

## The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

### Transformation, plurality and identity

The founders of the Quaker movement did not set out to establish a new religious society. Their aims were more radical – nothing less than to transform the way in which people related to God and lived their lives. They were not afraid to challenge prevailing orthodoxies, they took risks, courted controversy and made mistakes. But their clarity of purpose earned them widespread respect and led, over the years, to remarkable achievements, leaving a legacy from which we, today’s Friends<sup>1</sup>, are still benefiting.

What are we doing today to carry on this radical tradition? This paper argues that we need to rekindle the high aspirations and commitment of our forebears and interpret their witness afresh for the very different circumstances in which we now live.

The need for transformation is just as urgent today as it was in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Although the established church has lost its stranglehold over religious practice and priests no longer claim sole spiritual authority, yet many people are still confused, as they were three and a half centuries ago, and feel bereft, without a reliable spiritual compass. Social stratification and inequality may not be as extreme as in George Fox’s day but we seem no closer to a fair and just society. Today we face great diversity and complexity without the anchorage previously provided by a common acceptance of Christianity. Many see the society surrounding us as rotten to the core but feel impotent to change it.

Many of us, inside the Society and outside, are seekers still, whether we are aware of it or not, but we don’t always know where to look for help. We need to rediscover, perhaps reinvent, the Quaker way – the set of practices that has, over the years, proved reliable in ‘speaking to our condition’ and in helping us to discern the right path forward.

Quaker practice in Britain has taken many forms over the years. There have been periods of great outward activity and achievement and times of intense introspection. Ideas, about faith and worship, have changed and attachment to scripture has ebbed and flowed. The vestiges of all these historical trends are still with us. They form a tapestry in which individual groups of Friends, following different traditions, provide contrasting patterns and colours. But today’s tapestry is, in historical terms, modest in aspiration reflecting,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Friends’ in this paper refer to all those who participate in Quaker activity worldwide, not just to members of the Society in Britain

perhaps, an ageing and declining membership. And disharmony between parts of the tapestry (eg, theist/non-theist) risks pulling the whole work apart at the seams.

Looking wider afield, Friends in Britain are now a fairly small part of a growing worldwide Quaker movement that displays an even greater array of designs and colours. As followers of the liberal tradition we are dwarfed, numerically, by evangelicals, whose attitudes and practices often appear to us strange and 'unquakerly' (though they might say the same of ours!).

Plurality is the new reality in which the Society finds itself. But, in Britain, we have a crisis of identity, torn between a desire for greater unity and a wish to accept our undoubted diversity. A common purpose, focused on transformation and based on our shared heritage and common values, can provide a thread capable of binding our richly patterned tapestry together more securely.

Transformation, though we may perceive it differently, is as strong an imperative for liberal Quakers, whether theist or non-theist, as for evangelicals and other Friends. Irrespective of form of worship, or of belief system, the shared challenge is how to renew ourselves spiritually<sup>2</sup> and how to help make the fundamental changes in the society at large that we can all agree on. We may use a variety of approaches in getting in touch with the source of truth that is within us but all Friends share a confidence that this is possible and that we can use the insights we obtain from that source to radically change ourselves, our lives and the world around us.

Our future depends on faithful adherence to the fundamental points that unite all Quakers in Britain and around the world – our focus on the light within, the value we place on personal experience, our business method and our enduring testimonies to equality, peace, truth and simplicity. Working together in solidarity, despite our differences, will revitalise us and enable us to make a greater impact.

We should celebrate the rich variety of ways in which we experience the truth as a part of our identity and a powerful witness in a diverse and fragmented world. As a pluralist movement we will be better able to pursue a transformative agenda, helping to heal divisions and engage with other groups with common interests.

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<sup>2</sup> The word 'spirit' and its variants are not intended to convey a specific understanding of what it is that we believe to be the 'source of truth'. Nor are the words 'divine' and 'religion' meant to convey particular conceptions of 'God'. They are attempts to find words for those things that are beyond our rational powers of understanding. The problem of language is touched on later – see page 8

## **Historical context**

Many of the concerns felt by early Friends (in common with other seekers of the time), and the ways in which they acted on their concerns, reflected the turbulent times in which they lived. We need to separate their particular concerns, some of which were transitory, from the lasting discoveries they made, which we now call the Quaker way.

The mid-1600s were a time of great upheaval and uncertainty, accompanied by widespread feelings of deep insecurity and confusion in all areas of life. The traditional governing structures, the monarchy and the church, were overthrown or severely challenged. People relied more on their own resources, which were enhanced by increased literacy, and were beginning to realise that they could work things out for themselves. The 1640s had seen a burgeoning of sects. The Bible, now readily accessible, was both a source of spiritual renewal and a weapon of discord. People were steeped in it but divided in their interpretation.

Friends were of their age but rebelled against many of its assumptions. They could argue from the scriptures as convincingly as any, yet they insisted that what was important was the experience that fired the men of God who wrote the scriptures. They denied original sin, believing that God had placed a witness to himself, a divine spark, in every human heart. They believed that the second coming was in the present, not the future, for 'Christ had come to teach His people himself'. These truths, however, they saw as arid and intellectual notions until they became experientially known in the heart. They testified, therefore, against those who were 'professors but not possessors' of truth.

These conditions provided rich soil for dramatic cases of personal transformations. Contemporary accounts are full of sudden convictions, often accompanied by radical changes in life style and public witness against the structures and conventions of society. The climactic events experienced by early Friends and the language they used to describe them were clearly shaped by the historical circumstances and by the religious concepts of the time.

Quakers of all persuasions today believe that this disordered epoch not only triggered these special manifestations but also gave birth to unique insights, of lasting importance -i.e. the recognition of 'that of God' in everyone and the power of the 'inward light' to help us tackle the issues we face personally and guide our actions in the outer world. These insights led directly to the Quaker testimonies, which have stood the test of time.

Our early history is therefore crucially important. It is natural for some Friends to pick certain aspects of the experiences and witness of 17<sup>th</sup> century Quakers and some Friends to select other aspects. Each is choosing the

elements that best relate to their current situation. If one accepts that religious experience depends, to some extent, on context<sup>3</sup>, these variations in choice should not be surprising or be a reason for a person to dismiss notions that may appear to them to be strange or outdated. It is not the notions that are important (though we cannot do without notions entirely) it is the transformative spiritual experience that lies behind and beyond them, which cannot be adequately expressed in words.

Other periods of Quaker history in Britain provide examples of widely varying practice as Friends were both influenced by the prevailing intellectual, religious and moral culture and, at the same time, reacted against it. At times Friends were actively engaged in the wider society (e.g. in the abolition of slavery, in prison reform and plain dealing in business) and at times the Society seemed to separate itself off and go quiet. At times they did both. Our rich heritage provides opportunities to learn from the ways faithful Friends lived their lives in widely different circumstances. How they interpreted the world around them varied but transformation, either internal or external, is a common link connecting their authentic experiences.

### **Present day context**

Britain today is in many ways very different from earlier periods in our history. People do not now suffer to same extent from an oppressive authority that seeks to control their lives and to which they are expected to show deference. Most of us have ready access to a bewilderingly large body of knowledge of all kinds and are much freer to make our own choices.

Few Friends today are preoccupied with questions of personal salvation but many of us have a desire either for our lives to change (which we may call 'personal development'), or for the world to change in some way, or both. We live fairly atomised lives in a fast-changing and complex society, in which the structures are both more numerous and more diffuse than they used to be. In seeking change we face a great problem in knowing where to go for help and in choosing where and how to intervene. Since our numbers are small we often find ourselves working in partnership with others, who don't always share all of our concerns and with whom we may have to compromise.

The result of these changed circumstances is that transformation is not usually the dramatic event that was experienced by early Friends – it is a more gradual process. We may not use the word 'transformation' at all but describe it as a personal journey or as making a difference to others or to society. Yet our ultimate goal remains, to transform the world from a state of conflict, exploitation and division towards one of fairness, honesty and respect. And we recognise that, unless we ourselves are changed, we cannot accomplish this.

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<sup>3</sup> It is not suggested here that underlying religious truth varies but that our personal experience of this truth differs according to our circumstances

We place great emphasis on enriching our spiritual lives but we lack an accepted common language to express ourselves spiritually and to share our experiences with other Friends. Many of us may be influenced more by our reading and by our own private reflections than by our interactions with others. In Meeting for Worship, spoken ministry is often tentative and oblique, the message sometimes muffled by a desire not to offend other people by inappropriate use of words.

Despite these difficulties it is clear that Friends today do go through a process of personal transformation, less dramatic perhaps than in earlier ages but no less significant. Many of us would like this process to go further and to share it more fully but we are not always sure how to accomplish this.

Our outward concerns today are not mainly about challenging oppressive structures or securing freedom of religious practice. These battles have largely been won. We are still, as we were in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, concerned about peace, equality, truth and simplicity. The difference today is that these issues are global in scale and the problems appear much more complex (in the way they play out, not in their essence). Thus we are concerned, among other things, about global poverty and trade injustice and about the environment.

Transforming the world seems at times a daunting task. Our protests, such as those against weapons, seem puny and we recognise that our practical contributions, in prisons, in international debates on trade and on climate change, can only be modest in relation to the scale of the problems we discern. Often, we wonder whether there is anything distinctively Quaker about what we do in the world or whether we have become just another pressure group.

Yet throughout our history we have often had influence out of all proportion to our numbers, both directly, through our own efforts, and indirectly, through inspiring others. Many of us would like to think that we can continue to be ambitious in our vision of a transformed world.

### **Three levels of transformation**

Before considering transformation in more detail, we need to define more clearly what we mean by the concept and explore the different levels at which it may take place.

At the personal level, there is 'inner transformation', a term deliberately chosen to be neutral as to whether it occurs purely as a result of internal processes or whether it is triggered or aided by some outside agency, perhaps another person or divine grace. None of us can be certain how this mysterious process takes place but we can recognise it when it happens to us, or to others we know, and this is what matters. We may feel a sense of peace and a closer connection with the source of our spiritual energies. We start to perceive the

world in a different way and we gain a new understanding about ourselves and our place in it. Often we start to act differently. Matters that used to be important no longer are and we discover new concerns of which we were previously unaware.

'Outward transformation' has to do with a change in our relationship with the world around us, including the people, the structures and the environment. We may not deliberately intend to change other people but they may be changed by the way in which we recast our relationships with them. We are more likely to set out to change an organisation, e.g. by raising an issue or challenging a practice. Our methods may vary but the end result is the same: as a result of our actions, something else changes on a permanent basis. The word 'outward' is used to denote that it is a change that originates with our concerns and intentions.

These definitions make it clear that inner and outward transformation are closely linked and Quaker experience shows that there is a sequence, inner first and then outward. In the words of William Penn the Quakers 'were changed men [and women] themselves before they went about to change others'. Unless we are sufficiently 'transformed' internally how can we discern the right way to conduct ourselves externally?

Seen from this perspective, the Society of Friends performs two essential functions. First, it provides an environment in which the process of inner transformation can be nurtured. And, second, it enables our leadings for outward transformation to be tested and our initiatives to be supported. Beyond this, it clearly has an important role as a collective entity, defining and safeguarding our fundamental principles while providing coherence to our practices as they evolve.

Does the Society itself need to be transformed? Before we can address this question, we need to consider how it is performing its various functions and roles. Change in the Society is not an end in itself, it is simply a possible means towards transformation at the level of the individual, the group and the wider society.

### **Inner transformation**

In the cauldron of mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Britain, inner transformation occurred suddenly and was immediately translated into changed behaviour. In that time of crisis some people felt the call to travel in the ministry, even if this meant leaving their family behind. Others, on grounds of principle, exchanged their trades for life in prison. The accounts we have may show the more dramatic examples but there seems little doubt that profound change was the order of the day. We are known today as Quakers because of the visible signs of the workings of the spirit upon our whole beings in worship.

Today, sudden religious transformations are not common among British Friends. But they do occur in other faith traditions, as they have done throughout history. William James in 'The varieties of religious experience' documents numerous cases of what he calls 'conversion', transformational events that cannot lightly be dismissed. Among evangelical Christians today being 'born again' continues to be a real experience<sup>4</sup>.

The more gradual process experienced by British Friends today may be the more 'genuine' for being slow, but how can we be sure that it is really happening? Our own perceptions may be unreliable, particularly if we are constantly engaged in critical self-examination, which is inevitably accompanied by doubt. Those around us may provide a better guide to our changed state, but if they themselves are changing they may face the same difficulty of objectivity. In some cases we may detect an inner change when it becomes apparent from its fruits -i.e. a change in our behaviour. We start doing things differently and we (and others) imagine that this is because we ourselves have changed. But it is possible that outward change may occur without inner transformation, for example under the influence of others.

The only way that inner transformation can really be put to the test is when it is expressed. Hearing someone speak about how their life has changed, or reading their testimony, gives us a window into their being. If we listen at a spiritual level we can discern the nature of their transformation and, perhaps, understand the struggle they had on the way, and this can inspire us. The act of expression is valuable for the subject too, crystallising their ideas, feelings and insights through the act of revelation. Words are, of course, imperfect tools for conveying what is deep within us, but they are the only tools we have.

Do we speak with the directness and consistency that would indicate that our inner being has been transformed<sup>5</sup>? Or do we speak tentatively, obliquely and provisionally? Do we speak at all (about what is going on within us)? Merely asking these questions invites a comparison, perhaps to our disadvantage, with earlier, more radical, periods in our history.

Our current hesitance to speak and our careful crafting of what we do say may have more to do with the Society's culture (shaped by the culture surrounding it), than with a real lack of conviction. We are suspicious of certainties, we do not wish to appear boastful, we desire not to offend and we try to respect other points of view. All worthy impulses, up to a point, but, taken together, they may stifle plain declaration of who we are, what we care

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<sup>4</sup> We may be tempted to dismiss such experiences as purely psychological, lacking real depth or meaning. If we do this, we may just be revealing our inability to recognise the different ways in which reality can be experienced

<sup>5</sup> Some may prefer to imagine that our 'transformed being' is already within us, waiting to be discovered. In that case, our inner transformation is a matter of perception and understanding. It is still real if it leads to our looking at ourselves, our relationships and the world afresh

about and how these two relate, thereby making the sharing of our transformative experiences more difficult.

This is not a call for more spoken ministry, nor does it imply that we should all 'bare our souls' to one another. There are many ways in which we can make our testimonies. And these testimonies need not be introspective, nor indeed conform to any set pattern. The argument being advanced here is simply that the Society would be enriched by freer expression of what we each find to be true from our own experience, using whatever words and descriptions each of us feels appropriate. And that we would all benefit from listening to these testimonies openly, unjudgementally, looking only for the deeper meaning.

Our diversity means that our notions of truth and the language in which we express them vary greatly. We need to accept this reality, not rejecting this notion because it doesn't correspond to a notion we hold dear, or objecting to that use of a word because it means something different to us. In allowing ourselves to get distracted by these surface matters we are missing what is really happening underneath and, more importantly, failing to understand other peoples' witness to the values and principles we all share.

The barriers presented by a multiplicity of notions and languages pervade our history. For example, the 'publishers of truth' were preaching the message of Jesus Christ, risen, and were anticipating the second coming as a real event. But when we hear the same message in contemporary Quaker settings in other countries, some of us instinctively turn away.

To overcome the hurdle presented by what may appear to us to be strange or outdated words and concepts we need to regard them as conventions, ways of interpreting the world we live in and its underlying principles. We all, even non-theists, need conventions, comprising a set of ideas and the language that represents them, to make sense of our lives and to be able to navigate our way in the world. Understanding conventions, our own included, as culturally determined makes it easier for us to accept the validity of those inner transformational experiences that appear 'foreign' to us.

Communication shorn of all notions, symbols and images can be dry and insipid. Accepting the verbal imagery of others, while seeking the deeper meaning, allows us to see a more vibrant and inspiring picture and enables us to learn more readily from their experiences. We should feel free to express ourselves in Christian language, if we so wish, or to use secular words, and expect to be listened to in exactly the same spirit.

## **Outward transformation**

It is always easier to see the evils in a society distanced by time or space than in one's own. It seems clear to us now what the founders of our movement were protesting so vigorously against – the injustices, the misuses of power, the lack of freedom and so on. We can readily appreciate the principles of the fairer society they were striving towards and grasp their tactics.

In those days, many of the injustices were understood to be directly linked to supremely powerful institutions, principally the church, monarchy and governing structures. Civil society did not exist, in the institutional form we know today, and it seemed that there was no other course open than to confront the visible sources of power head on. Friends also attempted, on an individual basis, to challenge hierarchical social structures by refusing to defer to others or to show the respect that those in superior positions expected as their due.

It is more difficult for us to discern clearly the root causes of the problems in our own society and to work out how best to intervene. Power in Britain today is still unequally distributed and it is misused. However, governing institutions are constantly under challenge from an active, organised civil society that is relatively free to express its opinions and to protest. The established church no longer controls what people believe and a bewildering array of alternative faith systems is available. Society as a whole is less hierarchical, deference has largely disappeared and, arguably, too little respect, rather than too much, is shown to those in positions of responsibility.

Injustice is still a hallmark of British society but it takes different forms to previously. And, as argued earlier, many current problems have global connections. As Quakers we play our part in trying to redress the wrongs we see around us and beyond our shores, usually in concert with non-Quakers. In the way we behave we also continue to influence those we meet or work with, in line with our convictions.

Our radical past encourages us to set our sights beyond our individual efforts towards the sort of critical interventions that might cause larger shifts towards greater peace, fairness, integrity and simplicity. But the size and complex nature of the problems the world faces are daunting. Where should we concentrate our efforts and how can we make them 'trigger points' for widespread, permanent change?

Today, it is not so much the rulers themselves that we have to confront as the sets of principles and assumptions that guide their actions and legitimate them (in the eyes of society). In an inter-connected world, where power is widely distributed, one possible approach we could take would be to focus on the 'ruling ideas' that dominate the thinking, both of elite groups and of those who uncritically follow them. Our aim would be to identify harmful ideas

and challenge them, using modern communications and networks as well as traditional methods.

By way of illustration, here are some examples of ruling ideas that appear to the author as damaging to the principles of peace, equality, truth and simplicity:

- The idea that we are only responsible for acting in a way that is acceptable to those around us, without considering the full consequences of our actions for others and for future generations
- A belief that we are all entitled to the 'good things of life' and that our purpose should be to increase material wealth to the point where everyone can realise their entitlement
- An acceptance that unfair and violent means can be justified in the pursuit of supposedly worthy ends
- A starting assumption, without evidence of any wrongdoing, that people left to themselves cannot be trusted to act responsibly but must be controlled

Other Friends may wish to dispute these examples or to add formulations of their own. Of course we also need to identify the practical outworkings of the ideas we object to and demonstrate the harm they actually cause. But the main point is that radical transformation in the world today means challenging the ways in which people look at things.

This leads to a problem: how can we truly recognise the ideas that lie at the root of society's ills from those that just proceed from our personal inclinations? Quaker tradition has it that we should bring our 'concerns' to Meeting<sup>6</sup> and ask for corporate guidance. It is curious that this practice seems largely to have been abandoned. Perhaps we still associate a concern with travelling in the ministry, as in former days. Surely, we would gain today from subjecting our outward concerns, more widely meant, to the scrutiny of other Friends.

Working with non-Quakers in the outside world potentially increases the impact we can make but it runs the risk that our principles get diluted and that we lose the clarity of our distinct voice. This risk will be reduced if we are clear about the underlying principles. Corporate discernment can help us articulate our concerns and the rationale behind our transformative actions. Clarity will help us find common ground with others, in the religious and secular worlds, who share our vision and wish to work together practically.

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<sup>6</sup> In this paper 'Meeting' is intended to indicate the local or area organisation in which we participate, not a particular part of it, such as Meeting for Worship

## **Transformation of the Society**

The previous two sections imply that the Society could do a better job of facilitating both inner and outward transformation. For example, by providing an environment in which Friends feel freer to speak plainly about their experiences and are listened to in a spirit of open acceptance. And by encouraging Friends to bring their concerns and leadings to Meeting.

This raises the question of what the 'business' of the Society is really about. Many of the items that now come to our business meetings, and on which we spend much time, are essentially administrative matters, important no doubt for the smooth running of our organisation but with relatively little real impact on our lives or on those of the wider community. We hear reports of initiatives and activities by individual Friends and groups but without always feeling directly involved. Reflecting the individualised and fragmented nature of the society in which we live, we leave action largely to the private domain, leaving in corporate hands only a watching brief and perhaps some financial or moral support, if needed.

Previous generations of Quakers might have found this state of affairs puzzling. In the earliest days, it would have been unthinkable for Friends not to know what each other was doing, in some detail, and proposed projects were subjected to lively examination and debate. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was common for those involved in manufacturing and trade to bring the practical problems they faced to other Friends and Meetings sometimes held them accountable when their business dealings were considered to be inconsistent with Quaker principles.

The context today is, of course, very different but it is at least worth asking whether our Society might be more closely involved in what we, as Quakers, do in the world. Rather than focusing mainly on the administrative workings of the Society we might consider whether our 'business' should be more about how we nurture inner transformation and, through this, how, together, we can achieve transformation in the outside world.

But, to accomplish this, do the structures and practices of the Society itself need to be transformed? Or are we talking simply about incremental changes, a refocusing of effort, a simplifying of structure and process, perhaps a change in priorities?

The word 'transformation' implies a radical change from one form into another. This has happened to the Society before, but our history suggests that, in most cases, change has been evolutionary, emerging only gradually in response to new thinking and changing circumstances. New tendencies have often been slow to gain recognition and changes have been resisted by those comfortable with the old ways. The last major change, from the evangelical Quakerism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the liberal Quakerism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

took several decades in the transition, though marked by a few key turning points, such as the Manchester conference of 1895.

There have been cumulative changes over the past century, making today's Quakerism almost unrecognisable from that of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The boundaries of what was then a faith still firmly based on Christianity have been stretched, first by universalists and then by non-theists. New entrants to the Society, unfamiliar with long-established traditions, have, often with difficulty, interpreted the central messages for themselves and, in the process, subtly adapted them, thereby altering the understanding of everyone.

In reality, we are now a movement in which a variety of different 'forms', i.e. languages, understandings and sets of belief, coexist in a state of tension. Many Friends, of different persuasions, long for greater consistency and find difficulty in accepting forms that differ markedly from their own. We have not always been successful in our attempts to find accommodations on the issues that divide us. Unresolved differences between conservatives and liberals, between theists and non-theists, sap our energies and make our attempts at outreach more difficult.

A profound transformation, into a pluralist Society, has in fact already taken place. Our task now is to come to terms with this change and to embrace it positively. Rather than seeing our diversity as a problem, we should welcome and celebrate it, as potentially adding new dimensions to our lives and helping us make a greater difference in the world. Our collective transformation has not been into a single new form, but into a plurality of forms. It has been a pentecostal phenomenon in which we have acquired a variety of languages and related concepts.

The practices of the Society will change as we more readily accept our diversity. It is probably better to allow this evolutionary process to happen, rather than attempt to anticipate it by imposing new structures and ways of doing things. If the role of the Society changes in the way anticipated above, we can expect a further loosening of divisions (e.g. between 'members' and 'attenders'), greater variety in worship, more spontaneity and directness in communication and new approaches to how we conduct our business.

### **Plurality**

A Society that is open to a greater variety of spiritual experiences, recognised as authentic despite their strangeness, is enriched by its diversity. It will be better able to nurture inner transformation because it will not judge personal experiences and leadings by their form, it will seek only their deeper meaning. It will also be more outward looking, better able to relate to other cultures and faith traditions. By abandoning the search for consistency of doctrine and unity of belief a pluralist Society will be less concerned with itself, allowing its energies to be released for nurturing and encouragement.

But there are dangers arising from plurality – a loss of focus, even a weakening of identity. So the steps towards acceptance of our inherent diversity must be accompanied by a re-statement and confirmation of our core values and of the understandings that guide us, such as:

- Our belief that there is a source of divine inspiration and truth within everyone, an ever-present teacher who can show us the right path
- Confidence that, potentially, each of us can get in touch with this divine source for ourselves, without the need for an intermediary
- Knowledge that the practice of gathering together in silence helps us access and harness the power of divine inspiration
- The value we place on the insights we gain from truthful examination of our personal experiences and those of other Friends
- Our reliance on corporate discernment and guidance, rather than voting, as the best way to conduct our business affairs
- Firm attachment to the testimonies of truth, equality, simplicity and peace as true and reliable guides to the way we should live our lives

Commitment to these points of principle gives Quakers a coherent and distinctive position as a faith community. It does not make us totally different, as strands of most, if not all, of the above can be found in other faith traditions. What has, from our inception, made us stand out is our insistence on the need to reject matters of 'form', such as doctrinal beliefs, symbolic representations, structures of authority and conventions of worship, which stand in the way of true encounter with the ultimate source of truth. The strength of our objection to form has been a powerful witness in the past but we now have to consider whether conditions have changed and whether we should now rethink our approach.

There are, of course, some followers of religion who still accord a higher place to beliefs, symbols, structures and conventions than to true religious encounter. But today many people of faith<sup>7</sup> regard matters of form to be secondary and would not disagree with the Quaker insistence on authentic experience. However, they might argue that there is a place for form as a means of focusing worship. Some church goers find doctrines and representations a helpful aid, rather than a hindrance, to reaching towards the divine. Many place value in liturgy and music as inspirational prompts. If pressed, there might be people who would look critically at our practices, which we like to think of as free of outward form, and find them to contain hidden beliefs and conventions.

Surely the truth is that, being human, we all need some elements of form, however minimal. Even early Friends found that certain concepts, institutions

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<sup>7</sup> In this context people of faith include non-theists and humanists, as well as followers of established faith traditions. Their defining characteristic is that they have genuine ethical 'concerns', things that they care about beyond themselves, and that their concerns shape the way they live their lives

and processes were needed to provide coherence to a movement that risked, without any structure, becoming anarchic. Their essential insight was not so much an absolute rejection of forms but a passionate belief that the forms prevailing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had themselves become the objects of worship. In any case, it is evident that they unquestioningly accepted much of the conventional teaching drawn from the Bible, including notions of salvation, matters that many Friends today would regard more symbolically.

For some decades, matters of form have been declining in importance in many faith communities and interest in authentic religious experience has been growing. At the same time, more people, brought up outside any faith tradition, are today seeking spiritual inspiration (though they might not describe it in those words). The conditions for revival of a transformational Quakerism are there. But are we in a position to respond to this need? Perhaps only if we learn to accept the validity of a plurality of forms, not on the grounds of their intrinsic importance, but as alternative contexts within which authentic religious experience can take place.

Before we can engage with others, we first need to come to terms with the multiplicity of forms that exists within the Society itself. Perhaps we need to use on ourselves the approach to conflict resolution that we have pioneered in the world outside. When we have become entirely comfortable with the idea that Christians and non-Christians, theists and non-theists, liberals and conservatives, all can coexist within the Society and learn from one another, we will be half way there. Then we will be ready to tackle the remaining hurdle, that of accepting evangelical approaches as equally valid, as long as they are compatible with our basic principles.

Today well over half of Quakers world wide are evangelical, and this proportion is growing. We in Britain might reflect that their approach would probably, in some respects, be more easily recognised by early Friends than our own practices. And we need to remember that it is only a little over a century since many British Quakers were themselves evangelical. Why should we reject an approach that constitutes such an important part of our heritage, as well as one that is, in other formulations, a dynamic force in the spreading of interest in religion world wide?

We are understandably uncomfortable about the apparent certainties of evangelicals. We are tempted to criticise their reliance on doctrinal beliefs, their carefully choreographed methods of worship and the conformity that they appear to seek among those they recruit. But perhaps we should look beyond these forms to the fruits of their approach. If there we can find transformed lives, renewed hopes and an approach to the problems of the world that is consistent with our own, maybe we should reconsider the certainty of our objections.

It was argued earlier that we all need a degree of 'form' in our spiritual practices. We may vary in our need for it, and this need may change according to the stage we are at on our journey. If we can see through the vivid and distracting (to us) apparel worn by evangelicals and discern love and truth lying beneath, we are well on the way to embracing the evangelical tradition as a true manifestation of Quakerism. In doing this, we will be better able to start relating to evangelical faith movements generally<sup>8</sup>.

The concept of transformation provides an important bridge. It is to be found in all faiths, though differently expressed. Evangelicals may see it as being born again, traditional Christians as receiving God's grace, Buddhists as enlightenment. A Quaker focus on transformation, not its outward manifestations but its inner reality, could help us better understand people from different traditions.

A Society that positively accepts all the major strands of religious practice, from humanist<sup>9</sup> to evangelical, will not only be more comfortable in its own skin, it will be better able to relate to other faith groups and to society as a whole, thereby enhancing its ability to engage constructively with them. If we can accept that no single language is appropriate for all groups and situations then we will also be content to allow different expressions of the same deeper reality or truth<sup>10</sup>.

## Identity

The previous pages have referred to Quakerism sometimes as a Society and sometimes as a movement. Which of these are we? Both, of course. They can be seen as two sides of the same coin. But which is the dominant side, in how we see ourselves and in the 'face' we present to the outside world? The former approach positions us as an alternative to the whole gamut of other churches and faith groups, the latter as a force for change that engages with other people and organisations in pursuing common interests.

We have seen ourselves as a Society for so long, having at times been almost entirely separated from the mainstream, that it is difficult to imagine ourselves otherwise. Yet we should remember how the Society came about. It was a question of survival. Under persecution Friends had to band together and organise themselves separately. Denied access to places of worship, they had to build their own Meeting Houses. Faced with pressures to conform

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<sup>8</sup> A wholesale acceptance of all evangelical approaches is not advocated here. Some evangelicals may be so obsessed with form, such as literal interpretation of scripture, that they have lost sight of ultimate truth. The case being made is that we can recognise authentic spiritual experience by applying the same tests to other approaches, including evangelical, as we do to our own, by the difference they make to peoples' lives

<sup>9</sup> A humanist may have a problem with the term 'religious practice' and prefer something like 'approach to knowledge, freedom and justice'

<sup>10</sup> Truth is understood here to mean the reality we find from our own experience. It leaves open the (arguably unanswerable) philosophical question as to whether there is a single Truth that human beings will ever be able to fully grasp

with practices that went against their strong convictions, Friends demanded special legal provisions, relating to baptism, marriage and death, which, when granted, confirmed them as a distinct group of 'peculiar people'. Later, Quakers became an even more exclusive group, with entry requirements and disciplinary rules.

If the Society had not been formed to sustain our separate identity we would not be here today. Quakerism would have become extinct, like other movements dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But now we have to ask whether, to maintain our witness in today's very different circumstances, we still need to define ourselves primarily as a Society. Putting it another way, will we survive if we see ourselves chiefly as a separate, self-contained body competing, in effect, with a multitude of other organisations that also offer solutions to questions of faith and practice?

An alternative way of looking at our identity is to reflect on the original vision of our founders, before they set up an institutional structure, in which we are charged to 'be patterns ... in all ... places ... [to] all sorts of people ... [and] to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one'. This inspirational injunction implies that we should seek to engage with people where we encounter them, not wait for them to come to us. It means not just leading exemplary lives ourselves but also getting involved with other people in the lives they are actually leading.

George Fox, in the same passage as that quoted above, advises that our 'carriage and life may preach' to others. Many of us are nervous about preaching and shrink from the whole idea of proselytising. People should be attracted to Quakerism because of its intrinsic merits, we feel, we shouldn't set out to convince them. Yet how do people find out about its merits if we don't tell them? We have a dilemma and our tentative approach to outreach reflects this, a tentativeness that would be incomprehensible to our founders.

The dilemma exists because we are seeing ourselves as a Society, whose main aim is to promote our own practices, as contrasted with other ways of being and living. This idea implies a set of judgements about the relative merits of Quakerism and other approaches - judgements that most of us, in our present open and inclusive states of mind, are disinclined to make, or at least to admit to. As a result, most of us make little effort to reach out.

When we see ourselves, and present ourselves externally, principally as a movement, the dilemma resolves itself. As 'agents of change'<sup>11</sup> we can engage with people without making any judgement on their state and without any thought of a 'hidden agenda' (to make them Quakers). Our interest is simply

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<sup>11</sup> This term reflects our transformational role. It may not be appropriate as a way of describing ourselves in many circumstances, where we may wish to use other words, such as 'conciliators' (e.g. in conflict situations) or 'reformers' (e.g. of prisons)

to work with them to improve things. Much of our outward activity is already carried out in this way but this is not generally the case in the spiritual sphere. We are inclined to be suspicious of the spiritual approaches of others (unless they are contemplative, like our own) and, consequently, we don't tend to engage with them at that level.

If inner and outward transformation are inextricably linked, the latter dependent on the former, as argued earlier, this is a notable omission. How can we engage with people outside the Society at one level and not at the other? If the roots of our public witness are not apparent, of what lasting value is it? Surely we should proclaim the spiritual foundations of all our work, even if it takes place in a secular environment.

We come back to the problem of language. If we convey our inner convictions in Quaker language we will not reach those who are used to different form of expression. To make spiritual contact, we need to understand the 'inner language' of others, to interpret it and translate our leadings into a form that they can understand. In other words, we need to learn how to engage with them inwardly and express ourselves in their language(s).

This presupposes that those with whom we engage have some form of 'inner language', i.e. a spiritual or moral basis for their actions. Without this, there can be no meaningful contact at a deeper level. But, as argued earlier, all faith systems have this basis and many people who disclaim any faith do have strong moral principles, which they are usually prepared to articulate. Our task, in engaging with them, is to find out what their principles, or moral assumptions, are and to identify the common ground between theirs and ours.

In this process we need make no judgement about the forms (use of words, beliefs etc.) in which other people express themselves, or about their practices (how they arrive at their moral stance), we are concerned only with the underlying principles that guide their lives or activities. If in these we find elements that we can recognise as true from our own experience, then we have the basis for constructive engagement. As a pluralist movement we are liberated from form, seeking only the inner reality that is experienced.

Emphasising our identity as a movement and engaging with the outside world on that basis does not mean abandoning or weakening our organisation as a Society. We will always need, at the very minimum, a place we can constantly return to for refreshment and for support.

But, beyond this, the Society may need to adapt its role. For example: offering a place where all seekers are encouraged to come without conditions or expectations; welcoming into our Meetings people who have no intention of giving up their existing religious affiliations; and participating actively with

other faith groups, without wearing our Quakerism on our sleeves. To the extent that we are doing these things now, we are already acting as a movement. When they become the norm, rather than the exception, we will have made the transition from a group of people who define themselves principally as members, or attenders, of a Society to actors who are engaged in a transformational movement.

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Our history shows us that Quakers who speak plainly and courageously from their own experience can make a great difference in the world. To continue our radical tradition we need to re-discover our clarity of purpose, together with the passion and commitment that inspired earlier generations of Friends.

Recognising our diversity as a source of strength will help us do this and enable us to forge a clearer identity, grounded not on unity of belief but on solidarity in practice. Seeing ourselves as a movement devoted to transformation will enable us to engage more constructively with other faith groups and with society at large. It may also result in our attracting more people, of varying religious inclinations and none, into the Society, thereby injecting new blood that will further invigorate us.