to regulate behaviour. The need for advice was not merely to do with individual choices but also to do with social responsibility, and the manner in which Quakerism was to form itself as a substantial and influential Movement, with its own mode of operation. This early development is well documented, ³ nonetheless, it should be noted that the, apparently 'outward', requirements were designed to safeguard the Quaker mode of worship, of meeting with and listening to (and for) God's guidance, and of heeding necessary ethical outcomes. Witness and Testimony were not for their own sake, nor for the sake of individual or corporate gratification, but for the sake of adherence to God's will and purpose i.e. that experience of God should be lived faithfully in purity and fullness in and through humankind.

Hadley-King⁴ made a significant contribution to understanding Fox when writing in the 1940's. She emphasised two aspects of Fox's teaching, both of which seem relevant to the present consideration: She suggested that, through inward encounter with 'the light' individuals are 1) shown what is evil ('transgression' in the

¹ Underlying all of Fox's teaching is the call to spiritual fullness in faith and practice. The advice of this spiritual religion is expressed in his own words. In 1657 he said, 'Friends, meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was' in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995) 2.35

² Fox, G (Nickalls J ed.) *The Journal of George Fox* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2005) Fox refers frequently to the significance of the body as 'the temple of the Holy Ghost' p. 76 and as 'the temple of Christ' p. 170; the significance of the 'inward parts' in receiving the Truth p. 231; and of 'God in the heart' p. 196

³ Braithwaite, W.C. *The Beginnings of Quakerism*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1955) and *The Second Period of Quakerism* (Cambridge: University Press 1961)

⁴ Hadley-King, R. *George Fox and the Light Within* (Philadelphia: Friends Books, 1940)

terminology of Ambler, quoting Fox⁵), and 2) brought into unity, unity with God and unity with men.⁶ These two may, or may not be seen as sequential, but they do point to a distinction between, on the one hand, an individual occurrence and requirement: the recognition of our own transgression; and then, and distinctly, a corporate concern, on the other hand. Though corporate this latter is achieved in and through individuals in their togetherness. So, it seems that the teaching emphasised that each individual should know God within his (or her) heart, be aware of the light of the spirit within and be able, in rising above personal transgression, to relate to God in each person, for the benefit of all persons i.e. to know unity not only of connectedness to God but in connectedness one with another. Hadley-King's interpretation of the light within, in Fox's teaching, acknowledges that:

- There is no real unity between merely human natures. (This point is developed later in the essay.)
- There is no sum of accurate beliefs intellectually held that can save human kind (in other words experience not beliefs, is what is necessary. This point is developed later in the essay.)
- It is in living unity with the power, the seed, with Christ who is eternal and without beginning or ending, that man has life, for Christ is that life. (discussion here facilitates questioning whether an exclusively Christian interpretation is now, in the twenty-first century, held as 'Quaker ')⁷

So, according to Hadley-King, Fox's light within is the light of Christ, which carries some of the implications of historical Christianity. However, in his radical interpretation involving divine and direct revelation Fox drew:

His religion away from external authority, and found an authority for his religion (which was by inheritance the Christian religion) in the nature of human experience.⁸

This emphasis on 'human experience', as is well known, has been interpreted differently at different times in the history of Quakerism and gave rise to differences of priority. In the 19th century it led to the essay competition, won by John Stephenson Rowntree, and was followed later by the Manchester Conference of 1895. After the Manchester Conference, Quakerism seems to have developed a distinctive and notably practical direction. Certainly it did result in a 're-invigoration' of the Society but also, there is a sense in which it began to promote Witness and Testimony – the outcome of Worship – ahead of Worship. Social responsibility in the world and the concerns of Peace, Equality, Justice and Simplicity became, for many, the signposts of the Quaker Way. It is the adequacy of this interpretation of Quakerism that is questioned in this essay.

⁵ Ambler, R, 'The Presence in the Midst' *Proceedings, Quaker Theology Seminar, 1997* Woodbrooke Quaker Studies Centre, 1997. p. 12 ref: 'The light is that which will let you see your transgressions' (from Epistle 79)

⁶ Except when quoting other views or employing the more usual understanding I will use upper case 'U' when speaking of Unity from this point in the text. This is in order to emphasise the fact that I intend a particular interpretation, which will be identified and explained later.

⁷ Hadley-King, R. *George Fox and the Light Within* Chapter 7, p. 154

⁸ Hadley-King *GF and the Light Within* P. 171

Where are we now?

My understanding of our present position is, then, that within Britain Yearly Meeting we do continue to maintain a uniquely spiritual practice that is 'Quaker'.⁹ There is evidence that Worship, in the manner of Friends, has the potential for significant outcomes, both in personal growth and corporate guidance. However, my understanding is that for many Friends this spiritual practice, whilst theoretically important, is not embraced with the sense of discipleship known to early Quakers. There seems to be an indication that practical theology, action in witnessing to Testimony, is prioritised by a majority of our members.

Despite our very evident work in the world and our good standing in the eyes of many, we are now a Society of falling numbers: A Society which is not sure whether its connection with 'matters religious' is a problem to be dispensed with, as an embarrassment, or a pearl to be harvested, nourished and prized (even priced) in full value. The 'sign-posts' of Testimony are, however, the main attraction for many new-comers to the Religious Society of Friends, and remain the main concern for some established Friends.

We are now a Society aiming, as Quakers have mostly done, to reach out. But ... are we a Society 'of questers for questers' who have an ill-defined understanding of what it has to offer? Are we clear as to the nature of this quest? Is Quaker Quest, a recent initiative of the Society, a quest simply for members, for any slightly interested parties, people adrift in their spiritual lives i.e. a quest to increase our numbers merely? Or is it a quest for seekers after those things which this Religious Society holds dear? Is it a quest to 'keep the Society going' or to 'regenerate its religious purpose'? Is it a quest based on the post Manchester emphasis on Testimonies or is it an honest and sincere quest with the integrity to ask the difficult questions that seem not to have been dealt with adequately at the 'Identity' conference of 2008 in High Leigh?¹⁰

A member of the (location withheld to preserve anonymity of the essay writer) Local Meeting, a former Elder and Clerk, has written to our current Elders recently to seek consultation on this very problem. He writes:

Yesterday at meeting a visitor described how numbers in their meeting had grown after 3 successful Quaker Quest events. Unfortunately these newcomers were said to be affecting the meeting in such a way that long-standing members were staying away.

The question that arises is whether Friends are too anxious to be welcoming and inclusive. The writer of the letter continues:

⁹ Note also Ambler's work on the experience of and engagement with light. This work is referenced scrupulously to Fox's teaching; it relates to the understanding of Hadley-King but incorporates a third dimension in distinguishing between 'unity' and 'that of God' within the individual. See also work by Helen Meads – PH. D. in progress.

¹⁰ 'British Quaker Identity and the Heart of our Faith' Conference at High Leigh April 18-20, 2008 ; in 1999 Alastair Heron addressed this issue very thoroughly in *Our Quaker Identity* (Kelso: Curlew, 1999)

In particular the newcomers had not understood and accepted meeting for worship as an act of worship. Spoken ministry was too frequent and did not seem to be arising from the depths of worship but rather in the form of comments and responses etc.

If, indeed, this issue has arisen regularly since the inception of Quaker Quest, it is suggested that perhaps:

Friends are not making sufficient effort to ensure that new attenders learn the ways and traditional practice of Quakers but instead are allowing the meeting to adapt and change to suit the newcomers. Thereby Friends are losing a sense of their identity – that special religious/spiritual character that still unites us at a deep level with other churches and faiths but which traditionally has preserved a particular religious emphasis and a unique form of worship. It is essential that we take more care of our Society and particularly as regards the right holding of our meetings for worship (My emphasis in second underling)¹¹

This letter reflects much that I would hope to address in the latter part of this essay. What is raised here is whether we are where we need to be as a Religious Society or whether we truly know where we need to be going. Do we comprehend the fact that Friendship is not a factor of social responsibility, but is a Friendship that knows God as our guide, instructor and source of inspiration - our spiritual foundation? Social responsibility is an inevitable consequence of spiritual fullness; but without full spiritual development it may present itself as a theoretical position or a duty resulting from decision. Whether or not Quaker Quest has the intention of introducing the public to a path which leads to spiritual maturity, it is this possibility that this essay addresses. Spiritual maturity gives rise to a state free of individual need or want, one that is rather a wholehearted desire to serve God directly and also indirectly through serving others. Surely this is where 'we need to be' as our priority concern.¹²

The question that we need to address is whether we are now able to provide our membership with the spiritual fullness that set early Quakers aflame with a newly ignited experiential knowing. Do we even know what that might 'look' like? Or, are we satisfied to follow an almost humanist option and to believe that our 'good work' is our *raison d'être* and sufficient to answer the call of God through Christ? This question raises also another fundamental issue: i.e. whether Christ's task was a call to offer individual salvation to his followers (to show them what is evil) or to lead mankind into a Unity of spiritual development. The two may be related but the 'anthropological project'¹³ is surely to do with the latter pre-eminently: since the latter leads to the former, but the reverse may not inevitably be the case. If Quakers are to attain spiritual maturity the primacy of the experiential knowing that comes through

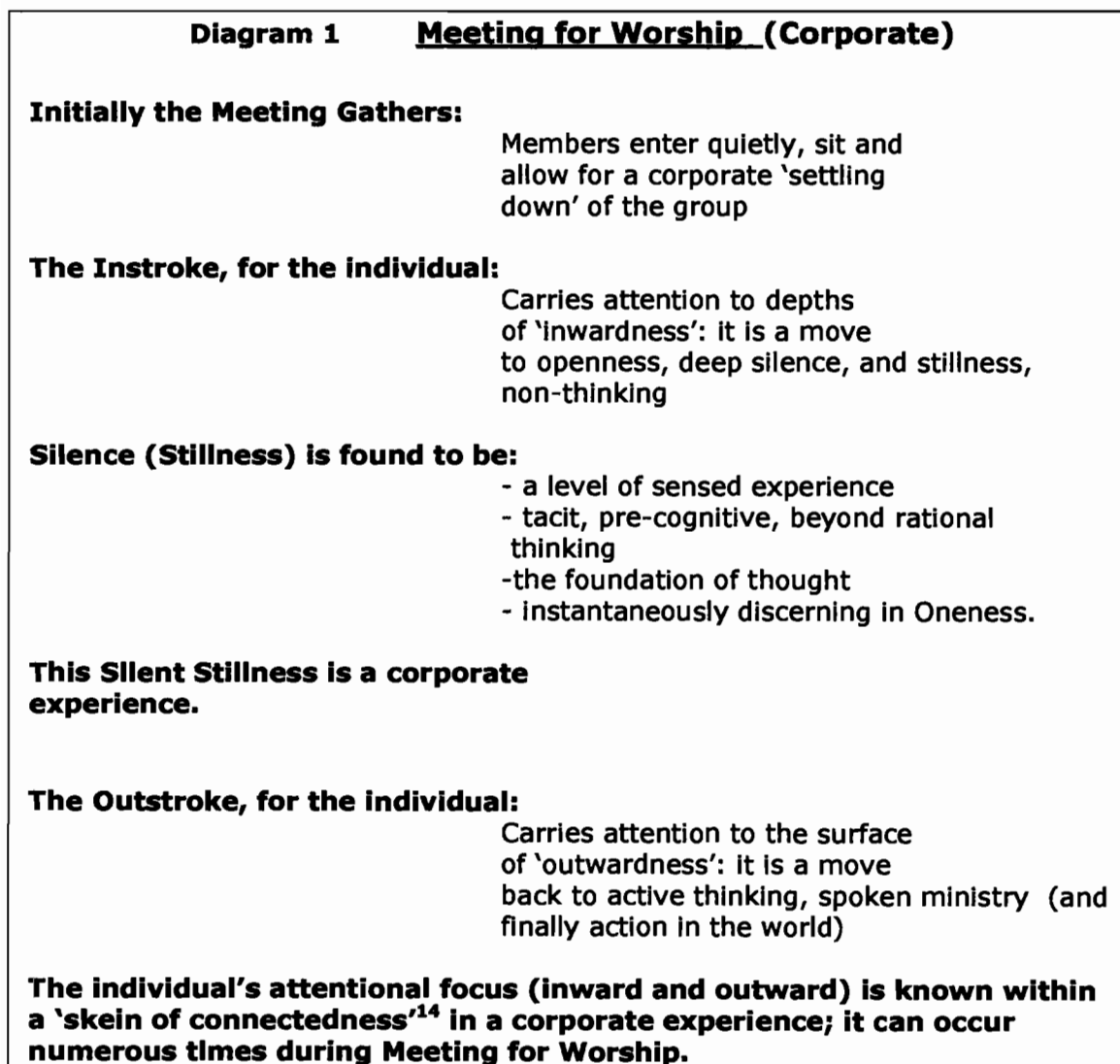
¹¹ The writer of the letter (name withheld to preserve anonymity of the essay writer)

¹² The interpretation of 'spiritual maturity' as linked with 'Unity' is discussed toward the end of this essay

¹³ Alison, J *Befriending the Vacuum: Receiving the responsibility for an Ecclesial Spirituality* Paper presented at the conference 'Sources of Spiritual Transformation: Revitalising Traditions of Christian spirituality for Today' St. Mary's University college, Twickenham, 30th June – 3rd July 2009

Worship is, as Fox maintained, the essential underpinning of our behaviour and action in the world that we inhabit.

So, are we still a Religious Society with a unique 'form of worship' worth preserving? Our Worship is a means of standing still in the light, of settling down individually and corporately. It is a process in which every individual and the group corporately aims to reach stillness and silence, in which it is possible to be fully open to our own inwardness. This, then, *creates the conditions* for worshippers to receive guidance for our individual and our corporate lives. (Diagram 1 represents this process.)



There are various ways of describing what happens in Quaker Meeting for Worship: staunchly Christian Friends use Christian language, non-theist Friends find other forms of words and, in today's very diverse membership there may be many distinct 'languages' of description and interpretation. The diagram above is intended to be amenable to a range of considerations.

¹⁴ Keiser, *The Growing up of Principles in Dualism: Immanence and Transcendence in Quaker Theology* Quaker Theology Seminar, Proceedings (Woodbrooke Quaker Studies Centre 1998/9)

This, then, is the process in essence of Quaker Meeting for Worship. It is known differently by individual Quakers, who also have varied ways of describing their 'spiritual experience'. Two contemporary examples, one speaking of process and the other of experience may help here. Thomas Green, a 20th century Quaker, acknowledges that during worship, the individual's mind will sometimes wander but suggests:

... What matters is whether or not the will, like a compass needle when deflected, is pivoted that it can swing back to its true direction.

He then quotes St. Frances de Sales:

When your heart is wandering and distracted, bring it back quickly to its point, restore it to its Master's side, and if you did nothing else the whole of your hour but bring back your heart patiently and put it near our Lord again, and every time you put it back it turned away again, your hour would be well-employed.¹⁵

In the mid 17th century George Fox, the dominant leader of early Quakerism, had advocated that:

... all Friends of the Lord everywhere, whose minds are turned within towards the Lord, take heed and hearken to the light within you, which is the light of Christ and of God which will call your minds to within ... Wait all in that which calls your mind inward ... that the mind shall feed upon nothing but the pure light of God ...¹⁶

In view of Fox's statement, above, Green's reference to a 'true direction' and to putting the heart 'near our Lord' can be taken to refer to a process of turning inward in Quaker Worship.

Thomas Kelly, another Twentieth century Quaker says:

In Worship we have our neighbours to right and left, before and behind, yet the Eternal presence is over all and beneath all. Worship does not consist in achieving a mental state of concentrated isolation from one's fellows. But in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life, within whom we live and move and have our being.¹⁷

This, then, is the manner of spiritual development through Quaker Worship. It is by constant renewal of self in both personal and corporate silence that growth of inward silence and stillness occurs and allows for spiritual transformation.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Quaker Faith Practice* (QFP) (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995) 2.49

¹⁶ Fox, G. *The Works of George Fox, Epistle LVI* (New York: AMS, 1975) pp 71-2

¹⁷ *QFP* 2.36 See also Diagram 3

¹⁸ It is important to note that, for Quakers, living Testimony and Witness in the world is as important as Worship. The two are complementary and inseparable as two sides of a coin. This essay focuses on the aspect of inwardness and how its growth affects outwardness.

However, the fact of diversity in today's membership raises another question; it is not one I intend to address in full but one which I do need to acknowledge. This question is whether the religious outcome desired by Friends is only attainable through Christ (irrespective of whether Christianity is seen as 'saving' or 'unifying'). I do not deny the importance of this question for some Friends but for me the spiritual aspects of all religions provide significant teachings from which we can learn; so I choose a more inclusive approach to interpreting Fox and his early teaching.

My conclusion is that as a Society we are unclear where we are, divided as to our priorities and insufficiently devoted to our spiritual practice (this latter is not true of all our members of course). I concede that this rather bleak view may not represent an irreversible situation.

Are we where we need to be?

I am tempted to be provocative and to offer an unequivocal negative in answer to the question. However, I have an enormous respect for the members of the Religious Society of Friends and have learned a great deal from being among its membership in the various situations that are offered at conferences, in Meeting for Worship, informally and formally, and on Woodbrooke courses, among others. So I feel the need to tread respectfully on the many and different sensitivities that our Society embraces.

I must, however, speak my case honestly. I do think we need to be a Religious Society and to stop the current ambivalence about our name: We are 'The Religious Society of Friends'. I do hold to the importance of the essentially spiritual and experiential mode of Quaker Worship and I do, with of the Meeting, hold to the importance of knowing and working to maintain that which is good in the Society – namely its mode of Meeting for Worship, in the un-programmed manner of the Society in Great Britain. This I take to be the irrefutable foundation of any work in the world and pre-eminently important to being a Quaker.

However, I do also recognise the fact that we are no longer a Seventeenth, nor even a Twentieth Century Society! Life has moved on; the moon seems to have come nearer; Universals are now within our conception; some of our mysteries are less mysterious than once they were. But, in our Universe, change and non-change live side by side, and so it must be in our Religious Society of Friends. If we are to perpetuate the Society which George Fox established, a Society that is at one and the same time Religious and 'of Friends': only so much can change or it will cease to be that Society at all. What, then, can change and what must stay the same? In relation to this question my position is that our spiritual practice must not change but our understanding and utilisation of its values and outcomes need to do so. I would also assert the importance of worshippers' responsibility to 'take more care of our Society and particularly as regards the right holding of our meetings for worship'. (See above p.4)

In this section of the essay I wish to:

- Indicate the nature of our diverse membership – (1)
- Identify some of the concerns that I have about our spiritual condition today – (2)

- Propose a new interpretation of what is possible through Quaker Worship – (3).

1) It is a fact that we have a diversity of members who dwell on a continuum of concerns. At one end or the other there is distinct difference, if not actual conflict of view and, possibly, lifestyle; at various positions in between there are mellower, more tolerant less conflicted perspectives I am not attracted to Wildwood's term 'the whole banana' but the explanation which he outlines is useful as is other related discussion.¹⁹ Further I agree with the view that:

'there is a growing tension between divers spiritual perspectives within Britain yearly Meeting: a situation that has only arisen over the last half century'²⁰

I favour a linear representation to make the position clear. (See Diagram 2)

Diagram. 2

Spiritual Theology and Practice ----- **Practical Theology and Work**

Our in-between members do not present the Society with stark contrasts, but those at either end are beginning to speak such different 'languages' that communication is sometimes vexed. There is on occasions a lack of compassion, a failure to engage in 'real listening and honest speaking'²¹ in order to allow for meaningful processes in the task of finding compatibility.

Dale²² speaks a language of compatibility, straightforwardly yet compassionately, but his priorities are clear, his concerns evident and his mission undoubted. He points out that

examples of the strengthening of [our] spiritual roots ... [are] through Bible Study, Quaker Quest, study groups and the like...

He suggests that these are 'absolutely fine' but asks:

Am I alone in believing that our Quaker tradition of seeing the sacramental in the whole of life means that our spirituality is endangered by such compartmentalisation? And that the existence of corporate opportunities to witness to core Quaker testimonies, whether truth, peace, equality, sustainability or simplicity is an indispensable part of our Quaker *spiritual* experience and a means of deepening it.²³

Dale is unafraid of acknowledging the spiritual rootedness of his Quaker life and of speaking of God, that which is sacramental and of 'our spiritual condition'. Yet, who could doubt the nature of his quest? Or fail to appreciate his work and will to work with others to find a corporately agreed spiritual insight into a sustainable way ahead?

¹⁹ Ashworth, T and Wildwood, A. *Rooted in Christianity, Open to New Light – Quaker Spiritual Diversity* (London: Pronoun with Woodrooke Quaker Study Centre, 2009) pp. 36 -51

²⁰ Ashworth and Wildwood, *Quaker Spiritual Diversity* p. 9

²¹ Ashworth and Wildwood, *Quaker Spiritual Diversity* p. 11

²² Dale, J 'Good lives can't cost the earth' in *The Friends Quarterly*, 2009, No 37:2 pp 44 - 51

²³ Dale, Good lives, p. 45

2) My concern relates to those who have begun to speak the social, political, economic and ecological sectarian language so eloquently that it has become hard to locate God's will in the work undertaken. It may seem a trivial criticism that God is *not mentioned* by those whom we know to be drawing on their spiritual resources in carrying out their work. However a more fundamental issue (even criticism) seems to me to be the fact that this language, which excludes God, may indicate a slippery decline into mere searches for agreement (or lack of dissent) among Friends. This may be far from attaining Unity in the Spirit, which is discussed in 3 below.

When Hadley-King states categorically that 'there is no real unity between merely human natures' she is, in effect, warning of this danger: Mere agreement, through human nature, mere lack of dissent which seems to offer tacit support, is not Unity. As individual Quakers, and as members of our Religious Society, who seek corporately for guidance, we do have the means to know and to experience Unity. We are able to recognise the qualitative difference between consonance (concord) and Unity; this is, however, available through our way of Worship in un-programmed stillness and silence. My concern is whether our membership recognises the responsibility that comes with the knowledge of this means and the resultant 'duty of care' owed. We have the means, have we the will?

By means of analogy my position is this: Consider individual Quakers as 'beads'. These may be linked or strung together to form a single rope of beads. Each bead remains individual but shares a common thread, or an interlinking in togetherness. Is this what Fox meant by unity? I do not think that it is. Is it what members of the Religious Society of Friends today mean? If it is so, it is an impoverished understanding of what is available to us. For Fox, and for early Friends, Unity means something much more profound, and essentially spiritual. Another analogy: Consider now four or five 'beads' of mercury on a marble surface – if an attempt is made to string two together, the slightest touch of one bead against another and there are no longer two beads, but one that is enlarged, and so on, no matter how many are linked – interlinking is truly unifying.

What is the sense of this analogy for members of the Religious Society of Friends today? Plainly our bodies do not conjoin into a single body in a literal sense but our Unity may be known in consciousness, in the living Presence of God. It is not my intention to quibble with those who find the word God a difficult one to employ. Eccles²⁴ speaks of God as a 'constructive creative force'; another view might be of that which is conceived as greater, and both within and beyond the sum of all parts of our creation. For Allen the word God is 'shorthand for all the poetic, philosophical and imaginative things knowable, with us and beyond us, communicable but also beyond words.'²⁵ In whatever way individual Friends conceive of the Reality that some call God, our perception, in the stillness and silence of Quaker Meeting for Worship is one in which there is a 'running together' of consciousness – worshippers sense a oneness in the covering Presence that unites. Thus, when Hadley-King says 'there is no sum of accurate beliefs intellectually held that can save human kind' there

²⁴ Eccles, P 'The Presence in the Midst' *Swarthmore Lecture 2009* (London: Quaker Books, 2009)

²⁵ Allen, B 'Ground and Spring' *Swarthmore Lecture 2007* (London: Quaker Books, 2007)

is the implication that an aggregate of opinions will not do, but oneness of spiritual consciousness i.e. in Unity, is what is needed.

3)I have written elsewhere of the manner in which spiritual maturing has the potential to lead individuals from experiencing life in multiplicity and diversity, to a state of experiential knowing in which perception of all life is in oneness – unity.²⁶ (Diagram 4 encapsulates my understanding of this process. It is attached at the end of the essay for those unfamiliar with the argument). It is enough here for me to suggest that this is where we need to be now in a Religious Society of Friends, moving toward Unity; A Society that fulfils its promise and offers spiritual maturing to all its members.

I am not suggesting some abstract or quietist concern without connection to the world of realities. *Of course Testimony is important.* What I wish to show is that if we can attune our individual and corporate lives not just to shared values, but to the Unity that underpins our apparent diversity, we have something more than mere agreement on practical issues. What we have is the means to re-awaken the fullness of Fox's vision at all levels of personally mature spirituality and to utilise this in our Witness and Testimony.

Fox's Epistle X really is a rallying call that is as relevant today as it ever was. It is not a call to peace, justice, equality, simplicity or sustainability etc., it is a call to 'stand still in the light...' to be fully awake in the Spirit and fully receptive to guidance ... fully alert to what Worship has to offer. It a call to Unity not to agreement; a call to act in Unity of consciousness on the basis of a developed interiority pervading all we do. This is not the prerogative of Quakers, but through Quaker Worship it is something available to Quaker experiential knowing – we should not neglect its importance. It is a call to inwardness and ultimately to interiority. (See *again* Diagram 1 in relation to the process by which this occurs).

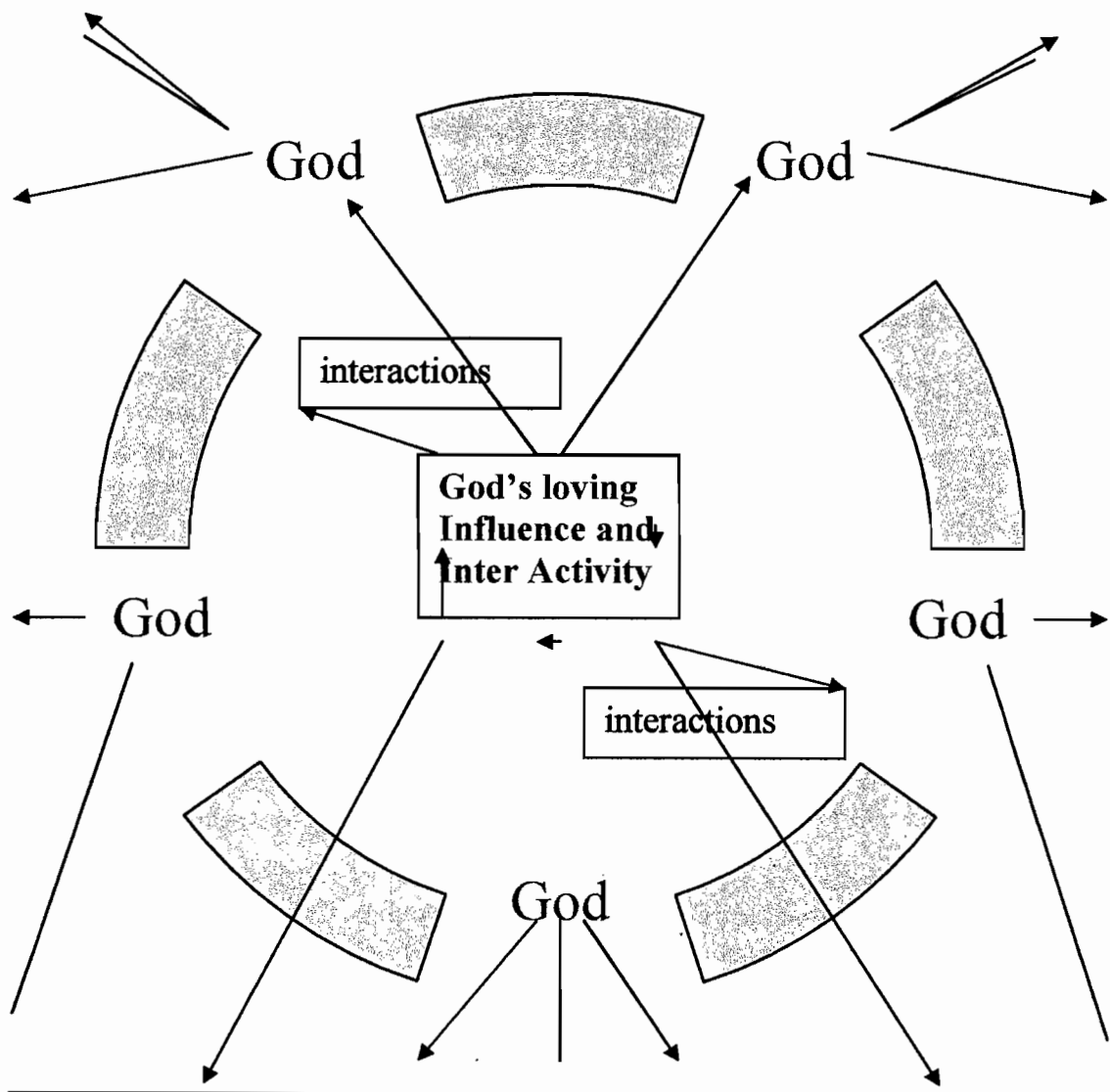
As inwardness expands, grows and becomes stabilised it is experienced in individual life as the all-time living reality of interiority. The result is that knowledge of the Unity of all things is opened to awareness. I maintain that only full evolution of spiritual consciousness can enable human beings to see beyond everyday multiplicity, and accept apparent duality as a stepping stone to the living experience of Unity; a renewed understanding develops, dependent on transformed spiritual formation. I am referring here to the spirituality of all Friends in a fully developed state; this has the potential to provide an awareness that can facilitate not only a different perspective on creation (including of course ecological, and other, issues of our world) but also an entirely different way of being in the world. Ashworth speaks of a new way 'of being human', quoting Paul, he maintains that 'as the individual separate self dies, issues of self interest die too'.²⁷ There is in this transformation a shift of consciousness, a spiritual maturing, which ultimately sustains a shift from identification of our individuality as 'separate' from all other individuals to a new identification of self in the oneness of God. When an individual's consciousness stands still in the Spirit, not only in Worship once a week, but at all times, as a result of regular and frequent Worship, then it is as though the individual is embraced within God's influencing will and guidance. When humankind 'identifies [instead] with

²⁶ References withheld to protect anonymity of essay writer.

²⁷ Ashworth, T *Paul's Necessary Sin* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)

God's eternal spirit, good actions flow naturally'.²⁸ The consequence of such experiencing is, as expressed in 1 John 4:13, 16, to do with the in-dwelling of Spirit: by this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of the Spirit ... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them. (Diagram 3 represents the manner in which this occurs.)

Diagram 3- God represented by the whole surface of the page, imagined to extend to infinity in all directions



The 'skein of connectedness' is now a sphere of connectedness in a 4 dimensional reality²⁹

²⁸ Ashworth, T *Paul's Necessary Sin* p. 230.

²⁹ Figure adapted from: Peacocke, A. 'Articulating God's Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences' *In whom we Live and Move and Have our Being* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004) p.148-9

Such an indwelling within God's influence, known initially in the stillness and silence of Meeting for Worship and, ultimately, at all times as the constant interiority within our lives, frees us from the fears of any and all negativity. It leaves us free to act positively in all situation. Even the prospect of death fades, this most notable epitome of negativity, death, is no longer a threat to our being. We are freed from death since the Spirit that we come to inhabit, and which inhabits us, transcends death, we can live as though death were not so.³⁰ This state of living provides to all individuals full strength for dealing with the weaknesses, problems and inequities in the world.

Alison refers to this transcending of the possibility of death as 'befriending the vacuum'.³¹ His discussion revolves around the possibility of spiritual transformation in terms of revitalising Christians Tradition. His terminology is distinct but the parallel with Quakerism's need to revitalise its own spiritual practice is notable. Speaking of the link between word and witness Alison maintains that:

A certain way of speaking is described [in the imagery of Acts 2], which bore witness to something having been experienced over time, and was picked up by the listeners as something inside them, such that they were able to relate to it, and to its authority from within, from their own starting place. This speaking and listening *itself*, as a sign of the Spirit which empowers it, both separates the listeners out from the crowd, and freshly individuates them by making them symptoms of a new sort of unity.³²

This description of knowing inwardness is comparable to Fox's teachings about the body as the temple of Christ. It is expressed in such a way that an individual worshipper, Quaker or other, can recognise that what is intended is the source and basis of religious experience in himself or herself. It is about spiritual practice such as that which George Fox proclaimed in his teaching; For Fox the Spirit is within... so, we need to 'turn within'. It is the path to the 'eternal and invisible': 'Oh, therefore mind that which is eternal and invisible and him who is the Creator and mover of all things!'³³ I do not intend to suggest that Alison and Fox are speaking of identical spiritual realities. However, I do maintain that there is enough of similarity to see that, though from very different periods of Christian history and of vastly different backgrounds, they express a comparable experiential knowing. I find here something that informs my plea for a revitalised understanding of the fullness of spiritual life in the manner of Quaker Worship.

Fox declares 'the way of salvation and the way of everlasting life'.³⁴ He also exhorts his followers to 'be rich in life and grace which will endure, ye who are heirs to life, [are] born of the womb of eternity'.³⁵ Experiential knowledge of this kind, of the eternal beyond time, the timeless moment, is available to Quakers in Worship. It

³⁰ Alison, J *Befriending the Vacuum: Receiving the responsibility for an Ecclesial Spirituality* Paper presented at the conference 'Sources of spiritual Transformation: Revitalising Traditions of Christian spirituality for Today' St. Mary's University college, Twickenham, 30th June – 3rd July 2009

³¹ Alison, J *Befriending the Vacuum*. Title of paper.

³² Alison, J *Befriending the Vacuum*. p. 7

³³ Fox, G. (Nickalls, J Ed.) *The Journal of George Fox* (London: Quaker Books, 2005) p. 59

³⁴ Fox, G. *Journal* p. 154

³⁵ Fox, Epistle 155, *Works* 7:147 (New York: AMS, 1975)

is, however, available in mature spirituality during life in activity also. Kelly, so often quoted for lack of other contemporary Quaker examples, speaks of the inner stillness available at all times – ‘deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level -... a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings’.³⁶ Here then is the word and experience of eternity and infinity - so familiar to the first Quakers. It makes real an experience that far exceeds some of our present day talk that reduces our religion to political jargon. Nevertheless, it provides *at the same time* the basis of an expanded comprehension of what knowledge in, and of, Unity makes possible in response to social and/or political issues.

Such knowing is not a matter of intellectual pursuit; it is not gained from remembering sacred texts, or even the images of former lives – however exemplary they may be. This knowing is a matter of developed spirituality. Thus Diagram 3 is distinguished from Diagram 1 in that whereas 1 is a linear representation of the centring process of personal worship, even if corporately enacted, Diagram 3 indicates a 3-4 dimensional understanding of what takes place over time, in both the hearts of individuals and in the heart of community.

Drawing on Peacocke’s world view (above) the centre is ‘internally present’ to all entities and processes. This expression encompasses a view of inwardness as within the centre of everything. It is like the centre of the circumference of a circle wherever it moves, and when the circumference has become boundless in dimension and exists through all time: The experience from the ‘centre’, wherever it might be located, is thus infinite and eternal. My adaptation of Peacocke’s original diagram is used to give an insight into the proposition that there is a state of inwardness that can be gained through Quaker Worship, which supersedes partial experiencing. This gives the consciousness of Unity, which is not merely a theoretical perspective for distinguishing between multiplicity and duality, but is a transformed mode of knowing. It offers a vision of possibilities from the state of stabilised inwardness or interiority. This is how I intend interpretation of Unity.

Was it this perhaps that moved Fox to write the following words?

The creation was opened to me ... Great things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened to me beyond what can by words be declared ... as people grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the word of wisdom, that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being³⁷

The consciousness of Unity, which is not merely a theoretical perspective, gives rise to a state of experiencing which offers a new statement of the human ‘relationship with God’, in relation to which the main contention of this essay is, finally, that differing states of ‘inwardness’ lead not only to transformed experience but also to differing theological statements and modes of practical theology. So, some may seem to be ‘practical and also spiritual’ some may seem to be ‘spiritual and also practical’. It is misleading to separate (Dale: ‘compartmentalise’) these two in this way and I do not intend an absolute distinction. In fact they are but two sides of the

³⁶ Kelly, T. *Testament of Devotion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964) p. 33-34

³⁷ Fox, G. Ed. Nickalls, J., *Journal of George Fox*, (Philadelphia: Religious Society of Friends, 1997) p. 27-8

same 'coin' of Quaker religious faith and practice. If there are differences of priority, they are not inevitably in irreversible conflict. It is more likely that, like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, they each contribute to an overall picture. We should not at this stage, however, delude ourselves that this is what we have already. What we need is the *cognition* of Unity. *Re-cognising* the importance of these differing understandings this essay expresses, in relation to degrees of 'inwardness' and growth of 'measure'³⁸, the possibility of changed perception: it is about moving from multiplicity and/or duality to Unity in conscious spiritual experience. The automatic result is a simultaneous change in perceptions of apparently contrasting explanations of Reality, and man's relationship with God. This in turn leads to a different way of living Testimony and Witness in the world. (Diagram 4 makes this clear.)

The proposition that results from the understanding above is a reinterpretation of Quakerism, in terms of what Quaker Worship can make possible. For Quakers spiritual maturity, if measured at all, is often *connected with life as lived in the world*: This means that engagement with social responsibility issues including peace, equality, justice and simplicity are seen as extremely important and often used as indicators of spiritual worthiness. These social and political engagements are in fact the necessary ethical consequences of Quaker faith and practice. A description in terms of expansion in spiritual consciousness through worship offers a new statement of what is possible in terms of the human 'relationship with God' and the knowledge that this provides. It is a description of Quakerism that respects not only the vision of early Quakers but also respects the enormity of the spiritual task with which we are charged. For the sake of creation itself we cannot afford to fail.

I am as aware of the needs of the twenty-first century for all humanity as any other member of the Religious Society of Friends. I am as concerned that we find ways to meet these needs, to relieve acute difficulties that are faced by so many people. However, in response to the question, 'Are we where we need to be?' I can only say 'we could be but in my view we are not'. However, what each and every Friend is charged to do is to Worship diligently, to act according to conscience doing the best she or he can, and give all action in service to God. Leaving Fox with the last word ... 'in the presence of the living God, be patterns and examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone'³⁹

³⁸ Two important Quaker concepts.

³⁹ Fox, *Journal* p. 263

Seven States of 'Inwardness' (Spiritual Consciousness) - known progressively through waking consciousness – Diagram 4

(dreaming and sleeping states also affected as 'inwardness' is developed over time)

1st State	2nd State	3rd State	4th State	5th State	6th State	7th State
No inwardness'	Inwardness' sensed but not experienced intimately	Inwardness' experienced but as distinct from and at the expense of 'outwardness'	'Inwardness' experienced fleetingly in 'outwardness'	'Inwardness' remains constant in waking consciousness	Inwardness' known and experienced as interiority' stabilised as a state of one's being	'Interiority' transforms not only sense of the self but also perception of the very nature of outwardness' - Existence itself
Life lived in:	Outward dominance	An 'outwardness' known as separate from inwardness'	Outwardness' and inwardness' alternate	'Inwardness' known in 'outwardness' during wakefulness	'Inwardness' constant in sleeping and dreaming. Inwardness' known in 'outwardness'	As 6th State but in an enriched sense of oneness - no undifferentiated outwardness'

Life Experienced as:

<p>Multiplicity and ever-changing diversity</p>	<p>Multiplicity felt to be incomplete and therefore unsatisfactory</p>	<p>Duality sensed sometimes dislocating multiplicity</p>	<p>A reality of duality</p>	<p>One as the boundaries that seem to create duality begin to dissolve to experience</p>	<p>Duality gives way to a pervading sense of unity</p>	<p>Unity, which becomes a state of life - Life experiences itself in and through the individual consciousness within the wholeness and oneness of unchanging Supreme Being</p>
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Horizontal Axis = Progression of spiritual experience/development
 Vertical Axis = resultant experience in the world

****I am indebted to the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi for the ideas developed here with amendments as necessary for discussion of Quaker experience of 'inwardness' in and as a result of, Meeting for Worship

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